

Queer Parenting and Grand Parenting.

You know, as I went through my teens I was wondering what it would be like to have my own children.

As time went on I also realized that I had to get married to become a parent, according to the rules of the day.

What was a person to do if one's sexual orientation was not considered as "NORMAL"?

Well, the way we dealt with that was to marry a person of the opposite sex, of course.

During the past number of years we have experienced many changes--- and parenting, regardless of one's sexual orientation, has become a reality, with some acceptance by society as a whole.

The family structure has gone through a transformation that may now include two mommies, two daddies, or a single queer parent, aside from the traditional family.

We may have children through an arrangement with a member of the opposite sex, we may choose adoption or surrogacy. There are a number of ways that I'm sure you are aware of.

It is indeed possible in whatever method you choose.

I wish to share with you some of my personal experiences as the queer father of a queer son, as well as a straight son, and eventually two beautiful granddaughters.

I have encountered many experiences in this often-complicated journey of life.

I am quite certain some of you here had similar experiences. It is clear to me that at my stage of life, the journey thus far has been quite satisfying, especially since becoming a father.

Even taking into consideration the many obstacles we have faced, especially in our younger years because of our sexual orientation, we survived and now we are the "OLDER" generation.

Of course, a number of us here will remember the hiding, the fear mongering, threats of gay bashing, rejection by family members and friends, and so on.

Then, the question is asked: How will my parents, my siblings and my friends accept this new type of family?

One would be very fortunate indeed to have experienced a life free of homophobia and discrimination.

Who would have imagined the possibility that members of our community would be able to become parents and feel comfortable doing so---AND be recognized by society at large.

The myths surrounding gay parenting are many and that is why it's so important to lay these fears to rest.

This is a task best handled by organizing a workshop, as time certainly does not permit any detailing tonight. Perhaps at some point we will be able to set something up. We had a seminar in

2009 when my son Chris facilitated that as part of the activities of Pride Week in Amherst.

Many of us who are seniors remain cautiously optimistic. We experience change on an almost daily basis, but may not be quite comfortable expressing ourselves publicly, agreeing with those changes.

Also, many in our community of my age had children, as it was expected by our parents for their children to marry and have a family.

So parenting would only be acceptable by normal means, and by that I mean traditional marriage, or through opposite gender sexual activity which of course in my time was frowned upon, more so than today.

Parenting and grand parenting is the same whether one is queer or straight. One imagines it to be different for all sorts of reasons. This is not the case, as the necessity to bond is the same.

That doesn't mean that obstacles do not exist. On the contrary, and in particular, attitudes need to change in order to put to rest the fears and myths that exist.

Raising awareness and putting in place positive educational programs in our homes, our schools and religious venues will see significant progress as time goes on.

Now it appears to be more in the open to exhibit a natural bond between a child, and his or her parent or grandparent, who just happens to be a member of the queer community.

As a queer father and grandfather, I wear this pride with absolute confidence.



It was the late 1950s and I was looking for some sort of stability in my life. After spending 2 weeks in hospital in 1961 with pneumonia, I fell in love with one of my nurses.

I realized this to be a complete turn about, as I had already identified myself as queer.

The marriage took place in September of 1963 in Springhill, my wife's home-town.

Now, as a married so-called "straight " man, it became clear I dearly wished to be a father.

We decided to wait three years to have our first child. We also decided to have a planned family. The first three years we traveled and were successful in our respective jobs.

The marriage was stable and we enjoyed being together. We were now ready to start a family.

Our first child Chris was born October 12, 1966. I was elated to have a son and we were well on our way to establishing a family.

In 1969 I was offered a position to teach at the Interprovincial School for the Deaf in Amherst, Nova Scotia. Shortly after the move my wife, a registered nurse, found a position with the Amherst Regional Hospital.

That same year on November 8th our second son Mark made his appearance and again, I was thrilled to be a father once more.

Just after our marriage we decided we would be very happy with two children.

A few years after we bought our first home in Amherst, I felt I could no longer live in the relationship for obvious reasons.

The problem was how could I possibly leave this perfect family? How bad is this situation that I was willing to give up my wonderful wife and two sons that I adored?

We never fought except for the disagreements that most couples experience, Great jobs, our own home and a loving family.

Well, I was 34 years old at the time of separation and I was also attracted to men.

So, this ended my life in the closet and I quickly became the openly gay father of a gay son and a straight son. My sons were now the pivotal part of my existence.

This was without doubt the most difficult decision of my life. The problem was that I still loved my wife and so the pain associated with this separation was phenomenal, especially for her.

Still, I could not stay in this marriage.

In addition, I knew custody would automatically be awarded to my wife and with any luck I would have visitation privileges.

We separated in June of 1974 after a stormy session one evening. The following day I left our home never to return, except to get my personal belongings that were left on the lawn for me to pick up.

The kids were rushed off to Springhill to the grandparents and I didn't see them for a number of weeks. The reason?

Well, it seems my wife and her family, except for my mother-in-law were convinced I was a negative influence on the boys because of my sexual orientation. They were thoroughly convinced I would turn the boys gay.

During the custody hearing there were many references to the effect that I would be a threat to the boys. There was unbelievable testimony from a psychiatrist who insisted Chris had effeminate traits because of his father's influence.

There were many derogatory remarks by many in the courtroom, especially by my wife's lawyer, to such an extent that I feared I would never see my boys again.

One could feel the disgust as this fiasco continued for a couple of hours in this Amherst courtroom.

The reason I bring this to your attention is the fact I went through living hell in this courtroom. The judge never once interrupted proceedings and then he made his decision.

Remember this was the 1970s and that is how it was during those years, and later.

I was allowed to see my sons on Saturdays for two hours in the afternoon, only if it was convenient for the mother.

The rules were strict and had to be followed to the letter. 2 PM to 4 PM and not a minute later!

At times the boys would sneak out to see me after school and of course I welcomed them with open arms.

I then realized I would not be separated from them forever. However, the visits became more difficult.

1974

In the fall I began dating Norman Carter and we started living together in February 1975 and my life was at a turning point. I was now in a position that I could only dream about a few years earlier.

We set up housekeeping and became the first same-sex couple to live openly in this area with a complete family, as Norman's two teenage daughters lived with us for a number of years. *mention a few difficulties; Laurel not accepting - opposed to Cindy*
Being a step-dad agreed with me and it seemed very normal and indeed rewarding.

Of course, this new family became the talk of Amherst and Cumberland County. How could this possibly happen in such a conservative area? Well, it did and survived.

However, we did endure slurs and the usual homophobic attitudes.

After my presentation I will read a few comments from Chris and then you will have more insight regarding the feelings of my sons.

Regretfully, my sons moved to Yarmouth with their mother and I was devastated.

The only time I had with them if I traveled to Lunenburg to visit my parents and because of bus connections it was rather easy. This continued for a few years until Chris and Mark decided for themselves when to see their father.

I concentrated my efforts on making this family work. The girls were now part of my daily life and I treated them like my own kids.

My boys grew older and Chris graduated from high school and moved to Kingston Ontario to attend Queen's University. He eventually came out to me.

He became very active in gay issues and eventually moved to Toronto where he continued his activism. He is the Queer Parenting Program Coordinator at The 519 Church Street Community Centre in Toronto.

A few times a year he conducts a course for prospective fathers named Daddies & Papas To Be. He designed this course and it was the first of its kind in North America.

As a matter of fact he was invited by the Opra Whinfrey Show to be a guest, but after a bit of wrangling he declined the invite. Seems there was a lot of confusion as to the correspondence that took place.

Actually, he was very excited about the prospect as it would have been a great opportunity to promote his work in queer parenting.

My youngest son also ended up moving to Toronto. He married a wonderful woman and in 2004 I became a grandfather for the first time.

This was a totally new experience since this was my very own grandchild. My expectations were now complete.

I have the best of both worlds. Now I became a grandfather to this beautiful girl.

I realized this little girl is part of me, regardless of my sexual orientation.

In 2008 another little girl came along. It is a pride that now can be publicly displayed.

Because of a little more acceptance by society, gay parenting and grand parenting is indeed a joy and it is sustainable in every sense of the word.

That is not to say problems don't exist. However, I believe most of us are aware problems exist without me going into detail here tonight.

Unless one has experienced this utterly sensational journey, it may be difficult to grasp the importance of being a parent or grandparent, including the many challenges that occur along the way.

The feeling this creates is extremely difficult to explain, suffice to say it totally consumes me. The reality is the fact it feels so natural and inclusive to me. The changes over the past few years have been profound.

Because of changes in the marriage laws in Nova Scotia, Norman and I were able to get married, becoming the first same-sex couple to legally marry in Atlantic Canada.

To help make this marriage between two persons of the same gender seem "normal", we allowed television cameras and the newspapers to cover this event.

This was also a huge turning point in the law in not only OUR lives, but gave all gay and lesbian couples the opportunity and the right to equal marriage in the perspective provinces in Canada.

With this new law we also bring attention to parenting within such family units, and therefore the public at large may see the possibilities and accept such families as fully functioning in every way.

The children and grandchildren bring enormous joy in a world where only a few years ago this seemed unattainable.

Norman shared his children and grandchildren, as I did mine with him.

Norman relished his role as a step-dad and his love for his daughters and my sons and all the grandchildren was plain to see.

I highly recommend to those not yet involved with parenting to embrace it, whether in a gay or straight world, as we are all the same somehow.

On January 4th of last year I lost Norman to a heart attack, making this journey more difficult, but yet the years have provided us with numerous joys and some events that could be overcome with hard work and determination.

At the funeral, his daughters and my sons accompanied me to the front of the chapel and a sudden feeling of accomplishment came over me and Norman was there with us *for the last time*

This was our family.

Together we managed somehow to make an untraditional family become a fully functioning family unit.

325 family members, relatives and friends attended the ceremony, giving me great hope that acceptance of ~~these~~ queer parents, their children and grandchildren, will be part of a world where peaceful co-existence, dignity and respect will be a reality.

So, I hope I have given you some insight into the reality of being a parent and grandparent in my particular journey.

As one thinks back a number of years, one also comes to realize the changes have been phenomenal. However, with all the positive changes we must be cautious and remain vigilant.

Queer parenting is with us, but look out for our youngsters as they begin school and may be teased and challenged, or endure bashing, as has been the case in many areas.

Our own children put up with teasing and homophobic slurs at school and on the street. Even though this happened in the seventies and eighties, it continues today.

Egale Canada conducted the first National Climate Survey on Homophobia in Canadian Schools and the results are shocking.

1, Three quarters of LGBT students feel unsafe in schools across this country.

2, Eighty seven percent of trans students are especially likely to see these places as unsafe.

3, Homophobic comments such as, queer, fag and the like are rampant in schools.

4. ~~Four~~ ^{One family} in ~~one~~ GLBT students would not be comfortable talking to their teachers about LGBT issues.

5, Only one in five could talk to their parents.

So, all is not well, even as we celebrate the fact that members of the queer community can now enjoy parenting in a legal and loving manner, just as our straight friends and families.

Our children remain at risk for bullying and rampant homophobia. As queer parents we have the opportunity to educate and raise awareness so that this troublesome attitude is diminished.



At my age and in these times, one remembers many years that have gone by filled with great memories, but also much strife. I will admit it has been tiring, but oh so worth it, as each little inroad we make in fighting for equality and equal treatment is a huge stepping stone for our children to build on.



Parenting... grandparenting... growing older... having experienced insults and homophobia in many places, we are now faced with additional possible difficulties in our final years.

Nevertheless, I believe we have set the stage for our younger generations to become adults in what I hope will be an easier way to ease into a future that encompasses us all, regardless of sexual orientation.

It is a daunting task and with so many remaining hardships members of the LGBT community endure, the youngest person alive today will not see an end to discrimination and homophobia.

It will prove to be a continuing battle, but with hard work and above all with strong determination, improvements will occur.

There are many that make attempts at minimizing our existence and condemn us in many ways, including the present pope.

So, being a queer parent is difficult and challenging, but with curriculum changes in schools, positive parenting at home and church support, we can do it.

I advocate this begin at a very early age and teach our kids there may be two mommies, two daddies or a single parent, but it can a fully functioning family unit. We all know the phrase "Love is all it takes to make a Family".

There are many more details regarding this journey as a parent and I have touched on a few along the way.

There are many stories to be told by many parents that have experienced a similar journey, and I urge that these stories be shared with others.

The foundation has been laid down and now the younger generations may build on these experiences in the hope that their journey is made easier.

We have already seen many changes and so a parents' journey will surely be less complicated and the challenges minimal, regardless of the sexual orientation of that parent.

As Chris pointed out in a recent interview; “kids need love, attention, commitment and dependability. These characteristics aren’t limited to straights.”

If we can dispel some of the myths, greater understanding will follow. The straight community will come to know that we are here to stay and live our lives accordingly.

The following are just a few of the myths:

1, “Gays and lesbians can’t be good parents”

Being a queer parent has nothing to do with your sexuality. Parenting is about nurturing, caring, guiding your children and being there when they need you.

2, “Gay dads will have gay children”

A common misconception, especially regarding gay men. If you are gay, chances that your children are gay are no more than if you are straight.

3, There is the myth that role models must be adhered to in a family unit and that the child will be damaged because of not having proper gender role models in the family or, that we shouldn’t be parents because we are automatically child abusers or the kids will question or have confused or sexual identities.

These myths must be addressed head-on and publicly.

There are new options for us and I assure you parenting transforms our lives.

In July I was invited to give a similar talk to the Senior LGBT Group in Toronto and it was amazing the number of questions and comments from this group of 50 people related to their younger years.

Many are parents and most said they would do it all over again. Parenting and grandparenting, the most rewarding experience possible and if I was not 70 years of age I would adopt a child without hesitation.

I know some in this room are parents and I am also convinced you are of the same mind as myself. There are many details that I have not touched on, but are included in my autobiography and hopefully it will be published at some point in time.

What can I say, other than this profound experience with all the difficulties, has been the most rewarding journey of my life, and indeed the love it brings enhances one's existence as no other experience.

Sexual orientation and gender identity does not determine one's ability to be a great parent

Queer Parenting and Grandparenting....nothing compares.

I love the words to a song from the early eighties and it was first performed in the Broadway show, La Cage Aux Folles.

I Am What I Am, my own special creation.

I invite you to get to know this queer father and grandfather. I invite you into my home to share experiences about our families, queer or not, young or old, whatever gender you may be, celebrate

our differences and embrace equality in all families, in all situations, and above all let's welcome parents and grandparents and their offspring, regardless of sexual orientation. Then may we say, "finally, the work to raise awareness and celebrate diversity has paid off handsomely".

I welcome any questions or comments you may have.

Gerard Veldhoven Toronto July 19, 2010 LGBT Snior Group
Sackville NB January 24, 2011 PFLAG