

Seattle Commission for Sexual Minorities
LGBTQ Parenting: A Community Forum
Wed 10/18/2006 6-7:45pm
Chaired by Charlie Butler and Wanjiku Gitahi
These notes were taken by Jeanine Johnson

Format: <Name> (<Initials_Used_For_Notes>)
Facilitator: **Eileen Terry (ET)**
Panelists: Johanna Bender and Sharri Kokx (JB, SK)
Barbara Clark-Elliot (BC)
Dietra Clayton (DC)
Nancy L. Sapiro (NS)
David Wing-Kovark (DW)

ET: Thanks everyone for attending despite the rain.

ET: How many people in the audience have kids? Parents? [everyone raises their hand] Great, we've all got parenting in common because it's an issue that touches all of us.

ET: [Introduced herself as a Commissioner, she doesn't have kids but does have two dogs - see bio handout for more info] Everyone should introduce themselves and then we'll start discussing questions.

BC: I'm a member of PFLAG and we provide support and help for those who are not heterosexual (although we don't like categories). PFLAG was incorporated as a non-profit decades ago after being initiated by a mother who was tired of her son being beaten up for being gay and Seattle's chapter began shortly afterwards.

ET: Now, you have a son and niece who are gay and lesbian, correct?

BC: Yes.

ET: Plus, you're actively involved in the federal government.

BC: Yes. I started out as an activist mother which helped a lot.

ET: Now, David you're from "Families Like Ours" (FLO). I'm told you two are of national acclaim.

DW: Depends on the day, but FLO began a couple of years ago to help equalize adoption and family-services so that lgbt-couples can adopt. Although many pro-family groups are anti-FLO, 72% of foster families become adoptive families, so it's important that foster licensed families be able to adopt too.

ET: And you are an adoptive father as well, right?

DW: Yes, you want them? [crowd laughs] I've got a 9 year old going on 40 and another 8 year old who's an avid reader.

ET: I'm sure they keep you busy.

DW: Yes, they're our second kids. We actually raised our god-children who are now grown.

ET: Nancy, you work on something near and dear to my heart, which is defending the right to marry. So why don't you give us a little bit about you.

NS: I work at the NW Women's Law Forum (NWWLF). We work for social change via the law and use different strategies to pursue our goals, including legal rights education, lobbying, impacting legal advocacy, host an info and referral line and more. Historically, the NWWLF has done a lot of work supporting lgbt couples. They were involved in successfully challenging the ban on glbt-folks in the military, including representing Grethe Cammermeyer awhile back – you all remember her. We've been successful in WA creating laws that ensure same-sex couples who split-up must also split their property equally. We were recently successful in forcing the Univ. of Montana to offer same-sex benefits to couples. We were also successful in getting WA to recognize "defacto-parenting-rights" which is what non-traditional families have when biological parents aren't present. We also defended same-sex marriage and lost in the WA Supreme Court, but we're waiting to here back about our appeal. Finally, a large part of the NWWLF's work has been our "celebrating diverse family initiative" (sp?) to protect "families" as they look today (which is beyond the traditional Ozzy and Harriet image of the all-American family).

ET: Sherri and Johanna have gone through a lot because you not only fought for same-sex marriage in WA, but also touch on parenting issues, including what happens with a same-sex couple's kid during emergencies.

SK: Well, it's hard to be setup as losers [crowd laughs], but Johanna and I are both parents and believe so strongly in our family and the rights of families that we accepted to be a part of the WA marriage challenge. We've also dealt with health issues, minor health issues, that have brought up lgbt-parenting problems. Once our son was having trouble breathing and had to be taken to an ambulance and the driver asked who "really" was the parent when the doctor chimed in "they're both the parents, get him in the ambulance and take him to the ER."

ET: Dietra, you're a youth-advocate and parent yourself, why don't you tell us about yourself.

DC: Yes, I've been a youth and family advocate for a long time and am also a parent by choice.

ET: Would you share some of your experiences?

DC: I'm fairly young, but when meeting people I've noticed a shock when people find out that I'm a parent.

ET: What services are available to young parents?

DC: There are parenting groups for those with children, but no lgbt ones that I'm aware of.

ET: David, do you know of any?

DC: Yes, there are some. There is a disconnect (as there are in many communities), because these groups are small, meet frequently and some informal-hub families exist as well. I wish I could name some, but their names change frequently. FLO is working with other groups across the nation to improve outreach and education, but locally we've worked with Camp 10 Trees, Rainbow Families, Family Works in Wallingford and a few others I can't remember off the top of my head are good organizations.

ET: What other issues are prominent in Seattle?

BC: For me, in PFLAG, safety is always an issue; safety and acceptance. My own son, who's now great big and tall, wasn't always and used to suffer verbal harassment of all kinds. PFLAG supports lgbt people, not just their families and friends. The younger they are and the more homeless they are, the more endangered their psychological and physical development becomes. LGBT kids have a much higher chance of being homeless than other kids.

ET: What can we do to help kids? Sherry, aren't you working on issues in the Seattle School system?

NS: A law was passed recently to help stop harassment.

SK: Yes, I do think that the new laws against harassment and bullying are helping. It's difficult as an educator, because there are 25 of us and 700 kids, so many times the kids have to report the cases because the teachers don't see it. That's why it's important to teach kids and educate them about the box in which we all live.

BC: My experience with the Seattle school system is that there are some safe areas, but they're not all the same. That's why PFLAG helps supports gay-straight alliances so that there are groups of kids who help protect one another. Despite the legislation, the Safe Schools Coalition is still my go-to place for anti-harassment and bullying issues because I feel the new laws lack teeth. What's the penalty for NOT stopping or preventing bullying and harassment? Nothing.

ET: There have been a lot of articles on bullying, etc. what other issues exist in this area?

DW: There was an issue south of Renton, but generally we always advise glbt-parents to go to school with their kids together. If they go together, it's easy to tell whether or not their child will have trouble being a student with lgbt parents or being an lgbt student. It quickly becomes apparent if they'll face discomfort, discrimination or worse.

ET: It's not just lgbt-kids who have problems, but it's kids of lgbt-parents too who also get this bigotry. So whatever we can do from an educational experience is awesome. Let's talk about parenting as an option, how hard is it to go out and start a family? Dietra, let's start with you because you're obviously bold.

DC: I didn't start a family in Seattle, but in Arizona (?) and had an amazing doctor at first, but once she found out I was a single-parent we had some issues.

ET: So you were completely ready to make it happen.

DC: Yes, I'm a Taurus and was determined to do it myself. Although obviously it would've been nicer to have more services.

ET: What were your parents like? Are they in this area?

DC: No, they're from Boise, Idaho and Las Vegas (?). Today, my grandmother tells people I live an "alternative lifecycle" - their support over the years has grown a lot.

ET: Johanna and Sherri, what was the process for you two to become parents?

JB: We actually didn't know how to get pregnant, which was funny because we both spent most of our 20s trying not to get pregnant. So we started searching the Internet for lesbian sperm banks and found a bunch of porn sites [crowd laughs]. Finally, we met with a knowledgeable friend and talked over coffee about how to make a baby. There are a lot of legal ramifications in becoming parents and significant legal consequences in using donors. I'm not critical of the process, but it's important to know what the issues are and I advise seeking legal counsel before visiting a fertility clinic and starting the process. Having said that, we both felt treated very well by the medical providers we saw. Seattle has been an easy place for us, as an open lesbian couple, to become and be parents. When we went around to several hospitals and filed "Powers of Attorney" to ensure the other would have next-of-kin rights should an emergency occur, several hospital personnel said they'd automatically defer rights to our partner. At which point I thanked them, but explained that I didn't believe they had that right. So we still had to file the paperwork.

ET: Dietra, you said it took a long time saving. I know my partner and I saved a lot of money to have a child when we lived in Texas, but were unsuccessful. How hard is it for lgbt-families to begin?

DW: As far as the adoption community goes, at least here in WA, depending on the agency you go to the process is fairly easy and the same for lgbt and heterosexual couples. Typically, (this is the biggest myth that comes into our office) the process takes the same time whether it's in or out of the system because the process is the same. The difference is that not all agencies will work with lgbt-families, so we worked with local agencies to figure out which agencies do what. Afterwards, we opted to focus on agencies willing to work with lgbt-couples vs. going after those that didn't. They were happy to get more customers and their attorneys were also happy because they got more referrals. Often the families are more of the block than anything else because they come in thinking they can't adopt.

NS: I think the point I want to make and have heard from several people on this panel is that there are significant legal ramifications and obligations. If there's one thing you get from me tonight, please make sure that you take the time to ensure all the paperwork needed to protect yourself and your child is done. When adopting, take the steps to ensure the parental rights of the biological parents are voided because people change their minds. Doctors may want to allow a same-sex partner to make decisions on behalf of the other, but legally may not be able to – so please ensure all the paperwork is filed.

ET: What happens if one same-sex parent dies and their parents want to fight for custody of their deceased-child's children? What happens in the state of WA to the other parent's rights?

NS: Legally, it's unclear. It's not going to be an easy process and a legal battle will ensue. If you didn't give birth to that child or take steps to adopt them, even if everyone around you considers you their Mom or Dad, the law may still not recognize you.

ET: I think that says it best, even though people may want to be supportive, the law may not make that possible.

DW: Also, there is a lot of sexism in adoption. Tonight I'm the only male parent on the panel and that's very typical. The court system is not designed for Dads, it's designed for women. Schools and everything lean towards Moms, not Dads. You'd be amazed at how many times I've had to go and prove I'm my child's father and that there is no mother. So doing the paperwork is extremely necessary.

ET: Let's just pour some gasoline on the fire, how about religious influence on supporting lgbt-families? For instance, recently I heard a legislator (?) say that marriage is for procreation - which astounded me. Nancy, what do you think?

NS: Make no mistake: marriage is very ingrained in our society. I think there's no mistake that the majority view in WA's recent same-sex marriage decision discussed children needing both a mommy and a daddy.

BC: I'm a heterosexual female, married to a heterosexual man and we adopted a son. We knew we weren't going to be able to have children when we got married, so should we

have been prevented from getting married? The other reason I jumped into this subject is that when I started PFLAG 7 or 8 years ago, there was this little book about affirmative religious organizations which has grown. Today it lists 3 in Renton alone. I always want people to know that there are many, many places where they are accepted and loved. So if you have that need, MARC (Multi-Associations of Religious Consortium; sp?) religious institutions exist.

ET: How about the crowd, let's hear from you. Do you have questions or personal observations for the panel? By the way, there's a microphone if you feel the need to project.

Audience member 1: Well, I've got a question for Nancy. My partner and I are trying to get pregnant with a known-donor and our doctor told us that a recent law doesn't allow any donor parent rights. They said that it wasn't an issue anymore, so we only had to worry about adoption ourselves.

NS: I wouldn't trust that advice. We've had several cases at NWWLF where a known-donor returns later and states that they want parent rights. So I'd recommend talking to legal counsel about whether or not you should have the donor formally terminate his legal parenting rights.

JB: When Sherri went to adopt our youngest child, we discovered that no more than two parental rights per child could exist. So as long as there is another person on the planet with parental rights, you can't get them.

NS: Actually, there are judges in King County who will grant more than two parental rights. It's been known to happen.

JB: But it's not the norm, right?

NS: Correct, you shouldn't assume that's the case and should still seek legal council.

ET: There was a couple that moved to a state, maybe Oklahoma, where the parents weren't accorded parental rights after they moved there.

DW: May 5th of 2004, Oklahoma signed into law that all their legal institutions wouldn't recognize any same-sex adoptions from other states or foreign countries. This past June, that law was over-turned and they are trying to get that over-turn reconsidered. However, that's the only state where that's happened so far, but several are watching to see what happens. This was a huge issue, but is now back in limbo.

ET: I'm not an attorney, so where do these issues end up getting resolved? At some point in time, the federal government is supposed to protect individual rights, despite individual biases. It's disturbing for me to hear about states who take away individual rights. I read an article that said 50% percentage of US citizens were married – talk about defense of marriage!

BC: Do you really believe that? I think that numbers isn't right.

DC: I know of other very non-traditional families. It's not just Mom and Dad anymore, it's Mom and Mom, Dad and Dad, Mom, Dad and more; so I think that stat is kaka.

Audience member 2: How often do you work with heterosexual couples (??)

DW: They're just not always looked at, because not everyone wants to see them in the political arena.

ET: It's one of those inconvenient facts and you bring up a good point: often the best way to stop bigotry is by putting it under a shinning light. Most of my lgbt-friends have heterosexual parents, because when I grew up, if there were lgbt-parents they weren't out about it. So I think your message was very-well taken.

NS: Yes, we try to ensure that the courts hear from supportive groups.

ET: Whether it's lgbt-parents who choose to become parents or not, there are ramifications. I know one couple who gave 30k to adopt and lost it all! So it's not as easy in other parts of the country and in other nations, as it is here.

BC: I just want to say PFLAG is there if you need help.

ET: I think Matthew Shepard's Mom spoke about this, but I think pro-lgbt-families have to vote.

DW: Well, you can checkout FLO's websites. I'm a parent and lgbt-parents are just like any other parents.

NS: NWWLF has a phone-line where questions like those discussed tonight can be answered.

JB: I just want to say thank you to everyone for attending tonight.

ET: And our activist, single mom?

DC: I don't have anything else to say. I've only got two minutes and really don't have anything else to say.

ET: On behalf of our commission, I really want to thank you for fighting the rain and traffic to get here for what I think was a very educational discussion. So help me thank our audience and panelists [crowd applauds].

THE END.