Fall 2004

Fusion Fall 2004

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Recommended Citation
Roof, Erin; Hyland, Amber; Carlon, Brainne; Smith, Kim; Beallor, Angela S.; Rothscuh, Jessica; and Daniloff, Morgan, "Fusion Fall 2004" (2004). Fusion. 2.
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Fusion Magazine
Fall 2004 Vol. 2

Struggle & Identity in Nicaragua
Fusion magazine

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Fusion magazine is produced by students at Kent State University twice per academic year. No part of Fusion may be reprinted without permission. Readers are encouraged to send letters and feature articles to the staff at the mailing or e-mail address above.

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Provoking Strong Reactions

This magazine provokes some really strong reactions. I’ve seen people pick up Fusion, look through it and promptly throw it down and step on it with disgust. I’ve seen people keep it with them in their backpack and praise the editors and writers that have worked for the past two issues. For a publication to be able to create that strong of feelings, whether they are good or bad, is something really quite amazing.

I don’t want you to pick up this magazine and think that if you are not a member of the LGBT community, this doesn’t apply to you. I think everyone, regardless of sexual orientation, race, or gender should be educated on issues affecting minority and oppressed communities. That is why magazines like Fusion, Uhuru and Artemis play such an important role on this campus.

For this issue, I wanted to go beyond the borders of the United States to show that prejudice and discrimination doesn’t just hit home here. It’s actually much worse in countries like Nicaragua and Belarus.

In this issue, Angela Beallor takes you on a trip to Nicaragua to explore the life of Miguel Silva, a young bisexual man struggling with his sexuality in a country that has been ravaged by poverty and joblessness.

Also meet Ruslan, a young man who is able to come out in America—but would face execution if he came out in his home country of Belarus.

Meanwhile, back in America, we have stories about a couple at Kent State dealing with one of the partners coming out as transgender, gay and lesbian parents building families through adoption, a profile on a drag king performer and the many challenges of coming out in different scenarios. We also have a listing of the Top 5 most gay-friendly colleges in Ohio, as well as the least gay-friendly ones.

I hope you take this copy of Fusion and enjoy the strong reactions it provokes — hopefully, it makes you think harder about your assumptions and your world.

Steven Harbaugh, Editor

Photo by Sarah Thompson
Not-so-foreign Territory

No one can deny that homosexuals and homosexuality exists. Biologists have also discovered homosexuality in other mammals, birds and insects. Homosexuality is a part of life and the natural world.

But my sexuality does not define my entire being. It does not define anyone’s entire being. Every day I begin to see a greater importance in exploring the differences and similarities between myself and others. No one thing should define a person.

Many people don’t know that my father actually grew up in Malaysia. And despite that, it still seems like a place that only exists as something that contributes to my father’s broken English. My father and I rarely speak about his Malaysian cultural heritage.

Frequently my own Malaysian heritage occurs to me as a square box called “Asian and Pacific Islander,” while filling out applications. Or, when growing up in a mostly white and Catholic grade school, I was often asked by classmates or other parents to name my country of origin. At home, looking at my fading Malaysian birth certificate in the same drawer as my U.S. passport, I realize how I was forced to choose one identity over another one.

Sexual minorities may fall into a category similar to racial minorities ridden with preconceived feelings latched to stereotypes and peer-influenced discrimination. Unlike racial minorities, sexual minorities cannot always be visibly identified and often choose invisibility.

Gary Gates, a demographer at the Urban Institute, found same-sex couple homes in 97 percent of the country’s “census tracts” in an analysis of the 2000 census. Census tracts are smaller than counties and Gates’ findings seem to indicate factually that same-sex couples are widely dispersed throughout the entire United States.

Sexual minorities exist throughout the world and live within every U.S. community. Hopefully at some point in the near future, people will realize just how prevalent sexual minorities are in our culture. I hope that one day sexuality will be regarded in society as something that is not taboo, but rather an acceptable part of my being — like my ethnicity.

Marie B. Ho, Visual Editor
The first step to prepare for a drag king performance is to bind the breasts, Angela Wicks, senior political science major says. “It hurts,” Wicks says. “You can’t breathe, and you feel restricted with how high you can raise your hands. You don’t want to move too much because you really want to make sure that Ace bandage doesn’t come off, because that could be really messy.”

Next is putting on the costume. Wicks wears big shirts to further hide her chest. She tops off the outfit with a bandana or baseball cap, which drag kings with long hair often use. Some choose to wear fake facial hair, but Wicks says these items are hard to find.

PRIDE! Kent’s former president struggles to bring awareness of her art inside and outside the sexual minority community

Story by Erin Roof
Photos by Molly Corfman
A new kind of beauty

Drag kings, women that dress as men for performances, are struggling to carve a place for themselves even within the sexual minority community. Men who perform as women are welcomed entertainment, but women in drag are still rare, even in an open group like PRIDE! Kent.

But drag goes beyond fashion statements: It confronts gender identity issues. It forces people to see beauty objectively, freeing viewers of the constraint of the male and female identities, Wicks, PRIDE! Kent’s former president says.

“It makes you see the person as a whole,” she says. “You see beauty on a larger scale — not just on a male or female basis. It’s the same in drag or out of drag — they want you to see them as a beautiful person either way.

“Gender is how you feel inside, whereas sex is biological,” she says. “When you’re a drag king, you’re obviously biologically female. When you’re in that role, you want to represent yourself as someone who is male so you have the attitude of a male and the dress of a male.”

Wicks struggles to find venues that will allow drag kings to perform. She says the only Akron/Kent-area night club that has welcomed drag king shows is the Interbelt. Even then, drag kings perform there only during shows associated with PRIDE! Kent.

Wicks says she hopes the drag king performances at PRIDE! Kent fund raisers will raise interest within the sexual minority community.

“When you’re a drag king, you’re obviously biologically female.

Angela Wicks
Former PRIDE! Kent president
“I think as we do more shows at the Interbelt and more of our members get interested in doing amateur drag, it will help start a drag king community,” she says. “There’s been a positive response. People go who have never seen a drag show, and they’re interested. Most of them think it’s entertaining.”

**The ‘boy’ band**

Wicks performs with a group of other Kent State drag kings. In their act, the group usually parodies a boy band by wearing jeans, buttoned up shirts, ties and backwards baseball caps. Wicks helps choreograph the routine, allowing solo showcases for each performer and synchronized movements during the chorus.

During his solo dance, Wicks’ drag character, A.J., works hard to represent himself as a male performer. Usher’s song, “Yeah,” vibrates across the room. A.J. has adopted Usher’s looks and dance moves for the routine. The choreography is complete with half-dressed women dancing in the background.

“You just have to portray yourself when you’re onstage as how a male would act while performing. How they’re going to talk. How they’re going to move their body,” she says. “You don’t want to use too much hip movement because that’s how a female would dance. When you see a drag queen out there, they’re doing a lot of things with their hips. When you’re out there and you’re a guy,
you’re going to want to use dance moves that a guy would use.”

Women have dressed as men throughout history for many reasons, says Lori McGee, a modern and classical language professor who also teaches Introduction to Gay and Lesbian Studies at Kent State’s Stark campus.

“Historically, women chose to dress like men to get social benefits only available to men such as voting, working, owning property and freedom to travel,” she says.

McGee says cross-dressing dates back to female Egyptian royalty impersonating male pharaohs. It was also a common practice for women to dress as men during the Hundred Years War of the Middle Ages. Women also dressed as male pirates and sailed the seas as captains of their own ships, and some women would dress as male soldiers to join the military.

Now, women have many of the same freedoms as men, so the reasons women cross dress are different.

“In today’s society, it’s an identity issue,” she says. “Some women do it to get attention because we’re so locked into our gender roles. Sometimes women wear men’s clothes because women’s clothes don’t ‘fit’ them.”

**Revolutionizing gender**

Even though women dressing as men is ingrained in American history, society is still unsettled by it, McGee says. People have come to accept drag queens, but still don’t welcome their female counterparts.
“I think it’s about societal power structure,” she says. “It has to do with patriarchal roles. Even though men part with the role, the man is still holding the power. So when a man subverts his own role, it’s more accepted in society. For a woman, it’s not OK because women don’t hold the power.”

Wicks thinks drag kings aren’t popular because they don’t get the attention of the public as much as drag queens.

“It’s a lot more shocking for people to see a man dressed as a woman in our society where there’s such a unisex dress code,” she says. “Girls dress in guys clothing now whether they’re straight or gay, and it’s not much of a culture shock. You see a guy in women’s clothing, and it’s definitely much more of a culture shock. That is why it gets a lot more attention.”

But for Wicks, drag is about more than being shocking. It’s more than putting on a ruse. It’s about slipping into another identity.

“It’s fun for me because I get to be a character,” she says. “It’s like acting. I step into
“It’s fun for me because I get to be a character. It’s like acting. I step into another person’s personality.”

Angela Wicks
Former PRIDE! Kent president

another person’s personality. For the five minutes you’re out there, you’re a different person.”

Even though drag kings haven’t become as mainstream as drag queens, Wick says audiences’ response keeps her hopeful that it will gain acceptance.

“Every time I’ve performed, I’ve gotten good remarks,” she says. “People really like seeing it. It’s just something different than the same old drag queen performance.”

Above/bottom right: Angela Wicks performs as AJ at the Internet Nite Club in Akron. Wicks’ chose a song by R&B group 112 for the performance.

Top right: Angela Wicks stands with PRIDE! Kent programming director Autumn Piller. Piller performs as Tyler Nordstrom. The two friends are watching Miss Kent State University Natasha Nordstrom perform a sensual rendition of a diva ballad.

Photo Illustration by Marsha Bansberg
What Makes a Family?

Two couples share the trials and tribulations of LGBT adoption in the face of adversity

Story by Amber Hyland
Photos by Samara Peddle
Note: Gary Alvero and Patrick Nicnilo requested that the names of their children not be used in the article. Most adoptive parents change the names of their children; they have not. For the protection of the children, their names will not be used. Also, by parents’ request, the children’s faces were not shown.

Because our country has a preconceived idea of what a “normal” family is, gay and lesbian couples must fight to prove their roles as adequate parents. The stories below of two couples who have adopted children prove that families, regardless of sexual orientation, need strength, hard work and love.

Melanie and Margaret

“The first year it was tough. We were so discouraged and felt like it wouldn’t happen. Then, boom. The next thing you know, we have four,” Margaret Roberts-Byrd says.

“She’s very fertile,” she adds. “I always tell her, ‘We don’t need any more babies.’”

But unfortunately, the children they adopted had many cognitive and emotional problems. But they did not find this out until after the children were in their home for a while.

The children came to them with their belongings in trash bags. The clothes they had did not fit them.

All four had been abused in foster homes.

Two of the children, Aaron and Ricky, are brothers. They were taken from their mother because of neglect and unsanitary living conditions.

At their previous foster home, their hands were put on stoves, and their heads were dunked under water.

“They didn’t have opinions about what they liked or didn’t like,” Melanie says. “They accepted what was given to them. All of that has changed.”

“(Couples who adopt) will think, ‘Oh, everything is going to be wonderful now,’” Margaret says. “Of course there is a honeymoon period, but then you see the real them.”

“Then they test you,” Melanie adds.

Despite the struggles, Margaret says they have great expectations for their children.

“We never tell them that they can’t do anything,” Margaret says.

“With the exception of jumping off of the roof,” Melanie adds.

“I would do it all over again. It made us stronger as a couple and as people,” Margaret says. “We don’t really argue anymore.”

“What!” Melanie interrupts.

“OK, a couple times of year,” Margaret says.

“Just to keep the flames burning,” Melanie adds.
“It helps to know what the triggers are,” he adds. Since their child was neglected, she had difficulty knowing that Christmas involved giving and receiving gifts.

The first Christmas the couple had together with their daughter, she sat in amazement, Patrick says. “Granted, it was a little overkill because the child had 20 packages to open,” he adds.

The couple waited until 11:30 a.m. for her to wake up and open her packages. But it would take over a week for her to play with her new toys. She didn’t know they belonged to her.

“Finally she learned that the world could be hers — and she has no problem asking for it,” Patrick says.

It has been four years since Gary and Patrick last adopted a child. They have adopted four children: three boys and one girl.
They have seen delays in the process, though. For example, once the couple claimed someone at the agency sabotaged their file. They have also dealt with social workers being uncomfortable with their sexuality.

“When they placed our daughter here, there was a complete uproar in the agency,” Gary says.

“They didn’t like the fact that they were placing an African-American girl with two white boys, let alone two gay boys,” Patrick says.

“Basically they likened it to prostitution,” Gary says.

Despite the discrimination and stress of dealing with what the agency may have left out about their child’s history of abuse, Gary and Patrick have learned how to make their family work. The men thought that nothing could surprise them about raising a family.

“And we’ve been surprised,” Patrick says. “You have to be willing, no matter what a child does, to say, ‘Despite all of that, we love you.’”

Gary continues and says, “These children have been manipulated. They’ve been let down by foster parents and the system. The whole approach is to do everything in your power to make sure they get everything they need.”

**Moments that melt the heart**

December 2003 was the first year Gary and Patrick were able to have a “normal” Christmas with their children.

There was wrapping paper all over the house. “The way things should look,” Patrick says. “The sad thing is this will probably be the last year that all of them believe in Santa Claus.”

Although their children are getting to the age where they want to be with their friends more, the couple finds time to cook for them and host birthday parties with the children’s friends.

Gary says his daughter has become “daddy’s little girl.”

“It can get to a point when I am furious at her,” he says. “But all she has to do is smile and say ‘Daddy.’”

Sometimes the comfort of hearing a term of endearment is enough to let the couples know that the hard work is worth it.

“Still whenever they say ‘Mommy’ it’s like, ‘Wow,’” Margaret says. “It still melts my heart. Before I put them to bed, I still give them their tickles.”

With any couple who adopts children, there is a period of adjustment. Despite this, Margaret and Melanie have found the time to be an active family. The children are all involved in sports, and on rainy days the family will stay inside to play board games and Uno.

“There was a big adjustment for them to move from city life to country life. Robbie has become a big country boy,” Melanie says. “We have ponds, and he is there catching frogs. It’s hard to keep shoes on him.”

“We’d do it all over again,” Margaret says.

“No regrets,” Melanie adds.

“Only joy,” Margaret says.
What Makes a Family?

It is illegal for any adoption service to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation. But this doesn’t mean the adoption process for LGBT couples is easy.

Michelle Wolcott, a social worker at the Northeast Ohio Adoption Services in Warren, says the agency abides by the law. Since the organization places “special needs” children, the detailed process focuses more on the strength of the family and its ability to deal with stress, not a couple’s sexual orientation.

“Not every couple that applies makes it through, but we have had LGBT couples who made it through—the same as traditional couples,” Wolcott says.

Sometimes an organization will not be this helpful, though, leaving LGBT couples to do a lot of the work on their own. The ease of the process depends on a social worker’s willingness to cooperate with the couple.

The following is a list of tips from individuals who have worked in the social service sector or who have gone through the adoption process.

1. Know what to ask the agency

The agency will have many questions for the couple. According to Mary Brown, a social worker at the Children Services Board in Youngstown, which hasn’t had any LGBT couples adopt, the initial inquiry form will ask a variety of questions before the couple can even move on to the home study. She adds that there is no way to hide sexual orientation since the agency will ask who is living in the home or who an individual is involved with.

While many social workers are willing to help throughout the process, some may not be prepared to deal with LGBT couples.

“You have to realize that there is a difference between social work and sociology,” says Patti Swartz, a Kent State English professor and former employee of an adoption agency. “Sociology looks at how individuals function in a society and how society works. Social work tries to fit individuals into a cultural norm.”

“Many agencies have social workers that are ambivalent at best about gay and lesbian parenting,” she adds. “There was built-in homophobia in the agency I worked for. Questions would come up like, ‘What if we had a gay couple trying to adopt? How would we handle the home study?’ Concerns would also come up with single parents who were applying. ‘If it was a woman, how would she provide an adequate male influence? If it was a male, how would he provide an adequate female influence?’” Swartz says.

“If you want to call and find out if an agency is likely to be discriminatory, ask if they have any gay men or lesbians on staff,” says Chris Adkins, who was a foster parent for three years with the Department of Kansas Social Services. “When they train foster parents, do they handle training for LGBT issues? Do they have any foster homes that have placed queer kids? And ask what their statistics are for recruitment. Their placement office keeps stats of foster family profiles. They know the racial, ethnic, religious, sexual orientation and just about any other
characteristic of their families, so that children can be profiled for placement in a home. You can always ask to interview someone from the placement office. Also ask what degree they hold and what degrees their supervisors and employees have. This will tell you a lot.

2. Be prepared for hard work

Sometimes an agency will not be trained to deal with LGBT couples. Social workers can be hesitant to work with the couple, leaving them to work through the process virtually alone.

“It is so individual with the system,” Melanie says. “Sometimes you will get a social worker who is willing to advocate for you. Then you get someone who barely wants to work with you when they find out you are gay.”

Swartz says she remembers from working at the agency that the community’s sense of tolerance matters too. “If a community is conservative,” she says. “Social workers are less comfortable in doing things that will outrage the community—often when the agency has to rely on the community for economic support."

Margaret says the agency is not supposed to discriminate, but Hamilton (an agency in Columbus) wouldn’t help the couple through the process. They didn’t answer their calls, Margaret says. She also says the agency said a couple children were perfect for the couple, but when it came to the matching meeting, the agency would always say no.

Interested couples must prove to the agencies how badly they want to care for the children.

“We had pictures with the kids at our home during Christmas. We made a three to four page letter with the pictures. I hand-delivered these to various people in the agency,” Gary says, noting that this showed the agency they were capable of being loving, caring parents.

3. Understand that once you adopt the children, there is no turning back

Often children with severe emotional and cognitive disabilities are placed in a couple’s home.

“There are conditions that aren’t written on their records,” Melanie says. “You don’t find out until they are in your home for a while. But it is much better than it used to be. In the ‘50s there was no medical history.”

The agency, Gary says, will only give you what you want to know.

“You have to go digging to find out how bad situations were,” he says. “When you find out something is wrong, you have to go to a doctor who has seen the child to figure things out.”

Swartz says homophobia has caused many gay and lesbian adoptive parent applicants to be placed with special needs children.

“There are already a lot of problems facing LGBT people,” she says. “Many of these issues of disapproval put stress on the relationship as well. Put a child with problems on top of that, there is even more stress.”

Margaret says she had to quit her job in order to stay home with her children. “I had a very good job,” she says. “But it was our decision. I had to for their development.”

When Margaret and Melanie began talking about moving into a bigger house, it scared their children.

“Stability means a lot,” Melanie says. “Robert and Phillip were in 10 different foster homes. They still have fears. ‘We don’t need to move,’ they said. I had to explain that we would all move together to a bigger house. Eventually we dropped the issue. Something like that puts them off.”

Gary says the worst thing that can happen is to not take care of special needs children because of their disabilities. “I see it as a character flaw for those people who give up on their children,” he says.

4. Advocate for your children

Because some adopted children have cognitive and emotional problems, it is important to help them through the educational process.

“In some of the schools, you have to tell them it is their responsibility to teach them,” Patrick says. “We don’t walk in and say that they are perfect. It is the school’s responsibility to deal with that — to handle their behaviors and educate.”

Patrick says some of their teachers have made a phenomenal turnaround, but they are still committed to fighting for their children.

“We went in there with the Gary and Patrick approach,” Patrick says. “Sometimes the children say, ‘No, you don’t have to go into school.’ We let them know we will fight for them 100 percent.”

-Melanie
Adoptive mother

-FUSION MAGAZINE
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Top 5 Most and Least Gay-Friendly Ohio Colleges

Story by Brianne Carlon
Photo Illustrations by Marsha Bansberg and Anne Maddox
For high school seniors, there are 63 four-year colleges to choose from in the state of Ohio alone. Students must make a decision between a large public university and a small private college. Rural setting versus big city life also is a factor. The choice may seem overwhelming, but the options for gay and lesbian students also may include finding acceptance at a new school.

This is a list of the most and least gay-friendly colleges in Ohio, which includes the biggest school, Ohio State University, as well as the smallest, Antioch College. To determine this listing, writer Brianne Carlon researched college information on LGBT student services and spoke with students and administrators.

Top five

1. Oberlin College (Oberlin):
   “I’d say that Oberlin is a great place to be gay,” says Andy Monk, co-chairman of the Lambda Union, one of Oberlin’s LGBT organizations. “There are a lot of kids here who haven’t dealt with or even thought about their straight privilege or their internalized heterosexism, but it’s more likely than not that they’ll be challenged to do so before they leave this place.”

   Oberlin has five LGBT groups. The Lambda Union acts as an organization that serves all members of the queer community. The group brings in speakers, plans programs and holds weekly meetings. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered Union or LGBTU is the most active student group on campus, and it also has the biggest budget.

   LGBTU’s goals include organizing political, educational and social events and to advance understanding and respect to sexual minorities.

   Oberlin also has groups called Act Up (addresses HIV/AIDS education), OUTrage (an activist-minded group) and Zami-Color (a group for queer students of color). It also hosts an annual Drag Ball, which is the most popular and attended event at the school every year. Oberlin was also listed in the September issue of OUT magazine as the best small-size school for LGBT students in the nation.

   “I’m just worried about what will happen when I graduate because Oberlin, even with all the problems it does have, it doesn’t even compare to the outside world,” Monk says. “I’m getting spoiled.”

2. Ohio State University (Columbus):
   Ohio State University has 17 LGBT student groups, as well as organizations for faculty and staff. The LGBT Student Services Center within the Multicultural Center runs the HERO Program, (Homophobia is Everyone’s Responsibility to Overcome), which educates the faculty and staff about LGBT issues. It also plans programs throughout the year, including activities for National Coming Out Day, Intersex Awareness Day, Transgender Day of Remembrance, and GLBTIA Awareness Week. It also coordinates the Ohio Transgender Day of Remembrance Conference and “The Other Prom,” an LGBT-friendly prom.

   Fusion is the oldest LGBT student group at OSU. The group’s mission is to provide a safe space for LGBT people and heterosexual allies through education, outreach, advocacy and social activities. The Wexner Center for the Arts also offers a popular gay and lesbian film festival, and it mixes LGBT themes in its exhibits frequently. 29 area bars and clubs offer an outlet for LGBT students, including Club Diversity at 863 S. High Street. The Advocate, the national gay and lesbian news magazine, once included Columbus on a “best of” list for the gayest small-size cities.

   “While discrimination is a reality here as everywhere,” says Brett Beemyn, coordinator of the GLBT Student Services Center, “Many students feel comfortable being out and experience few problems.”

3. Antioch College (Yellow Springs):
   Antioch College is a small private school with 618 undergraduate students. It has a popular Queer Center that provides a support group and network for the LGBT population at Antioch.

   According to Antioch College’s Web site, “The Queer Center recognizes the right of each individual to define, classify or label themselves according to their own beliefs and experiences.” The center offers various types of community outreach by sponsoring speakers, films, poets, art shows and workshops.

   Last year, Leslie Feinberg, author of many novels addressing transgender issues, spoke at the school’s graduation.

4. Ohio University (Athens):
   Ohio University has 11 different LGBT organizations including GLOBE (Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Employees of Ohio University) and Swarm of Dykes. It also has an LGBT Programs Center, which according to the OU Web site, is “committed to fostering human development and cultivating an inclusive, open and supportive community through education, support, student engagement, collaboration and advocacy at Ohio University and beyond.”

   There are a numerous amount of activities offered each year, including LGBT Community Celebration and Pride Graduation. The center also develops quarterly programs devoted to LGBT literature, including Queer Words, Queer Worlds and the LGBT Book Club. Ohio University also assists with the organization of PRIDE week. The university also sponsors two discussion groups called, “Out and About: The Coming Out Group” and “Transitions: Support Group.”

   “Personally, as a gay student here at OU, I feel it is a fairly welcoming environment for the most part,” says Justin Maxwell, president of Ally, a club for allies of the LGBT community.
5. Kent State University (Kent):

“I am happy to say that people on campus are very accepting and appreciative of other people’s preferences,” says Drew Danals, a sophomore fashion design major. “Also there is a large comfort zone throughout the campus.”

Although Kent State is currently the last major university in Ohio without an LGBT office of student services, it does offer several LGBT groups. PRIDE! Kent is the second oldest in the nation for the LGBT community. The group’s purpose is to educate the campus and surrounding community about LGBT issues, as well as create a supportive environment for those in need, regardless of sexual orientation. PRIDE! Kent holds events for the entire student body and conducts speaker bureaus in which students ask a panel of LGBT students questions regarding PRIDE! Kent, the members’ lives and the community. There is also a Safe Zone Program at Kent that provides havens for LGBT students who feel harassed or persecuted because of their sexuality. These gay-friendly offices are marked with a pink triangle. The office’s mission is to keep the students safe and offer consultation. Kent also has an organization called Friends & Allies for straight allies of the LGBT community.

“It’s generally friendly [at Kent State], [but] most of it depends on the individual,” says Karl Hopkins-Lutz, secretary of PRIDE! Kent. “Most people can’t even tell if many people are gay or lesbian outside of PRIDE! meetings.”

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**Bottom Five**

1. Denison University (Granville)

Denison University was #3 on The Princeton Review of the least amount of tolerance for gay students on campus. The Princeton Review is a nonprofit organization that conducts research and compiles a variety of school ranking listings for prospective students. The university has an organization called Outlook that promotes awareness regarding LGBT issues and it also started the Safe Zone program last spring, but the school does not have an office for LGBT services.

Students are not necessarily comfortable with being openly gay on campus.

“I know there are a large number of students in what I like to call the ‘GU’ or ‘gay underground,’ are only out to a small group of friends,” says Carrie Kortegast, assistant director of residential life. “We have dealt with a few incidents of anti-gay graffiti and the expression ‘that’s so gay’ is a common one on campus, but I would not describe the environment on campus as hostile toward LGBT students.”

2. Mount Vernon Nazarene University (Mount Vernon):

Mount Vernon is a private Nazarene university with a total enrollment of 2,337 students. The university offers 36 social organizations, the most popular being the campus ministry groups. No LGBT services are offered for the students.
Leah Norris, a student accounts coordinator at the Office of Adult Studies, says the university does not have to offer those kinds of services because it is private.

3. Mount Union College (Alliance):
“I don’t know one gay person here,” says Julie McLhinney, sophomore communication major. “I think if someone was openly gay here, it would cause a lot of attention on campus because everyone knows everyone else’s business.”

Mount Union is an independent school with 74 social clubs. As far as LGBT services, “That’s pretty limited for us,” says Susan Denning, Director of Corporate and Foundation Relations. But the school promotes “Six Guiding Principles,” one of them being diversity. The university has a Black Cultural Center, even though there were fewer than 20 black students in the freshman class last year.

4. Miami University (Oxford):
Miami University established a gay-straight alliance group, Spectrum, in 1986 to create a safe environment on campus and encourage diversity, but Miami still has a long way to go.

“Many students still feel uncomfortable or in danger coming out and accepting their sexual or gender identity,” says Tim Yaczo, a sophomore member of Spectrum. “Most of this pressure stems not from faculty, but from the student body, who, while they understand the concept of diversity and tolerance, rarely practice or employ a safe atmosphere in which one can be themselves. Indifference and apathy for others unlike the majority is the greatest educational and mental plague gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans people face everyday walking out the door at Miami.”

5. Ohio Dominican University (Columbus):
Ohio Dominican University is a private Roman Catholic university with 2,317 enrolled students. The school offers 23 social organizations, including the popular campus ministry group.

When asked to speak to someone about the LGBT services offered to the gay community at the school, the operator responded with, “The gay community? Oh, my goodness!”
Saving Ruslan

A gay foreign exchange student’s parents fight to keep him in America

Story by Kim Smith
Photos courtesy of Wendy Wartes

Seattle resident Wendy Wartes has one goal for her adopted son — to keep him out of his home country Belarus. Belarus’ population is 80 percent Eastern Orthodox and is not tolerant of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered community, Wartes says. Her son, Ruslan, came out to her while staying with her family during a student exchange program.

“He held a pillow and said, ‘I’m homosexual, but I’m not gay, there’s nothing gay about it,’” Wartes remembers. “He knew that the word ‘gay’ meant happy — there’s a language barrier there.”

In Belarus, it is difficult to find people open to homosexuality, she says. The head of the Orthodox church in Belarus has openly announced support for execution of homosexuals.

“He’d have to marry a woman, maybe a lesbian,” she says. “It’s not getting better there. The people have no free press and can’t talk about homosexuality.”

Wartes, a volunteer for the national organization Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), says she and her husband have tried to keep Ruslan in the United States since they found out in 1996 that he was gay.

“In Belarus, when he turned 18 he’d have to do mandatory army service for two years, and I knew how brutal that could be for him,” says Wartes, who also has three biological children.

Wartes, who is a teacher, contacted her senator and Tina Podlodowski, former Seattle City Council member, to help her keep Ruslan in the country. She told them, “I just had a foreign exchange student come out to me.”

As Wartes sought help, help came to her. A woman from PFLAG called Wartes soon after and took her out to lunch.

“I sat there and cried,” she says. “It was the beginning of my awakening. A gay man also took out Ruslan to dinner. My husband and I never had had a chance to ask questions of someone who was gay for Ruslan’s sake, as well as our own.”

Ruslan entered community college near Wartes, with a student visa, and because of his interest in music, joined a men’s choir. She says it was around that time they decided to adopt him.

His parents in Belarus were not ready to accept him when he tried to come out to them at 13.

“They wanted to put him into a mental hospital with shock therapy, so he tried to jump off a third floor balcony,” she says. “When he called to tell them why he was staying in America, his mother became hysterical and said, ‘You said you changed. You lied to us, you lied to us.’”

Opening up to his parents has helped improve their relationship, Wartes says.

“His mother and father are out to a couple of relatives and have looked at homosexuality in a different light,” she says. “I think it’s because we love him and have kept him. His mother shared with his aunt, cousins and grandmother, who all live with them in one bedroom apartment.”

Allowing others to be included in Ruslan’s life encouraged Wartes to tell her own parents about his sexual preference.
“I told my mother, who was 85 at the time. She said, ‘Well, if Ruslan is gay, then I have to rethink everything I thought about gay people,’” Wartes says. “The next day they brought a $10,000 check to help with his education.”

Ruslan is currently waiting to see if he will get an asylum visa. He has already dealt with depression and trouble acquiring work visas. Late permits caused job termination for him on several occasions. Ruslan currently works part time at a library, while he waits for his hearing.

Ruslan's case is based on his army status in Belarus, and when he turns 27, he’s not eligible for the army anymore, and his case will have to be based on his fear of returning home.

“It’s really scary,” Wartes says. “He didn’t feel he’d live to 20. At least now I can say we gave him six extra years of life. He’d have to stay closeted at home in Belarus. But he’s part of the family, and I can’t imagine them taking him away from us right now.”
As we talk in Spanish about his sexual identity, a smile spreads across Miguel’s face. He punctuates his thoughts with English and says, “I just want to be myself…”

Miguel Roque Silva is 21 years old and a resident of Ciudad Sandino, Nicaragua. Like all Nicaraguans, he has grown up in a society that has sought to define itself and find its way through dictatorship, revolution, renewal, poverty and instability. The history of Nicaragua is like a dialogue that switches back and forth between personal struggle and the struggle of society as a whole. Although Miguel refers to the struggle to define his sexuality, the same words can be heard from the lips of many Nicaraguans who still want to know who they will be and how this country will find itself.

Miguel was born in Ciudad Sandino in 1983. His parents had been involved with the Sandinistas — a Nicaraguan movement that fought and succeeded in overthrowing the dictator Anastasio Somoza in 1979. He and three siblings, however, were orphaned when his parents and sister died in a car accident in 1986. With nowhere else to go, they grew up in the household of an aunt in Managua.

“They were not interested in us. They didn’t care how we were,” Miguel says. “If we had food or didn’t have food. If we had light or water. In this house, we were mistreated and abused sexually, emotionally and psychologically.”

Miguel and his nephew Brian look through photographs in Miguel’s room in Ciudad Sandino, Nicaragua.
Miguel was left to take care of himself in Managua, Nicaragua, the capital that has grown from nearly 600,000 in 1985 to more than 1.1 million today. 

As a young child, he washed clothes and dishes, cleaned homes, and cooked to support himself. Gender roles in Latin America are fairly rigid, and the work that Miguel was doing is usually considered “women’s work.” He was treated accordingly, and he received insults that have lasted until the present — making reference to his gender expression and sexuality — mariposa, mamón, maricón, and gay. These words are derogatory words for sexual minorities in Nicaragua — mariposa is butterfly, mamón is a small fruit eaten in Nicaragua that is consumed by sucking, and maricón is a sissy.

“My sector is very, very dangerous because there are many people without a house, without money, without food,” Silva explains. “There are no jobs. It is a municipality of Managua, but here there are much less job options, and our economy is unstable. Ciudad Sandino is a refuge. It is a place where people come who have no other options.”

**Life Among the Ruins**

Today, Miguel again lives in Ciudad Sandino. The community began as a shantytown created by many displacements. Most notably, when the earthquake of 1972 destroyed much of Managua, the dictator Anastasio Somoza moved thousands of people who lost their homes to the western edge of the city: Ciudad Sandino. Waves of people also moved there in 1998 after Hurricane Mitch.

No accurate maps exist of the area because of the rapid urbanization. With more than 150,000 people living in tightly packed homes made mostly of cinder blocks and corrugated metal, it is the most heavily populated area in Nicaragua. There are only two paved streets, no garbage pick-up or sewage system and, as Miguel stated, virtually no jobs.

Walking through the streets, the poverty is striking. There are small children with dark brown hair turning blonde from malnutrition. Shops selling chips and fruit are set up in front of homes to try to earn cordobas, the Nicaraguan currency, to supplement small wages from the zona franca, or free trade zone, near the city. Women working in these foreign-owned factories earn less than $15 every two weeks.

Today, Miguel’s family is his sister Ivania, his niece Wendy and his nephew Brian. There has been little time when Ivania and Miguel have been separated. Although they are linked by blood, there are no bonds between Miguel and his two brothers. They do not support his sexual orientation, among other things, and are not really a part of Miguel’s life. Ivania’s home, in an unsafe, secluded area of Ciudad Sandino, is still a safe haven for Miguel in many ways.

“I am not always acting totally gay all the time — throwing out feathers or flaunting who I sleep with. I am bisexual, but I have my privacy also,” he says. “I sing and dance, and there’s no problem because of that. That’s at home, but if I am in the street in my neighborhood, I think it would go very badly.”

Ivania supports Miguel’s bisexual identity. She is his “bible” to
whom he shares everything. Miguel says, “In my house, I am free. I can talk to my sister about everything. She knows me most.” With many Nicaraguan families sharing very close quarters, it is often very difficult to find space to be with lovers or partners, especially for sexual minorities. Ivania has been instrumental in supporting Miguel through his struggles and helping Miguel to accept his sexuality. Despite the problems he faces when it comes to his sexuality, Miguel worries the most about his sister and her family. Many days, her family goes without food. It is hard to find work because she has no way to pay someone to watch the children. It is against this backdrop that many Nicaraguans struggle with their sexual identity. Coming out just adds another hurdle to an already difficult life. Hiding one’s sexuality is another struggle.

**Le Bistro**

We enter the darkened *Le Bistro*, one of three gay clubs in Managua. The club is crowded, *Flor de Caña* rum is flowing, and the backdrop of the stage is a large rainbow. A sign on the stage marks the event as a part of “La Jornada Por una Sexualidad Libre de Prejuicios,” the Journey for a Sexuality Free from Prejudice. We heard about the event while at a Sunday service of the Metro Community Church. It is the 13th annual celebration in Nicaragua as part of June’s International Pride Week.

Miguel encounters person after person that he knows as drag queens begin performing on the stage. A year ago, Miguel was still struggling to come out. Now he has found social circles amongst the shifting network of sexual minorities in Managua and in Nicaragua as a whole.

The reason Miguel is even able to come out in public about his sexuality is thanks in part to the change that came about in the ’90s. After U.S.-supported candidate Violeta Chamorro was voted into office in 1990 and the Contra War ended, food rationing and the draft ended as well. This defeated the Sandinista movement, and people lost the connection to the government that allowed them to promote change. Instead they had to do it on the individual grassroots level. This presented a double-edged sword — change was happening, but not on the government level. Actually, Chamorro passed laws against sodomy.

Omar Pinede Chávez is a 24-year-old member of Fundación Xochiquetzal, an organization that formed in the ’90s and was dedicated to educating people about sexuality, gender and AIDS/HIV. “After she [Violeta Chamorro] won,” Chavez says. “There was an explosion of non-governmental organizations, and those NGOs brought information with them. It wasn’t as hard for me because I found information in all these organizations, and being informed helped me to accept my sexuality. I wouldn’t have come out of the closet otherwise.”

Most NGOs have been founded since 1990 and have been instrumental in creating a sense of community among LGBT people. Sandinistas who lost their governmental positions in 1990 continued their humanitarian work within these organizations. Today, for instance, Nicaragua’s government gives very little money or attention to AIDS/HIV. The project of education, prevention
and protection in the face of the disease and other serious health threats is in the hands of NGOs such as the Center for Education and Prevention of AIDS, or CEPRESI; Fundación Nimehuatzín (an organization promoting prevention of HIV/AIDS) and Fundación Xochiquetzal.

NGOs are devoted to providing education and supporting research on LGBT issues. They also promote sexual diversity, tolerance, acceptance and respect. They work with high school students and college students and offer LGBT support groups. The groups also distribute information to prisoners, work with HIV positive people and those in the Nicaraguan sex industry.

**The Legacy of Struggle**

In Nicaragua, banding together to work for what is right can be traced back to the days of Augusto Sandino and the fight against the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza. During the Contra War of the ‘80s, the Nicaraguan population faced a guerilla army that the United States supplied with weapons and money to fight the Sandinistas.

Today, it is in the struggle for social acceptance and human rights for sexual minorities that is a prominent issue — apparent through the Nicaraguan media. Recognizing what it took to accept their own sexuality, many sexual minorities have chosen to work in the burgeoning network of NGOs that are engaged in work with sexuality, gender and human rights.

Clara Jivania Castellón Ramirez lived through the Sandinista uprising against the dictator Somoza and the struggle during the ‘80s. She has seen many changes in society and was involved in the initial organizing of the gay and lesbian movement during the late 1980s. “Even before the Chamorro government, there was a precedence set by the Sandinistas because there was a movement of homosexuals developing during Sandinista times,” she says. “The Sandinista government didn’t want to support that, and they threatened people that if they didn’t stop that movement, they would be thrown in jail.”

Despite the progressive changes made by Violeta Chamorro’s administration, she still passed Article 204. The law was introduced in 1992 and was upheld by the Nicaraguan Supreme Court in 1994. It states that “anyone who induces, promotes, propagandizes or practices in scandalous forms of sexual intercourse between persons of the same sex commits the crime of sodomy.”
While the law is not always enforced, its presence shows that cultural attitudes about sexual minorities influence public opinion and are a source of fear for many sexual minorities. In fact, the organization CEPRESI, which does AIDS/HIV education with gay and bisexual men, is careful about how they publicize themselves. They fear repercussions because of Article 204 if they are seen as promoting homosexuality.

**Women in Nicaragua**

For female sexual minorities, the challenges faced are much different: Article 204 has never been applied to women. Most lesbians are not as visible as gay men or transgender people. In Nicaragua, it is difficult for women to be independent and find ways of supporting themselves. Clara Ramirez, a lesbian and LGBT rights organizer, says it is hard because Nicaraguan women are dependent on their families.

“You don’t learn in this culture to be independent, economically or psychologically, if you are a woman. You don’t have permission to go out into the street, to be independent or to study, although that is changing now,” she says. “Women are working more, but there is still this pressure from your family that you have to have kids. It is horrible not to be able to express your needs to your family and to live a way that doesn’t come out of you naturally.”

This has also made it difficult for some NGOs to organize support for female sexual minorities. “It is hard for women to leave their homes and form these [support] groups,” Clara explains. They may have a family that they are responsible for or a restrictive job. “Women who do work, for instance, in the zona franca work Monday through Sunday. They don’t even have time or money.”

Female sexual minorities are constrained by cultural attitudes about women, too. But the presence of transgendered people can be seen everywhere — on the buses, in the marketplaces and in the clubs.

**Attending Service**

The houses in Managua are short with roofs of corrugated metal and fences to guard from the nightlife. Children stand in the streets, playing with each other or the many dogs that roam the city. Families sit in doorways watching the taxis go by. We walk through a gate, past a study, say buenas tardes to a woman in the kitchen and continue on to the back room to what is actually a church.
Miguel is not religious and does not attend this LGBT-supportive church regularly. But he enjoys the service as an opportunity to be around other sexual minorities. He knows many of the people at the service and seems comfortable there.

The room for the service is predictable. The table in the church boasts a candle, a silver cross, a covered glass of wine, a Bible and other Christian accoutrements. Chairs are arranged in a circle. In the far corner, there is a flag — red, orange, yellow, green, blue and violet. These are not the colors of the embroidered sashes worn by Central American pastors and priests but of the flag of LGBT pride.

The service of La Iglesia de la Comunidad Metropolitana (Metro Community Church) has existed for 19 years. It is one of the very few religious services in Nicaragua that includes a mission affirmation of sexual minorities. Those attending are young, between the ages of 17 and 35, for the most part. Women are rare participants in Nicaraguan organizations, the pastor says, and this service is no exception.

But Pastor Alberto Nájera Flores still considers it very powerful to be able to unite spirituality with sexuality.

“Sometimes it is difficult because of the discrimination against the gay and lesbian community here in Nicaragua,” Flores says. “It is hard to change people’s minds after they have had their patriarchal ideas all their life. It is hard to change their ideas overnight. It is really good to work with the community and help them accept”

You don’t learn in this culture to be independent, economically or psychologically, if you are a woman. You don’t have permission to go out into the street, to be independent or to study, although that is changing now.

Clara Jivania Castellón Ramirez  
LGBT movement organizer
I am not always acting totally gay all the time — throwing out feathers or flaunting who I sleep with. I am bisexual, but I have my privacy also.

Miguel Roque Silva
Resident of Ciudad Sandino, Nicaragua

Miguel dances in the kitchen of Ivania’s home in Ciudad Sandino, Nicaragua, with his friend Tara. Miguel enjoys dancing to Nicaraguan music.

Below: Sunday at the Metropolitan Community Church in Managua involves song and service led by Pastor Albert Nájera Flores. “People will say, ‘Oh, that’s a gay church’ but it is not a gay church, it’s a Christian church. It just happens that the majority of our members of our congregation have a sexuality that is different from heterosexual people,” Pastor Alberto Nájera Flores says.

“People will say, ‘Oh, that’s a gay church’ but it is not a gay church, it’s a Christian church. It just happens that the majority of our members of our congregation have a sexuality that is different from heterosexual people,” Pastor Alberto Nájera Flores says.

Above: Miguel [right] kisses a man named Johnny in Le Bistro Gay Club in Managua, Nicaragua.

Right: Ivania’s dog sleeps on the cold dirt floor in the front of their home in Ciudad Sandino, Nicaragua.
Sexuality is usually seen as separate from spirituality, so I had to discover it on my own. I did that through reading and through praying, and I wanted to know if what I was thinking was right or wrong. I had to go through that process. Coming to this community has helped me and also my experience with God has helped me to see that, to feel that I am doing the right thing.

Alberto Nájera Flores
Pastor of La Iglesia de la Comunidad Metropolitana
their sexuality, help them find the church and help them see their sexuality as a gift from God.”

The influence of religion in Central America is very strong. Most traditional forms of Catholicism and the myriad of other religious traditions in Latin America reject homosexuality. The Metro Community Church of Managua is fighting a battle on two fronts. The church presents an accepting religion for sexual minorities while also challenging the societal mindset about sexuality. For Flores, it has been an internal struggle.

“Sexuality is usually seen as separate from spirituality, so I had to discover it on my own,” he explains. “I did that through reading and through praying, and I wanted to know if what I was thinking was right or wrong. I had to go through that process. Coming to this community has helped me and also my experience with God has helped me to see that, to feel that I am doing the right thing.”

Leaning over Miguel’s shoulder as he reads El Nuevo Diario, a Nicaraguan newspaper, I catch the headline of the article — “Descubrí que mi esposo es gay” — “I Discovered that My Husband is Gay.” Miguel laughs at the article. Nicaraguan media has begun to include many articles and references to sexual minorities since the emergence of the NGOs.

These articles show that the general populace, greatly influenced by religion, cultural beliefs and prejudices, is slowly coming to terms with the growing visibility of sexual minorities. It is better than the silence of the past where sexual minorities did not meet or organize and were punished for doing so. The change will not happen overnight, as Flores says. It is a back and forth battle with both gains and losses.

And as Clara says, “Society needs to suffer a change. That change is going to come through these small changes being multiplied over and over again.”

All interviews were translated from Spanish by interpreter Tara Ramos and writer Angela S. Beallor.
It’s not just as simple as, “We’re here, we’re queer!” — to many gays and lesbians, it’s the most difficult moment in their life.

Paula Tubalkain raised her daughter, Cassie, in an environment that challenged stereotypes.

In the first grade, Cassie’s guidance counselor told Paula that she played with too many boys and not enough girls. The counselor warned Paula that there might be repercussions if Cassie continued this behavior.

“My response was ‘Lookit, Cassie’s going to have to grow up and deal with things,’” Tubalkain says. “She’s going to have to learn how to fight and stand up for herself.”

Cassie’s social interactions didn’t bother Paula — she loved her daughter for who she was.

And when Cassie turned 19, she finally came out to her mother. “It comes down to the fact that she’ll have enough issues because of her sexual preference,” says Paula of her acceptance of Cassie. “The person is not different. It’s the same individual that was the friend or family member you grew up with, and that hasn’t changed. You have to ask yourself, ‘Why were you friends to begin with?’”

Family and friends react differently when a loved one comes out. Some go through a grieving process before accepting, and some never get to the point of acceptance.

Tubalkain recalls the day she drove Cassie, who was a freshman at Ohio University, back to school. That was the day Cassie officially
came out to her. Tubalkain says even though she loved and accepted her daughter, she had concerns, including how their family would be perceived by the outside world, whether she would have grandchildren, where Cassie would live to find acceptance, and if Cassie’s brother, Brian, should be told.

“It was two years before we talked openly about it in our family because of my concern for Brian,” Tubalkain says. “I was afraid how it would affect their relationship. Then I found out he knew before I did.”

Cassie’s stepfather, Tom Tubalkain, a 1973 Kent State graduate, says he knew several people who came out to him through the years.

“I remember Cassie started to tell the rest of the family, and she was disappointed because most of her cousins already knew before she told them,” he says.

**Coming Out To a Spouse**

Telling the truth takes time, especially when an individual is just discovering their sexuality. Tom Falcone, who is almost 50, says growing up, he saw the stereotype of a gay man as, “a guy who acts more like a woman. That just wasn’t me. It couldn’t be me.”

Falcone tried to fit in and did not talk about his feelings as a teenager. In 1973, he met Linda, and they married 26 years ago. He was almost 40 when he accepted who he was, after years of trying to push it away. In 1996, Falcone found the courage to tell his wife that he was gay.

“The first words my wife said were, ‘Oh my god, the pain you must have been living with,’” he says. “The second thing she said was, ‘I’ll love you to the grave.’”

Feelings of isolation, not being accepted and discrimination are not limited to the person coming out. Parents, friends, children and spouses of sexual minorities can all experience these same emotions.

Linda Falcone, organizer of the Straight Spouse Network in Cleveland, says while she accepted and loved her husband, the worst part about having her spouse come out to her was feeling that she was the only one.

“When a husband or wife comes out, the other spouse goes into the closet,” says Linda, who organized the group five years ago. “I felt better the minute I found out I was not alone.”

In relationships that involve a gay and straight spouse, Tom says, there are other, more complicated issues to address.

“Parents are bound differently than spouses. The parents still have someone to grow old with,” he says. “The straight spouse has to make sure the last 26 years weren’t a lie. They question their identities — ‘Why didn’t I know?’”

Linda says she always felt out of place at the Straight Spouse meetings she organized because most couples were divorced. She says they wondered why she was there. Tom and Linda recently decided to get a divorce.
“We both said we’d know when the time would come,” Tom says. “We went through years to see if we could live without the spark and attraction. We missed it and started to resent it. We never wanted our love and friendship to be ruined.”

The Falcones, who have three boys between the ages of 20 and 25, taught their children acceptance of others but remained aware of the outside world. Tom says they reacted as most people do when he came out to them.

“They were shocked, saddened and confused,” says Tom, who would remove rainbow stickers from his car’s bumper when his children would use it. “I’m proud of my boys. They were taught to be good to others and respect people. That’s something I always craved.”

Discovering there are others with similar experiences and feelings can help with the acceptance of truth. Several groups around Cleveland provide information and support. Besides the Straight Spouse Network, there is TransFamily, the Lesbian/Gay Community Service Center of Cleveland and Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians & Gays.

Helping Others With Coming Out

Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians & Gays, a national organization, has chapters in Cleveland and Akron.

Jane Daroff organized PFLAG of Greater Cleveland, a volunteer, self-help organization, with Jes Sellers, after she attended a meeting in Akron with her son, who is gay. Both she and Sellers work for University Counseling Services at Case Western Reserve University.

“My son said to me, ‘You need to start one in Cleveland,’” says Daroff, who was completing her master’s degree at the time. “That was about 1984. I finished my degree in May 1985 and found us a space to meet in.”

The group averages about 30 people per meeting. Daroff says she wondered at the beginning if it would work to have both children and parents in the same group.

“Generally, it’s other people’s parents and children,” she says. “It’s easier to ask someone else’s child something you’re too embarrassed to ask your own.”

Daroff’s 40-year-old son came out to her when he was 14. Her family lived in Florida, and she says in the mid-’70s, there was no one to talk to in the area.

“I really didn’t know what the heck he was talking about,” she recounts. “I cried a lot because I was uneducated about it. So, I did a lot of reading and actually sent him to a psychiatrist.”

The psychiatrist Daroff chose promised to make her son as mentally healthy as possible — without changing him.

“He helped my son with whatever issues he was going through,” she says. “As tough as things seem now, they’re much better than they were then.”

Carole Popow is a resident of Cleveland and a member of PFLAG of Greater Cleveland. She also has a son who is gay.

“Once you get over the shock, and keep the lines of communication open with the child, it eventually gets better,” she says.

Popow says when her 36-year-old son came out to her, it was more of an affirmation of truth than a feeling of deception.

“I had suspected for a long time,” says Popow. “I voiced something to my husband, who didn’t want to listen.”

Her son Jeff Popow, who works for Cornell University, broke the news on Christmas day a few years ago. Popow and her son were alone at the time.
Members of the Akron chapter of Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians & Gays help each other cope with sexual minority issues. PFLAG, which was founded in 1981, is a non-profit organization that educates and offers support to those struggling with a friend or family member’s sexual orientation.

“He said, ‘You know, mother, I’ve wanted to tell you that I’m gay,’” she remembers. “I said to him, ‘I’m glad you finally told me. It must have been hard keeping it to yourself.’”

Popow says while she is an advocate for gay rights, it was difficult coming to terms with it at first because of her religious beliefs.

“The conflict I have is that I’m Catholic, and the church is not very accepting of gays,” she says. “My conscience told me I was doing the right thing, but I still felt I was going against the teachings of the church. It doesn’t bother me anymore — I’ll get to heaven some way.”

Personal and parental expectations still keep Paula Tubalkain concerned about her daughter and her daughter’s future.

She says sexuality is no longer a big issue in their family.

Tom Falcone says individuals who are coming out need to support their friends and family and help them to come to terms with it.

“You have to help people with the transition,” he says. “Be true to yourself, but keep love and compassion for them.”

More information:

- Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays
  www.pflag.org

- PFLAG Cleveland
  http://pflagcleveland.org
  (216) 556-1701

- PFLAG Youngstown
  www.angelfire.com/oh4/pflagy
  (330) 747-2696

- PFLAG Akron
  (330) 342-5825

- TransFamily in Cleveland. A support group for transgender and transsexual people, their families, partners, friends, and supportive others.
  www.transfamily.org

- The Lesbian/Gay Community Service Center of Cleveland
  http://www.lgcsc.org

- Straight Spouse Network
  www.ssnetwk.org
  (440) 354-6683

Photo by Molly Corfman

Photo by Molly Corfman
Posters displayed during an Akron PFLAG meeting.
Jen Wihebrink (left), president of Friends and Allies, discusses plans for upcoming events. The group will be sponsoring a photography exhibit at Kent, called "Love Makes a Family." The exhibit shows LGBT families.

STRAIGHT but NOT Narrow Minded

Photos by Samara Peddle
Friends & Allies is one of Kent State's newest student organizations. Founded in 2003 by alumna Shar Fish, the group's mission is to unite the LGBT and straight communities. The majority of the group's members are heterosexual. They work to rid the campus and community of homophobia and oppression toward the LGBT community. At the meetings, the group organizes events and conduct discussions on a range of issues from gay marriage to how to be a good friend to LGBT people.

“We discuss things such as voting rights, or just anything of interest happening,” the group’s president Jen Wihebrink says. “We’ll talk about issues going on in our lives or different things going on in the country.

“If people joined the club, it would get them out and open and accepting,” she continues. “It will help bring acceptance into their lives and give them an understanding and acceptance of what LGBT people go through. Hopefully, it will also help them understand their own sexuality.”

Friends & Allies meets every Monday at 9 p.m. in room 312 of the Kent State Student Center.

– Morgan Daniloff
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A Couple in Transition

A local lesbian couple faces new challenges after one woman says she wants a sex-reassignment

Story by Jessica Rothsruh
Photos by Sarah Thompson

The two women had been dating for months when Kyana Welch decided she didn’t want to be Amanda Boyd’s girlfriend anymore. She wanted to be her boyfriend.

“I’ve been thinking about it for a while now, and I think you should know that I’m transgendered,” Welch told Boyd one night as they lay in bed.

“I cried for months,” Boyd says. “For me, knowing this person as Kyana, as my girlfriend, and then having her be like, ‘Well, that’s not really who I am’ — I felt not really lied to, but I felt kind of betrayed about it. Like, ‘What do you mean you’re not Kyana? What do you mean you’re not this girl I’ve known and been dating for four months?’

“I felt like this person was leaving me, and this new identity was coming and trying to be in a relationship with me.”

Boyd began the process of adapting to Welch’s coming out. She began referring to Kyana as Jay, the name chosen to express Welch’s male identity.

Boyd also began fielding hard questions from members of the gay community.

Are you not gay anymore? Are you not a feminist? Do you like men now? Are you straight?

Boyd says Welch’s gender identification doesn’t change the way she views herself.

“It doesn’t change my sexuality — it definitely opened my eyes,” Boyd says. “The whole realization to me is just that it’s not a different person; it’s the same person. And to me, our relationship is a lot stronger now just because he knows that he can be himself.”

The Early Years

But it wasn’t always easy for Jay to be himself. Growing up as Kyana, it was hard to be feminine. As a child, Welch threw rocks in the alley with the neighborhood boys and played the male lead in a high school play.

When he was fifteen, Welch hung out at a teen club where he would dress as a male.

“We called them packers,” he says of the prosthetic phallic he used. “You put them in your pants, and it gives you a realistic look. I think my parents found that.”

Soon after, Welch’s parents sent him to a mental health facility where he stayed in residential treatment for a year and a half.

He still remembers the conversation that led to his diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder. The therapist asked him if he wanted to be a guy.

“That question kind of threw me off guard because I never even thought of it that way,” Welch says.

The rest of his time in residential care was devoted to curing him of his Gender Identity Disorder. Welch says he did feminine things in order to be evaluated as cured.

“I played the [feminine] role,” Welch says. “I had them take it off my diagnosis sheet and didn’t hear from it until my freshman year of college.”

Boyd recalls the first time she met Welch. “I met her with lip gloss, eyeliner, cover-up,” she says. “She thought the waning makeup and baggier clothes were signs of their relationship progressing.
“When I got comfortable with her, I let it loose,” Welch says about his masculinity. “It was very hard for me to cross my legs for hours or be dainty.”

He struggled with his gender identity for four months before he came out to Amanda.

“Before I told Amanda, she was asleep, and I was looking [the surgery] up — using crazy words to get to it,” he says. “Life is too short. I wish I’d have just known forever. Then I could have started and just been a man for real and not have to do all this technical stuff.”

The technical stuff Welch does every day includes binding his breasts, which are currently 38 DDD. He also packs. He says he has never been mistaken for a woman in public.

“People think I’m a 12-year-old boy, and 12-year-old girls are like, ‘Yoo-hoo,’” he says, laughing.

“Back off, Suzie,” Boyd jokes.

“The Transformation

Welch and Boyd joke around about Welch being transgender, but there is also a lot of pain.

“I hate binding, and I just hate being in this body,” he reveals. Boyd turns away and looks saddened by Welch’s statement.

“I think that’s going to be the hardest change for me to deal with, the physical change of the body as far as going from a female to a male,” Boyd admits quietly.

Welch is still biologically female but plans on changing that gradually over the next few years. The process will begin with another diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder, which makes it possible for doctors to prescribe hormones, he says. After Welch receives a diagnosis and goes through a mandatory three months of preparatory therapy, he will begin taking testosterone. During this time, he will also legally change his name from Kyana Nicole to James Nicholas.
After hormonal therapy, he will start physically reconstructing his body. He plans to complete the upper-body reconstructive surgery first and then the sex-reassignment surgery. He and Amanda are still undecided about which lower-body procedure to choose.

There are two female-to-male reconstructive surgeries they are debating over. One is called a phalloplasty and involves taking skin from the stomach and wrapping it around the clitoris. The second procedure, called radial arm surgery, is when skin and nerves are removed from the forearm and used to construct a phallus.

Before the surgery, Welch wants to tell his parents he is transgendered, something he still hasn’t found the right time for. He knows it will be hard on them.

“I’m their little girl — sort of,” he says.

Welch also says that coming out as trans to his black community will be an obstacle.

“Being in a black family, it’s kind of difficult to be gay or to be anything. It’s so taboo,” he explains. “I’m frustrated because my people, we just need to be educated. I mean, it’s going to be really hard to come out to my black friends. I just want to educate the community of color about transgendered issues and transgendered people.”

Welch says he sees a need for a group for transgender people

“"I hate binding, and I just hate being in this body. I think that’s going to be the hardest change for me to deal with, the physical change of the body as far as going from a female to a male."

Jay Welch

Transgender student
at Kent State. He says he hasn’t met another transgender person he can hang out with, and the LGBT clubs don’t offer enough support.

“We need to group together,” Welch says. “I’m just angry because I feel like I’m the only one.

“Let us female to males of color just come out.”

**Gender Roles**

Boyd and Welch don’t have another couple like them to talk to, and they find the role gender plays in their lives a challenge. Arguments have come up over their differing viewpoints on the importance of gender.

“I think the gender roles just come from history,” Boyd says. “I don’t care about gender roles.


“I’m not asking you to be in the kitchen, cooking my dinner while I soak my feet,” Welch tells Boyd. “I’m not asking that. All I want, really, from all our arguments about these roles, is for you to acknowledge my manhood.”

He has stronger feelings about gender roles than Boyd, and Welch says this is because he was raised in an environment where these roles were stressed.

“It’s ingrained,” he says. “Maybe I need to relearn, but I’ve been taught these strict roles, so it’s hard for me to think something else.”

The changes in their relationship keep Boyd questioning her place in it.

“It’s a role reversal, constantly,” she says.

Although Boyd and Welch go through things in their relationship that most couples will never experience, they are essentially like any other couple. They have easy times and difficult times, but they also have each other. And each day, Welch moves closer to becoming the man he wants to be.

“Life is too short,” he says. “Whatever you need to do to be a whole person, do it.”

**A Professional Opinion**

To receive a diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder, a person must meet two criteria. The person must exhibit a “strong and persistent cross-gender identification” and display a “persistent discomfort with his or her sex or sense of inappropriateness in the gender role of that sex,” according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

“Trans individuals are uncomfortable in receiving a diagnosis, feeling that it’s apologizing and saying they’re diseased,” says Matthew Skinta, a clinical psychology graduate student at Kent State. “There are others that really take a lot of comfort in feeling like there’s a label, and that this is a phenomenon that they’re not alone in.”

The majority of children diagnosed with GID grow out of the diagnosis by adolescence. Of those who are diagnosed in adulthood, few proceed with sex-reassignment surgery. Though there are no recent U.S. studies, a European study suggests about one in 30,000 adult males and one in 100,000 adult females seek sex-reassignment surgery, according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

Patients are encouraged to try nonsurgical means of feeling more comfortable with themselves, says Skinta. If the individual is still unhappy, he or she must complete years of therapy to ensure understanding of the sex-reassignment procedure and consequences.

“People are treated differently,” Skinta says. “Obviously, whether or not doors are held open, or who defers to you, or whether or not someone starts a fight with you at the bar — all of these things vary according to your gender presentation.”

Prior to surgery, an individual must also complete a year of the real-life test of living as the opposite gender. But the surgical procedures are becoming more successful. Operations for sex-reassignment surgery for male to female transsexuals have been done for decades, but quality outcomes for female to male surgery is a new accomplishment in the field, Skinta says.

In general, there is more research on GID in males than in females. Skinta says this could explain why it is presumed that there are more males with the disorder.

**Suggested reading for more information:**

“Middlesex: A Novel” by Jeffrey Eugenides

“Venuses Penuses: Sexology, Sexosophy, and Exigency Theory” by John Money

“Myths of Gender: Biological Theories About Women and Men” by Anne Fausto-Sterling

— Jessica Rothscheh
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