

Experiences of Lesbian-Parented Children:

A Journey of Discovery

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Abstract

Conversations around LGBT issues are being held in countries and cities across the globe. Meanwhile important legislation concerning same-sex marriage is being discussed at the state level and argued before the U. S. Supreme Court. Recent dialogue has also empowered LGBT-parented children to share their stories and to dispel some of the myths and misinformation about their families. Lacking in the literature are the children's experiences and especially the voices of those who grew up prior to the 1970s. This study takes a qualitative multi-method approach that looks specifically at lesbian-parented children and includes phenomenology, thematic analysis, and autoethnography. By exploring different types of autobiographical data, themes emerged such as disclosure practices, protection, community, and bullying. The research found that children of LGBT parents may experience more harassment as they become more visible; feel a strong connection to the gay community; and are important advocates in support of family equality. Findings could have implications in the fields of psychology, nursing, social work, religion, and law.

Dedication

Mommy

(1932 – 1991)



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Experiences of Lesbian-Parented Children:

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The conversations around same-sex relationships and LGBT issues are no longer held in a whisper. It seems that everyone is talking about same-sex marriage—from the parents of kids who want to marry a same-gender partner to the political figures who are trying to navigate the turbulent waters this issue brings up. On November 6, 2012, statewide ballot measures to legalize same-sex marriage passed in Washington, Maryland and Maine. In March 2013 Supreme Court justices heard two highly-anticipated arguments that could decide the future of gay marriage. One case has to do with whether or not to repeal the Defense of Marriage Act, enacted in 1996 by President Bill Clinton. DOMA gives tax and other benefits to legally-married couples if, and only if, the union is between a man and a woman. The other case disputes the state of California's constitutional ban on same-sex marriage (Proposition 8) adopted by voters in 2008. These arguments are significant because the Supreme Court has never before heard a case regarding gay marriage. Decisions made in June 2013 could potentially overturn state and federal law. In the LGBT community, there is both concern and hope in anticipation of these outcomes.

On the local level, the community has had reason to celebrate. Not long ago in Tacoma, Washington, it seemed unimaginable that one would see featured on the front page of *The News Tribune* a photo image of two gay men kissing at their wedding, as it was in November, 2012 after the passing of Referendum-74 (Krell, 2012, p. A1). This comes as an encouraging and hopeful statement for these times. Some say it is inevitable that full inclusion of LGBT people *will* happen. Much has changed in the over forty years since the Stonewall Riots—an event largely regarded as the catalyst for the gay liberation movement in the United States. Hundreds

of gay men and women had fled to New York in search of sanctuary and a place where they could be openly gay. Some found refuge at a Mafia-run gay bar in Greenwich Village called the Stonewall Inn. When an aggressive police force raided the bar on June 28, 1969, the customers fought back. The ensuing riots and protests influenced countless numbers of men and women to tell their parents, “Mom, dad, I’m gay . . . I’m a lesbian.” Once their sexual orientation became a little more accepted, many gays and lesbians wanted their relationships affirmed as well. Today we see the blessings of same-sex weddings and unions going on, literally, all over the country. Friends and families are being asked to be accepting, but also to be joyful and to celebrate this new move in our culture.

While same-sex marriage is sanctioned by a large part of the population, it is still a hot topic that raises political questions, religious questions, and questions of the heart. Issues come up for parents, heterosexual allies, and for people who simply want to avail themselves of the discussion. This includes young adult children of LGBT families who are finding it timely to speak out and to advocate for family equality on the local, state, and national levels (Family Equality Council, 2013). Recent dialogue around LGBT issues has empowered them to share their stories and to dispel some of the myths and misinformation about their families. Increasingly, daughters and sons are finding ways to relate their growing up experiences to a sometimes skeptical crowd. For children to speak openly about their families, even ten years ago, was rare. Undoubtedly it was because one of their parents was closeted and needed protection from an unsympathetic public. In the case of adult children growing up in the 1950s and 60s, the knowledge of their mother or father’s sexual orientation was very often a secret from them and from the world.

Thirty-three years ago Lewis (1980) proposed that more questions need to be asked about what is actually happening to the children of lesbians and that further study is needed to better understand when and how a lesbian mother should disclose her sexual orientation to her children. To a certain extent, given what the literature shows us today (2013), this work is being done and many questions have been answered. However, critics of lesbian-parented families have continued to discount the results from previous studies where “no negative impacts of having a lesbian mother were found,” because, in their opinion, the children have not yet reached an age where the negative impacts of having a lesbian mother can be measured (Johnson, 2012, p. 47). My study addresses this concern.

There is very little literature written from the perspective of children like myself who grew up in the 1950s and 60s with gay mothers. Researchers have also identified, over and over again, that the literature is missing the voices of adolescent and adult children. I will speak to this gap by adding a needed voice to the narratives and/or studies of lesbian-parented families—especially to an entire generation (my mother’s generation) that was given little place for voice. Using a phenomenological approach, this study will analyze themes discovered in the stories, narratives, and essays written by young children, adolescents, and adult children. In addition, my personal stories will add an autoethnographic component in which to gain a cultural understanding of self in relation to others. The motivating question, then, is an exploratory one: What *are* the experiences of lesbian-parented children? And, what can these experiences help us learn from the themes they uncover?

Literature Review

The Homosexual as Distinct Phenomenon

Historically, the research that was conducted on this topic in the 1950s focused on the homosexual as a distinct phenomenon. Homosexuality referred directly to the sexual relations between persons of the same sex and was defined as a sexual deviation. If the homosexual had children, the effects on them were barely considered, except to say that no studies pointed to actual inheritance of deviated sexual traits for the children (Bromberg, 1963). Instead, children during this period were studied, for example, in terms of how they *perceived* their (heterosexual) parents. In a 1955 study at Ohio State University, Kagan interviewed 217 children and asked questions such as, which parent would be on their side if they were in an argument with their parents; which parent would punish them if they were bad; which parent was the boss in the house; and which parent scared them the most? The results of this study suggested that fathers were less friendly and more dominant, punitive, and threatening than mothers. There was a consistent tendency for the older children to be more likely than the younger ones to view the parent of the same sex as more dominant and punitive, and that a “differential handling” of boys and girls as they grow older (third-grade as opposed to first and second) might account for this finding (p. 257-258).

“Normal” Children of Biological / Heterosexual Parents

In the late 1950s there was interest in children’s *identification* with parental roles (or role practice) as a possible basis for any acquired parental attitudes in young children. Doll-play interviews were conducted with thirty-one “normal,” middle-class preschool age children who did not have siblings, and who came from homes unbroken by separation, divorce, or death. Results of the study seemed to contradict the widely held assumption at the time that “the mother

is the initial identification model for both boys and girls, and that boys later switch to the father as the principal model, resulting in less continuity and consequently less stable and strongly sex-typed identifications than in girls” (Emmerich, 1959, p. 295).

Abnormal / Closeted Gays and Lesbians

In both studies, researchers looked at children from intact heterosexual homes. Indeed, the themes reflected in the literature regarding child development and outcomes were generally the most common themes of the day. Any consideration of homosexual parenting, however, was years away. Lesbian and gay parents had more immediate struggles in trying to accept an identity that society deemed *abnormal*. Because they were highly influenced by the historical context of the time, many remained closeted. A dominant ideology in post-war America was the growing hysteria surrounding anticommunism and the belief that “all ‘deviance’ was connected” (Eaklor, 2008, p. 84). Although the oppression lesbian women endured would seem to have guaranteed silence, in some cases, it bred visibility and activism (Eaklor, 2008). Some women risked exposure by frequenting gay bars and by becoming active in the first lesbian rights organization, The Daughters of Bilitis (1955) (Eaklor, 2008; Faderman, 1991; Harvey, 1993; Marcus, 1992; Penn, 1991). And yet, in the post-war era, to be politically active, or to come out publically for that matter, was out-of-the-question for some lesbian women. For those who were lesbian *mothers*, most chose silence over the risk of losing their children.

Silenced Lesbian Mothers

Researchers collecting gay women’s oral histories from the post-war era revealed two stories that relate to the experiences of lesbian mothers (Harvey, 1993; Marcus, 1992). Again, the major concern for these women was keeping their children (Marcus, 1992). One woman experienced a “kind of death” when, in trying to divorce her husband and gain custody of her

children, she was met with a threat that would expose her relationship with her lover and destroy her relationship with her kids (Harvey, 1993, p. 175-179). Lesbian mothers raising children were also hearing the shocking response by the American public to Kinsey's report on the *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953), where twenty-eight percent of the women studied had reported erotic responses to women. Not until 1973 did the American Psychiatric Association remove "homosexuality" from its list of mental disorders. The option to "come out" in the 1950s and 1960s was hardly an option for most lesbian mothers. The risks were too great.

After Stonewall – Waves of Research

After Stonewall, however, and after more and more gays and lesbians came out, the focus of the research shifted, and studies about lesbian mothers and their children became increasingly relevant. Johnson (2012) describes this research as having occurred in three waves. The first wave, which began in the late 1970s, examined lesbians who had become parents while in heterosexual relationships. It focused primarily on the mother's concern about disclosure of her sexuality to her children and custody worries if her sexuality became known. It also focused on the development of these children, and invariably, it compared lesbian mothers with heterosexual mothers (Jedzinak, 2004; Johnson, 2012). Because the bulk of this earlier literature was motivated by whether or not lesbian mothers should be awarded custody of their children, the psychological outcomes of the children were of primary concern (Fenander, 1999; Foster, 2005; Lewis, 1980). These concerns included sexual identity, adjustment difficulties/ behavioral problems, and the quality of the children's peer and social relationships (Jedzinak, 2004; Johnson, 2012). Generally, the studies concluded that children with lesbian or gay parents had developed psychologically, intellectually, behaviorally, and emotionally in positive directions, and that the sexual orientation of their parents was not an effective or important predictor of

successful child development (Fitzgerald, 1999). First wave literature suggests that the children of lesbian-headed families “[did] as well or better than children with heterosexual mothers” . . . and, that even with the added challenge and pressures of homophobia that were experienced by these families, “the parenting that the children and adolescents received from their lesbian mothers must have been of high quality” (Johnson, 2012, p. 46).

The second wave research (1980s and 1990s) looked more closely at lesbians who became parents within the context of lesbian relationships; however, like the first wave, it focused on family functioning and child outcomes by using heterosexual-headed families to measure “sameness” rather than “distinctiveness” (Johnson, 2012). By the mid-1990s researchers began comparing lesbian families with each other rather than with heterosexual families (Jedzinak, 2004; Johnson, 2012). In doing so, sociologists re-examined earlier concerns about gender identity and found that children with lesbian parents showed flexibility in their expression of gender that went beyond prescribed traditional norms (Jedzinak, 2004). Tasker & Golombok’s (1997) twenty-year longitudinal study looked at children growing up in a lesbian family and the possible effects on their gender development, emotional development, and social development. Concerns about psychological development and outcomes revealed no significant difference between children of lesbians opposed to children of heterosexual mothers (Fenander, 1999; Foster, 2005; Garner, 2005; Jedzinak, 2004; Joos & Broad, 2007; Patterson, 2009; Saffron, 1998).

And yet, because the research on lesbian parenting has so often focused on children’s adjustment and their gender development, it has perhaps missed any potential advantages to children’s development which could arise from having a lesbian mother (Saffron, 1998). The literature often shows, for example, that lesbian- and gay-parented children have more open and

accepting attitudes toward diverse sexual identities compared to children of heterosexual parents (e.g. Fitzgerald, 1999; Saffron, 1998). Although not always true, it follows that gay and lesbian parents may be particularly sensitive to the reinforcement of oppressive, hierarchical, socially-constructed gender identities for their children. The assumption that there are somehow appropriate sex roles for boys and girls who do not conform to the dominant gender order contributes to limited self-expression and to ongoing prejudice and discrimination. Fitzgerald (1999) offered an alternative approach which was to discuss children's development in terms of how well they were equipped to navigate life in areas of self-management, adjustment, and self-esteem, rather than if they exhibited traditional, 'normal' gender-role behavior. Because the second wave literature began to use a research lens that viewed lesbian-parented families as a unique entity, apart from their heterosexual counterparts, families could be studied for their potential to offer positive parenting role models (Foster, 2005). In one of the earliest studies, however, Lewis (1980) interviewed children ranging in age from nine to twenty-six and discovered some of the difficulties they encountered in dealing with their mother's life-style and the influence it had on their lives. The study was uncharacteristic of second wave research in that it looked at the experiences of the children from their point of view. For the most part, the literature about lesbian-parented families did not address the voices of the children, or begin to acknowledge their experiences, until the late 1990s.

So began the third wave research (1990s to current) where new and distinct themes emerged and children began voicing their experiences of growing up in lesbian-parented homes. The research has moved toward studies of the families and of the broader community, addressing themes such as: how the children are affected by their family structure, what their unique experiences might be during various life stages, and to explore the "intergenerational impact."

Orel (2006) investigated the impact of sexual orientation on the grandparent-grandchild relationship when the grandparent identified herself as lesbian or bisexual. The narratives of sixteen self-identified lesbian grandmothers revealed that the relationships they had with their grandchildren had everything to do with the ongoing relationship they experienced with their adult children. From the grandmother's perspective, "their adult children either facilitated or discouraged the development of an emotionally intimate relationship between their parents (the grandmothers) and their children (the grandchildren)" (p. 64). Orel also stressed that, in order to truly understand the intergenerational relationships, one would need to explore not only the perceptions of the grandchildren of lesbian grandparents, but also the perceptions of the second generation—the daughters and sons of the lesbian parent. Her study of the grandparent-grandchild relationship relied on the reports of only one generation—in this case, the grandmother.

Patterson (1998), on the other hand, studied thirty-seven lesbian-parented families and took into account three generations. Her research explored the extent to which children of the lesbian baby boom had contact with their grandparents and other adults outside their immediate households, and if those contacts were associated with the child's mental health. It is sometimes assumed that lesbians who are open about their sexual identity will be rejected by—and therefore estranged from—their families of origin. It is also assumed that children of lesbian mothers will have little contact with their grandparents or other relatives. Patterson's findings were *not* consistent with stereotypes of lesbian mothers and their children as being isolated from kinship networks or as living in single-sex social worlds. The results, in fact, showed that children of lesbian mothers had considerable social contact with their grandparents and other adults.

Third wave literature has looked closer at the "disclosure practices" or "coming out"

processes of both the lesbian parent to her children and the child's "coming out" about her/his family at different life stages. Discussions have included the concern of some mothers about *how* to tell their children about their homosexuality, *how much* to tell them, and *what words* to use (Lewis, 1980). Fenander (1999), in fact, provides specific guidelines for a lesbian parent's coming out to her children. Researchers have continually emphasized why coming out is an ongoing process and is necessary for all LBGT families (Garner, 2005; Goldberg, 2007; Welsh, 2011). A child's disclosure about her/his family can be understood as an "extension of the developmental process of acknowledging, accepting, and consolidating aspects of one's identity" (Welsh, 2011, p. 62). Furthermore, children must learn how to navigate homophobia when their parents are not there to help them through it (Garner, 2005). Newer literature has looked at some of the difficulties faced by emerging adults and how they negotiate disclosure about their family structure with their peers and other adults (Goldberg, 2007).

Studies have also identified the difficulty that some lesbian-parented children and emerging adults may have in finding the support systems they need following disclosure by their parent. The literature in the third wave reveals a lack of any real "community" for these children, particularly if they grew up before the 1990s (Jedzinak, 2004; Lewis, 1980). This lack of community, and other topics such as those described above, are becoming more common in the literature about lesbian-parented children. Notably, much of this current research has been undertaken by either the moms themselves or by their children. One daughter of a lesbian mom (Fenander, 1999) explored the peer relations of adult children of lesbian parents. Her research sought to provide a better understanding of specific issues (distinctive and unique) that a lesbian-parented child encounters. In particular, she was interested in taking a closer look at some of the underlying issues being addressed by children of lesbian parents and to provide a detailed

description of what it's like to be an adult child of a lesbian parent. Another study (Joos & Broad, 2007) focused on the distinct experiences of lesbian-parented children and how they tell their own stories. The primary aim was to consider differences by understanding the children's coming out stories about their families and the negotiation of (in)visibility. Ng (1999) argued that only those individuals who have had the experience of being raised in a lesbian-parent family in a homophobic culture can accurately speak to how it truly feels on a daily basis.

More and more, the literature calls for voices from the children of these families and particularly to learn about their experiences growing up. In 1999 Fenander concluded that little is known about the development of the offspring of gay and lesbian parents during adolescence or adulthood and that it would be beneficial to do a longitudinal study of lesbian-parented children in the United States and to look at their development during different stages, from infancy to adulthood, and to compare and contrast with children of heterosexual parents. She also thought it would be interesting to look at lesbian-parented children's life satisfaction and self-esteem once they become adults and that studies on the strengths as well as the cultural element that gay families possess are important. Patterson (2009) encouraged more research about how lesbian-parented families cope with prejudice and discrimination and research that would include detailed behavioral observations or diary studies of lesbian-parented families

Researchers have also identified a strong need for topics that explore the adolescent and adult-child's experience. Welsh (2011) was particularly interested in studies that captured the voice of the adolescent and his/her experience of growing up in same-sex parented families—that there is a “dearth of current research that takes into consideration the adolescents' perspective” (p. 53). Goldberg (2007) emphasized that little is known about the children's experiences as *adults* and that more research is needed that explores the disclosure practices of

adults raised by sexual minority parents. It is not uncommon to read in the literature that research over the long-term, or across various ages, or at different life stages, or during changes in family processes over time, is needed (Jedzinak, 2004; Patterson, 2009). It is, in fact, “imperative that research continues to be conducted regarding the experiences of those raised by lesbian mothers . . . and that researchers learn about the lives of lesbian families across various ages from [actual] lesbian families” (Jedzinak, 2004, p. 120).

Current Discussion – Old Discourse

Currently, the conversations have been heavily focused on controversial issues in and around same-sex marriage due to the cases before the Supreme Court—the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) and Proposition 8, both which impact LGBT parents and their children. The scholarly arguments between Marks, Regnerus, Amato, Eggebeen, and Osborne are ongoing, especially in the current political climate. In 2012 Marks critiqued the 2005 American Psychological Association’s brief on lesbian and gay parenting—the overarching question being: Are the assertions presented in the brief that there are “no differences” between the children of lesbian or gay parents relative to the children of heterosexual parents valid and precise, based on the cited scientific evidence? (p. 736). Regnerus (2012a) argued that “The scholarly discourse concerning gay and lesbian parenting . . . had increasingly posed a challenge to previous assumptions about the supposed benefits of being raised in biologically-intact, two-parent heterosexual households” (p. 753). His article was based on findings from the New Family Structures Study (NFSS)—a social-science data-collection project that fielded a survey to a large, (almost 3000) random sample of American young adults (ages 18-39) who were raised in different types of family arrangements. By examining *differences*, Regnerus (2012a) contradicted the “no differences” claim made by the APA brief on same-sex parenting that

Marks (2012) critiqued above. He maintained that the brand-new data coming out of the NFSS was “novel and noteworthy . . . [and] that a study with the methodological strengths of this one deserves scholarly attention and scrutiny” (p. 755).

With claims such as the following, scholarly attention and scrutiny did come. Regnerus (2012a) wrote, “[the] NFSS . . . clearly reveals that children appear most apt to succeed well as adults—on multiple counts and across a variety of domains—when they spend their entire childhood with their married mother and father, and especially when the parents remain married to the present day (p. 766). Amato (2012) contended that the articles by Marks and Regnerus provided useful opportunities for readers to think about the current state of research on children with gay and lesbian parents, and that the articles raised two sets of issues. One involved the scientific status of research on this topic (raised by Marks), e.g., “How good (or bad) is the existing evidence? And did the APA publication misrepresent this evidence? And, “the other involved concerns about law, social policy, and civil rights” (p. 771). Amato argued, “Clearly, having a gay or lesbian parent does not uniformly disadvantage children” (p. 774). He also stressed the importance of appropriate comparison groups in studies of gay- and lesbian-parented families—that married heterosexual parents should be matched with married same-sex parents (p. 773). From a civil rights perspective, Amato asserted that “all children should have the right to be raised by married parents”; yet, the debate over same-sex marriage cannot and should not be adjudicated on the basis of social science research. Amato objected to any findings that are used to restrict the civil rights of any group of individuals (p. 774).

Eggebeen (2012) contribution to the debate began with the question: “What can we learn from studies of children raised by gay or lesbian parents?” He suggested that the Marks and Regnerus papers “provide a challenge to the broad scholarly consensus that children raised by

gay or lesbian parents suffer no deficits” . . . but they prove nothing (p. 775). Instead, he compelled us to think about some of the negative findings resulting from the NFSS report, for instance, as far as “quality of parenting,” believing that “parents, regardless of sexual orientation, are equally motivated to provide the best care possible for their children,” but that “gay and lesbian parents and their children face challenges that may make parenting more difficult” . . . that “building and maintaining social support networks may be more difficult for gay and lesbian parents.” His suggestion was that we look to the considerable research which shows that the quality of intergenerational family relationships, friendships with other parents, and ties to community groups that encourage good parenting *matter* for both good parenting and for children’s well-being (p. 777).

Further scrutiny on the papers of Regnerus and Marks surfaced from demographer Osborne (2012), whose comments included: “We are left with little understanding about why family scholars should conduct research on children of same-sex relationships, why we might expect differences in outcomes between children of same-sex relationships and other family structures, and what the study findings imply” (p. 779). She contended that studies comparing heterosexual- and same-sex parents within a given family structure (e.g., married to married, cohabiting to cohabiting, unstable to unstable, etc.) may be a limitation in *all* studies because of the small sample size associated with children of same-sex parents. She also argued, “We lack theory to tell us exactly why gay and lesbian parenting would produce negative child outcomes. For all we know, the effect derives entirely from the stigma attached to such relationships and to the legal prohibitions that prevent same-sex couples from entering and maintaining ‘normal’ marital relationships” (p. 783).

The debate continued with Regnerus' (2012b) response to Amato, Eggebeen, and Osborne. Although he recognized and concurred with them on several issues (mostly the concern that organizations might utilize the findings to press a political program), Regnerus emphasized that he “never wavered from his interest in the empirical research questions underlying the [NFSS], e.g., what are the lives of adult children of men and women who have same-sex relationships like? Are they different in notable ways from others who report other household experiences? There was going to be a social-scientific story to tell, and I considered it my job to report it. That is what scientists are supposed to do” (p. 786). Regnerus did not waver! In his final statement, he wrote, “The biologically-intact, stable nuclear family may seem like an endangered species—it is not—but it remains the most secure environment for child development” (p. 787).

At first it appeared that Regnerus (2012a, 2012b) offered us some new research, yet it looked vaguely familiar to the research conducted during the first wave. The discourse has not changed. The NFSS still compared lesbian mothers (and gay fathers) to “intact bio families” (IBFs)—the “normal,” the favored, the dominant. It was reminiscent of Fitzgerald's (1999) warning, stated earlier in this review, concerning the underlying assumption that lesbian mothers should be judged on how well they compare to heterosexual mothers. Some of the conversations have not moved away from this assumption that having lesbian mothers is negative.

Limitations / Weaknesses of Existing Literature

As researchers carry out studies of lesbian-parented children, or consider them for the future, an often-heard concern is the issue of small sample sizes, focused on white, middle-class families, and that future research should include a larger sample size that is more representative of the various ethnic groups (Fenander, 1999; Goldberg, 2007; Ng, 1999; Parrella, 2003). When

looking at studies of the actual *parents*, Foster (2005) adds to the list: middle- to upper-class, well-educated, urban, out, non-addicted, and socially-connected lesbians living in North America, Britain, or Europe. Also, many of the earlier studies have been criticized on the grounds that the lesbian moms in research samples have been over-represented and that the diversity of their lifestyles, relationships and communities has not been recognized (Kershaw, 2000). As stated above, this issue of over-sampling is also true of the children and adult children of lesbian-parented families. Goldberg (2007) suggests that more studies are obviously needed that utilize representative, diverse samples, and that go beyond a comparative framework; reliance on this approach has limited the scope and direction of the field.

Method

Phenomenology

This study seeks to answer the question, “What *are* the experiences of lesbian-parented children?” According to Creswell (in *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions*, 1998), “a phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept of the phenomenon” (p. 50).

Phenomenology, then, serves as the foundation for a qualitative multi-method approach that focuses on the perceptions, feelings and experiences of the children, adolescents, and adults who were raised by lesbian mothers. The ultimate aim in doing phenomenological research is to come to a deeper understanding of what it means to be human and to become more fully who we are (Van Manen, n.d.). Max van Manen—considered a pioneer in developing phenomenology as a qualitative research method—also stresses the importance and the challenge of *writing* as an inherent dimension of interpretive inquiry. He argues that, “Writing is the way that phenomenology is practiced . . . and is at the very heart of the process”—that being attentive to “moments in the act of writing,” which he describes as “moments of seeking, entering, traversing, gazing, drawing, and touching” is part of the experience (Phenomenology Online, 2011). Because the main thrust of this research is to understand and interpret lived experience, and to remain as attentive as possible to the ways that we experience the world, it is the goal of this researcher to place importance on the moments he describes. In an article titled “Practicing Phenomenological Writing,” Van Manen (1984) outlines a methodological structure involving a dynamic interplay among four procedural activities. They include: turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests the researcher and commits her/him to the world; investigating experience as it is lived rather than as it is conceptualized; reflecting on the essential themes

which characterize the phenomenon; and describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting. The researcher is guided by these activities and describes below her relationship to this method of inquiry.

A genuine interest and commitment to the phenomenon and life world of lesbian-parented children is at the core of this research. Phenomenological research, Van Manen (1984) tells us, is always taken on by someone who is on a quest to make sense of a certain aspect of human existence. While exploring original, lived experiences, the researcher is required to “[stand] in the fullness of life, in the midst of the world of living relations and shared situations” (p. 40), and, in this study, to explore various lived experiences of lesbian-parented children. Phenomenology differs from other kinds of research in that it “makes a distinction between appearance and essence, between the things of our experience and that which grounds the things of our experience” (p. 41). The researcher, in reflecting on the essential themes which characterize lesbian-parented children, asks: What is it that makes a lived experience what it is? What is the nature of the experience? And, how are the experiences that the researcher discovers in her/his study translated into artful writing? Van Manen asserts that phenomenological writing is “thought brought to speech” (p. 41). In bringing thought to speech—or thought to writing—the researcher attempts to bring voice to the experience(s). For this reason, in a study about voices, and the lived experience of lesbian-parented children, phenomenological writing lends itself well.

In addition, phenomenology invites the researcher to “[glean] thematic descriptions from artistic sources” (Van Manen, 1984, p. 62). Van Manen compares the phenomenologist to the artist, where “the source of all work is the experiential lifeworld of human beings” . . . and that “the artist recreates experiences by transcending them” (p. 62). Phenomenology, then, is an ideal

method for research that anticipates the use of less traditional, but creative, data sources: for instance, accounts of experiences through poetry, film, and photo images.

Thematic Analysis

Qualitative thematic analysis is related to phenomenology in that it focuses on the human experience subjectively, and it examines and reflects on themes that characterize a phenomenon. This type of analysis emphasizes organization and rich descriptions of the data as well as showing relationships between themes. Using an inductive approach, thematic analysis first involves identifying and using themes. The themes are then allowed to emerge from the data.

This researcher begins to identify the themes during the initial reading of the texts, noting items of interest and importance in the margins. This was the case in many of the anthologies and books that contained narratives and informal study results of the children's lived experience (e.g. Arnup, 1995; Drucker, 1998; Garner, 2005; Howey & Samuels, 2000; Saffron, 1996; Siegal & Olson, 2001; Snow, 2004). The *themes* became a common thread between other lesbian-parented children and the researcher.

The next step in thematic analysis is to sort items of interest into proto-themes (or *initial* themes) (Subvista, 2010). This was achieved by creating a worksheet that listed the collected data sources vertically and the proto-themes across the top. The researcher then filled in the grid, naming the specific data sources that were appropriate to each proto-theme category. In this way, the researcher could see the prominent themes; see which of the themes in her own stories were in common with the themes that stood out for others; and see where the gaps might be. Because many of the proto-themes were related in some way, or overlapped in others, they were grouped together into categories or thematic clusters. Initial themes were identified and clusters were created.

In working through the process of doing thematic analysis, the next step is to examine the proto-themes and attempt initial definitions. This phase can be understood as “trawling back through the data” and examining how information was assigned to each proto-theme in order to evaluate its current meaning. A provisional name and a flexible definition for each emerging theme is created during this step (Subvista, 2010).

There is then a second “trawling back through the data” where the researcher carefully re-examines the text for any relevant incidents of data for each proto-theme. A process of re-contextualization takes place in this phase, whereby literary and artistic works are placed in a different context. All data is now considered in terms of the categories developed in the analysis. Because human perception is selective, and relevant data can be overlooked, this is a vital step in the analytic process, taking each theme separately and re-examining the original data for related information. Subvista (2010) also notes that pieces of data that may have previously been assigned to a theme may in fact be contradictory. Such contradictions should be sorted out at this point in the process.

The researcher then constructs the final form that each theme will take, and “the name, definition and supporting data are re-examined for the final construction of each theme.” All related material is used and re-contextualization takes place—this time focusing more closely on the underlying meaning of each theme. Each theme is reported and the data story is told (Subvista, 2010).

Thematic analysis is considered a valuable qualitative research method because it often captures the intricacies of meaning within the data. It is the goal of the researcher to interpret words, texts, and images from the collected data and to tell a meaningful story. This researcher

uses memoirs written by lesbian-parented children; anthologies compiled by lay-authors that include stories and poems written by lesbian-parented children; books written by adult children of lesbian or gay parents who seek understanding of their own growing-up experiences by comparing them to those of others, usually through informal surveys or questionnaires; personal narratives written by the researcher; heart-to-heart conversations with friends and family who have a history with the researcher; poetry written by lesbian moms and their children; documentary films that portray real-life issues for lesbian-parented families; and photos of lesbian-parented families.

Autoethnography

While thematic analysis is tightly woven into the phenomenological process, autoethnography is an essential thread in the analysis as well. In this study, the researcher functions autoethnographically as both researcher and as subject. Narratives from her own history and narratives from others are included—the focus being on the experiences and the researcher’s relationship to them. In the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2000), Ellis and Bochner define autoethnography as an autobiographical genre of research and writing that connects the personal to the cultural; although, “Like many terms used by social scientists, the meanings and applications of autoethnography have evolved in a manner that makes precise definition and application difficult” (p. 739). Ellis and Bochner name thirty-six like terms under the broad rubric of autoethnography—terms such as personal narratives, narratives of the self, personal experience narratives, and . . . lived experience (van Manen, 1990). Increasingly, however, autoethnography has become the term of choice in describing studies and procedures that connect the personal to the cultural, frequently appearing in titles of books, theses, sections

of books, articles, special issues of journals, and book series. Autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethnos), and on self (auto).

This study, in particular, calls for an approach where the researcher's experiences can be integrated into the thematic descriptions and analyses of others. It can be argued that such experiences, and the relationship the researcher has to the data, will enrich the understanding of the phenomenological quality of those experiences that might otherwise be lost in more traditional approaches to data and analysis. The autoethnographic component becomes necessary, not only in the analysis portion of this study, but in the overall phenomenological research because the researcher's experiences have often been missing from the literature.

Ellis and Bochner (2000) recommend that when doing autoethnography, the method (or form) should be allowed to evolve during the research process. Several suggestions include: beginning the thesis (or dissertation) with a short personal story to position oneself for the reader; tell one's longer story as a chapter; or integrate parts of one's experience into each participant's story (p. 757). In this study, the researcher's experiences are partially integrated into the theme segments of the Results/Analysis section and the complete stories are placed in an Appendix. In doing autoethnography, as in doing phenomenological research, the rewards are, "You come to understand yourself in deeper ways. And with understanding yourself comes understanding others. Autoethnography provides an avenue for doing something meaningful for yourself and the world . . ." (Ellis, 2000, p. 738)

Results

Secrecy / Disclosure

Moments remembered:

Mother's quiet words seemed to silence the fairy orchestra of frogs and cicada under her open bedroom window. For a moment, the whole world held its breath, and then the long howl of a coyote tore across the night.

(Hart, 2005b, p. 142)

Melissa Hart is the adult daughter of a lesbian mother who remembers vividly the moment when her mother came out to her. Her words draw us into an experience that for Melissa was alive with sound and place and time. What she remembers from three decades before as a prelude to her mother's coming out ended in a loud cacophony of confusion, chaos, and anger, "You're a *lesbian*?"

Many children experience their lesbian or gay parent's coming out in highly personal and distinctive ways. Oona, at thirteen, recalls "the crisp autumn afternoon" when her mom sat her down to talk—the time of day and the season as if it were yesterday (Arnup, p. 335). I, too, will never forget the season, and even the specific day of the week, when my mother chose to share with her, then, sixteen-year-old daughter that she was gay. I remember very few of the words, but I do remember the warmth, tenderness, and sensitivity in which my mother spoke. We were alone in the house; it was spring and a Friday afternoon. I remember this because the next day, when my mother's partner was driving me to work (I taught ballet classes on Saturday mornings), she said something like, "I understand that your mother talked to you yesterday (turning her head to see my reaction). If you have any questions, I'm here." It was at that moment I said to myself, "Oh, it *is* real. I thought it was a dream" (See Appendix A, p. 90).

Claire (33) was also sixteen when her mother told her. The two of them had gone out to lunch and, because of something Claire said, her mother decided to take the plunge and tell her

she was lesbian. “It was totally out of the blue,” Claire remembers. “[She] hadn’t had an inkling that [her mother] might say something like that.” Once she did, though, “a lot of things fell into place” (Saffron, 1998, p. 83-85). Similarly, for me, once my mom came out, my life made more sense—the people who had entered it, the comings and goings. The *knowing* can be a relief—a missing piece that helps answer questions a child may not understand.

As far as timing, I think my mom thought long and hard about when to tell me she was gay. I’ve often wondered if she chose that particular moment when I was sixteen because she was worried that others, including my friends, might have already figured it out and that I might learn from someone other than herself (see Appendix A, p. 92). She may have also been anticipating my upcoming stay with one of her lesbian friends in San Francisco, knowing that I would be witness to other relationships for which she had no control (see Appendix A, p. 113).

Other gay parents wonder why they were so worried to begin with; their children react with little more than a shrug of the shoulders. For some children, the news takes more than awhile to sink in. For others, learning about their parent’s sexual orientation was and is a non-issue or not *experienced* at all. It may be all they have ever known.

Being told / finding out:

Already knew – have always known. Amber (25) remembers her mom harboring a big secret that was obviously causing her a great deal of stress. When her mother sat her down to talk, Amber was relieved that what she had to tell her wasn’t something much more radical than coming out of the closet—like something having to do with her mother’s activism during the Vietnam War. “I had just turned sixteen and had known for years,” she said (Garner, 2005, p. 40). Like Amber, Oona knew prior to her mother’s telling; she was, in fact, happy about the disclosure (Arnup, 1995, p. 335).

For other children, who were born into—or who were very young when they first experienced their parent in a same-sex relationship—it may be all they have ever known. Katrina (17) was raised by her mother who also happens to be a lesbian. “It’s always been that way,” she says. “I don’t remember her sitting down and saying, ‘Katrina, I’m a lesbian.’ She didn’t need to” (Saffron, 1998, p. 40). Rosie (20), who has *two* gay parents, recalls that at age thirteen she asked her mother, “So, what exactly do you do with Joan?” With that question, Rosie doesn’t remember being conscious of knowing, but in retrospect, it was obvious that she did. It was her way of *asking* her mom to come out (Saffron, p. 134). Mark (29 and gay) didn’t so much ask his mother to come out, but his knowledge of it was certainly confirmed, when at age fourteen, she called him into the bedroom and said, “Look, I’ve got something to tell you.” His response was, “I already know, Mum. You and Liz are a couple of dykes” (Saffron, p. 110).

No big deal / fine / normal. A number of lesbian-parented children remember that their mother’s coming out was “no big deal,” it was “fine,” or it was “normal.” Of note is the age at which the child remembers being told, what the child took in and remembers from the moment, and at what age the child is now in the re-telling. For example, Falcon was fourteen when he shared the experience of his mother’s coming out in the book *Love Makes a Family* (Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999): “When my mom told me she was gay, I didn’t really mind. I thought it was her decision, not mine. I can’t change it, so I was happy for her. She was still my mother!” (p. 49). While Falcon may not have had a complete understanding of the *meaning* of his mother’s “decision” to come out or (was it?) her decision to be a lesbian, his devotion to her is clear. Sophia’s experience is one of *knowing* her whole life that her mom was gay. She remembers being six or seven when her mom “just talked to [her] about it casually.” When asked the question, “How does it feel to have a lesbian parent?” Sophia (now 13) replies, “I’m fine with it;

it's okay and it doesn't bother me (Snow, 2004, p. 27). Andrew (also 13) recalls, "I was so young when I first learned about my mom being gay; it was no big deal" (Snow, p. 65).

The "no big deal" attitude that some lesbian-parented children voice about their families is expressed this way because the children view their family structure as "normal." Rachel (19), for instance, describes how rooted her mother's lesbianism has been in her life:

My Mum's always been lesbian. She came out when I was two or three, and I've accepted it as totally normal. Her sexuality was just one other fact about her. It wouldn't have occurred to me to explain that my Mum had a girlfriend, any more than it would to explain why my Dad had one. I wouldn't have thought that needed explaining. I can't imagine what it would be like for either my Dad or my Mum to have anything but women partners. It's always been that way . . .

(Saffron, 1998, p. 117)

While Rachel grew up with a politically active and publically visible lesbian mother (Linda Bellos), Zoe (24) spent her early years in a communal house with lesbians. In her words, "I grew up assuming and accepting that being lesbian was perfectly normal and natural" (Saffron, 1998, p. 149). Rikki (24 and gay), on the other hand, has no clear memory of his mother's orientation as a young child. It wasn't something that was talked about openly; rather, it was something that he put together himself. "I knew what lesbianism was and I knew that's what she was. It wasn't traumatic for me at all." Rikki tells how his mother never really *announced* that she was lesbian, but didn't see herself as being closeted either. Instead, she would say, "I don't hide anything, but I don't scream it from the rooftops" (Saffron, p. 124-125). In the 1960s and 1970s, when Rikki's mother was raising three children, lesbians were invisible. Some simply chose to be private.

Like Rikki, Rayna (16) put it all together without an actual coming out conversation initiated by her mother. A daughter of two gay parents—and a child of the 80s—Rayna was the one who did the telling:

When I was twelve years old, I told my mom that she was a lesbian. My mother was becoming friendly with a woman who lived down the street, and then they started hanging around each other a lot. She was here all the time! She wouldn't go home. Once I wore her socks by mistake. It was just ridiculous. So I asked my mom, "What is your relationship with her?" And she said, "Oh, we're just good friends." I said, "I think you are a lesbian." She said, "Well, I haven't done anything yet, but I'll let you know." And I said, "Watch, in about three weeks you're going to come back and tell me. And she did." (Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999, p. 79-81)

Unlike Rayna, many children are not so matter-of-fact or in-the-know. For twelve-year-old Emily (21) and her younger sister Jai, their experience went like this: "We were sitting in the car and Mum said, 'Do you know what a lesbian is?' We didn't have much of an idea at all. Mum then said, 'Well, I'm a lesbian.' [We] just said, 'Oh right, fine.' Mum went on to say that we shouldn't talk to school friends and people in the village about it" (Saffron, 1996, p. 71).

Anger / disgust / confusion. The children's initial response when their parents come out is not always met with "okay, fine." Rayna's younger brother Edward (12) explains: "I was twelve when I found out my dad is gay. I already knew about my mom being a lesbian. I was kind of mad and confused. I thought, 'How can I have two gay parents?'" Adam (25) had a similar response when, at age twelve, he learned about his mother's lesbianism. He remembers

being “disgusted” and “angry,” and not understanding how a thing like this could happen (Garner, 2005, p. 41).

Anna (27), at thirteen, and her sister Molly (25), at eleven, came right out and asked their mother if she was gay. The question was answered with, “Girls, we need to talk.” In that moment Anna remembers that she and Molly were “hysterical.” “We were crying. All of us were crying. And we were pissed.” We said, “Why can’t you two just be friends?” In response, Anna recalls her mother taking the three of them out to dinner, because “when there is a crisis,” that is what her family always does (Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999, p. 126-127).

In the case of Kate (24), daughter of two gay parents, the news of her mother’s lesbianism was a shock. “There was never any reason for me to believe our mother was lesbian. She’s always been a *normal* mum.” Two weeks after telling Kate and her sister about their father, she sat them down again and said, “I’m gay too.” Kate shouted at her mum, “How can you do this? Why do you have to put us through so much crap? Here I am, living in a mobile home, got a gay father, and now you’re telling me you want to be gay as well. God, how much do I have to put up with you?” As an adolescent, Kate recalls wanting to punish and hurt her mother; but, at twenty-four, she describes her mom as being “stronger,” “calmer,” “more at peace with herself,” and “happy” since coming out. She also notes that her parents were married in the 1960s and that “being gay was quite a hard thing . . . so they didn’t admit it to themselves” (Saffron, 1996, p. 91-97).

Children often experience a mixture of emotions when a parent comes out, and the emotions and understandings change over time. For Justin (10), “I was probably about four or five years old when I first found out what gay meant. My mom talked to me about it, but I can’t remember how she explained it. I remember feeling a little strange and a little confused; I guess

I didn't really know what it meant. But now I feel okay with it; it's perfectly all right . . .” (Snow, 2004, p. 18). Mandy (24) admits she was never angry or ashamed about her mom's lesbianism—that, for all her life, it had been normal to her. Still, she was “fearful of being rejected” by others and frightened of their reactions once they knew about her mother (Saffron, 1996, p. 99 & 102).

Need for language. The mixed emotions and confusion sometimes experienced by lesbian-parented children may indicate a lack of language to use. When Les (35) was growing up, she knew that her mother had a relationship with a woman, but the lack of discussion around the issue “left her trying to figure things out on her own.” She wishes she had had the language to use to describe her own relationship with her mother's partner and her mother's partner's relationship to her mother (Garner, 2005, p. 50). It was in this way that my own mother first shared her story with me—by telling me how she loved Lois. It was pretty obvious by my response that I didn't understand. Without a thought, I replied, “Well, I love Lois too!” It was then that she smiled and explained that this was a different kind of love (see Appendix A, p. 90).

Mandy (24) recalls: “My Mum apparently told me that she was a lesbian when I was four. They were just words, and I didn't understand what they meant” (Saffron, 1996, p. 99-102). Abby Garner was only five when she innocently said that something was “queer” while in a car with her mother and eight-year-old brother. The ensuing conversation with her mother was the closest thing to *how* she found out her dad was gay:

“We don't use that word in our family. It's a not-nice word for someone who is gay. Abby, do you know what 'gay' means?”

“Yes, it's when two women or two men love each other. Like, Dad and Russ are gay.”

From this experience Abby learned that just because “some people think it’s terrible to be gay,” she would have to be careful about whom she told (Garner, 2005, p. 38-9).

Telling others / others finding out. Coming out is an ongoing process that extends to the children as well as the gay parent. Some children have to make daily choices about *if* and *how* to come out about their families—for instance, to their friends, classmates, teachers, and future spouses. Although the process may become less critical as the child grows up, and as societal reactions change for the better, children of gay parents are aware that telling others about their family may have a negative impact. The children’s experience often involves who *not* to tell and parallels their parent’s experience of holding a secret, coming out, and testing the waters.

Marc (18) “I was fourteen when my mom and I got to know Bonnie (‘other mom’). I saw right away how happy Mom was with her, and I hoped she would stay around” . . . “I don’t tell people about my family. It’s hard to bring girlfriends home because I don’t know how they will react” (Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999, p. 39).

Wendy: “I didn’t come out about my family to any of my friends in high school, and I always introduced my mother’s partner as our roommate. Some years later, I realized that my friends knew my mother was a lesbian, but at the time I was much too uncomfortable to talk about it. Even though I wasn’t consciously trying to hide a ‘horrible secret,’ I instinctively knew that I didn’t want to tell my friends. When I went to college, I immediately told all my friends and it wasn’t a problem” (Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999, p. 134).

Sarah: “When I get asked about my family, I sometimes say, ‘You don’t need to know,’ and sometimes I tell them. Sometimes I like to talk about my family and sometimes I don’t. Most of the time, I only tell my good friends because I know I can count on them not to tell

anyone else. Sometimes it's not easy to tell people, but usually they won't stop asking until you tell" (Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999, p. 250).

It was difficult at times for Adrian Hood, daughter of singer-songwriter, feminist-activist, lesbian mom Alix Dobkin. In a mother-daughter conversation (as told to Toni Armstrong, Jr., May, 1989 *Hot Wire*), Adrian reveals:

"I'm proud of you, too. I am, I have my wishes—wish you weren't as out as you are; I wish that being lesbian, which is something I respect, wasn't such a major part of your life—that it wasn't your career, your lifestyle, your everything. That is often hard". . . "It's hard when someone says, 'What does your mother do?' If it's someone that I can't tell you're a lesbian, well, 'She's a folksinger . . .' 'Oh really? Does she perform ever?' It's hard. You are a lesbian and there's no way of hiding it" (Arnup, 1995, p. 328).

For Adrian, it was near impossible to keep any secret, even if she had wanted to, because her mother was "out" so publically. For Jake (now 22), it was easier. When in high school, he was "intentional about structuring his life so that he would not have to be out about his family." He kept school and home separate and maintained his silence almost until graduation. He isolated his social life to being just at school, until he decided to tell a friend who was "pretty politically liberal," and she basically said, "So what?" After that, Jake told everybody. "It was such a liberating experience, he said. "I can't even explain how liberating [it] was." He compared it to a "person who is obnoxiously gay [immediately after coming out], and just has to tell everybody." That was Jake (Garner, 2005, p. 117-118).

Anna (27) didn't tell anyone about her mom until she was out of high school, although she found out later, they all knew. One friend expressed to her that even though she knew she wanted to hear it from Anna. It never mattered because this friend always loved Anna's mother (Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999, p. 127-128). I found this to be true in my experience as well. Many of my friends knew my mother because she played the piano at the ballet studio where we danced . . . and they loved her. Recently I asked one of my peers, "How and when did you learn that Miss Barbara was gay? Did you always know, or did someone explain it to you when you were younger?" Her reply was: "Gee, I don't know if I knew until after college, never really thought about it, or else didn't even know about homosexuality, or care one way or the other."

Kate (24) waited until late adolescence to say anything to her friends about her parents' orientation. It was a big secret she was keeping. She remembers telling her boyfriend about it, and that "it was lovely to have a bit of support, because it was a massive burden [she] was carrying." Moving to the city, and to a university, where people were more liberal made things easier. Having two gay parents was "cool" and "trendy." The burden has become lighter as she's grown up and talked about it more. (Saffron, 1996, p. 91-97)

As a child, Tina (29) followed her mother's example of silence. "I tried to act as if I didn't care . . . that it was *her* business. The truth is that I was terrified to speak on the subject . . . What would people say about me if they found out? I decided early on that it was probably safer to stay in the closet" (Garner, 2005, p. 98).

Adam (25), says (about his high school days), "I probably would have rather died or something before I would let someone at school find out" (Garner, 2005, p. 115).

Arthur, when in high school, “had no control over whom to come out to and when to come out because his family was so visible.” His mother and her partner opened a feminist bookstore in their hometown in southern Mississippi (Garner, 2005, p. 115).

Meema Spadola (daughter of lesbian mom and filmmaker, *Our House: a very real documentary about kids of gay and lesbian parents*) states that her mother was initially very scared about having her story be told in a documentary film and expressed strongly to her daughter, “You have no right to out me” (Howey & Samuels, 2000, p. 127).

Zoe (24) describes the experience of telling others: “I usually try to tell people that my Mum’s a lesbian after they’ve already met her. I don’t think I’ve ever told anyone and they’ve said, ‘Oh no!’ Instead, it’s always been, ‘So! That’s really exciting.’” She told a couple school friends when she was twelve. They just said, “So?” It was no big thing to them. “I find that it’s a much bigger deal working up to telling people than actually telling them; it’s important to me that I tell them because it’s such a big part of my life. In some ways I think it’s really important that people know, because telling helps make it more accepted.” As a teenager, though, Zoe remembers making sure that there weren’t any lesbian leaflets or books lying around when her friends came to visit (Saffron, 1996, p. 149-51).

Although I don’t remember ever concerning myself with the books, literature, art, music, or décor that lived in my house growing up, I remember a similar story to Zoe’s from just a few years back. I had hired a woman to come in and do a little housecleaning. I had been storing many of my LGBT research materials in a portable rack. I don’t know what possessed me to lift up the rack and move it as far as my clothes closet before I stopped and said out loud, “What in the world are you doing?” Ironically, I was hiding my research books in the *closet* (see Appendix A, p. 105).

Now 31, Nicole recalls that in her mid-twenties, after returning from Africa and the Peace Corps, her mother had changed. “My mother was ‘out’ and happy, but I was confused. Over the years, I had internalized my mother’s fears and society’s homophobia. I had become sensitized to the reactions of others and felt vulnerable. I didn’t have the skills or the esteem to ‘out’ myself as the daughter of a lesbian” (Snow, 2004, p. 55)

Tina, on the other hand, came out about her lesbian mom as a spontaneous reaction to something her then boyfriend said to her when they witnessed two men holding hands on their college campus. Tina’s boyfriend blurted, “If I could just put them all in a hot-air balloon and blow it up, the world would be a better place!” Tina exploded . . . slapped him, and yelled, “Would my mother be on that hot-air balloon, too? She’s gay also! Would she have to die for your stupid-ass cause, too?” Tina had for years endured homophobia without saying anything about it. She recalls the moment when she finally did: “I slapped my ex for all of the years people told me that homosexuality was a sin. I slapped him for all of the secrecy and ignorance that envelops the black community about being gay. I slapped him for every child with a gay parent that lost their voice and [was] denied a part of their existence to ‘belong’ to a hypocritical society. I yelled to release all my [pen-up] anger, frustration, and confusion. I yelled because I love my mother. I was tired of being silent.” (Garner, 2005, p. 119)

My own son—and proud grandson of his two lesbian grandmas—sent me a text message in the autumn of his first year of college: “Mom, I just saw two guys holding hands, walking on campus. I’m SO happy!”

Fear / rejection / homophobia. When twelve-year-old Edward found out his mom was lesbian, his most immediate fear was that if he were to bring his friends home—and they found out—they wouldn’t want to come over again (Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999, p. 81).

For Nicole (31), the decision of whether or not to be ‘out’ as the daughter of a lesbian has been an ongoing struggle. She explains: It is “partially because of the real risks—people lose their children, their jobs, and their lives—and partially because of the fear that my mother inadvertently bequeathed to me by remaining vigilantly ‘in the closet’ while I was growing up.” Nicole remembers when she was ten years old, her mother and roommate were “very discreet.” (Her father had custody.) She and her sisters were led to believe that they were just buddies, splitting the bills, living together out of convenience. At about thirteen, she began to question, “Why did my mom share a bed with her ‘best friend?’” One afternoon, in the heat of an argument, Nicole angrily accused her mother of being gay. Resigned, her mother sighed and admitted it . . . but, asked Nicole not to tell anyone. Nicole was hurt and confused . . . “Why didn’t she tell me before?” She silently tucked her feelings away and settled into a pattern of *denial*. “I kept my mother’s sexuality a secret, as she requested. I didn’t talk about it with anyone . . . I denied it to myself and played along with the charade, constructing a false identity that was acceptable and safe to present to others. (Snow, 2004, p. 54-57)

Molly (24) did not come out to her friends until she was eighteen. She was always “worried about being rejected and not fitting in.” She was also afraid her friends wouldn’t like her family and that they wouldn’t understand how wonderful they were.” At a conference (age 18) Molly and her sister met other kids who had gay parents and discovered that they were not alone. She could finally speak about the secret and how awful it was to keep (Kaesler & Gillespie, 1999, p. 126).

Selective disclosure / the “acceptance” test. Many children of gay parents are selective about *who* they disclose to and the importance to them for a positive response. The following data supports the idea that gay-parented children will risk losing a relationship with someone

over their families not being accepted. Sometimes they are simply selective about whom they tell, and other times they put them to the test:

“I was not comfortable ‘coming out of the closet’ with my mom’s life-choice.” Oona remained silent until her late teens, at which time she began coming out to her friends. She decided then that they would either accept or support her and her family, or she would find new friends. Oona believes now that the “silence . . . [is] the most harmful part of living in a lesbian-parented family” (Arnup, 1995, p. 337).

Gretchen (13) uses this tactic: “When I meet a new kid at school, I find out if they can be my friend by telling them that my parents are lesbians. If they get totally turned off and say, ‘Yuck! You’re disgusting,’ then I know they’re not going to be my friend because they can’t accept my family. I think I have pretty good taste in friends because when I tell them about my family, most of them say, ‘Okay, that’s fine’” Gretchen also seems quite at ease and unafraid that others know about her family dynamic. In fact, she enjoys the shock value. “When I was walking down the hall one day at school, this boy said to me, ‘I heard this rumor that your parents are lesbians. Is it true?’ I said, ‘Yeah, it’s true. What’s your point?’ His jaw just dropped down to the floor. It was so funny! He didn’t know what to make of the fact that I didn’t seem to care.” Gretchen also expressed a strong feeling of pride for her family simply for being who they are—happy that they are so open with friends, teachers, and the world (Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999, p. 43).

For Tashina (18), “All my friends know my mom is a lesbian, and they don’t care. I tell them, ‘I just wanted to let you know about my mom because if you can’t accept [her], you can’t accept me.’ That’s exactly how I deal with my boyfriends. Out of all my boyfriends, I’ve never had any problems with telling any of them. They just say, ‘That’s cool’” (Kaeser & Gillespie,

1999, p. 204). I did exactly the same thing as Tashina—putting my boyfriends through the test and judging them by what and how much they could accept. Most of them passed; the others didn't matter (see Appendix A, p. 102).

Although Rayna (16) and her brother describe being very protective of their mother, “she’s fairly out.” She doesn’t walk around with a T-shirt that says, ‘We’re queer. We’re here. Deal with it.’ But if you just hang around long enough, you can pretty much figure it out” (Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999, p. 80).

Some children may not put their friends to the test, but are still selective about when and how they reveal themselves to others. The following describes the experiences of three sisters—adult daughters of lesbian mother Christine (Drucker, 1998, p. 178-79):

Marybeth (35): “I only talk about it if the subject is brought up and in a situation that it seems okay.”

Jean (29): “When and if it comes up, I do talk about my mom’s orientation. I am not ashamed of her.”

Tara (29 – Jean’s twin sister): “My close friends know about my mom . . . I talk about mom’s sexual orientation sometimes, but not with people whom I know have closed minds.”

Then there is the serendipitous coming out about one’s own lesbian mom to another lesbian or gay parent. I’ve experienced this twice in the past year, due to the questions people ask about my research. Once they discover that I grew up with a gay mom in the 1950s and 1960s, they respond with surprise, interest and encouragement (see Appendix, p. 112).

Protection / Safety / Trust

. . . when she kept the silence for her children

— (see Appendix A, p. 96)

Lesbian mothers often try to protect their children from harm—to keep them safe—by remaining silent. Yet, “protection” goes beyond a mother holding a secret; it is revealed in the way that children protect their mothers; in the way that friends protect their friends who have lesbian moms; and in the way the LGBT community protects one another. Oftentimes this becomes a matter of trust. Who can the parent trust, and who can the children trust, and who can the parent trust with her children? Is it safe? The following statements demonstrate the many ways in which children experience matters of protection, safety and trust.

Kirk (30), when he was 11, “just needed to tell somebody,” [about his family] but wasn’t sure he could trust them (Garner, 2005, p. 117).

Meema would “avoid the truth” about her lesbian mom because she was afraid of disapproval and because she was constantly reminded that it wasn’t safe to tell the truth (Howey & Samuels, 2000, p. 126).

Although she didn’t know at the time, Emily (21) knows now that her mother was only “trying to protect” her and her sister Jai when they were told they shouldn’t talk to school friends and people in the village about their mother’s lesbianism. She “didn’t understand the social significance and stigmatization attached to being a lesbian” when she was only twelve (Saffron, 1998, p. 71).

Claire (33), on the other hand, was told at sixteen that her mother was lesbian. She recalls her mother saying that “the reason for letting us assume that her [mother’s] girlfriends were *lodgers* [emphasis added] was to protect us. What we didn’t know couldn’t hurt us” (Saffron, 1998, p. 84).

Mandy (24), who endured her mother and father's custody battle in the 1980s, remembers: "Mum did her best to keep some stability in our lives while [the custody case] was going on and to protect me so I wasn't connected to the real craziness of it all." Later, Mandy understood that her father's ultimate plan was to take her away from her mother—a mother who was "frightened" and "desperate" at the possibility of losing custody of her only child. Worried to see her mother completely devastated, "[Mandy] felt [she] had to protect her." "I didn't see her as weak but as human" (Saffron, 1998, p. 100).

In retrospect, Nicole (31) recognizes that her mother was "doing the best that she could at the time—that her intentions were to protect the family." Her mother told her recently: "I didn't want to burden you or embarrass you, as I know had been the case with other children I had known or read about." "I wanted to protect you" (Snow, 2004, p. 57).

As a child of the 1950s and 60s, issues of protection, safety, and trust around the topic of lesbian-parented families were a common theme in my own experiences growing up. For my mother, it was extremely important to know who to trust in the straight community in the 1960s (see Appendix A, p. 98). From almost everyone, she kept the silence—for her own protection and for the protection of her children (see Appendix A, p. 96). She would often travel to San Francisco during the summer month when my brother and I were with our father. It was in the City where "the experience of being gay was safe at times" (see Appendix A, p. 97), as it was at the ballet studio where her position as piano accompanist was one of the safest occupations available to her (see Appendix A, p. 110).

Once my brother and I knew our mother was lesbian (1967 & 1969, respectively), the gay community seemed more comfortable around us. They could be themselves and they could trust us to be okay because our mother told them so and because we *knew* (see Appendix A, p. 90).

Even today, as I come out about my family to others in the LGBT community, I sense their trust in how they interact with me (see Appendix A, p. 103).

My mother was not confident, however, with my young friends having sleepovers. She had a secret to keep and a reputation and children to protect. I remember, she would allow me to stay overnight with one friend, in particular. My mother knew that the overnight experiences at this friend's home were not only healthy ones for me, but that I would be with people she trusted" (see Appendix A, p. 92). On the other hand, if friends were to stay at my home, there was always the fear that my friends might go home and tell their mommies what they had seen. I had no realization of this growing up, and it was a surprise to me when I discovered recently that I, too, worried about trusting certain people from entering my home and seeing my stuff—specifically, the materials for this research (see Appendix A, p. 105).

As I grew older, and became a parent myself, I found it "unimaginable . . . that any parent would not trust [my mother] with their children." It was the early 1980s. I had been to a mother's meeting (a requirement of my son's pre-school), and we were told by the group leader that we should go home and call our legislator to insist that homosexuals not be allowed to teach our children. "I remained silent, unable to speak about the rage inside me." Because my mother was a piano teacher and taught private lessons to young children, I was extremely worried about her and about other gays who were teachers. I kept the silence that night to protect the community and to protect myself from the homophobia that filled the space I found myself in. I felt strongly enough about the issue, though, that I left a message with my legislator to the effect, "I'd probably trust [a gay teacher] with my kids even more than if he/she were straight" (see Appendix A, p. 100).

Family / Activism

My family when I was growing up was like the gay Ozzie and Harriet. Mom had dinner on the table, and her partner was into gardening and carpentry. It was really nice. I have no complaints. I hope that one day people can talk about their gay parents like most people talk about their mother and father.

(Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999, p. 232)

The ways in which children of LGBT parents experience “family” is as varied as it is in the straight world. For Angela (24), who grew up with moms resembling a “gay Ozzie and Harriet,” her experience was a positive one and so unlike those of her friends. Many of them, she explains, “have experienced sexual abuse or alcoholism or other issues in their families. They come from dysfunctional families, so I don’t fit in with them. I don’t know anyone like me, where we can just hang out and simply talk about our good childhoods.” (Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999, p. 232)

Children often relate the struggles they experience with people who simply do not understand their unique family dynamic. Anna (27), for instance, maintains, “I don’t have a problem with religious people, but when people tell me that my family is bad and is going to hell because there’s the wrong kind of love in it, it makes no sense to me. All I can ask them is, ‘Why don’t you meet us first, and then make a decision?’” (Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999, p. 128)

Sol, at eleven, was confused by the fact that “Some people don’t understand everything about my family. They ask me, ‘Who is your real mom?’ I say, ‘They are both my real moms.’ I have a great family full of lots of love. That is why it is hard for me to understand why some people are so afraid of us” (Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999, p. 154).

Natan (15) assumes he doesn’t need to explain his family structure because most of his friends already know. His experience of having two moms, he views as a positive one: “Most kids think what their parents tell them to think. I’ve been exposed to more ideas, so that I can

think for myself instead of just listening to what other people say. I think I've learned something from being in this family" (Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999, p. 176).

Many children have known nothing else than to have same-sex parents. Others experience divorce, single-parenting, and the arrival of a new family member as I did. "Once my mother came out to me, the dynamics of our family changed. No longer did my brother and I live with our single mom and a roommate" (see Appendix A, p. 102). My mother's partner had already moved in, and I was reaping the rewards of a blended family (as in a marriage), along with new family traditions and relationships (see Appendix A, p. 94). Her family members, as well, were getting used to a new dynamic—the fact that her partner was the mother of two teenagers. In many ways our presence validated and legitimized my mother for the very reason that she *had* children (see Appendix A, p. 106).

Abigail may have only been five when she found out she had a gay parent, but from that moment on, "[She] began a lifetime of seeking out allies and avoiding people [she] perceived as homophobic and therefore threats to [her] family" (Garner, 2005, p. 39). She would later become a nationally-recognized advocate for family equality. Activism among the children of LGBT parents is strong and growing.

Ashley (20), who was born in the early years of the gayby boom (1980s) says, "I struggle as a queer activist to carve out a place for queerspawn in queer communities." While in college she was involved in organizing communities and to show why the inclusion of LGBT-parented children is so important: "Many of us come from communities in which the definitions of gender and sexuality are far more fluid than those of mainstream America. We are queer by birthright. We *are* the change in our nation that queer communities strive to make through

activism. But you must make room for us to be your legacy—to be that change” (Garner, 2005, p. 223).

This study shows that activism on the part of LGBT-parented children can be, and often is, an off-shoot of the family dynamic. Abigail’s activism began shortly after she graduated from college, when she volunteered to lead a support group for teenagers of gay parents. Born in 1975, she had similar thoughts to mine in that she wondered if she had anything to offer young people who were living at a time of “rapid changes in attitudes toward homosexuality” (Garner, 2005, p. 3). What Abby discovered instead was that they faced the same issues and had the same questions and concerns that she had had several years before. “Our common ground was greater than our differences” (p. 4). It was then that Abby’s activism, and the sharing of her experiences as the daughter of a gay father, began.

Increasingly common is a call to activism that begins at a much younger age. Sol Kelley-Jones, on the night before her eleventh birthday, received the “Young Civil Libertarian of the Year” award from the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) (Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999, p. 154-155). The daughter of lesbian parents, Sol was increasingly targeted for her activism and pride during her middle school years; but, she refused to be silenced. Instead, she turned her energies toward creating forums for other marginalized youth. Now, age twenty-six, her legacy lives on through her work with the Proud Theater (Proud Theater, 2012).

My first call to activism came much later than Sol’s. At fifty-nine I had attended a screening of the film *Gen Silent* on the UW Tacoma campus and felt a deep connection to the elders featured in the film. It was then I realized I might have something to give back to the generation of lesbian and gay elders who raised me (see Appendix A, p. 103). I felt the call again when I marched in the 2012 Seattle Pride Parade behind Colonel Margarethe (Grethe)

Cammermeyer—who in 1990 first challenged the military’s antigay policy—and her wife, artist Diane Divelbess (see Appendix A, p. 108). On the back of Margarethe’s tee-shirt were her words:

We are your daughters, your sisters, your sons, your nurses, your mechanics, your athletes, your police, your politicians, your fathers, your doctors, your soldiers, your mothers. We live with you, care for you, help you, protect you, teach you, love you, and need you. All we ask is that you let us. We are no different. We want to serve, like you. Need love, like you. Feel pain, like you. And we deserve justice, like you.

Community / Support

Orson (30) – The gay community and the gay culture, I grew up in that. To think that that's not a part of who I am or who I have become would be denial.

(Garner, 2005, p. 193)

The children's involvement in gay culture and in the gay community has a great deal to do with the openness of one's parent and the time in which they live. For some in this study, the experience and the need for support from peers, from parents, and from the community were absent while they were growing up. They felt isolated, as if there were no other children like them. Others were involved in community gatherings from the start.

Peer support. Oona's mother came out to her when she was thirteen years old. Reflecting back to that time, she tells about her family (Oona, her mom, her mom's partner, and her mom's partner's son) and their involvement in a lesbian parenting group: "For some time, I was the only teenager and the only girl in the group. While the mothers chatted, the little boys played, and I would stand around, unsure of my place. I really needed a supportive peer group at that time, and unfortunately, I didn't have one. This absence succeeded in alienating me more from the idea of our gay family. For some time, our family was more a 'living arrangement' for me. That's not to say that I did not care for my [family]. It's just that I did not feel supported in the way that society told me I should be supported" (Arnup, 1995, p. 337-8).

When Molly (25) was eighteen, her sister Anna (27) called her up and suggested that the two of them attend their first Gay and Lesbian Parents Coalition International Conference, for free, if they would provide childcare for the little kids: "It was the first time we met other kids who had gay parents. We realized that there was a lot that we weren't dealing with. We cried for three days. There were eight kids in the room and every kid was crying. We just passed around the tissues" (Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999, p. 127).

Angela (24) remembers, when in eighth grade (early 1980s), that her school had a support group for children of gay parents: “I knew who the children of lesbians were because their moms were all friends of my mother, so I was shocked to see that lots of these children didn’t show up for this group . . . One girl I knew came to the support group and never came again. I said to her, ‘This group is so cool. Why don’t you come back?’ She said, ‘My mother isn’t really gay.’ I thought that was pretty sad. I was really proud of my mom being a lesbian . . .” (Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999, p. 232-3)

Some children appreciate the need for contact with other children who have lesbian or gay parents. Josh (12) explains: “Every month we go to a lesbian parents’ group. It’s a bit boring. The adults just go and talk and I sit downstairs playing darts . . . There are lots of other children, but I’m the oldest. I would like a group for kids my age who have lesbian mothers. I don’t know what kinds of things we’d talk about—the same things we talk about anyway—but at least I would feel safe. In case of a slip of the tongue—saying something about lesbians—it wouldn’t matter.” (Saffron, 1996, p. 180)

Rikki (34) concurs that, “What was missing for my mother and for us was a sense that there was a community of people like us. It would have helped us to feel normal. One of my mother’s girlfriends had children and they lived with us for about two years. So we knew that there were other lesbians with children” (Saffron, 1996, p. 180).

Zoe (24) remembers that as a teenager (1980s), she tried to form a support group for the children of lesbians and gay men. She was “feeling positive” about her mother’s orientation and wanted to pass it on to others: “Unfortunately, the support group didn’t ever get off the ground . . . It’s hard to find children of lesbians who are having difficulties with their mothers’ lesbianism, though they’re the ones who most need a support group” (Saffron, 1996, p. 181).

Melissa (at 35) wrote in *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide*: “Throughout my adolescence, I assumed that my siblings and I were the only children of gay, lesbian, or bisexual (GLB) parents. In 1979, we were removed by court order from my mother’s house and allowed to visit her only two weekends a month. She and her partner weren’t politically active. Their lesbian friends had no kids, and coming out about my mother to my classmates didn’t feel safe, so I missed the opportunity to meet others like me” (Hart, 2005a, p. 1).

Parental support. In Ian’s case, looking back, he recognizes that his mother was going through a rough time, trying to find a new identity after years of an unsatisfying ‘straight’ marriage: “Only later, when she had achieved a greater degree of self-acceptance, could she look at me and see how I was doing. But when I was ten years old, I had no one to turn to for advice on dealing with gay people or those who hated them” (Howey & Samuels, 2000, p. 107).

Community support. To have and to feel community support is one of the experiences strongly held by this researcher. Not only in my growing up experiences, but in my experiences as an adult, the theme of “support” from both the gay and straight community emerges.

I first felt the kind of support sought by the gay community, and received by my mother, when she told me the story of a trusted friend who was there for her when she needed it most. She knew where to turn in seeking out this friend—a parent and straight ally—who could help her with a situation that had occurred with my then teenage brother. I was comforted then, and am comforted now, to know that back in the 1960s she knew with all certainty that there were those in the straight community who would stand by her (see Appendix A, p. 98).

More recently, my experience with the community has been through the connections made with LGBT parents interested in this study about lesbian-parented children and in feeling my support of them reciprocated (see Appendix A, p. 112).

In a poem called *Returning*, my son “[understood] the haunting, breathless feeling of belonging, of returning . . . as [did] I.” Our visit to San Francisco (2010) and to my mother’s favorite haunts in the gay community had a lasting impact on daughter and grandson. Together, we experienced “belonging” as I witnessed his connection with the community, and he witnessed mine (see Appendix A, p. 96).

I experienced again this feeling of belonging when I attended my first pride parade in 2012. More than anything, I wanted to be “out there” marching with other allies, especially last year: partly because of *Gen Silent*, partly because of writing the stories of my childhood experiences, and partly because of the immense pride I have for my mother, the parenting I received from her and from her partners, and of the community as a whole. Little did I know, I would be walking right behind Colonel Margarethe “Grethe” Cammermeyer—who in 1990 first challenged the military’s antigay policy—and her wife, artist Diane Divelbess. Marching behind the banner of the Episcopal Church, they felt the support and inclusiveness as did I (see Appendix A, p. 108).

Insiders. When Meema left home at seventeen to attend a small liberal arts college outside of New York City, she encountered a different kind of support which came surprisingly from her new *straight* friends and classmates. As she told them she was the daughter of a lesbian, some exclaimed with “admiration and envy”: “That’s totally cool,” or “You’re so lucky.” “In the straight world at least [Meema] had gained entrée into a minority group” (Howey & Samuels, 2000, p. 126).

It can be a familiar experience for children of LGBT-parented children to feel like insiders in the gay community at certain times in their lives. I feel particularly connected to the generation of elders featured in the film *Gen Silent*. These people are near the age that my

mother and her partner would have been, were they alive today. At one particular point in the film, two lesbian elders (who reminded me a great deal of my two moms) were asked the question, “How do you explain [. . .] to a straight person?” One of them replied, “They’re weird. They’re not tuned in.” I turned to the friend sitting next to me, with tears in my eyes, and said, “*I’m* tuned in.” A lesbian mom herself, she nodded, “Yes, you are.” I understand and feel comfortable with their quirky behaviors—one of them singing, “I’ll Build a Stairway to Paradise” as she rode backwards on her stair lift, arms stretched out like she was performing on the Broadway stage! I’m at ease and familiar with the artistically-appointed interiors of many a gay boy’s home—at home, where the closet doesn’t exist (see Appendix A, p. 103).

Homophobia / Bullying

I sometimes feel that homophobic people are the “perverted,” as they insist on hating something that can be, and most often is, very caring and beautiful — the “blended” gay family.

(Hayes in Arnup, 1995, p. 338)

Children often experience bullying simply because they have an LGBT parent; others, because they have more than one. Bullying ranges from the somewhat harmless teasing to the extremely hurtful and violent extreme.

Bullying. In the film *Our House* (2002), Ryan (15-year-old daughter of Vickie) was excited to share with her friends at school the news of her mom’s upcoming wedding. “My mom’s getting married,” she exclaimed. “I’m going to be in a wedding!” But, these innocent comments that had come from love and pride backfired viciously due to the fact that her mom was marrying a woman. Ryan was “put through hell,” her mother explains. She was pushed, she was shoved in the hallways . . . several times she was shoved so hard that she dropped her books, which were then kicked across the floor. Ryan lost all her friends one by one. In time, her mother went to the principal and said, “There are things going on here.” She reported that Ryan had been called “stupid.” “She was told “you have sex with dogs.” She was called “bitch,” “dog,” “cow,” “lesbo,” “lesbian,” “whore,” “queer,” “slut,” and “gaywad.” Her mother told the story of Ryan waiting at the bus stop where two teachers were present. Ryan was being choked, and the teachers just stared at her. One of the teachers commented that he was aware that a boy had had his hands at Ryan’s neck, but didn’t think he was doing any harm. Ryan’s mother couldn’t take it any more after that incident. She asked a doctor to write a note to the school to have Ryan’s assignments sent home. The doctor said, “If Ryan were to continue to attend classes for the rest of the school year, it would be detrimental to her psychological health.” From then on, Ryan was homeschooled (*Our House*, 2002-Arkansas family).

At the opposite extreme, Edwian (12) claims, "I haven't been teased by anybody about my family because nobody cares if my mother is a lesbian." "Don't be ashamed of who your parents are," he says matter-of-factly (Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999, p. 215).

Marc (18) relates, "Growing up with lesbian moms wasn't easy. Some kids teased me and tried to beat me up. They thought that I was gay just because my parents are" (Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999, p. 38-39).

Arthur was confused, when in high school, after his mother and her partner opened a feminist bookstore in small-town Mississippi, he received the "cold shoulder" from a "few snobby girls who were also really devout Christians—Baptists—who, when [he] walked into a room . . . would stop talking and stare at [him]." It was confusing to Arthur because, as he put it, "They had known me for years, but we didn't have the interaction that we had had before. What did it matter to them?" (Garner, 2005, p. 115)

Ian experienced homophobia by standing back and keeping silent, especially in the years before he was fifteen. The son of a lesbian mother, he had been told at an early age to "smile and say nothing" if anyone asked him where his father was or who he lived with. Ian smartly avoided being teased or bullied by watching and listening to other children's experiences. He recalls an incident when he was taunted by a bully in elementary school who asked him if he liked "rock" or "disco" music. Ian remembered seeing earlier that day the words "DISCO SUCKS" scrawled on the back of a seat on the bus, so he answered, "Rock . . . Disco sucks!" The boy was pleased with the response and said, "That's right, dude . . . Make sure you listen to rock. Only faggots like disco!" And, even though Ian wondered what some of the schoolyard terms like "faggot," "homo," "dyke" and "lesbo" meant at first, it didn't take him long to figure out that his "mother, apparently, was a dyke" and that he would need to keep that fact a complete

secret. Because his mother was always afraid of losing her job in those days, and because there was always the “looming threat of violence” if anyone were to find out she was gay, they became an “itinerant family,” moving from one town to the next every time someone started asking questions (Howey & Samuels, 2000, p. 107-108, 111).

Melissa’s experience at age nine (1979)—soon before her mother actually told she was a lesbian—came in the way of peer teasing and bullying. In her memoir *The Assault of Laughter*, she writes:

I spotted Julia Goldberg walking across the street from her house. She knelt down by the backstop to tie her shoe, and I walked over to her. “Hi, Julia!” I said.

She blinked at me. At first, she stood up as if she were going to walk away. Then she paused. “Hi, Lissa,” she said, looking at the ground. “My mother says we’re not allowed to be friends anymore.”

“Why not?” I asked, bewildered.

“Because of your mom.”

“What *about* my mom?” I cried.

Julia lowered her voice. “I thought it was just a rumor,” she said. “But then I told my mom, and she called that woman who worked with your mom on your old Girl Scout troop, and she said it was true.”

“Said *what* was true?” I demanded, nearly in tears.

“That your mother’s . . . well . . . gay,” Julia said.

My fists clenched. “Take that back!” I yelled. “She is not!”

Then Julia did walk away from me. “Get a clue, Melissa,” she said over her shoulder.

I ran after her and grabbed her by one of her black curls. “I said *take it back!*”

“How can I, if it’s true,” she said.

I hit her. I’d never hit anyone in my life, but suddenly my hand shot out, and I slapped her right across her red cheek. It turned even redder, and her eyes filled with tears. “They’re right!” she yelled and pushed me down onto the gravel. “You *are* a lesbo lover!”

I stood up unsteadily. A crowd of kids surrounded us. They began to chant. “Lesbo lover! Lesbo lover!”

The kids at school called Melissa “Lesbo Lover” the rest of the week; she was picked last for kickball during P.E.; and someone drew a picture on her backpack of two girls kissing (Hart, 2005, p. 128-129).

Custody. Sandra (37) – “My mom’s sexual orientation affected my relationship with my dad, because he would say awful things, and it made me sick with anger at him. My relationship has only become closer with my mom, because we had to stick together in the custody battle” (Drucker, 1998, p. 147-148).

Homophobia in schools. As children experience homophobia in their schools, more and more of them are expressing the inequities and have begun advocating for curriculum changes, or are, at least, attempting to speak out about their families. For instance, Tashina (18) openly expressed that “Teachers need to say in their classrooms that most families don’t consist of just a mom, a dad, a puppy dog, a boy, and a girl. A lot of parents are divorced by the time the kids get into elementary school. There are lots of single parents out there too. Some families have one dad or two dads. Some families have a mom and a dad; some families have one mom; some families have two moms; some families have the aunt taking care of her nephews and nieces, or grandparents taking care of the grandchildren. And some parents are really old—some of my friends have parents who are almost fifty! There are so many different kinds of families.

Teachers don't teach the whole story about families in schools. They're still into teaching about the old conventional families (Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999, p. 205).

The following is a letter written by a child of a lesbian mom who was angry that his teacher disregarded his family "type" from the curriculum. The letter was not signed by the student because he was afraid of the repercussions that might come if he did.

Dear Ms. Tripp,

As a student in one of your classes just beginning the family unit, I was offended by the exclusion of gay and lesbian families in the introductory packet to our unit. If the packet is an attempt to include all types of families then please don't leave out the kind of family I live in and have lived in for most of my life. I would appreciate it if you would include gay and lesbian families as a type of family that really does exist.

As the son of a lesbian mother, when I looked on the list for a description of my family and it wasn't there, I felt like my type of family wasn't considered "real." For me, *Kate and Allie* just does not cut it!!!

Sincerely,

Someone who is proud of his mom! (McLaughlin in Arnup, 1995, p. 248)

Rayna (16) tells of a recent experience when she spoke on a panel at a high school with her mom. "This guy in the audience told my mom that he wouldn't want her to teach his kids because she is a lesbian." This reminded Rayna of how her grandfather—a biology major in college—was not allowed to teach at a high school because he was black. "Homophobia is the racism of today," she says. "Like racism, you learn it from the people you grow up with, from your parents, from television, and from society." In her human rights class at school, Rayna is

“studying gays, lesbians, and bisexuals and [is] learning just how incredibly homophobic our society is. “If you have any kind of moral issue about it,” she says, “[students] can be excused from taking [the] class.” In Rayna’s experience, “Even as we’re shifting into a more diverse culture—or, in theory we are—a lot of people still have a lot of hang-ups about sexuality” (Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999, p. 79-80).

Sol (11) did a survey about attitudes toward gays and lesbians in the fourth and fifth grade classrooms at her elementary school. She learned that there is a lot of homophobia, and that, although there were some supportive teachers at her school, there were some who were afraid to deal with gay and lesbian families. Sol felt sorry for the kids in those classes. She also reports that “from first through fourth grade, there was never one story or one image presented by the teachers that included gay or lesbian families unless [she] brought it in.” This “felt awful” to her, as well as the fact that “Homophobic name-calling goes on all the time at school and seems to be completely acceptable on the playground.” “When I was little,” Sol says, “I especially hated those times on the playground” (Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999, p. 154-155).

In the seventh and eighth grade, Natan (15) remembers being “harassed by other kids who would say stupid things about [his] mom, mostly.” “I just ignored them,” he says. “I think they stopped because they grew up more . . . maybe.” Natan’s opinion is that there is a lot of homophobia in high school. He explains: People use the word “faggot” a lot, but it’s not directed against homosexuals. It’s basically used as a general insult. One teacher called someone in her classroom a “faggot,” and my friend said something to her. The teacher said, “Oh, I didn’t mean it that way. I just meant it as a general insult.” There’s not that much straightforward, out-and-out homophobia. It’s usually a more subtle thing.

Like Sol (above), Natan would like to see some curriculum changes in the elementary schools. He sees a problem with the fact that “[schools] don’t normally do anything about gay and lesbian families in kindergarten and first grade,” and that “everything is based on the totally straight family” (Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999, p. 176).

Homophobia in churches. When Sol (11) was nine she saw people carrying signs outside her church that said, “God hates gays and lesbians.” “It was very scary for me,” she said. “I woke up crying that night because I dreamt that these same people bombed our church when our family was there. I don’t want to be afraid of these people and I don’t want them to be afraid of me and my family” (Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999, p. 154).

Homophobia in legal system. Sol (11) describes firsthand how it is that homophobia hurts real people—real children and real families. She says, “I have two moms, but one of my moms, Joanne, is denied all legal rights of parenthood simply because she is gay. She cannot marry my other mom, Sunshine. She cannot legally adopt me in Wisconsin. Gay and lesbian families deserve the same rights as straight families” (Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999, p. 154).

Children adopting homophobic attitudes. Abigail maintains that if her parents had waited until they thought she was old enough to understand what “gay” meant, her “experience would have been a lot different—and more negative. By that time, she says, “I easily could have adopted some of the homophobic attitudes that are prevalent in our society . . . I would have had to ‘come to terms’ with my [parent] being gay rather than simply integrating it into my life along with all the other information I was absorbing as a young child” (Garner, 2005, p. 39-40).

Adam (25), too, argues that if he and his sister had been younger when they found out their mother was lesbian, it would have been a better time than in adolescence, because at an earlier age “society’s negativity toward homosexuality hasn’t crept into the child’s head yet. At

the time that Adam found out, he thought “*those* people [were] weird.” His prejudice—his homophobia—was already in his mind (Garner, 2005, p. 41).

Parenting / Communication

Yes, they've seen the poems. The world prefers I not tell the children: hide, be oblique, be secret, be grotesque. But the youngest says when I tell it all, that's what he likes best.

(Pratt, 1990, p. 98)

Children have questions. They want to hear the stories from their lesbian parent(s) so they can make better sense of their own worlds.

In her memoir *The Assault of Laughter* (2005), Melissa (then age 13), describes a conversation she had with her mother, shortly after she learned her mother was gay. It went like this:

“Why’d you marry Daddy if you knew you were a lesbian?”

“I didn’t exactly *know* I was.” When I was growing up, girls were just expected to get married. That’s what I did.”

“So then when did you figure out you were . . . uh . . . gay?”

“Some women know right away. Ms. Whitney [Melissa’s mother’s first partner] knew when she was your age. But I didn’t know until she came along.”

“So you had sex with her.”

“Briefly . . . I would’ve been happy to stay with her forever, but she found someone she liked better.”

“Do you date other women when we’re not around?”

“No . . . But I do belong to a group of lesbian mothers who have lost their kids to the court system. We have meetings, and sometimes those can be almost fun . . . well, fun and depressing.”

“What d’you talk about?”

“We talk about how to get our kids back.”

“Does this mean I’ll be gay, too, when I grow up?”

“Not necessarily . . . Scientists have found that homosexuality is genetic, which means that it’s predetermined before a person’s born . . . not just a choice someone makes, but I don’t know exactly how that works . . .” “It’s been a hard year, Lissa,” she said. “I’ve been told I’m mentally unstable and sick. I’ve lost my kids to a monster because of what goes on in my bedroom, which shouldn’t be anyone else’s business but my own.”

“Mother had never talked this way to me before. I felt uncomfortable, but at the same time, I felt exhilarated, as if I could feel myself growing older and more experienced by the minute” (Hart, 2005b, p. 147-148).

Like Melissa, I remember, in the conversation with my mother—when she communicated to me that she was gay—she must have thought (or hoped) I was mature enough and grown up enough to understand and to ask questions (see Appendix A, p. 90). I didn’t ask at the time, the question Melissa asked, which is, “Will I be gay too?” It was later, in one of our “little talks” I learned with total certainty that I would be loved and accepted whether I was gay or straight (see Appendix A, p. 101). My mother simply did not wish it on me, knowing how hard the gay life can be.

Legitimate / valid. Some children of lesbian moms grew up feeling they had to be better behaved than other kids. If we looked good, our moms looked good. Could it be that having well-mannered children meant a lesbian mother was somehow legitimate and valid as a parent?

William Murray (2000), in his memoir, remembers that at age eight, “I was painfully well mannered and had been raised to believe that my role was to remain quiet and respectful in the presence of adults” (p. 77).

In my experience, thinking back, my brother and I were not perfect children—far from it; but, we sure knew how to do a lot of things. No one could iron better than my brother, and he wouldn't allow anyone to touch his wrinkled clothes. There were times when we would fight over who got to pick up the house so that just one of us could take all the credit and be first to please our mother when she came home from work. We would literally, “pick up the debris,” from the floor and carpet because we didn't have a vacuum cleaner.

Sometimes I wonder why, when my brother and I were teenagers, mom would sit and watch us clear a table and do the dishes when we were guests in someone else's home or when we had invited guests at ours. She seemed to enjoy showing us off. I wonder if mom thought she needed to have perfect children in order to prove something to herself and to the world. We all felt the pressure from the straight world to be legitimate and valid (see Appendix A, p. 106). My mother also carried the weight of being the custodial parent. “It's not that we didn't have a father.” The divorce had simply betrayed her trust in him and how he parented his children. It was our mom that did the major share of parenting (see Appendix A, p. 113).

In a role often entrusted to a daughter's father, my mother had a way of scaring my boy friends away if they did not look her straight in the eye and shake her hand firmly. It was a matter of trust for her. If they couldn't do these two things, she was done . . . and so was my relationship with them. I was okay with that.

Other Mom / Second Mom

Marc (18) – I'm really proud of my family. My moms have helped me understand women, and they are good to talk to about girl problems. They have taught me that violence begets violence, and that everyone deserves respect. They have helped me to learn to respect myself. I know they will always be there for me.

(Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999, p. 38)

Appreciation / the way it is. Adrian Hood, in conversation with her lesbian mother Alix Dobkin, remembers how, when she was around five years old, “All I used to want was for you and my dad to get back together . . . but then when I lay awake thinking about that, I think, yeah, it's a great fantasy, but then Liza [one of Alix's partners] wouldn't be in my life . . . and Denny [another partner] wouldn't be in my life . . . I wouldn't have this perspective on life that I have and this whole other culture that I would never have been exposed to. And I've gained so much from it.”

Although she appreciated her mother's relationships, Adrian recounted how she could be embarrassed by Liza's appearance (as well as her mother's): “I remember you and Liza coming to pick me up at school, and was I embarrassed—you had on the work boots and the shaved heads, and Liza probably had her broken nose and the black eye—I remember walking through the hall and it was just very, very hard. All I wanted was a normal family” (Arnup, 1995, p. 326).

Bill (30) and his siblings “refer to Leslie as ‘Leslie,’ and they consider her a second mother. “The fifteen years that Leslie has been in our family,” he says, “feel more like a lifetime. I can't imagine a time where she wasn't a part of our lives. We also considered another very close female friend of our family to be a mother. She has passed away. I feel that we grew up in a family with several mothers—women who were very important in helping to create an extended family” (Kaeser & Gillespie, 1999, p. 99).

Kelly (20), who has a much better relationship with his two moms than with his dad and stepmom shares: “My mother’s been with Judy since I was six years old. I love her just as much as I love nay parent that’s been in my life since I was born” (Snow, 2004, p. 48).

Lesbian moms Sandy and Robin, through artificial insemination, gave birth to Ry (17) and Cade (19). When asked, “What is it like, being raised by two moms?” Ry replies, “I have nothing to compare it to. I’ve always thought of them as being Juliet and Juliet.” “They’re both *real* mothers. It’s like mom and mom and the kids” (*Our House*, 2002-New York City family).

Roles. *In Gringa: A Contradictory Girlhood* (2009), Melissa speaks about the woman she had experienced growing up who did not live the archaic lifestyle where men do the physical work and women cook, clean, and care for the children. Instead, she says, “I’d grown up watching my mother fix a broken fan belt in the VW bus with a pair of panty hose. Annie [her mom’s partner] built furniture and did oil changes on her Miata. Even my grandmother, divorced from my grandfather long before I was born, mowed her own lawn and cleaned the gutters each fall. (Hart, p. 229)

Sophia (pseudonym), remembering back to her adolescence and the relationship she had with her mother’s partner Laura:

“Laura figured out how we could have enough money and things to survive, even if she did it unconventionally. She could fix whatever broke, and she contrived recreations for me that had somehow or other felt out of our financial reach before. But most of all, I think she brought order to our scattered lives, an order I would need in the year to come. I made a habit of cleaning—or at least tidying—my room before I went to my father’s on the weekends. I’d leave the laundry, in two separate piles, outside my door, and it was always clean by the time I

returned. If Laura didn't come in with my mother to say good night, I'd call for her. They were my parents, both of them, at least on the weekdays" (Howey & Samuels, 2000, p. 6)

Ryan (15) is the biological daughter of Vickie; Cary (23) is the biological son of Sophia. For Cary, his second mom Sophia satisfies some of the roles that are traditionally male, for example fishing and fixing automobiles. Ryan shares things with her second mom Vickie that her biological mom admittedly doesn't have a clue about . . . going shopping, putting on make-up, and curling their hair (*Our House*, 2002-Arkansas family).

I rarely called my mother's partner "mom" or "second mom" or "surrogate mom" until after my mother's death in 1991. The following was taken from a photo album I created for my mother's partner, and my children's grandmother, before her death in 2009. It illustrates how very important she was and is to our family.

Together . . .

we are a family

we share . . .

music

and friends

and glorious meals

. . . together

we find joy in "being" together

. . . comfort in Gramma's arms

on Gramma's lap

we hold hands

we listen

we play

we cry

we act silly

we hold on tight

. . . together

always together

we celebrate . . .

birthdays

and graduations

and weddings
... together

we celebrate Lois
all that is Lois
the gift that is Lois
the incomparable Lois!

Discussion

This study has explored the growing up experiences and adult experiences of lesbian-parented children. Themes emerged through reading published memoirs and collections of stories and essays, as well as through the viewing of several documentary films. Many of the themes were common to the children's experiences—themes such as a parent's "coming out" and the children's coming out about their families; how the children are protected or kept safe by their parent(s); the amount of support they receive from their families and the gay/straight community; and the sometimes extreme cases of homophobia and bullying directed at the LGBT-parented child. These themes have intrigued the general public, as well as researchers, and are often presented in the form of questions in studies, surveys, and interviews of the children. What differentiates this study is how it pulls from some of the often missed voices of adolescent and adult children and explores their experiences through a wide variety of source data, rather than from a focused agenda or limited survey by individual researchers. By their very nature, survey questions limit the responses from the participants. Where the literature lacks the personal, from-the-heart kind of responses, it also lacks some of the stronger, more relevant, themes that emerge when sons and daughters are able to share their experiences more openly.

How lesbian-parented children experience their mother's initial coming out is often marked by a significant, one-time event and one they rarely forget. It matters to the child—the when, the how, and what words their mothers used. The literature has addressed some of these concerns in the third wave research. This study, however, suggests that a range of emotions is felt by young, adolescent, and adult children of lesbian-parented families at different stages in their lives. Some experience anger first and later understanding. Others move from understanding to advocacy. As we are allowed to hear from these adolescents and adult children,

and to follow along with their changing emotions and attitudes, we can better appreciate the impact that their parent's coming out has on their lives. Also, as concerns over whether or not lesbian-parented children will turn out all right diminish, perhaps we can measure progress by the manner and timeliness in which lesbian-parented children and future generations are told.

Once the secret is revealed, children begin to experience their own "coming out" about their families. They must deal with how, when, and if to share with their friends and peers, their boyfriends/girlfriends, classmates, future spouses and their families, and later their adult co-workers, curious individuals, and their own children. These experiences varied greatly in this present study and illustrate the ease or difficulty in which these children come out, ranging from acceptance and support to rejection, bullying, and harassment. As newer generations of lesbian- and gay-parented children grow up—those who have known nothing else than to have same sex parents—they will have a newfound understanding and will undoubtedly face challenges different than those who came before them. Adoption, artificial insemination, and divorce are already altering the demographic of what was once considered a "normal" family dynamic. Children will need support in their schools and in their life journeys to be able to "come out" freely. They will also need extra support from the legal system and the mental health profession due to having multiple same-sex parents, e.g. four moms. The issues are no different than for the child who experiences her/his parent's divorce and re-marriage and winds up with multiple step-parents. We are simply in new territory.

The experience of "coming out" for both parent and child is changing due to the openness of this topic and the fact that children are becoming more confident and more willing to say to the world, "We are all right!" Yet, while some children take the knowledge of their mom's sexual orientation in stride, others still fear the rejection they may encounter if they share the

information with others. Garner (2005), in her book *Families Like Mine* asserts: “Grown children frequently say that their LGBT parents underestimated the effects and the pressures of navigating through a homophobic world” (p. 98). In my own experience, to this day, there is often that moment, when I first come out about my lesbian mom, I take a breath and think to myself, “Here we go!” and there is this unknowing of how it will be received. Garner says, “Each time someone considers coming out to someone new, there is a process—even if it lasts only a split second—of weighing the risks against the benefits” (p. 99). My son (and grandson of lesbian grandmas) was in this situation recently on his college campus in Texas, when one of his colleagues suggested that it was “God’s mistake” that some people are gay. He was shocked and unprepared to take on the issue with people who were homophobic and unready to listen. Not only the children of LGBT parents go through a process of coming out and navigating a homophobic world, but the grandchildren and great-grandchildren are impacted as well. “For children,” Garner says, “coming out about their family is about *them*, not their parents. Part of their experience is learning for themselves about when to come out, when to stop a homophobic joke, and when to defend their families” (p. 120). Such was the case for my son. As the results show, coming out can be a stressor that occurs regularly and throughout the lives of lesbian-parented families.

“When children choose to remain silent about their families,” Garner (2005) says, “it is rarely because they are ashamed, but because they want to protect themselves and their families from the unknown” (p. 99). There is also the need to feel safe in an unsafe environment. This is sometimes a matter of geographic location and sometimes because of the child’s age and their grade level in school. Many children are overwhelmed with the predictable hurdle of needing to fit in while in junior high or middle school *without* the added dynamic of having an LGBT

parent. To do *anything* out of the norm makes them vulnerable. Silence then is often the best strategy, simply to get through those years. It is a time, Garner says, when “the habit of hiding can sometimes become so ingrained that children hardly notice the lengths to which they go to feel safe” (p. 117). It does not matter whether or not the child accepts her/his parent’s orientation, or is even proud, careful discretion for the children is often about their own acceptance and safety. Sometimes this worry about exposing themselves to ridicule and homophobia goes through their minds for their entire life. Children may also worry about their mom(s) and what “outing” them might mean if there were a custody battle, especially if they are not sure whom they could trust. The children themselves may simply decide they do not want to be “outed.” They evaluate the risk and decide how vigilant they want to be.

In coping with schools, peers, and neighbors, LGBT parents are often concerned that their children may not be safe in the world and can be overprotective of their children’s security outside the home. Later on, perhaps in high school or college, children may encounter supportive peers. These peers, Garner (2005) describes, “sometimes take on the responsibility of protecting their friend with LGBT parents. Because the friends understand the negative effects of homophobia, they try to minimize its impact, creating a phenomenon [she calls] the ‘buffer zone’” (p. 118). It is imaginable that this extension of community will continue—that trusted friends and parents will protect, and with protection, the children will feel safer, and with safety, the need for silence will lessen.

Some lesbian-parented children recognize at an early age the importance of getting support from their peers, family, and community concerning how their parents’ orientation impacts their lives and how to navigate in the world. Other children become adults before realizing what they missed and what they long for now. Oona (daughter of a lesbian mom), for

example, articulated: “I now know that this peer support is essential for the children of gays. There are many adjustments for these children, whether they are born to gay parents or are parented by ‘straights’ who later become gay. It’s essential for children to have friends who understand and support their family life. This support reflects on the family as a whole, as well” (Arnup, 1995, p. 337)

In adulthood, the need for inclusion in the gay community becomes a focus for lesbian- and gay-parented children—no longer connected in the way they once were. As children shaped and influenced by the “queer” culture in which we were raised, we share “a collective frame of reference,” says Garner (2005) in a chapter from her book *Families Like Mine*, called “Tourists at Home”:

From this abstract frame of reference, concrete cultural factors emerge such as customs, music, literature, dance, and language. Many sons and daughters of LGBT parents—the majority of whom turn out to be heterosexual—enter adulthood with strong connections to their queer cultural heritage. (p. 194)

But, without actual connections with the people, there can be a feeling of homelessness that some children experience and a need to build community and discover other lesbian-parented sisters and brothers. Results in this study show just how important these connections can be for many of the children, even those we will never know.

William Murray (2000), deceased staff writer for *The New Yorker* magazine, wrote his memoir about growing up with two moms and how he thrived in “the arts” circles. His book *Janet, My Mother, and Me: A Memoir of Growing Up with Janet Flanner and Natalia Danesi Murray* offers insight into the lesbian and gay community during a time when homosexuality was even more hushed than when I was growing up . . . or when my mom was growing up. Born

in 1926, Murray was six years old when my mother was born. Still his story comes closest to the historical period from which my experiences come. Like a brother, our lives are linked.

The same holds true for author and teacher Melissa Hart. After reading her 2005 memoir *The Assault of Laughter: A Daughter's Journey Back to Her Lesbian Mother*, I experienced a soulful and sisterly connection with her. After several years of corresponding via email, we made arrangements to meet in Eugene, Oregon, where she lives and works. A wonderful thing occurs when adult children who had similar growing up experiences meet, laugh, and share stories for a period of two hours. As we parted, I asked her jokingly if I could now be considered a “queerspawn.” She laughed and said, “You’ve been a queerspawn since your mother came out and you were five years old!”

These feelings of inclusion and “insider” status within the community are important to the children of LGBT parents. As we discover each other, the community grows exponentially. Lisa Saffron (1996), in her book ‘What about the Children?’ remarked: “The greatest single problem for daughters and sons of lesbian and gay parents is our isolation. When kids from similar families just get together, regardless of what we do or say, it is a positive experience we can’t underestimate.”

When some of us hear of young children today who experience stigma due to having same-sex parents—married, same-sex parents in some cases—we may feel drawn to their cause. Homophobia is present in the lives of lesbian-parented children, and it impacts all of us. In some ways, it is as though there is more discrimination now because of “the knowing” than when same-sex relationships were a secret and the children were invisible. The stigma that some children experience now due to their parent’s sexual orientation was perhaps non-existent in earlier times (1950s and 1960s). Clearly, the conversations were few. Many gays and lesbians

have kept silent for a long, long time and are just now marrying their partners, while those with children are entering new and visible territory and will likely face new issues of inequality.

The daughter of lesbian parents, Sol grew up on the frontlines of the LGBTQ movement in Madison, Wisconsin. She actively countered the harmful effects of heterosexism from her youngest years, and began developing anti-homophobic and anti-racist school curriculum (Proud Theater, 2012). There is an obvious need for this kind of activism in the fight against homophobia, initiated by the children and adult children of gay and lesbian parents who have the experience and history to make a difference—children like Ella Robinson, proud daughter of Gene Robinson, the first openly-gay Episcopal bishop and his husband Mark Andrew (Ella's other dad), or Zach Wahls, who spoke before the Iowa House of Representatives, opposing Joint Resolution 6, which would end civil unions in his home state. He spoke of the strength of his family—his family of two moms. Co-chairs of the “Outspoken Generation Program,” Zach and Ella are working with the *Family Equality Council* to change attitudes and policies so that children are safer from bullying and that all families are respected, loved, and celebrated—including families with parents who are LGBT (Family Equality Council, 2013).

Several of the children in this study identified some of the unique experiences and questions common to being parented by a lesbian mom or moms, for example, “Will I be gay too?” How honestly a mother responds to questions such as this can, and does, make some of the situations that children will undoubtedly confront easier to navigate. To read actual dialogues in this study and appreciate the historical context in which some of the communications occurred may also shed light on how some children of lesbian moms grew up feeling they had to be better behaved than other kids. If we looked good, our moms looked good. By presenting well-

mannered children, a lesbian mother gained legitimacy from mainstream society and validity by overcompensating in her role as a “good” parent.

With two moms, the experience can be a complicated one. Some children have always had two moms, and it is all they have ever known. Others were raised by single lesbian moms or grew up in households much like those in divorce situations where there may have been multiple partners, relationships, and comings and goings. For children who grew up in much earlier times, there may not have been a title at all for one’s mom’s partner. Was she a “roommate,” an “auntie,” a “sister?” It was not safe to call her anything else. And without same-sex marriage, the word “step-mother” was, and still is, uncommon. She may simply be called by her name. There were some children in this study, however, who were most concerned about both of their moms being seen as “real” moms and are immensely proud of it. Biology does not seem to matter. Children also shared the experience of having a maternal relationship with two women who often provided a kind of balance in their lives, each offering something unique and positive. Previous literature has not looked at this relationship in any kind of depth, nor has the relationship been given the value it deserves.

Conclusion

What stands out in this study is subject matter that looks at intergenerational influence, inspires community building, and calls for advocacy. This is largely due to the presence of an outspoken generation of children who are currently at the forefront in very public ways. The experiences of LGBT-parented children are no longer being kept quiet . . . and with good reason!

In the *Los Angeles Times*, April 5, 2013, one of the justices of the Supreme Court, Anthony M. Kennedy is quoted as saying “We have five years of information to weigh against 2,000 years of history.” He suggested that it might be wise to move slowly on the same-sex marriage issue because gay parenting was still new. Contrary to Kennedy’s beliefs, however, there have been children of gay parents who have grown up and died throughout those 2,000 years—children who have been successful and who have contributed to the world in uncountable ways. For some of them, it was the parenting they received that they valued most and that they pass down to their own children.

William Murray (novelist and New Yorker staff writer) in his book *Janet, My Mother, and Me* (2000), tells of his second mom Janet’s concern about revealing too much about her life with William’s mother in a book that her grandchildren might one day read. She was worried that they might be shocked or that they might disapprove of her life and of the letters she wrote to their other grandmother over the span of forty years. Here are her words for William’s children to experience:

I hope that my grandchildren, and other young women like them, born in a freer, more liberated society, more knowledgeable about relationships between the sexes and without the inhibitions or taboos of an earlier era, will understand and

value our experiences and efforts to be, above all, decent human beings.

(Murray, 2000, p. 164)

My two sons grew up, as did William's, knowing they had two grandmothers who were gay. These two young men are experiencing today, what Janet had hoped for with her own grandchildren. For them, it is an understanding, a subtle appreciation . . . and a *haunting, breathless feeling of belonging* (see Appendix A, p. 96). To be "culturally queer" is a generational thing and one that is felt by lesbian-*grandparented* children as well as the children whose experiences and perspectives are the focus of this study. How many grandchildren can say that, before they were even born, their lesbian grandmothers threw a gay baby shower for their straight mother? How many grandchildren are thrilled at seeing two young men holding hands on their college campus? How many grandchildren show excitement and interest in knowing one of their lesbian grandmothers lived long enough to see some of the remarkable and positive changes that have taken place in support of same-sex marriage? And, how many grandchildren look forward to a time when they can speak openly and without fear about their lesbian grandmothers to a not-so-accepting crowd in Texas? The legacy of their grandmothers lives on through them, as does the legacy of our mothers through us.

In the film *Gen Silent*, Stu Maddux (2011) brings to the screen a documentary about LGBT elders who, after fighting the first battles for equality, now face so much fear of discrimination, bullying, and abuse in the healthcare system that many are going back into the closet. Whether these elders are parents or not, they are part of a community that influenced many-a-child's growing up experience. Adult children who may share a history with these elders dating back to the 1950s and 60s will likely feel the intergenerational impact of this new

and relevant issue in the coming years. In many ways, *their* stories and *their* struggles are *our* struggles.

When lesbian-parented children describe their experiences, they are not presuming to tell their mothers' stories. However, we are standing on our parents' and grandparents' shoulders, and the generations to come are standing on ours. While generations of gays and lesbians become elders, and new generations of grandchildren are born, the hope is that the weighty issues around homophobia and equality for families will fade away. Ry (co-producer, editor and director of *Our House* revisited) remarks on a rhetorical question she had asked in 1999, "Having gay parents . . . will it ever just be nothing?" Now, at twenty six, she affirms, "It will always be an issue because of my history" (*Our House*, 2002, Special Features).

There is work to be done, and the call to action is stronger than ever before. In *Gen Silent* a small but growing group of impassioned allies attempt to wake up the long-term care and healthcare industries to their plight. These include end-of-life issues which are becoming especially relevant now for the gay and lesbian communities and their families. My mother's partner, while in her final stages, entrusted me to take care of her ashes after she died—to spread them in the ocean with my mother's. Although, when the time came, I was unable to pick them up because I was not her legal step-daughter. Thankfully, I had the support of her siblings, and her ashes were released and placed in my hands. Several times during the eighteen years after my mother died, her partner (my second mom) told her doctors and hospital nurses that I was her daughter. I did not have to prove it. She just lied. The problem is people should not have to lie.

As children of lesbian moms, we are also children of their partners, wives, and of the larger LGBT community. Melissa Hart (2005a) writes: "We're the children of queer parents, but also of the queer community. We have a right to be part of the community that raised and

informed us. Historically, we've been ignored, without a language to describe our experience.”

This study has shown that many of the community's children are not only describing their experiences, they are translating their values into action and are willing to set the record straight.

As allies and children of the gay and lesbian community, we have a powerful voice.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A
RESEARCHER'S PERSONAL NARRATIVES

Appendix A Coming Out

Lois had lived with us for a couple years already when mom sat me down to have our talk. It was the day she had planned to “come out” to her daughter. I was sixteen at the time—obviously naïve—because later I discovered that there were a number of people my age who had known Barb and Lois’ story. I remember very few words that were spoken that day, but I do remember the warmth, tenderness, and sensitivity in which my mother shared with me. Looking back, I’m sure she struggled with how to do it. We were alone in the house. It was a Friday afternoon—the only day of the week that I wasn’t at the ballet studio, taking class or rehearsing. I also remember that it was Friday because the next day, when Lois was driving me to work (I taught ballet classes on Saturday mornings), she basically said, “I understand that your mother talked to you yesterday (turning her head to see my reaction). If you have any questions, I’m here.” It was at that moment that I thought to myself, “Oh, it’s real. I thought it was a dream.”

I don’t know if mom used the word “homosexual” or “gay” during this conversation. She approached the topic as if to tell me something new about LOVE and about how she loved Lois. I still didn’t get it. She must not have used words like “sexual” attraction or preference. My guess is that she knew just what I could handle and just how I would best hear it. My initial response to her was, “Well, I love Lois too!” It was then that she smiled and explained that this was a different kind of love.

She didn’t tell me on that day about my brother Blake, whose experience of finding out was not as positive as mine. Apparently, a gay man, who had been to our house for a theatre cast party several years before, entered my brother’s basement bedroom and made a pass at him. Blake was probably fourteen at the time.

It didn't take long to realize that mom's coming out to me was monumental for her and to the community. Things changed after that. My life made more sense—the people who had entered it, the comings and goings. The gay community seemed more comfortable around us kids because we *knew*. I began to understand, better, mom's relationship with a former partner, who I thought was a roommate. Mom was very sad when her friend left for San Francisco in the late sixties to “find herself.” I was sad too. I didn't know at the time that it was a break-up. She had been with us during all of my elementary school years.

Appendix A Sleepovers

It never occurred to me, growing up, when my mother said I couldn't have girlfriends stay overnight, that it had something to do with what they might see and report back to their parents. I don't like "giggly teenagers," she'd say . . . and I believed it. My mother's bedroom was right down a short hall from mine. It was easy to see that there was only one bed, shared by two women. I thought nothing of it.

Only recently did I realize that mom's reasons for not allowing sleepovers went much deeper than not wanting to listen to the high-pitch voices of adolescent girls. The sleeping arrangements in my home seemed natural, familiar, and I didn't question it. For mom, she had a secret to keep, a reputation to uphold as a teacher, and children to protect.

My mother—affectionately known as Miss Barbara—was the piano accompanist at the ballet studio, where I, along with many of my closest friends, received formal dance training. Students knew Miss Barbara, and so did their parents. Some were likely more aware than I was of her sexual orientation or the hunch that she might be gay. This may have had something to do with her "coming out" to me when she did. Others had probably figured it out, or she was fearful that I might learn from someone other than herself.

One of my friend's mothers was a school nurse, and she must have known. This particular friend's home was the one place I had permission to stay overnight—even on a school night, after ballet class. I liked staying there because there was a sense of orderliness and normalcy that was modeled. We sat at the dinner table together at a reasonable hour, we were called to breakfast in the morning, we wore slippers on our feet, and it simply felt good. Although my friend had her own issues with her parents in adolescence, as many of us do, she and I built traditions in those days that we still share. Thanksgiving pie baking and Yugoslavian

Easter Bread! My mother knew that the overnight experiences at this friend's home were not only healthy ones for me, but ones she could trust.

Appendix A Roommates

I was six years old when mom's friend came to live with us. I have no memory of her moving in; she had been an occasional babysitter. Now she was simply mom's roommate. At six, it didn't occur to me that two women sleeping in the same bed meant anything more than, "Where else would she sleep?" Like my mother, her roommate attended college at the University of Puget Sound. She was young enough that she seemed more like a big sister than a parent figure. I was devastated when she left for San Francisco and I was a young adolescent. I knew my mother was unhappy, but I didn't understand it to be more than losing a roommate. After all, I was sad too. Her presence and departure would make much more sense later.

Lois' arrival, however, came as a big surprise when she picked me up after ballet class one night and had her car packed with some of her belongings. My mother, turned around in the passenger seat, all aglow, to tell me that Lois was coming to live with us. I remember clearly that it was right after the winter break, and our family had just spent Christmas Eve with Lois and her then partner Toby. Apparently, some kissing went on under the mistletoe and my mother swept Lois away. The truth is Toby and Lois' relationship was already in trouble.

For two years I considered Lois to be just another one of mom's roommates. She was more than a roommate though and would remain my mother's lifelong partner. She helped bring order to our household by taking over the finances; by keeping our refrigerator filled with food; and by sharing with us her family traditions. I learned quickly that this roommate was special! She knew I had domestic tendencies and she advocated for them—making sure I had a sewing machine, buying me my first cookbook, encouraging creative projects for us to do together. Lois also brought into our lives new friends, jazz music, joy and laughter. For my mother, Lois, and

me, we were the “three musketeers!” What fourteen-year-old, pre-menstrual teenager wouldn’t be happy living with two loving and nurturing women?

Appendix A Returning

I. City Lights Books, San Francisco

Her grandson
leans against the
bookshelf between
Jazz and
Queer Studies

peruses a biography of
Glenn Gould
classical pianist

walks
stands
on the same ground
as *she* did
as did Kerouac and Ferlinghetti
fifty-some years earlier.

Upstairs,
the “Beat Corner”
he opens a book of
poetry
turns the pages
“I don’t get *any* of this”

yet, he does

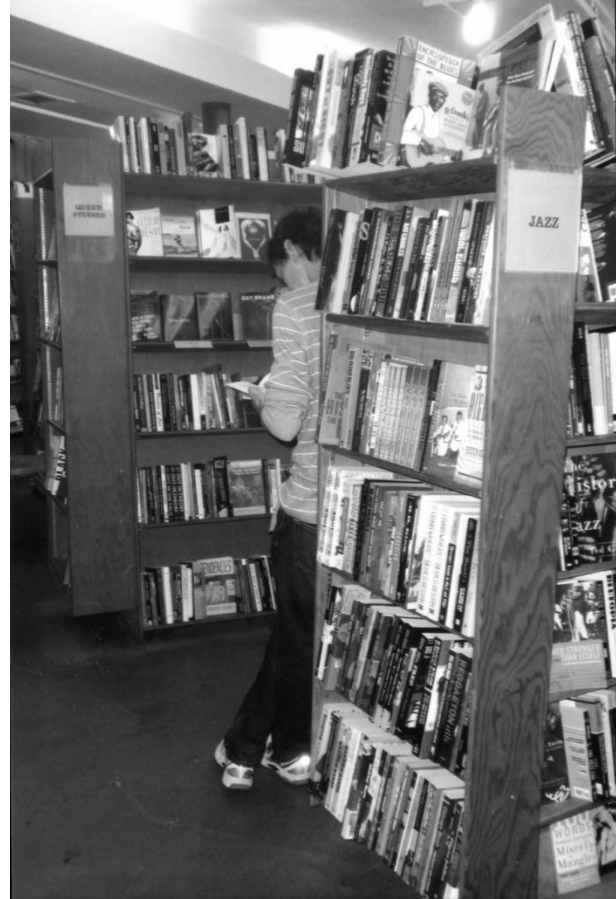
He understands the
haunting
breathless feeling of
belonging
of returning

as do I

II. The Castro, San Francisco

We head to The Castro
her other grandson leads

We dine at *Harvey’s* for
Sunday Brunch,
so completely comfortable
with a wait staff of the
most gracious and



(Author’s collection)

lovely men
who refer to my
straight husband as
“sunshine”

black and white photos of
Harvey Milk
line the walls
political and social upheaval

pain and violence

again, I am breathless
as I return to the
history
that was once hers

when she kept the
silence
for her children

III. The City, San Francisco

Their grandmother
found “home” in the city

in a bookstore
in a neighborhood
in a place of acceptance

where beatniks dwelled
and coffee shops flourished
and artists retreated
and jazz went underground

and the experience of
being gay was safe at times.

Today . . . *returning*
her grandsons
know from where
they have come

Marcie Pierson
2010

Appendix A Pawn Shop

In the 1950s, my mother made friends with a local pawn shop owner in downtown Tacoma. She often shared stories of how she would frequent his shop after her piano lesson, which was held in a private studio in the (then) Rhodes Building. Her friendship with this man and their weekly coffee klatch grew in popularity over the years. The story goes, even my grandfather occasionally joined in. I've often wondered: was he envious of the relationship between my mother and this intriguing pawn shop owner; was a trip to downtown Tacoma a welcomed break from my grandmother; or, was my grandfather simply curious about with whom his daughter was choosing to hang out? Later, my mother's friend proved to be an important ally when she needed him most.

Unfortunately, my brother did not learn about our mother's sexual orientation in the sensitive way that I had. My brother was thirteen or fourteen years old when a so-called friend of our mother's visited his basement bedroom and "made a pass" at him. A cast party made up of actors, dancers, and musicians had been going on upstairs, and this particular actor had slid out of the room unnoticed. Apparently, Blake was confused and knew something was not right about what had happened, so he shared it with the closest person he knew. I will never know the extent of the "pass" made at Blake, but it was serious enough that our mother, in a moment of desperation, contacted her pawn shop friend and asked him to meet her for a drink.

As she told Blake's story to him, he responded without hesitation, "What do you want, Barbara . . . guns, knives . . . a hit man?" Astounded at the mere thought, she found her breath and reassured him that, "No, I just need to know that you're with me!" My mother's sharing of this meeting is significant in that it describes a small but influential community of support for her as a gay mother of a teenage son during tenuous times. Her pawn shop friend was someone she

could trust—a straight man and a family man. He acknowledged for my mother that what had happened to Blake was intolerable and that if she called for a battle, the battle would be fought.

Appendix A
Mothers Meetings

My eldest son had attended a local church preschool in the early 1980s. As a condition of his enrollment I was required to go to monthly *mothers meetings* where moms had the opportunity to build friendships, to be encouraged by one another, and to gain practical parenting strategies.

One meeting, in particular, stands out. Most likely it was toward the end of my son's time in the preschool, or this incident might have been reason enough for me to pull him out. As the meeting was getting underway, the hostess reported to her small audience of women a local news story declaring that a *certain* Tacoma public school teacher was gay. The assumption was made that each of us in the room would go home after the meeting and call our state legislators in Olympia to make certain that this man would not "teach our kids!" I remained silent, unable to speak about the rage inside me. I couldn't wait to get out of there. Tears blinded me as I drove to my mother's house and into her arms. My mother, after all, was a private piano teacher. It was unimaginable to me that any parent would not trust her with their children.

Once calm, my mother helped me script a phone message to our legislators in support of the Tacoma schoolteacher. I remember thinking that if I were ever made aware that one of my children's teachers was gay, I'd probably trust him/her with my kids even more. This phone call remains today one of the few times I've used my political voice. My mother was not one to wave a flag, but she *did* think it was important, especially for *me* that, in this case, I wave it.

Appendix A Crushes

My mother noticed things. She could tell the first time one of my friends—who was probably gay, but perhaps didn't know it—had a crush on me. It was the spring of my senior year in high school, and my mother sat me down for a little talk. She prefaced it with such concern for my friend that I was a bit surprised. Why not concern for *me*, that this friend might do something or say something I couldn't handle? Instead, my mother cautioned me about “leading on” girls (as innocent as I thought wearing a bikini in my own backyard might be) because of the hurt it could cause them.

My mother must have known about this kind of hurt—being physically attracted to girls who were straight . . . or, at least, who appeared to be straight. It's hard to say whether or not this family friend had “a thing” for me because she knew my mother (referred to as Auntie Barb) was gay and thought that I might also be. I was too naïve and too hung-up on her older brother to notice. But when she asked if she could come over to shoot some pictures of me because she was experimenting with photography, my mother paid attention.

This particular mother-daughter talk led to a discussion about the difficulties of being young and knowing or questioning whether or not one is gay—closeted or not. The words that stuck with me from the conversation went something like this: “I wouldn't *wish* the gay life on you or your brother. It's a harder way to have to live.” It was a day to ask questions. I learned with total certainty that I would be loved and accepted no matter what my sexual orientation. My mother expressed deep empathy for my friend that day, and I never forgot it. In the years to come, there were several other crushes from questioning friends; but my mother had prepared me well to be sensitive to their feelings and to be careful.

Appendix A Dating

Once my mother came out to me, the dynamics of our family changed. No longer did my brother and I live with our single mom and a roommate. Lois wasn't going anywhere, and a new sense of security was felt. I had also started dating around this time, which meant boys were picking me up at my home where it was pretty obvious two women lived.

It wasn't long before I started judging my boyfriends by what and how much they could accept. I can't remember the exact words I used with them, but it definitely gave me pause if I fished around and discovered that a certain boy had "a problem" with our family structure. For many of my peers, it didn't really matter what other people thought. Part of me was like that . . . but, although it shouldn't matter, it did. It was as though, if someone couldn't accept Barb and Lois, they couldn't accept me . . . and therefore, I couldn't accept them. It was all tied together.

Perhaps, having a gay mom made me appear a little intriguing to my boyfriends. It was the sixties, after all, and free love abounded. It would make sense that some of my boyfriends might have been curious about my family situation. My mother had a way of scaring them off, though, if they didn't look her straight in the eye and shake her hand firmly. How could she *trust* them if they didn't? A few of them failed, and I was bound to hear about it!

Much later, when I began dating my then future husband, I knew for certain that if our relationship was to go anywhere, he would have to love Barbara and Lois, and I told him so. It was extremely important to me. Come to find out, loving each other's parents was important to him too. We didn't know at the time that his father and *my* Lois already knew each other professionally. They were both piano tuners and had been referring potential customers to one another for years.

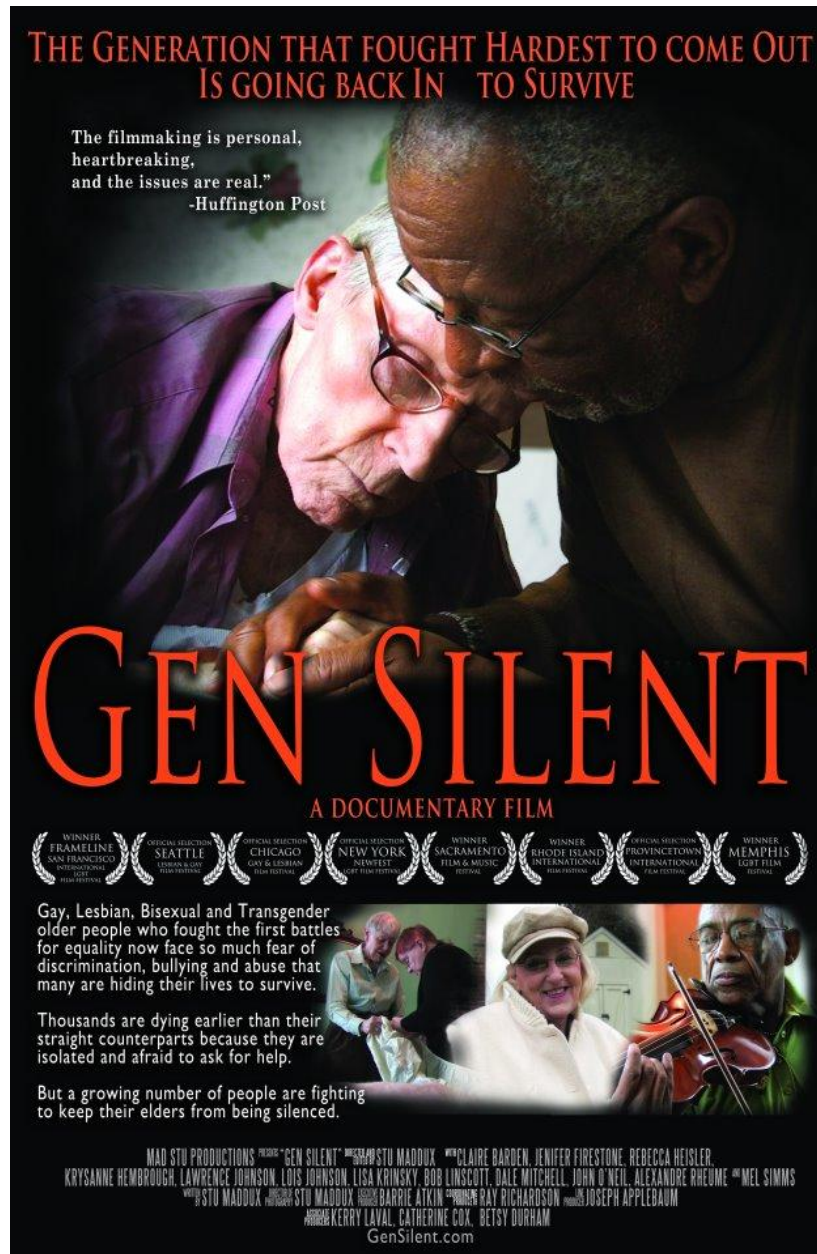
Appendix A
Generation Silent

On April 27, 2012 a private screening of the documentary film *Gen Silent* came to the UW Tacoma campus. Open to the entire campus community, the auditorium was filled mostly with students in social work, their professors, and a handful of interested others. I was there because, when I think of my journey in writing these stories and what may become of them, and of *me*, once I finish, the thought of finding meaningful work advocating for lesbian and gay elders is high on my list.

I feel deeply connected to the generation of elders featured in this film. These people are near the age that my mother and her partner would have been, were they alive today. At one particular point in the film, two lesbian elders (who reminded me a great deal of my mother and Lois) were asked the question, “How do you explain [. . .] to a straight person?” One of them replied, “They’re weird. They’re not tuned in.” I turned to my friend, a social work professor, with tears in my eyes, and said, “*I’m* tuned in.” She nodded, “Yes, you are.” I understand and feel comfortable with their quirky behaviors—one of them singing, “I’ll Build a Stairway to Paradise” as she rode backwards on her stair lift, arms stretched out like she was performing on the Broadway stage! I’m at ease and familiar with the artistically-appointed interiors of many a gay boy’s home—at home, where the closet doesn’t exist.

The problem evidenced in *Gen Silent* comes when older, disabled or ill gays and lesbians need care, but are afraid of discrimination, so they return to the closet. Many don’t even ask for services. Many age alone. They have no children or may be estranged from them if they do. The lucky ones have partners (or spouses) who can advocate for them, as in the poignant story featured in the film, where a gay man is forced to find a nursing facility that will accept his dying partner and one that will genuinely accept the beautiful way they care for one other. As I

watched Lawrence rub lotion on the boney hands of his weakened loved one, my friend turned to me and asked, “Are you all right?” And, I was. It’s just that I was painfully struck (and inspired too) by how this film impacted me. I hadn’t realized before just how much or that I might have something special to give back to this generation that raised me.



(http://stumaddux.com/GEN_SILENT.html)

Appendix A
Housecleaning

During a particularly difficult time a few years back—trying to balance my work life, school life and domestic life—I hired a woman to come in every three weeks to do some housecleaning. I knew a little bit about her already and had seen what a hard worker she was and the thorough job she did. This was also the time when I had begun some extensive research on my master’s thesis topic and had placed a book rack on the floor of my bedroom to hold all the literature I was collecting. If the housekeeper were to look closely, or dust/vacuum closely, she would have seen titles such as *Out of the Ordinary: Essays on Growing Up with Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Parents*; *Lesbian and Gay Parents and Their Children: Research on the Family Life Cycle*; or, *Queer American: A GLBT History of the 20th Century*; and the like.

I don’t know what possessed me to lift up the rack and move it as far as my clothes closet before I stopped and said out loud, “What in the world are you doing?” I was also amused at the irony of putting the “subject” books in a *closet*! I made a conscious decision that I would not hide the work I was doing—that, perhaps, this was a teaching moment not only for others, but for me as well. I was quite sure I knew where this woman stood politically. Maybe it was the American flag on her business card; maybe it was the “God bless” at the end of her voicemail message. Still, why did it matter what she thought or what she might say or do?

I shared this story with Gloria Stancich on the day I interviewed her for the Tacoma Community History Project. She chuckled and acknowledged, “We’ve all done it.” There were times when we as a community had every reason to be scared. Even now, we want to know that the people who enter our homes and see our stuff can be trusted.

Appendix A Perfect Children

In the late 1950s and throughout the 60s it likely appeared to the outside world that my brother and I were being raised by a single mom. We visited our father—with his new wife and her two children—every other weekend and thirty days in the summer, but mom had custody. There were probably only three years total when she didn't have a "roommate." Still, until Lois came along, mom was considered the head of the household and the sole parent. As a parent our mother had the respect of her peers, and to those who were watching, she appeared to be doing a pretty damn good job. Our school teachers praised her at conference time for how well adjusted her children were, and in our report cards, they made comments that affirmed for her that she was a good parent.

As young children, I've been told that Blake and I were always tidy and clean (to a fault, probably) and that we held up our end in domestic chores at a very early age. One time my grandparents found me alone in our third-floor apartment *ironing!* I was five years old and was simply playing house, waiting for them to arrive. It wasn't long afterward that my grandfather bought us the home where we would spend the better part of our growing up years.

Thinking back, Blake and I were not perfect children—far from it; but, we sure knew how to do a lot of things. No one could iron better than my brother, and he wouldn't allow anyone to touch his wrinkled clothes. There were times when we would fight over who got to pick up the house so that just one of us could take all the credit and be first to please our mother when she came home from work. We would literally, "pick up the debris," from the floor and carpet because we didn't have a vacuum cleaner.

Mom often commented about how, when she got married at age nineteen, she didn't know how to do *anything* because my grandmother did everything for her. She was not about to

let that happen to us. Sometimes I wonder why, when we were teenagers, she would sit and watch us clear a table and do the dishes at someone else's house. She seemed to enjoy showing us off . . . or, perhaps, she wanted her kids to be *better than*. Better than normal? Perfect? I use the word "perfect" here because, as a single, divorced, gay woman, I wonder if mom thought she needed to have perfect children in order to prove something to herself and to the world. I think she may have felt the pressure, and I think we did as well. Shortly after Lois came to live with us, she visited her five siblings to "come out" and to tell them about Barbara and her children. The story goes, her youngest brother and his wife replied by saying that "anyone who can raise two children as well as Barbara is all right with us, gay or not." It's as though having children made my mother more acceptable.

Appendix A Pride

Determined to march for the first time in the 2012 Seattle Pride Parade, the most difficult decision was who to walk with. So many options! I was invited to join UW Tacoma's Diversity Resource Center; Tacoma PFLAG; The Episcopal Diocese of Olympia; SEIU Local 925; and a labor contingent (PAWS-Pride at Work or Washington YELL-Young Emerging Labor Leaders). At the last minute, I chose to walk with three of my friends and parishioners from Christ Church Tacoma. It may have been the promise of receiving communion on a city street that made the difference for me, or the fact that being with a smaller group might feel a bit less overwhelming with the thousands of people attending. The important thing was being "out there," especially this year: partly because of *Gen Silent*, partly because of my work with these stories, and partly because of the immense pride I have for my mother, the parenting I received from her and from her partners, and of the community as a whole.

Little did I know, I would be walking right behind Margarethe "Grethe" Cammermeyer—who in 1990 first challenged the military's antigay policy—and her wife, artist Diane Divelbess. My understanding is that they walked with the Episcopal Church because an Episcopal priest (or two) had performed their marriage ceremony in 2011. They felt the support and inclusiveness as do I.

Although I didn't want a big deal made about having my picture taken with her, I was pleasantly surprised to find the photo below on the web. That's me in the yellow sweatshirt and baseball cap. I was simply honored to be in her presence. What was particularly moving was how many people in the crowd cheered for her, reached out to her—even stopped the movement of the parade to hug her.



(Author's collection)

On the back of Grethe and Diane's tee-shirts were the following words:

We are your daughters, your sisters, your sons, your nurses, your mechanics, your athletes, your police, your politicians, your fathers, your doctors, your soldiers, your mothers. We live with you, care for you, help you, protect you, teach you, love you, and need you. All we ask is that you let us. We are no different. We want to serve, like you. Need love, like you. Feel pain, like you. And we deserve justice, like you.

Margarethe "Grethe" Cammermeyer

Appendix A
The Ballet Studio

I grew up in the ballet studio. Jan Collum's School of Classical Ballet was my second home and a place where I worked, I taught, and I danced! It was also the place where, from a very early age, my brother and I could be with our mom. On the days she wasn't teaching private music lessons, she was the piano accompanist for ballet classes. We would check in with her after school; talk to her on her breaks; and thank her from across the room with a smile as she played the most unforgettable music. Known as Miss Barbara, she enriched the lives of even the youngest dancers with her piano playing. Once a month, on "make-up dances" day, tiny ballerinas (or *danseurs*, for the boys) would whisper in her ear, "I would like to be a princess, a soldier, a flower, a drummer boy, a swan, or my all-time favorite . . . a fried egg," and Miss Barbara would come up with music—sometimes improvised, sometimes classic pieces—that allowed children to move creatively and magically in their own private little world.

The ballet studio was more than that, though. It was a place of community and safe haven for both my mom and for us. We didn't have to be latchkey kids, and our mother could watch us, almost every day, interact socially with our closest friends and develop as dancers in a discipline that we carried into adulthood. Mom's community at the studio was strong. She had a working relationship and a long-term friendship with Jan Collum and the respect of many of the dancers and their parents through the years. I still have contact with dancers from back then who loved my mother and who were influenced by her music and the person that she was. The studio was a place where she could work, and selectively disclose her sexual orientation, with little fear of exposure. In the 1950s and 60s it was surely one of the safest occupations available to her.

I am reminded of the song from *A Chorus Line* which, in many ways, speaks to the experience I had growing up, and that my brother and mother found to be true as well. Part of it goes like this:

Everything was beautiful at the ballet,
Raise your arms and someone's always there.
Yes, everything was beautiful at the ballet,
At the ballet,
At the ballet!!!

from *A Chorus Line*

Appendix A Serendipity

It was a totally unexpected and wonderful surprise, the day I met for lunch with one of my co-workers and learned she was a lesbian mom. Our story began when, on Facebook, we learned that we both enjoyed watching the reality television show *So You Think You Can Dance*. Soon afterward we discovered that we had both been dancers in our younger years and that we had a special bond because of it. Not only that, her teacher (Kay Burch Englert) had been a good friend of mine, and my brother and I had danced with her way back when she studied with Jan Collum. Kay died of cancer in 2005, and my co-worker was (and is) still grieving her loss. She welcomed hearing about the connection I had to this influential figure in her life. We shared a few of our favorite dancing stories and realized quickly that there were more to come.

We were getting to know one another, talking over lunch that day, when the question was asked of me, “What are you doing with your master’s thesis?” I tend to be a little hesitant when answering that question, but less so as time goes on. In this case—perhaps because of the warmth and trust I felt from her—the words spilled out. “It’s about the experiences of growing up with a lesbian mom in the 50s and 60s.” I noticed some excitement, but, at first, she simply said something like, “I would totally love to read it when you’re finished. I’m very interested because of my own story and my children.” I quickly responded, “Are you *out*?” “Oh, yeah, I came out three years ago, and I’ve always wanted to meet a child who was raised by a lesbian mom and to find out what it was like.”

Appropriately, my friend called our meeting *serendipitous*. Just when I started to think that what happened way back when wouldn’t be meaningful to anyone, she came along. I realized that connections like these are what keep me moving forward.

Appendix A Role Models

Our mother was carefully choosing role models for us long before we ever knew she needed to or was consciously doing it. Given that mom was extremely close to her own father, our grandfather was an obvious pick as a male model. It's not that we didn't have a father. Divorce may have simply betrayed her trust in him and how he parented his children. Grandpa took on the more active, fatherly role until he passed away when my brother and I were sixteen and fifteen years old, respectively. He was self-educated, told great stories, and was the one we turned to whenever we were troubled about anything at all or curious with questions our mother couldn't answer.

Our ballet teacher Jan Collum was another choice. A divorced, single mom, with a teenage son, Jan served as our model in an artistic sense. She was the person who was closest to our lives back then and the dance culture of which we were so much a part. For me, Jan was my primary model of femininity. Once, as a pre-teen, Jan and I were having our Christmastime "Marcie Day" in Seattle. We typically visited the live reindeer in the store window of Frederick and Nelson's, dined out for lunch, and went shopping in the fanciest of stores! I must have made a big deal that day about the pretty-and-pink, youth-sized garter belt on display, because Jan secretly purchased it and wrapped it up as my gift. I remember my mother *aghast* at the thought of her little girl wearing nylon stockings. I'll never forget the year Jan bought me a black corduroy jumper and my mother said I wasn't sophisticated enough to wear black. She also didn't think I was sophisticated enough to be a "Marcia," even though she's the one who named me that in the first place!

Mom was confident that Jan could and *would* provide for us if anything tragic ever happened, and she listed Jan in her "will" as our legal guardian lest it did. I remember thinking

that my father would probably have put up a real fight for us. His ego might have been at stake. He respected Jan, but would have preferred his son enjoy more manly things than dance. As it happens, the arts won out, and when my brother was about fourteen years old, he spoke for both of us, writing a letter to our dad telling him that we would not be coming over every other weekend anymore. It broke his heart. Dad had been making it difficult for us to pursue what we loved to do when it was *his* weekend to be the parent. Jan was like our second mom in many respects, and many of the things we learned about life, we learned from her at the ballet studio. We learned about hard work and discipline; we learned that if a teacher cares enough to call you out or say something that might sound like criticism, it was a gift; and, we learned of the value and richness of an artistic community.

It was Jan who introduced my mother to Toy Yat Mar—a friend from Jan’s vaudeville days in Seattle and on-the-road. A petite Chinese woman, Toy resided in San Francisco where, in the 1950s she sang in the Forbidden City nightclub and was known as the “Chinese Sophie Tucker” [film]. What I know best about Toy is that my mother would routinely visit her in the summers while my brother and I stayed with our father. After all, San Francisco was and is a draw for gays and lesbians everywhere to find comfort, safety and commonality. Toy lived by herself, but she was, as long as I can remember, deeply involved with a closeted lesbian woman and her two young children. On two separate occasions—while on summer scholarship with the San Francisco Ballet School—Blake and I stayed with Toy and participated in her daily visits with her family across town.

I find it interesting *now*, looking back, that the summer month I spent with Toy Yat Mar was around the same time my mother came out to me. Was the timing coincidental? I imagine the two of them on the phone—my mother sharing with Toy that “Marcie knows!” It seems like

it was such a carefully orchestrated thing—the telling and the knowing. I remember how Toy assured me that I could talk with her about any questions I had. My mother had entrusted her.