

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

by Ella Hammond

In every parent's life, as you are raising your children, there are defining moments that you will remember and look back on with a variety of feelings. They will be clearly imprinted in your memory. Some will be happy, some will be sad, some confusing, some satisfying, some heartbreaking. Those defining moments began for me when my oldest son started attending school.

We enrolled him in the local Seventh-day Adventist elementary school. But it wasn't long until I got a call from the teacher to come for a conference, as "he wasn't fitting in." So began a pattern that continued on through his school years. He always seemed to be the child picked on and left out of the group. So much so, that at one point a teacher told me that he had "become the class scapegoat, and needed to learn to defend himself!"

Another of those defining moments for me, was in 1981, about three years after we had moved to a lovely little community in the Pacific Northwest. Our sons had begun attending the local Adventist school, and our oldest son was starting his fifth-grade year. One day he came home from school very upset and said, "Mom, what does fag mean?"

And in all honesty, I replied, "Well, I remember from studying ancient history that a bundle of sticks was called a faggot. And I remember from my academy days that the guys used the word "fag" as a slang term for a cigarette. I guess they must be calling you a bundle of sticks!"

"But Mom," he insisted, "it must mean something worse than that, the way the kids say it."

I did not know what else it could mean! I was a fourth generation Adventist, my dad was a retired minister, I had attended SDA schools my entire life, I had a college degree in home economics with teaching certification in elementary education, I had taught first grade in the public school system until our first son was born, and I had never heard it before. Go ahead and call me naive, sheltered, or ignorant, but I truly did not know any other meaning for it.

So I went to see his teacher (isn't that what good parents do?), told him what had happened and how I had explained it to my son, and said we both wanted to know what else it could mean. I will never ever forget his reaction. He looked away, hemmed and hawed, turned red, and began, "Well, I am embarrassed to say it, but..." Finally, after I told him to spit it out, whatever it was, he said "It is the slang term for a homosexual!"

I felt as if I had just been hit in the stomach. When I could talk, I said, "Please see that this stops. I don't want my son called that!"

Now, I freely admit my son was not a model student at school. But we never had any trouble with him at home. As I talked to the teachers and worked with him, I kept

wondering, Why can't he get along better with the other kids? Why does he have such a hard time fitting in at school?

It wasn't until recently that he told me, "Mom, I wanted to fit in so badly. I wanted to be liked."

And the reason we didn't have any trouble at home? "I felt safe there, Mom. It was the only place I felt safe."

From that moment in the classroom with his teacher, my whole life began to change. I did not know then how much it would change. For several years I never said a word about it to anyone else—not the family, not the pastors, not my friends, not even my husband—hoping it would not could not, be. My son was not a homosexual! Surely it would go away as he grew up. But it didn't! Life has a way of throwing us into situations and forcing us to deal with them.

My son's life began to change from that moment, too. Thus a naive, young, Seventh-day Adventist mother and a young boy began a very complicated journey, and this short article can give you only a brief glimpse of that journey.

Let me just share two other moments that are indelibly stamped on my mind. The first happened on a weekend Pathfinder outing to Canada. Our club was staying in an Adventist church school facility in Vancouver, BC. We had just arrived, and I, along with the others, was helping carry supplies into the kitchen. In just those few minutes since our arrival, there on the blackboard was already written in big letters for all to see, "Chris is a fag." And years later, at the Adventist college Chris was attending, he went out to his car after a snow storm and on the windshield, in the snow, someone had written, "Chris is a fag."

Our teachers desperately need guidelines and training on how to handle the situation when they have a gay child in the classroom. Several years ago we had an interesting meeting with my son's former elementary school principal. We had flown to Colorado for the Adventist Winter Ski Festival. We are all avid skiers and with our whole family and some good friends who went along, we had quite a group. The festival included special programs and we had loads of fun. After attending the Saturday night program, we were standing around talking, when who should come up but the boys' former principal, who was then the conference education superintendent. He shook hands with both our sons and congratulated them on their education and jobs. He pumped Chris's hand especially hard, and said, "I always knew you would turn out okay!"

My son's face froze. Knowing the anger Chris felt toward this man, I walked away, praying harder than I had ever prayed before. When I returned, the poor man was standing there with his mouth hanging open, and my son was unloading all his pent-up feelings from those elementary school years. I will never forget the words my son used.

"Mr. ---, you did not protect me. Your job as principal and teacher was to protect your children and to teach them to be kind to each other, but you did not protect me. "

The next day I had a chance to talk to the principal alone. I asked if he had known that the kids had called our son "fag" and said he was gay. He answered, "Yes, we did. We talked about it behind closed doors, but we didn't know what to do."

"Why didn't you talk to me about it?" I asked.

And again he said, "We didn't know what to do."

So because they didn't know what to do, and were afraid to talk about it, they did nothing, and my son's self-esteem was trampled in the ground daily. They did not know how to get out from behind their closed doors. And I, as a young mother dealing with it the best I knew how did not know how to get out from behind the closed doors either!

True, we all have scars from our childhood and must learn to live with them. But the topic of homosexuality, above all others, seems to frighten and horrify so much of the Christian population today that we parents of gay children have few if any, places where we can go for understanding and love. And our gay children have fewer places where they can go. There is no place to turn for love and support from our local churches and church school teachers. I say this not to elicit sympathy for my son or myself, but to help you understand in some manner the kind of treatment that Chris and all gay young people have to deal with over their growing-up years, and to help you imagine if you can, the extreme loneliness he and I both felt.

Well, space does not allow for all of our story. But it is because of these experiences I've shared, that I am determined to try to do something to help lessen fear for other families like ours. I want to help to open doors so that church families, teachers, and parents will have some tools to deal with these situations, and will no longer fearfully hide behind their "closed doors."

Several years ago I heard about Carrol Grady and her book and found out that I was not alone. I was not the only Adventist mother with a gay child! I found someone who understood the path I had been walking. Now you know why I am sharing some of our story. There are many other Adventist mothers/parents of gay children out there, and you are not alone. We need our church to love and support us and our gay children as we all struggle to learn what God requires of us.

I have heard my dad, the retired pastor, say so many times, "Our church is a hospital for sinners, not a hotel for saints." And we all are sinners. And God loves every one of us.