When a Spouse Comes Out in Later Years

By Amity Pierce Buxton, Founder

A recent article by Yagana Shah in The Huffington Post examines the phenomenon of closeted LGBT spouses coming out after the age of 50. I was featured in this important article. Here is an excerpt:

“We’re all victims, both the gay spouse and straight spouse are victims,” Amity Pierce Buxton told The Huffington Post in an interview. Pierce Buxton founded the Straight Spouse Network in 1986, after her own husband of 25 years came out, to help other couples going through the same issues.

When the people involved are middle-aged or even older, the situation brings about its own unique challenges.

“When you’re older, there’s less time to rebuild a new life,” she says. In her experience, a third of couples split immediately and angrily, a third try to divorce amicably and another third try to make it work...”

To see the entire article, go to http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/3-women-share-the-moment-they-found-out-their-husbands-are-gay
Every Day is a Busy Day for the Straight Spouse Network Team

Every day an average of five Straight Spouses locate the Straight Spouse Network website and ask for support. They come from all around the world to find us by simply googling “my husband is gay” or “is my wife a lesbian” and other key phrases. Even more people find us after discovering who we are through Social Media. Our Communications Director is very active in getting the message out there that we exist.

July started out slowly but suddenly surged, ending with 146 requests, compared to June when we had 143. As we send this newsletter out, our August total is 135. Over all, we’re getting six times more requests than we did six years ago. Calls to our Triage phone lines are steadily increasing in number as well. The Triage team responds to every Straight Spouse who finds us.

But other people come to our website, too. They’re curious about who we are and what we do. They may be Straight Spouses who are building up the courage to contact us for help. They may be family members and even LGBT spouses looking to help their Straight Spouses. Instead of filling out the Support form, they fill out a Subscriber form. That automatically adds them to our general mailing list. Then they start receiving our newsletters and other mailings.

Each year Subscriber requests are consistently higher than the previous one. Our newsletter gives us the opportunity to educate a wide range of people all over the world about everything Straight Spouse.

–Linda Ehle-Callens and the Editorial Team
I grew up in Philadelphia, was married in 1982 and in 1984, my husband and I moved to Bucks County, PA. My husband started coming out in 1997. I tried going to a Straight Spouse support group, even though I was convinced we could work it out. I left the support group because they made me feel uncomfortable about wanting to stay with my husband.

I was in a doctoral program for clinical psychology and during that time I had training in running groups. We divorced in 2000. In 2002 I opened my practice and decided to start a support group. I’d begun healing from my divorce and I felt inspired to help others cope with the pain I had experienced myself.

Today, the support group in Bucks County, PA is very active. We meet every other month. It still amazes me that we have so many new men and women that join our group each time we meet.

The support that the members give each other is beautiful and so very helpful. The most surprising new group members these days are the younger women who join. They have only been married a few years and some are only in their twenties.

Although the world is becoming less homophobic and more accepting, we are far from where we need to be. In my book, “A Pebble In His Shoe: The Diary of a Straight Spouse”, I write about our journey and my husband’s suicide in 2005. I often wonder if he were alive today, would he be so happy that the world is a more accepting, kinder place? Yet, I am reminded at every meeting that we still have so far to go to be completely loving and welcoming of all people.

In my private practice, I also see more couples trying to work out alternative living arrangements due to financial considerations, and/or the desire to continue raising their young children together.

Facilitators put themselves out there month after month. They embrace others’ sorrows and pain during every compassionate email they send to each Newbie, every sympathetic phone call they make and every support group meeting they lead. A Facilitator recently received this message from a Straight Spouse who had just gone to her first support group meeting. This is what makes it so worth it:

“It was so good to meet with you all today. It’s like we’re sisters. Until I met you, I’ve never known another woman who’s had the tragic experience of being married to a homosexual (or bisexual). ...

Thank you for investing so much time in me and all of us. It means so much. It’s been such a blessing for me to find supportive women who are going through or have been through the same kind of hellish nightmare. Thanks for today. I don’t know if you realize how much your facilitating these support groups means to those of us who are Newbies. I don’t feel lost anymore.” – A.”
In 2007, after almost 34 years together, my husband “Andy” finally admitted he was gay. During the long discussion which ensued that night, we briefly pondered staying together. But it was too soon for any concrete decisions. I cried myself to sleep on the couch. When I woke up the next morning, Andy was picking up his briefcase and leaving for work, as if nothing had happened.

When Andy got home that evening, he enthusiastically announced that he’d joined an LGBT swim team. During discussions over the next few nights, he said these things: “You’re my best friend, I’ll always take care of you, I thought I did a good job,” and “I thought you’d just have affairs.” What he did not say was, “I love you. I want to stay with you.”

After all our years together, it was difficult for me to simply, suddenly let go. For a few months I continued to entertain the idea of staying together. I googled all over the place and learned that “there are rules you have to follow.” So I googled on until my brain ached, but I never found those elusive rules. By that time, Andy had moved out. One afternoon a stranger handed me an envelope and said, “You’ve been served.” I had no idea that Andy was filing for divorce. But I did finally accept that our marriage was history.

Nine years later, I sometimes wonder how it would have played out if Andy had said he wanted to stay with me. I don’t think about that out of nostalgia or regret, but as a Support Group Facilitator. All of us Facilitators have a considerable number of new Straight Spouses come to us saying they’re considering staying in their marriages. The fact is, we’ve been in mixed orientation marriages all along; most of us just didn’t know it. But once the revelation was made, the entire make-up of what was a marriage is no more. Deciding to stay together isn’t exactly continuing the marriage; it becomes a re-creation of the marriage.

WHY SOME COUPLES CHOOSE TO STAY

Last month I sent out a request for people in MOMs to tell me their stories. The responses were few but substantive. I believe some people didn’t respond because their experience in staying together was difficult and extremely private. That choice presents unforeseen challenges and sometimes pain. The responses I did receive were very candid and insightful.

When someone says, “I still love you and I don’t want to leave,” it’s a game changer. According to MOM responders, one major reason for staying together was because the couples truly loved each other. This is understandable, especially because these particular marriages had been long-term. Other reasons were financial considerations, or religious beliefs, or the fact that there were still young children at home. Many factors make the decision to stay together as difficult as deciding to separate. I don’t see that anyone who made the decision to remain together did so lightly.

FINALLY, THE RULES AND NONNEGOTIABLE DEAL BREAKERS

The official rule book I was searching for doesn’t exist. Every couple has to create their own rules to fit their unique lifestyle. Here are some individual rules included in separate responses. Some are individually specific but some can apply to any couple.
Always communicate honestly, discuss changes and problems coherently. Sometimes couples seek joint therapy to help the process.

A limit or ban on internet or phone app activity

Agree that both spouses can have sex with other people. Some agree to continue being intimate with each other.

No extra-marital activities in the shared home

Inform each other of outside activities, and no one has veto powers.

Always practice safe sex - with each other and others

Trans/non-trans marriage: no transition, no overt female dress

Monogamy only

Separate finances

Shared household chores and responsibilities

Quietly accept that there may be ‘dalliances’, but they must be kept discreet

Treat each other with respect and loving behavior, always making each other the primary focus

Some couples share their marital dynamics with extended family and friends, while other couples feel more comfortable keeping their lifestyle private.

Concentrate on the Good outweighing the Bad

Figure out what YOU want before you try to figure out what YOU BOTH can live with

EVERYTHING CHANGES

In her research, our founder, Amity Pierce Buxton, Ph.D. found that approximately one third of Straight/LGBT couples stay together. After about three years, half of those unions end. It's important to note that our participating MOM Spouses have all been in very long-term Mixed Orientation Marriages now. Here is some of their advice and some cautionary notes:

Keeping your Open Marriage a secret can make it difficult to have outside intimate relationships and puts both spouses in the closet. One Straight Spouse stressed the importance of developing your own individual support and friends in addition to your couple-friends.

Many MOM couples have very inactive or unfulfilling sex lives with each other. Even with the best of intentions, sex with each other tends to slow down and sometimes end after a time. Sometimes the gay spouse has more resources, and remains sexually active outside the marriage, while the Straight Spouse does not have the same advantages. Not everyone can live in a sexless relationship. Even after a very long period has passed, some of the Straight Spouses realize that things can change. They have to accept that there is always the possibility their gay or lesbian spouse may eventually fall in love with someone else.

Even if a couple truly loves each other, one of the biggest challenges for the Straight Spouse is learning to trust again. Once someone has cheated, it takes a great deal of fortitude to forgive, accept that reality and feel comfortable about the future. This is where communication and honesty are most important. Also important: don't dwell on the idea of your spouse being intimate with someone else.

If you work, focus on that, on your career and the fulfillment you derive from it. Nurture your interests: family ties, athletics, exercise, music, art, craftsmanship, cooking, travel, gardening.

Most couples are parents and have extended families. Those relationships may have to be rebuilt along with rebuilding the marriage. Everyone deserves the comfort of familial support and enjoyable family gatherings and life's celebrations. In the end, a true family spirit should be the legacy we all leave for our sons and daughters.

Sincere thanks to everyone who shared their stories, insights and advice. This information is sure to help other Straight Spouses more fully understand the challenges they may face.

– By Linda Ehle-Callens, Straight Spouse Network Staff

To join one of our Straight Spouse Support Groups, be put in touch with a Support Contact or one of our special MOM online groups, email SSNDaphneChicago@gmail.com
“No”, I told myself. “John can’t have AIDS. He isn’t gay”. When it came to AIDS in 1990 Hoboken, we were all pretty sure we knew the score. It had become a full-blown epidemic, killing thousands of gay men. Headlines had begun to report celebrities, including actor Rock Hudson and designer Perry Ellis, dying of it. Randy Shilts’s book And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic was flying off the shelves, and rabble-rousing gay men’s organizations such as ACT UP and the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC) were gaining steam.

Just a short ferry ride away, to walk down any street in Greenwich Village was to chance a skeletal young man coming at you, lurching along on his cane with haunted, sunken eyes and purple spots on his face. You’d abruptly shift your gaze and pretend to be fascinated by a shop window across the street; you didn’t want to see walking death on a bright, sunny day. God help you if you were worried about getting sick like that because you were a gay man, or because your lover had suddenly become ill. God help you if your beloved family member or friend was suffering in this way. AIDS. Horrible.

But AIDS only affected gay men—the kind who wore chaps and bandannas, and had keys hanging off their belt loops, like the Village People. The kind who engaged in high-risk, unprotected sex in back-street downtown clubs. Right?

Of course, we also knew people who’d died of AIDS who didn’t look at all like that—coworkers, cousins, uncles, brothers—some who’d “come out,” others who hadn’t but were considered terminally single, asexual, or “light.” After a few beers, the men in our crowd referred to these men as “three-dollar bills” and “taking it up the keister for Easter.” In reference to a popular Manhattan health club, they joked, “Don’t pick up the soap!” And we’d all read sad accounts about gay men infected by the disease who’d been shunned by family and friends, fired from jobs, and, in some cases, beaten senseless.

We still weren’t exactly sure how you contracted AIDS—many were afraid to kiss gay friends or use their bathrooms. But we didn’t think about it all that much. We were married, our Hoboken crowd, and—it went without saying at that time—straight. AIDS was the last thing we had to worry about. Except, in the Y’s locker room the other day, hadn’t my friend Linda mentioned a story she’d seen on the news about a woman catching AIDS from her dentist? And what about that girl, Ali Gertz, whom we’d read about in The New York Times? Twenty-three, white, upper-middle-class, Jewish, and educated at Horace Mann, this girl had contracted AIDS from a date with a heterosexual guy seven years before. What if you’d slept with someone a long time ago who unknowingly carried the AIDS virus and he gave it to you—how would you even know you had it? There was also the Starsky and Hutch actor Paul Michael Glaser’s wife, Elizabeth, who’d contracted AIDS from a blood transfusion and passed it on to her daughter through breast feeding. Their little girl had died of AIDS two years before.

But none of this had anything to do with John. He wasn’t gay... AIDS. A wave of panic came over me. In the fading light of evening, my image of the disease came sharply into focus. Though I suffered the same misconceptions as everyone, I had seen its effects firsthand among my singing waiter group. The most gifted of them, my dear friend Chris, had died of AIDS-related illnesses only the previous spring...
Here at the Straight Spouse Network, we thought folks might like to know that Saturday, September 3rd, is World Beard Day. Honestly, this is a real yearly international event. It’s a celebration of mens’ beards in all their glory, variety and distinction; long, curly, braided, shaved into various shapes and designs.

Most of us know that many closeted gay husbands and their peers like to refer to the women they married as Beards. People who focus on the bravery of married men coming out of the closet call us Beards. Single closeted gay men call their female friends Beards. A closeted husband comes out and his wife of many years and the mother of his children suddenly learns that she is a Beard. But women and beards are actually two different things. We wouldn’t want to see anyone enter the wrong beard into some contest, so...

Let’s clear up any confusion...

Women are sexual beings in their own right. Their unique female sexuality should be respected and appreciated. No woman aspires to be a crop of facial hair. And women definitely would not look forward to being "shaved" away.* They are human beings, not follicles. Calling a woman a Beard could make her feel uncomfortable, be insulting to her dignity, femininity and sexuality; and possibly be itchy at times. *Shaving on World Beard Day is considered highly disrespectful.

Let’s face it, the term Beard really isn’t a fair description of femininity. Beards are something that people, usually men, grow on their faces. Some people grow them better than others. Some should really never attempt to grow them at all. But those who are gifted with a thriving plantation of facial hair, have many creative things they can do with their beards. It’s part of their masculine image and facial charm. It’s a choice in grooming and appearance. But it’s not a woman. A beard most definitely is not a wife. ◆
It was 1966. Dave and I were driving home from a date one night and stopped at a red light. The green light traffic passed in front of us. “Dave, look. Isn’t that your dad’s car? Um...that wasn’t your mom in the car with him...” I said, a bit confused. I watched as his dad drove into a parking lot leading to a motel. “What is he doing?” Dave was quiet for a few minutes then reluctantly explained, “When I was little, I learned not to ask mom where dad was going on the nights he drove away after dinner.” “So, he cheats on your mom?” “I guess so.” I was shocked. “Does your mom know?” He said, “Probably.” After that, the subject was closed to discussion.

For almost seven years Dave was my world. We planned to get married. But I knew he’d cheated on me several times; like father, like son. I finally couldn’t take it any more and broke off our engagement. I dated around, concentrated on my career, and four years later I married Andy. A few years afterward, I heard that Dave had gotten married. One night I was visiting a friend and she told me about how Dave still had a roving eye. Like his father, he was going out on his wife.

When I married Andy, I just knew in my heart that he would never cheat on me. He never looked at attractive women the way Dave had. Over the years of our marriage, Andy didn’t run around on me, but then, like many Straight Spouses, I never felt he had a true sensual desire for me either. Most Straight Spouses share common red flags: few PDA’s during the relationship, rarely being complimented or congratulated on accomplishments, a disinterest or aversion to being sexually intimate. Many Straight Spouses talk about how their closeted mate never stepped in to defend them while they were being challenged unfairly by family members, friends or business associates. Another commonality is how they were contradicted when it came to disciplining their children. Of course, at the time, most of us did not know that our spouses were hiding in the closet.

Fast forward to the Post Revelation years. I’ve been in the Straight Spouse support group arena for nine years now, so I’ve had a lot of time to observe much of the fallout we have in common. One of the most significant observations that many Straight Spouses have described is how, after revelation, they begin to see their grown kids, families and friends display behaviors that reflect their gay partners’ past treatment of them. I’ve come to realize that our closeted mates’ behavior toward us influenced how those around us think we should be treated, and even influenced their emotional reactions to our post-revelation angst. Far
too many of my group members who tried to tell their families and friends why their marriage was ending, heard this, “I don’t want to talk about it. You’re crazy.”

**A TEACHABLE MOMENT**

A Straight Spouse confided in me that recently her son, Nick, went out on a casual date with a nice girl. After the date ended, the girl walked to her car which was parked pretty far away. It didn't occur to Nick that he should walk with her to her car. His mom normally wouldn't tell her grown son what to do. But when she found out about how that date ended, she decided to say something. “Son, when you were growing up, you never heard your dad say to me, ‘I love you, you’re pretty.’ He never had my back,” and she went on to cite that whole litany of past unchivalrous examples. “I know you’re not in love with this girl. But she really likes you and she deserves respect.” Nick got it. He texted the girl a nice thank-you message.

Our LGBT spouses’ negative treatment of us was a bad example, even if subtle. They set the tone for how we “deserve” to be treated. Those close to us were watching, and many were inadvertently influenced. The name for that is Emotional Contagion and psychologists have been studying it for centuries. If you google it, you’ll see a plethora of books and articles on the subject; mostly clinical studies. If you’re in therapy, you may have already discussed the term with your clinician. If not, now you know what it’s called.

Besides adopting our spouses’ attitudes toward us, an additional effect of the contagion can be that our kids are also affected by the negative emotions we were suffering at the time; depression, anxiety, poor self-esteem. Most Straight Spouses know that list. Our afflictions can have contagious second-hand effects on our kids. So, we have a double edged sword here.

Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive...

There is no way to simplify what a Straight Spouse endures. When we’re faced with the possibility of our marriages ending, it can be far more complicated than when a marriage between two straight people ends. After my relationship with Dave ended, I didn't feel the same kind of sadness I did when my marriage to Andy ended. During my years with Dave, I truly experienced fulfilling intimacy. No matter how hard I tried, that kind of fulfilment never came to fruition with Andy. It wasn’t his fault; it just wasn’t in his nature. But how he obviously felt about me left a lasting impression on my family, friends and, I suspect, some of my business associates.

It takes time to untangle such complicated behavioral influences. Once the problem is defined, we can work on the solution. The best weapon is a Positive Attitude. It’s difficult for many of us to get over the anger, but that can be our biggest enemy. Too many of us dwell on the deception and betrayal we’ve felt. But over time, it’s worth working on letting it go. Our kids don’t want to see us sad or depressed, because it makes them feel the same way. So we have no choice, it seems, but to keep our ‘lows’ to ourselves and share our good moods when we're having a great day.

When Nick’s mom told him why he probably didn’t walk his date to her car, I saw it as a chance enlightenment for all of us. I was lucky to find a teachable moment. It set me on a quest to learn more. And I’m focused on listening to all my peers and while they share their stories, I’ll harness more teachable moments whenever I find them. ♦

*Linda Ehle-Callens is a professional writer/editor/art director. These are her personal opinions and observations.*