



Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)

by Teresa Theophano

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Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), an international non-profit organization that operates out of Washington, D. C., works to support glbtq people and their loved ones. Stemming from parents' desire to be involved in their gay and lesbian children's struggle for equality, PFLAG has been an inspiration to and resource for countless families since the 1970s.

Sexual minorities differ from racial, ethnic, and national minorities, who may face discrimination and disdain, but who develop within their families important systems of support and nurturance. In contrast, glbtq individuals generally grow up in families in which their minority sexual orientation or gender identity is concealed, ignored, or condemned. Hence, they often receive little or no support from their families, especially during the crucial and often traumatic coming out process.

Moreover, since most parents are heterosexual and may have imbibed the larger culture's misinformation about sexual minorities, they are frequently ill prepared to understand and accept their glbtq children.

Given these circumstances, the presence and growth of PFLAG have been enormously reassuring both to glbtq people and to their families and friends. Indeed, PFLAG has developed into a significant force for the advancement of glbtq rights.

Early History

PFLAG's origins trace back to New York City in 1972, when a gay man named Morton Manford was attacked at a gay rights rally. Jeanne and Jules Manford, his parents, saw the assault on their local news and were appalled that the police had failed to come to their son's aid.

Jeanne Manford decided to take action. The following year she marched alongside her son at the Pride Parade, carrying a sign that read "Parents of Gays: Unite in Support of Our Children."

Noting the emotional response she received from the crowd at the parade, she determined to begin a support group for other parents of gay and lesbian children. About 20 people attended the first meeting of New York City Parents of Gays, as the group was then called, and over the next several years similar groups began meeting throughout the country.

These disparate groups, along with other parents, came together in 1979 at the first National March for Gay and Lesbian Rights in Washington, D. C. Two years later, in 1981, PFLAG decided to establish itself as a national organization, and opened its first office in Los Angeles. The following year, the group was incorporated as a nonprofit organization under the name Federation of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, Inc. In 1987 it relocated its headquarters to Denver and in 1990 to Washington, D. C.

PFLAG's Mission



The South Orange County PFLAG contingent at the Long Beach Pride Parade in 2005. Photograph by Angela Brinskele. Courtesy Angela Brinskele.

One of PFLAG's most important functions is to counsel and support parents as they come to terms with their children's sexual orientation. They also provide support to members of mixed-orientation marriages, often in conjunction with the Straight Spouse Network. In addition, they attempt to educate the broader public by providing accurate information about homosexuality and gender identity. Finally, they advocate on behalf of glbtq people and their issues.

In the 1970s, PFLAG's activism included protesting Anita Bryant's anti-gay Save Our Children campaign. In the 1980s, the group worked to oppose lesbians being discharged from the military, as well as distributing educational materials and information.

In the 1990s, PFLAG's then-president Paulette Goodman began corresponding with First Lady Barbara Bush, who stated that she supported ending discrimination against all Americans. The two continued to communicate until 1992.

Current Structure

In 1993, the organization renamed itself Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. PFLAG's restructuring that year included the establishment of an affiliation process for chapters, along with the election of a board; PFLAG thus became a member organization with strong support for its chapter affiliates.

Many of the individual chapters have active educational and support programs, ranging from media outreach to fundraising for scholarships for glbtq university students.

Bisexual and Transgender Issues

Despite the exclusion of "bisexual" and "transgender" from the organization's name, PFLAG works for the rights of these sexual minorities as well, providing education on gender identification along with sexual orientation. PFLAG's policy statements on such issues as legislation, equality in the workplace, hate crimes, same-gender marriage, religious affiliation, and comprehensive sex education all reflect its deep commitment to ensuring the rights of all glbtq people.

Current Priorities

PFLAG publishes several pamphlets that help parents understand their children's sexual orientation or gender identity and sponsor several programs meant to inform the public about glbtq people. The organization also attempts to counter the untruths promulgated by anti-gay groups.

PFLAG's current priorities include supporting the work of local grassroots affiliates, working for the safety of students in all schools, and building inclusive models with which to support diverse communities.

Its founders and early members are still tremendously active in the organization, which has become one of the most visible queer support groups in the nation.

Currently, there are more than 460 chapters of PFLAG throughout the United States, with over 200,000 members and supporters.

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www.pflag.org

About the Author

Teresa Theophano, a freelance writer, is a social worker who specializes in community organizing with glbtq populations. She is also the editor of *Queer Quotes* (Beacon Press, 2004).