

PREFACE

Family Wake-Up Call!

A disaster is certainly not what we'd have chosen as a means of highlighting the families of LGBT people, but that is exactly what happened. On September 11, 2001, New Yorkers of all backgrounds including members of the LGBT community suddenly lost their partners, their parents and their children. In a matter of moments, partners in care, partners in shared finances and partners in life-long companionship were gone and most people in this state were oblivious to the LGBT community's share in the national grief.

After all, a common stereotype of LGBT people is that of carefree, unattached single folks. That we do form life-long unions, raise children, care for partners, friends, parents and our frail elderly has not been understood or formally accepted. As a result, the LGBT community has long endured mistreatment, emotionally, financially and legally. Although members of our community have historically taken on the functions and roles of the traditional family, recognition of these support systems has, for the most part, been denied. Along the course of life, from birth to death, we have mostly been excluded from the vital governmental support given to other families.

While the devastating events of September 11th opened doors in significant ways to much-needed compassionate survivor assistance, the time has come to make clear the life-long functions of families of LGBT people and the need for fair and equal recognition of these families on an ongoing basis.

What and Why: "The Gay Family"

"No man is an island." No one exists without some connectedness, for all of life from birth to death demands mutual dependence. It begins with our immediate family of parents and siblings, as well as extended biological and marriage-created kinships of cousins, uncles and aunts. As our needs evolve, we widen our family circle by partnering (sometimes through marriage, when possible), raising children and choosing our close friends.

Families exist to provide acceptance, loving companionship, life guidance and supportive care throughout the life cycle. From life's beginning to its final hours, human beings need the sense of belonging, to feel loved for themselves, and to experience mutual help and care in all phases of physical, social and spiritual existence. In addition, family members have bonds of emotional and financial support.

For the LGBT community it is fundamentally the same, with one major difference. In the face of almost universal oppression and alienation, members of the LGBT community have managed to nurture each other. We have relied on families of choice and our close systems of support. For the most part, we have accomplished this without the legal,

financial and emotional help afforded traditional families. However, this effort has not come without significant stress on our relationships, families and communities.

Families are Dynamic

Even in this context, it needs to be emphasized that the “family unit” is neither static nor isolated. It exists in dynamic association with neighborhoods, specialized communities, cities, states, nations and, increasingly, international influences. The form and function of families are altered by advances in science, communication, transportation, changes in economics, social roles, cultural norms and governmental and religious ideologies. For most of the population, the idealized enduring “traditional family” never has and never will exist in reality.

Families are forever changing to meet changing needs. In times gone by, families were productive economic units working together in the home (including children). Family households consisted of multiple generations, from newborns to elder grandparents living together, if not under one roof, then close by in tightly knit neighborhoods. Today, families are scattered cross-country pursuing new economic opportunity or retirement living. Daily contact is maintained via phone, fax or e-mail.

What is the “norm”? Economic pressures have both mothers and fathers working outside of the home. Women no longer seek marriage as the only fulfilling life path and single-parent households increasingly emerge through choice, divorce or unplanned pregnancy. We are facing a growing “sandwich generation,” requiring caretaking of both the very young and an increasingly older senior population. The fastest growing segment of our population is over the age of 85 years. Our greatest challenge now is caring for the present population over increasingly longer periods of time. Further, our complex cultural diversity, with its different family traditions, confounds attempts to describe the family norm. Indeed, we must view changing family structures and functions in relationship to a rapidly changing society. It is against this tumultuous backdrop that the LGBT community is blossoming into maturity and defining its role as a loving and responsible segment of the greater population.

Our Family Background: Where We Have Been – What We Are Becoming

The theme that began to unite LGBT people after the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion was the freedom to express our own sexual and gender identity. We have fought for this individual and private right while vigorously opposing attempts to brand us as immoral or mentally ill. During this time, our energies were consumed in reaching out to other LGBT people, creating a community and, at the same time, maintaining any necessary “secrecy for survival.” Outside our own circles, visibility was rarely given to our long-term

relationships, our cared-for friends, relatives or children from heterosexual marriages, single parenthood, adoption or foster care. It took the HIV/AIDS crisis of the early 1980’s to transform our community’s image from one of sexual liberation and individual freedom to one based on compassion and care. We have demonstrated resourceful and inventive leadership in health and social services and the capacity to create organizations serving the multiple needs of our community. Indeed, in the midst of the chaos and reconfiguration of the traditional family unit, we have been structuring our own families and providing them with sustenance through a community of evolving and innovative LGBT support systems.