

# Gay Community Offers Few Services For Gay Parents

## Gays Turn to Straights, As Support System in South Florida is Lacking For Gay Moms and Dads

By Bill Hawkins

Raising kids is no easy job, but parents like George, Cindy and Lawrence have one additional challenge – and one common bond. Each of them is gay.

"I found that there isn't much of a support system in South Florida for gay men who are parents," said George DeHeer. "And so a lot of what I've had to deal with has been done on my own and with my partner."

Cindy Gavin and Lawrence J., who prefers not to use his last name, agree about the need of such support and all three hope more gay parents might step forward to help one another.

Interestingly enough, all three said it's often been the straight community that's given them the most help with their parenting journey. Lawrence was guest of honor at a neighborhood new baby shower when he brought his son home less than a year ago. DeHeer had loving moral support of his family, while Gavin found emotional help from her former husband and straight friends.

Speaking before a recent late summer meeting of the Senior Action in a Gay Environment (SAGE) of Broward County, the three told of their own individual stories about becoming parents and the joys – and heartaches – which accompanied that decision. SAGE, one of the largest gay groups in South Florida with more than 400 members who are 50 years or older, has many gay and lesbian parents as members.

DeHeer and his partner, George Hibbs, who live in Hollywood, have been together 17 years and became legal guardians six years ago of 11-year-old Zack.

Gavin and her partner, Gail Fitzgerald, who live in Wilton Manors, have been together 6 and-a-half years and raised Gavin's two daughters, now 19 and 23.

Lawrence, a 53-year-old single gay man living in Hollywood, adopted his son, Oscar, now 23 months old, a year ago.

While some of the family details may be different, in many cases the stories about being a gay parent are the same.

"I always wanted to have a child, but knowing I was gay at an early age I knew that just wasn't going to happen and had to accept that fact," said DeHeer. "I tried to volunteer with organizations dealing with kids so I could be close to children and help them in whatever way I could."

That led him in 1991 to become involved with Project Stimulation, a Fort Lauderdale-based effort to assist HIV-infected parents who were ill, but still trying to raise their children — some of whom were also HIV infected.

"By just holding those babies and giving them a comforting touch and love, medical experts said they could see positive results occurring in helping those youngsters to become healthier," explained DeHeer.

One part of Project Stimulation was a Baby Buddy Program in which volunteers would help mothers and their children in the program. It was through that project that DeHeers met Zack, who was not infected and was only 15 months old when DeHeer and he began to bond.

Zack's mother was terminally ill and plans were in place to transfer the child to some friends of the mother upon her death.

However, as the bond between Zack and George grew, the mother took notice and surprised DeHeer one day by asking him to take care of her child when she passed on. By that time Zack, who was healthy and not HIV infected, was 4 years old.

"I knew what I wanted my answer to be but I wanted to make sure and discuss it with my partner, George," said DeHeer, who is a controller for an auto insurance company.

With a solid 10-year-relationship under their belt at that time, the duo responded with an enthusiastic "Yes."

When Zack's mother died, the paperwork processing began to establish DeHeer as legal guardian. There was a conscience effort not to try and adopt the child because of Florida law prohibiting gays from such actions. The law remains under a pending legal challenge.

After a year of legal maneuvering because of the gay issue, the couple finally signed guardianship papers and Zack was their's.

"Zack had been living with us all that time, so we had all settled into a new life, but having a child changes your priorities," said DeHeer. "It changed our social life and we also discovered that we, as gay parents, now became a minority within a minority as we found few gay parents around for support."

Also because Zack is biracial his dark skin color would call even more attention to the family when out on vacations or shopping. "Here we were two white gay men with a black child going into a restaurant in North Carolina while on vacation. Well, you could hear a pin drop when we walked in," said DeHeer.

But the joys of parenthood have outweighed the negatives.

"The joy of seeing the child grow, of knowing you can influence his life and to see the world through his eyes are all so special," said DeHeer. "I also get to act like a kid, which I love, so I have a locked in excuse to be a little crazy at times."

Both men agreed that the decision to bring Zack into their family had to be a mutual one. They also talked with their own families, who offered support.

"I am 17 years older than George so I had some concerns how I would react," explained Hibbs. "I had been married and had a son so I had gone through all that and was ready for a slower pace of life."

But Hibbs said that when he discussed it with DeHeer, he knew he could not deny either of them the opportunity for the experience and said, "Today Zack has my whole heart." Zack also has a stepbrother of sorts in Hibbs own son, who is now 31 years old.

For Gavin, her decision 10 years ago to face up to her sexual orientation brought her face-to-face not only with a divorce action to end her marriage, but also with losing her two daughters.

Because the girls, then age 8 and 12, had a difficult time dealing with their mother being a lesbian, they chose to live with their father.

"I cried and bit my tongue because I knew that was what they wanted," she said. Gavin's strong Christian belief also forced her to struggle within herself to deal with the whole issue.

"I thought that as a lesbian I was a bad example for my kids because my religious guilt told me I was," she explained. "It took me awhile to work through all that and discover differently so I could honestly accept who I am."

As time passed and Gavin's relationship with her new life partner grew, not only did the mother feel better about herself, but also the attitudes of her daughters changed and they have adapted.

Today they live their mother and the 23-

year-old has completed college and has been living at home until she makes a career move. The 19-year-old just graduated from high school and is exploring her future.

"The girls still are timid about the whole gay issue, but they have come around," said Gavin, who is a dental hygienist. She also credited her husband and family with their support that has allowed the extended family to grow and become closer.

She laments that she missed some time

"I chose not to try and pursue it in the U.S. because I knew being a gay man I would face all sorts of delays and legal hassles," he said.

With strong support of his family, Lawrence quickly found himself last fall in Guatemala waiting to pick up his new son, Oscar, then only 6 and a half months old.

"This was the moment I had been waiting 30 years for and I had expected all these great emotional feelings to happen," said Lawrence. While he had lots of positive new parent feelings, he said there also was the overwhelming impact of "sheer terror."

His fear was based on the reality of what he had done and the question for himself — and one asked my most new parents — of whether he was really prepared to do all he could to raise this child.

"I felt overwhelmed at that moment, but things finally came together when we got home and settled," Lawrence explained.

To brighten his return home, he was greeted by a neighborhood block party, which became a giant baby shower. "Everyone was so supportive. It was just wonderful," he said.

Today Oscar, a cuddly 21 months old, goes to day care while Lawrence is at work. The two continue their growth as a new family.

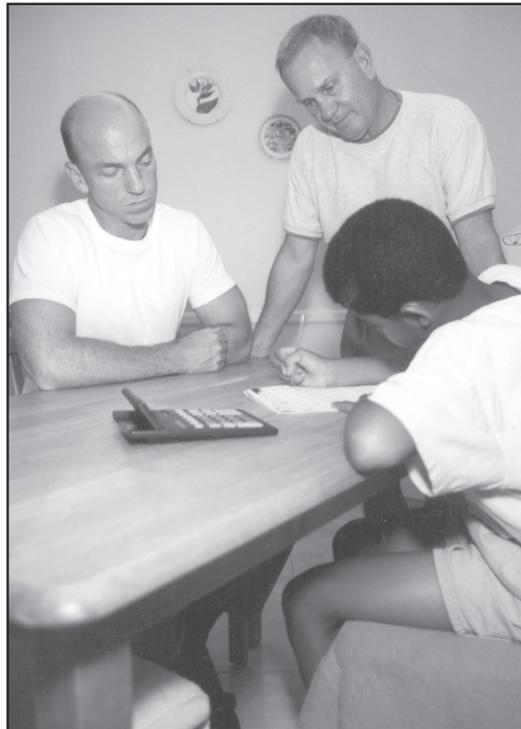
"I took him to New York and thought we'd have a great time seeing the city," said Lawrence. "But all he wanted to do was walk everywhere. I have a very active child."

The new father said any decision to adopt is a "hard one," but he "feels very lucky to have Oscar in my life."

Ray Rideout of Wilton Manors, a SAGE member who arranged the parent discussion, praised the families for their "courage" and said national statistics show that gay parents are attentive and good parents. He said all three families are "an inspiration to us all."

There are efforts by the Gay and Lesbian Community Center in Fort Lauderdale to help form a gay parents support group and the Stonewall Library and Archives has books available for young children and teens dealing with aspects of gay life.

There also are a growing number of websites providing support for gay parents, while locally the Metropolitan Community Church's Sunshine Cathedral has moved to establish day care during services to help gay parents to bring children to services and share as families.



George DeHeer, left, and partner, George Hibbs, help their son, Zack, with his homework.

with her daughters and that there was no gay parent support group to help her. "It would have been nice to have someone to turn to with questions," she said.

"It was hard to hide the gay issue from teachers and others, but I knew I had to for the sake of the girls and out of respect for their feelings," said Gavin. Today she said "I'm so happy. I have a loving partner and my life is really wonderful."

For Lawrence, a high school teacher and someone who always wanted children of his own, the only alternative was adoption.

Last year, the educator used the Internet to open doors to adoption agencies around the world.

## Stonewall Dems Select New Executive Director

National Stonewall Democrats this week announced their decision to appoint Chad Johnson as the political group's new executive director.

"Chad Johnson brings remarkable strengths and experience to a very demanding job," said Julian Potter and Rick Trombly, NSD co-chairs, in making the announcement. "He shares our passion first as a loyal Democrat, along with his unshakeable commitment to our community's civil rights. We were encouraged to see all of our aims met in one outstanding candidate."

Trained as an attorney, Johnson has frequently provided pro bono legal counsel and support to leading gay and lesbian civil rights and political groups - including his services to prepare the original steps necessary to incorporate the National Stonewall

Democrats as a national, nonprofit group.

In his political roles, Johnson also volunteered his time and expertise during the 1992 and 1996 Clinton-Gore campaigns, and in 2000, served as National Vice Chair for Business Outreach on behalf of the Gore-

Lieberman campaign. He also is a founding member of the Democratic National Committee's Gay and Lesbian Leadership Council. Chad Johnson earned his undergraduate degree as well as his law degree from Harvard University, and now makes his home in Washington, D.C.

The National Stonewall Democrats is the national organization of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Democrats. NSD is committed to improving the record of the Democratic Party and educating voters about the vast differences between the two major parties on issues of importance to GLBT communities.



Chad Johnson