

Letter from Kevin and Brenda Housen

"When one door closes another door opens; but we so often look so long and so regretfully upon the closed door, that we do not see the ones which open for us." -- Alexander Graham Bell.

Brenda and I have two children, a daughter who, at the time of this writing is 22, and a nineteen year old son, Ben. Ben happens to be gay.

Ben knew he was "different" for as long as he can remember. One day, when he was in the fifth grade, he asked me how old I was when I had my first girlfriend. As I think back on that day, it was pretty clear that he was troubled by the fact that he hadn't had the urge to pursue girls yet. I told him that everyone is different and that when it was his time he would know it and, in fact, there would be nothing he could do about it. I didn't think much more about it at the time. Many of his friends didn't have girlfriends. And yet, this was apparently a turning point for him. He must have been struggling with his sexual identity for years before this, but had finally come to the realization that he was just didn't fit into the mold that society casts for most young men.

Our son continued with that struggle for seven more years. As parents, we like to think that we have a pretty good idea of the road our children are traveling on. But seven years passed and we didn't realize he was wrestling with such a fundamental issue. Just about a year ago now, we were visiting relatives during the Thanksgiving holiday. Ben seemed a bit distant, spending much of his time alone listening to music. We assumed it was one of those moods we all fall into now and then, especially as teenagers.

The day after we returned home, Ben told us he had something to talk to us about. From his demeanor, it was pretty clear this was more than one of our usual family chats. Ben told us he is gay, a statement for which we were wholly unprepared. As a father, I was sure I knew more about this than he did. I asked him "How can you *know* you are gay? You haven't even tried dating girls yet." Ben, of course, had been thinking about this for several years. His reply to me was, "How do you know you're straight? You haven't tried dating men yet." I mention this because I think it illustrates the limited understanding we had of homosexuality. Brenda and I knew a couple of gay people, but none were close friends. Because of this we really hadn't considered the topic in much depth.

Brenda and I are reasonably liberal people. We tried to assure Ben that there was nothing wrong with him. We suggested that it might be a good idea for him to see a

counselor. As it turned out, Ben knew a great deal more about homosexuality than we did and it was Brenda and I that needed the counseling. We spent the next month or so very depressed, trying to come to grips with this news. Like many parents whose son or daughter has just come out of the closet, we went in. There were so many questions, yet we felt like we couldn't talk to any of our friends because it might get back to Ben's high school. We knew about the Matthew Shepard tragedy. Could something like that happen to our son? After a little reading we learned that the suicide rate for gay teens is much higher than for straight ones. Somehow, we didn't realize that our son was gay. Could we also have not seen that he was severely depressed? Why was our son gay? We constantly replayed his childhood in our minds to try to pinpoint something we did or didn't do that might be responsible. We were worried for Ben's safety and at the same time depressed by what appeared to be the "loss" of our son, the grandchildren we would probably never see, and the problems that would arise when some of our more conservative relatives found out. But, most of all, we blamed ourselves for somehow putting our son onto what looked like a *very* rocky road.

Brenda and I had never heard of PFLAG but, fortunately, Ben had. He gave us their phone number. After a few weeks, we decided to give them a call. I've never felt the need to visit a counselor, and I was doubtful that visiting a PFLAG meeting would help much. I was wrong. It was a great relief to talk to other people that were in similar situations and to learn that many people experienced the same feelings that Brenda and I had. At the same time, we learned much more about homosexuality than we had from the books we had been reading. We discovered that most people's sexuality is determined at a very young age, the factors that determine one's sexuality are varied and still hotly debated, and that there are many alternatives to the concept of a traditional family. Our most significant realization, though, was that we had not lost a son; we just gained a somewhat different one.

Discovering that our son is gay has caused a lot of turbulence in our lives, but we've come to realize that it's also opened other doors for us. We've met many new and interesting people that we probably would not have met otherwise. It's opened our eyes to the discrimination that gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered people see every day. Most of all, this experience has brought us much closer to both of our children. We've talked to them about many things that we never could have discussed with our parents.

Our son is gay. I suppose I could also mention that our daughter has blonde hair; a fact that, in an ideal world, unfettered by intolerance and ultra-conservative beliefs, would be no more significant than our son's sexuality. Hopefully, the actions of organizations like PFLAG, and the many others devoted to gay rights, will make the world a little more ideal.

Kevin and Brenda Housen

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