

POINTS OF VIEW

Time for understanding to come out of closet

"I always tell them, would you choose this life? Every day I fear for my job because I work for a conservative company. Would you choose a life of religious persecution? Would you choose a life where people look at you like you're the scum of the earth?"

A lesbian

That was an excerpt from articles which appeared in the Suburban Life section of our papers on "Being Gay — When Do You Know?"

Recently, a local woman called to tell us those stories had given her the courage to bring up the subject with her son, whom she had suspected of being homosexual.

Both were relieved at finally being able to discuss his five-year secret. She called to thank us and to ask for information on a support group for parents of homosexuals.

They still hadn't come to grips on how to tell her husband, she said. Those same articles prompted another caller who left a message. Why do we continue to do articles on homosex-

uality? he asked. Is it because someone on our staff who is gay is pushing for this?

Well no, sir. The idea for the story came from a dialogue at an April Birmingham City Commission Meeting. There, city officials passed a Fair and Open Housing ordinance which prohibits discrimination because of color, religion, sex, marital status, age, national origin, handicap or sexual orientation.

Adding sexual orientation was a late-hour decision which prompted debate from the audience. Some considered it a "moral" issue. They said they believe that people "choose" to be homosexual.

We wanted to see if that were true. So we asked.

Our small sampling, of homosexuals and those who counsel them, showed quite the opposite. They knew at an early age they were "different." They would have been oh so happy to have been "normal."

Reporter Larry O'Connor talked to



JUDITH DONER BERNE

Keith, 34, who waited until his early 20s to come out, though he suspected at age 7 that he was different. In his teens, "I had a girlfriend, but I had strong feelings for the guys I was hanging around with. I kept praying, 'God take these feelings away.'"

O'Connor talked to Cathy, 27, who realized in second grade she wasn't the same as other girls. She tried therapy, then a different church, to rid herself of what she had been taught was aberrant behavior.

And he spoke with John, now in his

mid-40s, who realized he was different in his late teens but repressed those feelings for 20 years.

When he did begin a relationship with a man, he felt an initial sense of loss, because he'd never have "a wife and the 3.2 kids, the traditional family life."

Few young people, much less adults, would "choose" that kind of anguish. Most of the time it's too painful to talk over with parents or friends. No wonder gay and lesbian students are three times more likely to commit suicide than other students.

Now some progressive school districts are offering help.

The National Education Association last spring held a workshop on "Affording Equal Opportunity to Gay and Lesbian Students Through Teaching and Counseling."

Goals are to help teachers, counselors and administrators understand homosexuality, and deal with homophobia, violence directed at homosexuals, stereotyping and inappropriate

teaching and counseling.

The Birmingham Schools sent Frank Colasanti, Jr., a counselor at Groves High School, who will use the information to help students who are coping with their sexuality.

Some school district residents object. As one resident, Pat Kendro, told the school board: "They (schools) should stay out of it. This should be private."

We could call on the old turnabout used so successfully against both Vice President Dan Quayle and President George Bush on the abortion issue. What if it were your child — or grandchild — who faced this situation?

That child fumbling for his sexuality needs to talk to someone. In an ideal world, it would be his family. But in the real world, he or she knows full well those aren't his family's values.

Judith Doner Berne is assistant managing editor for the Oakland County editions of the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers.

Councilman spells out 'family values' meaning

Republican orators, with one exception, apparently did a poor job defining "family values" last week in Houston.

To some, the Grand Old Party was preaching morality, the church's job, when it should have been dealing in economics. To others, abortion falls under family values because it prevents unwanted families. To still others, it raised the marital fidelity question.

Let me offer one newsman's unofficial grasp of the Republican buzzword: A man marries a woman — not another man — some time before the first baby arrives. Abortion never occurs to them. The man supports his family. The couple keeps the kids clean and sends them to school on time. They take the kids to church, and mom gives some time to PTA.

Sometimes things sour between the

mom and dad, and they split. Dad still supports them and sees the kids on weekends. If they don't live happily ever after, at least they aim toward that ideal.

The Rev. Keith Butler, a Detroit councilman, spelled out government's role in promoting family values some what more bluntly than did the prime time orators.

Butler spoke of "providing incentives for families to stay together, discouraging births out of wedlock and requiring able-bodied welfare recipients to enroll in job training."

Butler mentioned a housing preservation program "so that tenants and renters can own their own home, sink roots deep into their neighborhood and grab a piece of the American dream."

What are anti-family values? Mom gets pregnant at 15 and has four kids by the time she's 21. None of



TIM RICHARD

the fathers marries her or pays a penny of support.

The first baby has a low birth weight and other complications because of mom's youth and lack of pre-natal care. Another baby is accidentally shot by someone driving past a crack house. A third child is a truant from school, joins a gang and lands in prison after

fathering a few kids of his own. The fourth one begins reproducing at 14 ... and her daughter at 13.

After the last child reaches 18, mom is no longer eligible for AFDC and begins collecting general assistance (until it was abolished).

The government, in Mario Cuomo's words, becomes family, providing AFDC, Medicare, rent supplements, WIC, food stamps and more. Their social worker advocates setting up voter registration booths at the DSS office.

Except for Butler, most GOP orators pussy-footed around the topic. Half of Republicans and two-thirds of Democrats, I suspect, were unclear what the code phrase "family values" implied.

Vice President Dan Quayle was counter-productive in explaining family values when he picked on unwed mother Murphy Brown. His target was

a mature woman with a high-paying job. In real life, 90 percent of unwed mothers become clients of the social services lobby.

And since it's unwise to pick on women, Quayle should be targeting the males who have fun and run.

That is how one newsman interprets this year's buzzword. No orator came close to spelling it out bluntly, so I sat down and read the platform, particularly pages 10 through 34.

Not all Republicans embrace — or even understand — "family values." Not all Democrats hold anti-family values. You as a voter will have to decide (1) whether family values are important and (2) whether the candidates in your district do or don't subscribe.

Tim Richard reports regularly on the local implications of state and regional events.

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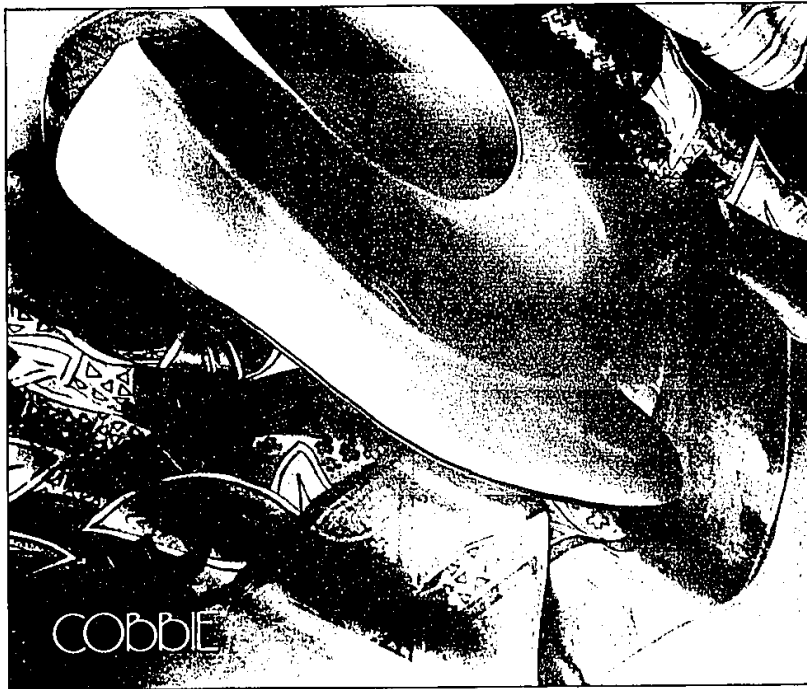
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