

Coming out to family carries fear of rejection

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Editor

Ed. Note: Because of the sensitive nature of this story, the names of University of Richmond students interviewed have been changed.

Though the process of coming out to anyone is difficult, the most difficult people for homosexuals and bisexuals to come out to are their parents.

Jennifer, a senior, said her biggest fear initially was total rejection. She said that before she told her parents she was a lesbian she feared she would suddenly become an outcast.

"Even if they didn't kick me out of the house," she said, "I was afraid that they would somehow not view me as a complete part of the family or a complete person. I want to be able to go home and talk about who I'm dating. But if you are ignoring that, you are ignoring part of me. That is probably worse than being kicked out of the house."

Now her parents know about her sexuality, but they are still reluctant to talk about it.

"When I first started to tell them, my sister had to come in and tell them that I was their daughter and that they needed to listen to me," she said.

Every story about coming out to parents is different, Jennifer said, and that it has been comforting to share her story with other members of the Lambda Coalition, a group for gays, lesbians, bisexuals and supporters of their rights.

"They all talk about their parents' initial reactions," she said, "when they were scared, confused, angry and guilty. But now they are at the stage where they can talk about it. That is something I cling to as I deal with my parents. I hope that a year from now my parents will be in that different stage and be more able to talk...."

"It's important to have a group there for

Coming out of hiding Homosexuals at UR

PART 4 Coming out: Effects on families

you when you have been rejected by your parents because that's a hard thing to take. It's devastating. It hurts your self-esteem; you don't think you are as much a person as everyone else. But then you have that support group of people who think you are important and have dealt with those feelings of emptiness and loss of self-worth."

One of the problems parents have is that even if they are open-minded about sexuality, they never expect it in their own children, Jennifer said.

"No parent pictures their child growing up like this," she said, "and there is always that feeling of guilt that they did something wrong in raising you."

But the only way to get over those feelings, she said, is by talking about them.

"Since they won't talk about it [her sexuality]," she said, "I have this fear that they will never come to terms with it, that I will never really be close to them and that there will always be this wall between us."

Patience and understanding are two important qualities in breaking down that wall, she said.

"It's not just the talking," she said, "it's the listening. ... It's frustrating waiting for my parents to be able to listen to me, but I am able to wait because I do understand. I can relate my own feelings to theirs because I went through the same phases."

Those phases include denial, fear (of what others will think of you if they find out that you, or your child, is homosexual), a state of wondering why this has happened and

finally acceptance.

"It took me a while to come to terms with it myself," Jennifer said, "and it took my sister about a year and a half, so I know it is going to take time for my parents, too. ... I don't know what they think, and I don't know why it hurts them. I don't have a daughter, but if I ever did, I think I would try to handle it differently."

Parents generally have two basic assumptions about raising their children, Jennifer said. They want you to be happy, and they want what is best for you. Problems come in when they realize that the things they expected would fulfill those assumptions are different from what they imagined, she said.

"Once they see this [homosexuality] does make me happy," she said, "it will be easier for them to accept."

Accepting homosexuality is difficult because parents know that if individuals try to live openly as homosexuals life is not easy, she said. Thus they have a difficult time seeing that type of lifestyle as the best for their child, she said. "It's not the way a parent wants their kid to fight through life," she said.

Her parents are supportive of her in all other aspects of her life, she said, but it bothers her that she cannot share everything with them.

"I don't want to hurt them," Jennifer said, "I just want them to be able to share this part of my life with them."

Other students had different experiences when they came out to their families.

Robert, a bisexual, decided to come out to his family during a vacation when they were able to slow down enough to really talk things through, he said.

It was actually a relative who first asked him about his sexuality, he said, and when he came out to that person a year and a half ago he also came out to himself, he said.

Since that initial experience he said he has

found it important to come out to as many people as possible, he said. "It was a very uplifting experience," he said. "I just didn't want to be stifled by society anymore. ... Once you realize you've been brainwashed you want to de-program everyone else, too."

Robert said his mother was the hardest person for him to come out to, and that she was shocked when he first told her.

"She had lesbian friends before," he said, "and had been friends with gay men, but it was different when it was her own son." She has since been accepting and understanding, he said.

Robert's stepfather was incredibly accepting from the beginning, he said. "He had a close member of his family who was gay and he looked up to him," Robert said. "He inquires about who I'm dating and how things are going. It's great."

Michael's parents found out he was gay when they found a letter written to him by one of friends that mentioned who he was dating at the time. He said his father asked him about it and has since been receptive, but his mother has not.

"It is definitely much harder to tell people who think they really know you when they really don't," Michael said.

One of the things Michael said he has learned since coming out to his parents is that you try to predict how certain people will react so you are better able to explain things to them, he said.

"One of the things I always remind the people I come out to is that I am still the same person I was before I came out," he said. "By and large that makes it easier for people to grasp."

Catherine, a lesbian, came out to her mother last fall and knowing how long it took her to come to terms with her sexuality herself, she said she is giving her mother time to do the same.

See LAMBDA page 11

Lambda

continued from page 2

One issue that is always raised when homosexuality is discussed is religion. Religious conservatives consistently argue that homosexuality is "against God's will" and that "the Bible says it's a sin." People raised with that kind of religious background often have difficulty with the issue of sexual orientation.

But there are gay, lesbian and bisexual support groups in many religions and Biblical scholars who argue the exact opposite of the conservatives.

David Braverman, assistant dean of Richmond College and faculty advisor of the Lambda Coalition said, "Many people operate with the underlying rule of 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,' but others often forget about ideas of mercy and forgiveness when it comes to the issue of homosexuality. Often the people who are the quickest to pull out the religious argument are the quickest to condemn."

Catherine said, "I don't see how anyone has the right to play God over me."

Jennifer said, "My parents are very religious ... but they believe God is all-loving and would not reject anyone based on their sexuality, so they have never rejected anyone for that reason."

Ed. note: The Lambda Coalition, along with five other organizations, was approved as an official campus organization at yesterday's Arts and Sciences faculty meeting. The vote in favor was described as strong, with one opposed and one abstention.