

**PARENTS OF LGBTI+
PERSONS IN EUROPE**

**TELL IT
OUT!**



**EUROPEAN
NETWORK OF PARENTS
OF LGBTI+ PERSONS**



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*There is an axiom that says
"Whatever we dream alone,
Remains a dream
But what we dream with others
Can become a reality"*

EUROPEAN NETWORK OF PARENTS
OF LGBTI+ PERSONS (ENP)



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Preface

The Council of Europe has repeatedly drawn attention to discrimination against children and young people on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics (SOGIESC) and the huge value of parental support.

Many parents may be at a loss as to where to turn for advice when confronted with the situation where their child is perceived as not conforming on the grounds of SOGIESC. Although it cannot replace face-to-face advice, this book can provide much needed support and reassurance for such parents.

The testimonies in this book give a powerful insight into the importance of loving, encouraging parents, irrespective of their child's SOGIESC. The consequences of discrimination stemming from dominant SOGIESC-based stereotyping and restrictive norms in the social environment can lead to a child hiding their real selves, bottling-up unmanageable stress, fear of parental rejection and the potential for untold harm. An accepting, supportive family can bring their child unimagined happiness, wellbeing and afford them the same opportunities as all other children to flourish in life.

The Council of Europe's Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Unit stands by these brave parents who give the best lessons in love and commitment to common values in a society which has discriminated generations of children on grounds of their actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics. We strongly hope that these real-life examples will give inspiration to all who read them.

*Eleni Tsetsekou,
Head of SOGI Unit Council of Europe*

Introduction



Dear Reader,

This is a book that is a true labour of love and dedication, created by parents who all share one common dream - to see our children, especially those who happen to be LGBTI+ - live their lives in societies and communities that welcome them and affirm them, with dignity and love.

The joy we parents feel whenever we see our children find the love of their life; content with their job; welcomed by others in communities; living a sense of purpose and belonging ... it makes every effort we've made, worthwhile. We are happy only when our children are happy!

We know however, that many families are suffering silently because perhaps they will never see their children fulfilled or happy. Many families are still sadly living in such fear and exclusion: because of homophobia and bullying in schools; discrimination at the workplace; or the sheer fact that one's love for someone of the same sex would never be accepted or celebrated.

The European Network of Parents of LGBTI+ Persons (ENP) was formed in 2017 with the aim of offering solidarity to such families that are being marginalized and rejected, so unjustly. By bringing parents together to share our experiences, we learn from each other and empower one another to believe in unconditional love, despite the many obstacles or oppression faced. We aspire to live in hope, to build societies where fairness and dignity are respected, keeping in mind that we are all different but all of us contribute to the common good. Strong divisions are only overcome by open hearts and through sincere dialogue. We know this from the experiences we've lived in our own families. Now we want to share this – come out of the closet, and to speak out to tell the truth about our LGBTI+ sons and daughters - and to Tell It Out to the world!

We have seen and tasted first hand, the pain and suffering of social exclusion; we have endured the loss of watching suicidal family members slip away; we have witnessed families breaking apart for lack of acceptance of LGBTI+ members. This must stop. We must save lives. We must save families.

As you read through these stories, try to imagine the underlying emotions and inner journey that people go through just to stay sane and to face the troubles of each day. Try to put yourself in the shoes of those whom you may know, who stand around you but are still 'invisible' to you – invisible also to society. Be their support and be the change that society is yearning for, to safeguard those who are vulnerable, excluded or alone.

Your voice matters! Please help ENP to reach out to more and more people. Thank you for your willingness to read and learn about diverse family realities. We welcome your feedback and support to inform others about ENP. Your role in building a safe and fair environment for LGBTI+ people will eventually benefit us all – because we are after all, just one humanity!

ENP Board

*Margarida Lima de Faria
Joseph & Joseanne Peregine
Sven Stabroth
Christopher Vella*

STORY 1

My happiness was conquered through many tears... perseverance and hope

Fernanda Ferreira, PORTUGAL



“Dad, Mum...I just want to tell you that I’m gay”. The suspicion had haunted me for a long time. At first, I was extremely frightened and sad, because my son, Pedro, was seriously ill, very depressed and had isolated himself from everybody. He also suffered from panic attacks. In short, his mental health was declining. Whether he was gay or sick, my main concern and priority was dealing with his mental health. I was also frightened and sad because I doubted whether I could help him. I doubted if I would be strong enough to deal with my son’s mental health, but I also worried about having to face homophobia and prejudice in my own home.

In spite of my total ignorance about homosexuality, the truth is it didn’t worry me much. Pedro’s father, on the other hand, was devastated.

I was scared of the outside world, of how society would treat Pedro because of his orientation. I was also scared of how our extended family would react, whether they would despise or disrespect him...So, whilst dealing with Pedro’s health with the help of doctors and hospital treatments, I was also searching the Internet for information about homosexuality. It was through the Internet that I found out that prejudice and homophobia are also very prevalent throughout the world. This was such a shock to me ... I was flabbergasted with my findings and dismayed at the thought that I might have to hide my son’s true self, or cope with the existence of a “terrifying” family secret. To live a lie. I felt I would be unable to cope.

Finally, I saw a light at the end of the tunnel. One of my Internet searches led me to discover AMPLOS - a Parents' Association for freedom of sexual orientation and gender identity. AMPLOS had been set up only one year earlier and I immediately contacted them.

Nowadays, I feel much happier and serene. My happiness was conquered through much tears, perseverance and hope.

Returning to his studies after stopping for over a year, Pedro managed to graduate from University. Now, he has also completed a master's degree. AMPLOS meant a lot to my family and to me. I learned we must not fear talking to people freely about this issue. Pedro's father has become a more enlightened person. There are no more secrets at home. I consider it a privilege to have a gay son. It was and still is a very enriching experience. While, before, I used to see the world in black and white, now I enjoy its full spectrum.

STORY 2

My son freed me from the curse of the stiff, rigid and narrow-minded brain

Anonymous, NORWAY



I thought I had a girl. My only child; blonde, lean, beautiful and feminine - much more feminine than I ever was. High heels, high fashion. It turned out to be wrong. "Mom, I'm a guy. I'm not a girl," ... my 18-year-old said, "I can't live like a girl any more. I'm a man inside".

I was devastated. I questioned it. I denied accepting it. "But you have hardly worn a pair of jeans" I argued, "and you always wear high heels and flashy feminine clothes. How can you be a man?" The answer helped me understand: "The only way I can meet the world in a female shape, is when I feel like a man in drag." That got to me. That made sense.

It became a reality. An unknown, fearful reality. 'She' had to become 'he' in my thoughts and my speech. It was hard. I cried, I panicked, I cursed the universe. I endured endless sleepless nights, I was devastated. I mourned the loss of my daughter. I had no idea what to do. I felt like an idiot; how could I not have seen this?

Slowly, my daughter became my son. It was all new to me. Thankfully, it was not as new to him. He helped me find people to talk to, who knew what it was all about. He provided me with books and sites that helped explain it all to me. That made me understand it better. It did not, however, stop me from worrying.

I was so scared for him. I was sick worrying about how his life would turn out. The suicide statistics of transgender youth scared the living

daylight out of me. Would he even survive? Would he get proper health care? And what about love? How would he find love? I knew nobody who was transgender, I knew of nobody like him who had found love. And what about work? Would he even find work, with so much ignorance and prejudice? The thoughts tortured me.

Time passed by. My teenager became a young man. Amidst diagnostics, hormone therapy and surgeries he managed to proceed with his education. It has taken a little longer than average, naturally, but he has managed somehow. My first fear to disappear was my fear that he would not find somebody to love. I was wrong; there has been no lack of love interests. Boyfriends have been in high supply and now, he has been in a stable, loving relationship with his boyfriend for several years. Gradually my fear for his mental health disappeared too.

He has emerged as a happier and calmer version of himself after his gender affirming treatment. He has become confident in himself, and has actively engaged himself in making the situation better for other people with gender incongruence in Norway. Today he is a man; a homosexual, great, bright transgender man who is respected and loved. It seems strange to me now that I ever saw him as a girl. He is a man. As for work; there seem to be no problems. I am so relieved and so grateful for this outcome.

What did I learn from all this? A lot! I consider myself so lucky for this life lesson. It has taught me lessons of love and lessons of gender and sexual diversity. It has given me insights into topics in society that we need to address. It has given me purpose. But first and foremost it has made my mind agile and flexible. My son freed me from the curse of the stiff, rigid and narrow-minded brain. Thank you!

STORY 3

I had one advantage

Ágnes Gyémánt, HUNGARY

Although I always knew that my child was different from the other little girls, I pushed away the thought that my child wasn't straight. She didn't like to play with girls' toys, but she loved boy sports. She didn't like to wear dresses; from a young age, she chose to wear the most neutral clothing. One time, I talked to her about it. We agreed to wait until she was sure, and to give me time, too. I thought it was my fault that she didn't accept herself, but I think it was just me who didn't want to accept that she was attracted to women.

When she told me that she had a girlfriend, I tried to find out what I did wrong. I blamed myself; I thought it was my fault. I was disappointed. I had different expectations for my life and for her life as well. No one teaches you that you shouldn't plan your child's life for them. No one teaches you what to do when your child is different from what society expects. I had one advantage that other parents don't have. I was also different, because I am disabled and I had faced discrimination. I had to fight to be recognized and accepted. Now I could understand my own mother's pain and her insistence that I study hard. I too was afraid that people would hurt her or make fun of her. I was afraid that she would be isolated and unhappy because she wouldn't have friends or find someone who loved her. That she would not have children. That people would feel sorry for me or despise me because I didn't know how to raise a "normal" child.

Luckily my fears did not materialize. My daughter has a wonderful personality. She wins over everyone with her affectionate, kind and caring love. She is smart and on top of it, a

great organizer. No wonder that the LMBTQ community counts on her and her creative ideas. She has a good heart, she is always willing to help; she is accepting, generous and brave. She charms everyone and is surrounded by people who want to be near her. She has a partner with whom she shares a child and she recently married her girlfriend. I think - if anything - that what we first thought were disadvantages have become irrelevant. The difficulties she faced, only made her a stronger and better person. I think it's changed me too. I try to be worthy of her and I am very proud of her.

STORY 4

We need to get to know homosexual children, listen to them and love them as we love our other children

Pepe and Puri, SPAIN



We are Pepe and Puri. We have been married for 49 years. We live in Seville (Spain). We are members of Ichthys-CVX Familia, a Christian group of parents and relatives of LGBTI+ people. We have three children and the eldest, named José Enrique, is gay. This is the story of his 'coming out' with us.

Pepe's story

My wife told me that our son had come out to her and that she had told him that her love and feelings towards him remained the same, since he was just like any other of his siblings and they were all her children. My wife also told me that our son wanted to come out with me in due time. Days were passing by, but my son didn't tell me anything about his being gay. I organised he was worried and sad, perhaps because he couldn't find the right time to tell me about it. So I said to myself: 'This situation can't go on because he's having a hard time,' so I went to his bedroom (he was living with us at the time) and said to him: 'Your mum has told me that you are homosexual, and I think exactly the same way as her: my love, affection and feelings towards you have not changed; we love you as much as we love your siblings; we know that you have not decided to become homosexual, but God has created you the way you are and that can't be changed because it runs in your genes.' My son looked at me thankfully and said: 'Thanks, Dad,' and we hugged each other.

I consider we are a very happy family, and we treat our three children the same way, irrespective of their sexual orientation. We have accepted things as they are.

My only fear is that part of society still can't see that a homosexual person is also a son of God, and that they could make some harmful comments about him. People shouldn't be judged by their sexual orientation. What really matters is their kindness and behavior and my son is a wonderful person, a very good man and a Christian. I feel proud of him, as I feel proud of my two other children.

Puri's story

When my son came out I regretted he hadn't told me so before, and I felt sorry that he had been suffering those years without sharing that with us. I love him deeply, as I love my other two children, and that love will never change.

My son is a son of God as we all are. He is not a sick person. His homosexual orientation was granted to him by God, and God also gave us a wonderful present when he was born.

We need to get to know homosexual children, listen to them, and love them as we love our other children. My son has some qualities which we heterosexual people would like to have. He is a good Christian, a believer, he wants to be part of the Church, that same church which some groups reject. He has a conciliatory spirit and I am very proud of him. I really enjoy myself when we are on holidays together, when we share a day out, a family meal and more things. He also came out with his siblings and nieces, and they all continue loving him very much and sharing experiences with him. I wouldn't change my gay son for anybody else because his values are God's gifts.

My only fear is that part of the Church, part of society and some people could harm him because of his sexual orientation.

STORY 5

My daughter is actually a boy!

Maria Augusta Santos, PORTUGAL

My baby was born when I was 35 years old. A beautiful, calm and deeply wanted child who grew up to become a wonderful toddler and a fully accomplished and highly intelligent teenager. I felt fulfilled as a mother and as a person. Puberty wasn't without its struggles but the overall picture was as idyllic as ever - until it wasn't anymore!

The phone call from school was intriguing: my daughter was absent for a week, even though I saw her leave the house to catch the school bus in the morning, as usual...I left the office immediately to find her at home, in her bedroom, where throughout that week she had returned each morning as soon as she saw me leave the house...

I could feel her uneasiness but none of us managed to put the right words to that feeling. We still had long and deep conversations, she was still as affectionate as ever, but something had changed. We decided she should start seeing a child therapist and so she did... In the meantime, she began refusing to wear dresses, wanted her hair cut short and didn't start waxing or wearing makeup, unlike other girls her age.

One evening, she finally revealed what was tormenting her for so long: she felt she was actually a boy! I knew instinctively that the main thing to do was to reassure her that my love for whom she was, remained intact and to look for information about what being transgender meant. Also, I needed time to fully internalize the scope of that confession. I tried to combine my primal reaction to help and protect her with some basic common sense: I was the adult and should make sure this was not a whim or a psychological/psychiatric condition before sponsoring any irreversible changes. The diagnosis was



confirmed two years later. My son started hormone replacement therapy and, later, began the surgical side of transition.

I would lie if I said I don't miss my little girl sometimes... and I still worry enormously about transphobic attacks and how extra hard it might be for him to get a challenging job and a happy family life with someone who loves and respects him.

But he is still the same wonderful and very gifted person I gave birth to 24 years ago and every day I marvel at his courage, wit and magnificent achievements. I believe in him and know deep down he will get all the happiness he deserves in life, hopefully while I am still around to witness it!

STORY 6

No matter what

Anne Rigney, IRELAND

My name is Anne. I am the mother of two children, a son and daughter. I live in rural Ireland in County Roscommon.

When my son Daragh was sixteen years old he informed me he was gay. We had been out for a walk in local woodland when he said he had something to tell me.

He looked very worried as he told me he was gay. I was not expecting it and started to cry. He asked me why I was crying and I told him that I was sad because I would have no grandchildren. Up to that point, grandchildren had never entered my head. I hugged him and told him I loved him, no matter what.

That was in 1998 and at that time I did not know any gay people. There was a lot of talk of gay men dying from aids at that time. I was worried for my son. I knew his life would be complicated and challenging. I decided to educate myself about the LGBT community and got in touch with a helpline for parents of LGBT children. I spoke at length with a wonderful man who allayed a lot of my fears and concerns as a mother. My biggest worry was that my son would get beaten up or taken advantage of by older men. (I also had this worry for my daughter).

At that time in Dublin there was a support group for 16-18 year old LGBT persons and there were educational talks for young people about health and safety awareness. My son joined this group. Sadly in rural Ireland there was no support in place at that time for the LGBT community.

My son moved to Dublin where he had wonderful years making lifelong friends and actively participating in Dublin Pride parade every year.

It is now 2018 and my son Daragh is living in Germany with his husband Lior and they have a beautiful little daughter, Emma, who is now two years old and who has brought so much joy to my family. Having a son who happens to be gay, awakened in me, a fighting spirit which had been dormant. I was very active during the Marriage Equality referendum in Ireland in 2015.

My daughter Cara and I went out canvassing door to door in Roscommon. We had a landslide victory with the Irish people voting for the LGBT community to have the same rights as everyone else, to marry the person they love.

One of the happiest days of my life was standing witness for my son Daragh when he married the love of his life, Lior, in Roscommon.

STORY 7

This experience has changed us

Corrado and Michela, ITALY

“Talking and opening heart to heart, the word of mouth, the ways that have allowed us to discover we were not alone.”

When you think that you have found all the right answers in your life. Life often changes the questions, as we are often reminded by our friend Mara.

And it was the question by our son Simone four years ago, who had discovered he was gay fifteen years earlier, *“so what are you doing for me and for those like me, you, who do so much for the married and engaged couples in your parish? What are you doing for those who are expelled from their parents or their Church?”* - the thing that changed our peaceful lives of parents of three children and grandparents of five grandchildren.

That question pierced our heart: he was right!! Everything has changed from there. We let ourselves be questioned and we understood that it was not just enough to have welcomed the reality of our son many years earlier, but that nowadays we had to open up ourselves to other parents, sons and daughters.

To do this, it was enough simply to show ourselves in public and this allowed other couples to approach us and share their reality as parents of homosexual boys and girls.

In our experience there were personal meetings, invitations to dinner, talking and open heart to heart conversations, by word of mouth, the ways that have allowed us to discover that we were not alone. In fact, solitude and the sense of failure closed the parents too in a “closet”

from which it is very difficult to come out.

And the Davide group in Parma was born: our group consists of seven married couples and gay boys, two of whom, on the way, have had civil unions (*Italian sort of marriage for homosexual couples*).

We started meeting each month to share our lives and them, their anxieties and worries, but also sharing their joys and discoveries, welcoming everyone's experiences as a precious gift.

We first experienced the joy of feeling listened to, of feeling welcomed, of feeling not alone anymore.

Reflecting then and praying on the Word of God we understood how the Father of Heaven loves our sons and daughters as they are. He has designed our own plan of love: discovering the happiness of being loved in order to open oneself to the gift of themselves, to be able to love.

It is clearly a different way of loving, a different love relationship, but no less intense, true, liberating and worth living.

This certainty has reassured our minds of parents worried about their happiness, but also worried that they may lose their faith (as unfortunately happens) by feeling rejected or banned by the Christian community.

Since the beginning, in fact, we had the strong conviction of holding our children with one hand and the Church with the other, trying to, sometimes lacerating, not losing any of them nor any of them being removed or abandoned.

Sometimes in this attempt, it seems to be on the cross, pulled from one side or the other, but we know we are in good company! On our way, we met groups of LGBT believers, boys and girls in various Italian cities who continue to persevere in believing and each time, we were amazed by their faith and the intensity of their prayer. This is what we could touch, hear, and see in their lives.

It was also the way that Providence has shown us to welcome and support parents in difficulty, creating a network in which friendship has become palpable with a close link from one corner of Italy to another.

This experience has changed us.

We are living a renewed and wider form of parenting: welcoming our son in his reality was the way to give birth to him for the second time. To welcome, support, encourage other parents and other sons and daughters was for us, a way to becoming parents for the third time.

It also made us grow in the journey of faith in a more authentic and profound encounter with the Lord, with his Word, in the incessant request to know and do His will.

This experience has also opened our hearts, discovering the beauty of diversity and supporting those who, because of all diversity, have been dismissed, mocked, denied.

This is why we often thank the Lord and we feel we are blessed parents !!

Coming out twice

Éva Tuza, HUNGARY

Coming out twice. We had to come out twice. The first time, when our daughter told us that she was attracted to girls. The second was a year later, when she told us that she had processed her feelings and she was sure that she was transgender.

I was shocked both times. I didn't know what was happening. My world was collapsing and my thoughts were spinning:

- How did this happen?
- Was she molested? Is this why she's feeling this way?
- Why didn't I notice earlier?
- Did I do something wrong?
- Did something happen while I was pregnant?

At this second coming out, I organised that as much as the first coming out crushed me, when my daughter told me she liked girls, I would have been happy if that had been it. It was harder to accept her as a man, call them a different name, watch their transformation, than the first coming out.

First and foremost, I was afraid that they would be hurt. I feared that they would be isolated and unloved. I thought their life would be hard.

Then came the other fears:

- What if she's confused about her feelings?
- What if later, she realizes she is not transgender and she can't go back?
- After the operation, she will never be the same.

- What happens if there are complications during surgery?

- How will her body respond to hormones?

I am calmer now but my feelings are still shaky. They come in waves. Sometimes weak, sometimes strong. Last week, when we received the go-ahead for the name and gender change, our happiness overshadowed our fears. Did they make the right choice? It's too late to go back. It's permanent now.

The other feeling that overwhelms me – and still surprises me - is, my God, I have lost my daughter forever. Of course, I know they are a transgender boy and the girl that I gave birth to is no more. Still. Where is she? My daughter is really dead, there's no coming back. I haven't shared these thoughts with them, because it would hurt them. As a mother, I am alone with these feelings.

I have a son. I love them so much. I would give my life for them. But where is my daughter? I want her, too. Or should I mourn her loss? Where can I bury her? She lives in my heart and I can't kill her. Then I feel like a horrible mother because my son is finally happy yet I am still suffering.

I couldn't understand how this could happen

Mother Simona, LITHUANIA

I am a mother of two grown up children a twenty-four year old son and a transgender daughter who is now twenty-six. Just 5 years ago I was still sure I was raising two sons. When the older child told me that she was a trans woman I didn't really understand much. By that time I had seen a couple of TV shows about someone wanting to look like the opposite gender but I never thought it could be that serious.

When raising my children I'd never noticed any clues about the eldest child, like interest in girls' toys or eagerness to wear girls' dresses or skirts, therefore such news came as a complete shock. I couldn't understand how this could happen in our family, which seemed to be no different from other regular families. My children had grown up healthy, had good grades at school and studied at universities! After receiving such news I was completely stressed out, I cried a lot and even experienced short-term depression. I wanted to talk to someone who was in a similar situation to me but I had known no one like that, making this period really hard to endure.

As both the father of our children and myself had very negative reactions, it made our child give one more try to living like a "normal guy" – to get a girlfriend and try to forget her true nature. However, this attempt was not successful and 2 years later my daughter completely made up her mind to start transitioning. The second time wasn't as painful because deep inside I'd known it could happen any time. After re-thinking the past many times, I remembered seeing her in the bathroom pulling her cheeks which were just starting to get facial hair,

having difficulties to adapt at school, changing it a few times, in addition to always being interested in various spiritual and religious experiences.

With my daughter's encouragement I eventually started taking an interest in the phenomena of homosexual and transgender people. I started attending a self-help group for parents of LGBT* children. Having met other mothers there, listening to their testimonies, I finally understood I am not alone in Lithuania, that there are people who understand me, whom I can share my emotions and feelings with, making me feel so much better. Thanks to this group, I got the opportunity to participate in an international meeting of LGBT* parents in Malta. Meeting parents from various European countries who shared their experiences of many years broadened my understanding further.

I organised I should not only love and accept my child just as she is, but also respect her identity and show my support in everyday struggles. I should admit that accepting all the changes, moods and uncomfortable situations sometimes still poses a challenge for me and takes a lot of effort.

The fact that Lithuania heavily lacks LGBT* recognition only makes our lives harder: there are no policies for transgender medical care, no availability of sex reassignment surgery, and of course same sex couples have no right for civil partnerships or marriages.

It's hard to change old mindsets

Johnny, IRELAND

How did I actually react to my son telling my wife and me that he was gay? It's probably more honest to relate my reaction to a previous indicator that my young man 'may' be gay. A year or two previously he had inadvertently left open a link to a gay site on our P.C. and I remember a distinct anxiety attack on that occasion. My young man was always part of the male macho world of sport, hurling soccer, Gaelic football – which I had encouraged and participated in myself. He had a great circle of sporting friends growing up and was always the centre of their social gatherings.

Why this anxiety attack? Was it that I would find it difficult for myself to be the father of a gay son? After all, my own circle of friends was all sporting, straight and maybe not so liberal in their outlook. Was I fearful of how society would treat my son? Would he be safe? Then of course there was always the possibility that I was misreading the situation. Many young men look up gay sites on occasions, I'm sure. I think I was clinging on to the hope that my son was not gay.

I had always presented myself as liberal minded and would always advocate for the marginalized, involving myself in various active projects to highlight the plight of travelers, third world assistance programs and even led a student revolt in my teenage years. In a discussion with some mates some years ago the question arose: 'Would you feel comfortable in a gay bar?' of course I was to the fore stating; 'and why should that be a problem?'. All is well when you fight the battle for others. It's

easier. It's comfortable. It feels good. But can you really empathise? How strong and committed are you really, when the circumstances arrive at your own door?

The 'confirmation' was well organisation. My son and his older brother, who already had a girlfriend, were all home for the weekend. The usual humor and banter had prevailed. In hindsight I did notice certain giddiness in my older son. I think he was enjoying the excitement of it all. My gay son chose his moment and said: 'Mam and Dad, I've something to tell you. I'm gay'. I'll always be thankful for the initial response. It was physical and tearful. We all just hugged and 'cried a verse'. My wife and I thanked him for telling us, told him we loved him and hoped he would be happy and safe. I looked into my wife's eyes and I have never seen such love, pride and gratitude. I sense she knew in her heart for some time and the confirmation was a relief. Women and mothers have greater gifts.

It took me some time to adjust to the new circumstances. I'd like to be able to say that I had no problem shouting from the rooftops: '*My son is gay and I am so proud of him!*' It took me time. Everything was so acceptable within the confines of our own household but I wasn't prepared for the dissemination process – family, friends, and grandparents. I grappled somewhat. I had to adjust to a new 'gay-speak'. My real support and mentor during that period was my wife. I would certainly have benefited from talking to others who were going through the same experience.

I would like my son to think that I was immediately comfortable and open on hearing his news. Comfortable is probably the easiest part – the openness is more of a challenge. How much more difficult must it have been for him.

As in all facets of life, education is the foundation stone. Ignorance can lead to such injustice, discrimination and suffering.

I'm still on a learning curve. I'd like to be available to others who may be on that curve also. An old Irish seanfhocal (proverb) states: 'An tslat a chruann le haois is deacair í a shníomh ina gad' – it's hard to change old mindsets. It's no different for me really. But one has to remain open to new realities and, for me, to be grateful for the strengths presently around me and the wonderful wisdom and generosity of my own parents.

STORY 11

A welcoming family in a difficult external context

Piera, ITALY

My name is Piera and I am a volunteer of Agedo (Association of parents and friends of LGBT people, Italy). Mine is a peaceful story in which, after the coming out of my two children, there was a loving welcome from the whole family. This serenity, however, is disturbed by the external reality LGBT people have to deal with, because of prejudices against them.

In this historical moment even more so, I cannot get a serene look at the intolerance and hate towards the "differents". The Catholic Church also has its responsibilities with the negative messages it transmits through initiatives such as the prohibition for homosexual persons to accede to the priesthood or statements that exclude them from the possibility of being able to live their love.

Reception and inclusion are added values: nothing is taken away from others! I hope that soon they both fall in love because we are tired of waiting and life is short and we all have the right to live it to the fullest.

Nothing is as it seems

Birgül, TURKEY

I have been painting for 35 years. When I first started painting, the most important thing for me was to portray the visual on the canvas as real as possible and to convince the viewer of this reality. When painting, my biggest concern was this issue of being convincing.

I prepare my palette to paint the tree in front of me, and so firstly I put all the colours and then I mix all of them. I see that the tree is green hence I put a lot of green. As I continue to paint I realize that the tree actually contains only little green. It has brown, it has yellow, it has purple, it has blue and it has white. But I use so little green that I thought this couldn't be real. "I must be making a mistake," I think, yet every person that sees the painting tells me how beautiful the tree is. To make things more clear, I get a red apple and put it on the table, and then I draw a red apple. As I look at the palette lying in front of me I see that the least used color is red. It has yellow, it has green, and it has purple. The shadow of the apple really is purple - the bottom of the apple looks purple. Yet once again red is the least used colour.

Over the 35 years, I spent as an artist there is one thing that I have learned, our senses deceive us. I have started to realize that nothing is as it seems. Nothing is as it seems...

Years have passed and I still paint. I have a 15-year-old boy. Our life is really great and we are really happy... I trust my kid. I gave birth to the most beautiful kid in the world - the most beautiful. He is starting to

develop a character of his own. Each new day I see a new side of him that I didn't know about yesterday. Both the inside and the outside of my kid is so beautiful...

One morning I wake up to a weird feeling: my kid is lying to me. I can't bring myself to accept this. I think we're so close that he couldn't lie to me. I offer him so many options that there is no case in which he would need to lie. I catch him in one or two of his lies. I skim through his computer, I feel shame but I continue. There I come across a letter. A letter, written for someone named "Kaan", a love letter. He is so good at literature that I thought a girl friend of his fell in love with Kaan and asked my boy "Can you write a love letter so that Kaan would understand my emotions". Lies continue.

Another morning I wake up with the feeling "Okay, enough with the lies." I pick up my son after school and we go to a cafe. To tell him: "I am the only person you can trust in this world, I love you this much, I love you that much... But there is something wrong. You are lying to me and I want you to explain". Finally, I ask the question:

"Son, who is Kaan?"

Along the line, we order a pizza. This pizza is the most important pizza in my life. Then comes the pizza, I take a bite.

"Okay mommy, I must tell you this now. Kaan is my boyfriend". he says.

"How so? Sorry, I couldn't understand." I reply

The pizza bite was still in my mouth. "Mom, I'm gay" he says. That was such a big shock for me at the time, I inspired myself by saying: Calm down, don't react, just calm down. I asked him a few questions such as, how long has he been feeling this way. Then I told him that he shouldn't



label himself that way and that we didn't have enough information regarding this topic, so if we go to an expert maybe the expert could inform us. He agreed.

We paid the bill and left the restaurant. Only at 11.30, could I take the pizza bite out of my mouth, the same pizza bite which I took at 7 at the cafe. Everyone had slept, but I couldn't sleep that night. As soon as it was the morning I found one of the best psychiatrists in Izmir and went to him. First I went alone. In the meantime, I didn't talk with my son regarding this subject. But my whole world had come crashing around me. The dreams that I had for him, came to nothing, and it was as if my boy died. That's how I felt. There was such a fire inside of me. The psychiatrist roughly explained to me what this was but I didn't get what I wanted because I had wanted to change my kid, and make him heterosexual just like the other normal kids - like the majority. What the psychiatrist said didn't satisfy me. So then I found a psychologist. He was a young fellow and I went to him with my boy. I told him about the situation as soon as I entered. The first thing he said to me was "If you want to change your child, please don't come here again. Come only if you want your child to live in the society as he is". He nicely explained all the terms to me. I insisted "My boy is 15 years old and had no sexual experience before, how can he say that he has an interest in his own gender when he had no sexual experience?". The psychologist responded: "The statement and the feelings of someone are what matters to us". I was faced with the most important thing that I have learnt once again: our senses deceive us, feelings are what matter. That was the day when I began to come to terms with the reality. It has been 2 years since I learnt this. In the beginning, I used to cry a lot. The first year, out of nowhere I used to tell my friends and even strangers "Hi Ayşe, do you know that my son is homosexual?" just to overcome the crying. After telling it countless times I have learned to say it without crying.

Now with each passing day, I learn a new and beautiful feature about my son. Every single day... He has taught me so much... I have read books for hours, not only books about sexuality but books about life. I have learnt all of this thanks to my son. I owe him so much.

Translation: *Arda Enfiyeci*

From "Gökkuşağından Hikayeler" (October/2018) story compilation book of LISTAG families in Turkey.

Oh my god, how will my child live in this non-tolerant society?

Mother Vaida, LITHUANIA

My child is wonderful. He is cool, creative, intellectual, smart... I am extremely proud of him. We are very close now. I learned that he is homosexual a few years ago. It wasn't unexpected, I had a feeling that he was gay seeing him growing-up, developing, becoming more mature. I experienced the biggest shock when I thought, *Oh my God, how will my child live in this non-tolerant society?* He might get assaulted, beaten, hurt or killed." I was reading in the media that such things happen. I was very frightened for my child's safety. The other wave of fear came over me when I thought about what my closest friends and colleagues would think if they learnt about it. I understand that I shouldn't care for the opinion of others, but I couldn't get this feeling away. I lived with it. A lot of people do not know and I am not telling them. I am only telling it to those I trust.

I was thinking how this coming out has changed my life. It hasn't changed. Everything is as before. The same child, the same days, the same minutes... But I started to be interested in many things, participate in various events, I've become more active. Maybe I just don't want to get behind young people? I am saying to my child: "If you hear me talking nonsense, stop me!"

He didn't come out to me himself, I had asked him. He said: "*Yes. It is how you think.*" Other mothers were crying a lot, I didn't. Before coming out he was reserved. I thought that maybe he was using drugs.

It became much easier when I found out that he did not! I do not feel any guilt. Other mothers say that they do, not I. Young people from his surroundings are not surprised, they work, create, living together. But most of the older generation has the mental framework from Soviet Union. They were educating "standards" and no one saw persons as individuals. If you were not a "standard" you could end up in psychiatric hospital or you could be thrown out of society.

It would be better if my son had come out much earlier. I can only imagine what he has been through. He was expecting support from his closest people, but he didn't receive it because he was not talking. When we learned about it nothing has changed essentially, we only stopped communicating with homophobic people. No one has a right to judge and condemn. Just let them live their own lives! Those who judge and condemn others –it is hard for me to accept. My values are different. I became more understanding and empathetic towards others. Now, when I hear someone judging or bullying others, I do not run away, I express my opinion. Not everyone may like it. If it is accepted, I am happy about it. When my colleagues and acquaintances discuss the publications on LGBT topics, I hear a lot of dirt. Homophobic talks are like a knife to my heart. No one said anything directly to me about my son, but I distance myself from homophobic people. I hear the opinion they express and I feel desperate about such non-tolerant society, we still live in.

Several years ago I felt so alone. I was thinking, "there should be other mums like me, how could I find them?" I wanted to talk and I was interested in what they knew. Did they understand their children and communicate with them? Now there are several of us in the group, but the group is not getting bigger. There might be many reasons for that. For example, we are gathering in Vilnius, and mothers live throughout

Lithuania. The meetings are free, however, traveling from other regions costs money. If not the finances, maybe it is fear that is stopping them? Maybe they have doubts ... that they need support. When I went to meet other mothers for the first time, I expected to see distressed, reserved, frightened women, and when I saw them, I thought, "How cool they are!" We became close straightaway. Of course, for some it is easier to talk, for others it is more difficult, but no one forces us to do anything. It may be that I lose some friends because of my child. The future will show if they are real, but I have found new ones already.

For other mothers, I want to say: "Read, take an interest and think. The fear is born out of ignorance. It's not like you did not succeed. Your child is wonderful." Participating in the group I am helping to grow up for myself. Being and talking with the same parents as me, strengthens and supports me, I hope others too. Together we can grow a lot.

Unconditional love

Theo and Marjo Kuipers, NETHERLANDS

Theo

My wife Marjo and I are parents of two sons, one gay and one straight. For us, there is no difference between them whatsoever. We love them both unconditionally and their sexual orientation is not an issue for both of us. We believe that God created them the way they are and who are we to question Him about this. In our family we have a strong bond and we try to live with each other in a peaceful way and also to look after the needs of our fellow men. When our youngest son had his coming out it was the day before Christmas. My son was working on his computer in his study and he was looking at an LGBT website in order to get more information.

I asked what he was doing and he replied, I have to tell you something. My wife and our eldest son and his girlfriend were sitting in the living room. He told us that he liked boys more than girls and we were not surprised at all. Deep down we know he was gay. We hugged each other and he was very relieved and grateful that we accepted him as a gay son, brother and brother-in-law. In the next week he did his coming out with all of his close friends and no one rejected him. That was such a relief for him. He wished he had told his story much earlier. We know very little about the gay scene and of gay relationships.

A close friend and colleague is gay and he told us a lot of interesting things about the gay scene and even took us to gay bars in Amsterdam. We live in Hoorn, a small city near to Amsterdam. We started to visit Pink celebrations in the Keizersgracht church in Amsterdam and we also sailed on several boats during the Gay Parade in Amsterdam.

In 2016 we sailed on the World Religion Boat (slogan Coexist in Freedom) and won the first Prize. A gay Imam out from France was standing next to the lesbian daughter of Desmond Tutu from South Africa.

Some people on the quays started to cry when they saw us sailing past, through the canals of Amsterdam. We also decided to be present when the ENP was launched in Malta. Unfortunately there is no parent group in the Netherlands so we are individual members of the ENP. We strongly support the slogan Unconditional Love of the ENP.

It is so sad when parents decide to ban their children after their coming out. We cannot understand and accept this is still happening every day. We will carry a banner with this slogan of the ENP at the Pride Walk in July in Amsterdam. Our son will walk with us and we are very proud of him. We will tell everybody about our family and about both our sons - one gay and one straight. Acceptance and equality starts within a family.

Marjo

Ever since he was young, I had felt that he would probably love boys. It was his Christmas gift to our family when he told us whom he is deep inside. Mentally I knew; you are my son no - difference before and after telling us. But my heart cried when he hugged me and said: "Thank you for loving me, the way I am". Of course I love you. You are my same son before and after Christmas!

He has chosen to let us know in a natural (normal) way. We respected his choice and did not tell everyone.

But as parents you have to deal with your surroundings. "Why did you not call/tell us?" someone asked. I answered: "Well I also did not call you when our eldest son was straight" And no, we did not raise them in a different way.

STORY 15

I found myself standing in front of my beloved son

Melani Centrih, SLOVENIA

I am 62 years old and my son is gay. He made his coming out 14 years ago. He was 18 years and he was in the first year of his studies. At that time I was working very hard and a lot. The family relations were stable and I thought that my children (one other son, 7 years older than the younger one who is gay) were adult. I was happy and was expecting no more thunderstorms in our life.

One evening my son visited me unexpectedly at my office. At first he was speaking about being ill and feeling depressed and burnt out. I was relaxed thinking that feeling ill was nothing special. Then he admitted: "But I have a problem. I feel attracted to the same sex..." And he cried bitterly.

For me it was an enormous shock. I had never seriously thought about homosexuality as a real possibility in my life, but then I found myself standing in front of my beloved son, crying about the fact I never thought it could be possible.

So what? In a few seconds I had to decide what to do. And it was the right thing: Calm down! He is alive. He is sad about the situation but he told me the truth. He is prepared to share his life with me.

And this was a deep relief. In just a few seconds of my life I turned my thinking and values and priorities upside-down – today I am so happy I reacted this way.

I can't stress this enough. Even if your child is shouting this



information at you, stay relaxed. Listen in a calm manner and acknowledge that you're doing so with a nod here and an "OK" there.

They may feel like they've failed in some way for relieving the burden off their shoulders – so rather than concentrating on specific clues, try connecting on an emotional level.

Have you told anybody else? This is also the question that bothers parents when their child is coming out. It is very likely you're not the first person your child confided in. Often an LGBT+ child will try to gauge your reaction by telling others. They might not want to disappoint, upset or shock you, so they turn to others for advice on how to approach telling you.

Asking this question is a good thing. It gives you an idea of how open he/she is, especially if your child doesn't want to reveal it to anyone else yet. An LGBT+ person will spend the rest of his/her life coming out to someone – I experienced many coming outs that went badly and this person is trying to find another opportunity to coming out and seek to talk it over – he/she is trying to find out what went wrong last time and is looking for the better way. The understanding and support of parents in this situation is very valuable and irreplaceable.

These 14 years were not always easy and positive but we made it together as a family. My husband, my older son, all aunts and uncles, the community that was also very involved in the process. Coming out is not always easy but it is the only right way. It gives everybody the opportunity to stay human and to react in a very natural way.

STORY 16

I've written this letter to you to explain my situation

'Marta', SPAIN

1. What was your feeling when hearing the news?

We were more or less a traditional family, with the funny peculiarity of being usually making up stories in order to explain why the keys always get lost or why the clocks never show the time you said you arrived home last night.....

One day my twenty year old son called me to his room and said "*Mam I realize that I've always been a woman, I've written this letter to you to explain my situation*". It sounded unbelievable to me. I was on the point of saying "*Please stop this joke, it is just not funny*" when I organised that he was serious. He was so afraid of being rejected that his eyes were almost crying. I embraced him saying "*I don't understand anything at all, but be sure that I love you in any circumstances*"

I was really confused; I couldn't stop wondering how was it possible that the son I had delivered became a woman? Two contradictory feelings collapsed in my mind. On the one hand I thought that as I had never noticed anything during the twenty years of his life, I should have been the silliest mother in the world and on the other hand, my thought was that not being so silly, if I hadn't organised anything, it was simply because it would have been nonsense.

2. What were your fears?

Once I began to believe it, I needed to know what a transition means in all the aspects: medical, psychological, social..., I was scared of the damages it could cause to his health: secondary effects of the hormone



therapy and risky surgery. I questioned what could happen if he changed his mind after having transitioned.

I was worried about social rejection and I doubted whether he could live a normal life. I was afraid about the effects on the whole family. We made a big effort to respect each one's character and point of view. Despite the differences, my husband has been a strong support to our daughter, and me during all this period. But it was not easy to manage with the different process, rhythm of acceptance and commitment to LGBT issues.

3. What do you feel now?

Five years have passed and the transition is happily finished. My daughter is studying at University and working, she has a lot of friends and the standard life of a young woman. I'm helping other parents in overcoming the transition of their sons and daughters and helping sons and daughters to cope with their parent's difficulties.

Nowadays we always refer to her in the feminine, even when we spoke about her childhood. It is difficult for me to say that I have a trans daughter, as I consider her a plain woman. Considering herself a real woman, my daughter dislikes explaining that she is a trans woman. That is the reason why I'm using a nom de plume. Nevertheless, to be honest, I'm afraid it may mean coming inside a second closet. The first coming out is telling out your true gender identity, the second closet appears when you are reluctant to say that you have made a transition, as you are afraid of being rejected.

STORY 17

There is a new light inside each of us

Carlo Terriaca, ITALY

We were in the kitchen, the three of us, some twelve years ago, one of the first days of January. He was sitting in front of us. We had been worried for some days because he was upset and we didn't know why. Many questions had been asked with no answer.

Suddenly he took a deep breath and said *"I have to tell you something, at last I have understood who I am, now I can give a name to that: I am homosexual"*.

The first words were my wife's, she said : *"I knew it. My hope is that you might meet a person who loves you and whom you love the way your dad and I love each other"*.

"I knew" – said Paola. Indeed we've never talked about this, nor had we shared suspicions or troubles. But she knew, all the same, like mothers often do.

I was shocked by those words *"Now I can give a name to that"*. At that time he was 24. Putting my hand on his shoulder I asked myself: *"Where was I during his adolescence?"* Then two thoughts occurred to me: For no reason would I ever allow losing this son of mine and I had to protect my love for him. But I had to work on myself. I needed help.

The next day there was an amazing blue sky and the sun shone over Rome. Coming back from the school my wife told me that she had been looking up several times, the sun was shining but she was sad: she thought that our son will never have children of his own.

Then several months passed and each day there were words between

me and my wife, sometimes they were so few, sometimes they were linked to each other in a previous conversation.

Were we guilty for that? During my sleepless nights I often thought about his childhood remembering a reproach, a quarrel, some particular moments that may have overshadowed my parenthood.

After two years we told our relatives, we spoke to our friends after watching a movie all together.

At that time a friend of my son, a girl, made her coming out and her parents were very harsh with her. She used to come to our house and cry. Paola was moved and as she had known of Agedo, she decided to join the Association to give a helping hand. I joined in all the same but this time, I must confess, to give a helping hand.

It was great to break our loneliness, sharing hugs with other parents. We were very few at that time, now we are so many both in Rome and in the other seats of the Association in many other cities of Italy.

Decidedly, as I said in a poem I wrote after joining Agedo, there is a new light inside each of us. We make a point of trying to share it with as many people as we can.

STORY 18

“Mom, Pawel wants to tell you something... He’s gay”

Marzenna Latawiec, POLAND

It’s been many years ago. My eldest son, Kamil, had outed the middle one: “*Mom, Pawel wants to tell you something... He’s gay*” I asked “*Is it so?*” “*Yes.*” answered Pawel quietly. “*But are you sure?*” “*Yes*” repeated my son quietly and went to his room followed by me. I said “*You’re toast!*” (meaning it’s going to be an uphill struggle for him) but I embraced him and hugged him. I felt sad. I felt that not all the doors will open for him and there will always be a chance of meeting someone who will slam these doors in front of his face. But I truly had no idea what homophobia was back then. I thought it’s just a common dislike of a group of people seeming too different, based on clichés and that it’s rather uneducated people without much self-reflection, who copy those clichés, adopting them as their “opinions”.

A few years later my youngest son, Stas, came out. He wanted to visit a boy from Sweden whom he had met at a Pride in Warsaw and he had no clue how to communicate it to me. We were just discussing summer holidays plans and at some point he said it “*You know, mom, I think I’m gay*” I asked “*What do you mean you think you’re gay?*” “*Well, I am gay*” he said. I laughed, hugged him but deep within my soul I felt his life would be an uphill struggle too.

Two years later, on New Year’s Eve, Stas had been attacked while holding his boyfriend’s hand on their way home. Even though I was shocked by the whole incident, it still had not educated me enough on what homophobia really was, because the people who attacked them were fitting the description of a somewhat primitive person, to whom I

limited this kind of behaviour.

Only when I told this story, did I realize the reaction of “normal” people who beforehand I had found progressive and wise, had opened my eyes. Homophobia is everything I thought it was but also something much bigger, deeper and more dangerous. It’s a prejudice. A state, which can’t be analyzed logically, cutting out access to any empathy and occurs among not only simple but also well-educated individuals. Apparently my view on people had been very idealistic till then.

This incident thought me also that homophobia does not exist in Polish law, so it can’t be accounted as a hate crime. As Stas suggested, I joined Akademia Zaangazowanego Rodzica (an association of an involved parent) to find out more about our legal system and the ways to change it. I have stayed in the organisation for 4 years. I realised the list of injustice touching LGBTQIA people is huge - especially in my country - we are still at the very bottom of the ILGA index.

Today, I am a part of three LGBTQIA ally organisations. My country is governed by a far right populist party, ‘winking’ at the far right electorate. Allowing hate speech towards all the minorities is a norm. In my opinion along with the changes in the legislation, it’s crucial to work in a positive way, towards fundamental changes in the social mentality, because only such changes can guarantee the law would last. It is definitely a mission tailored for a mother of two gay men!

STORY 19

We kept it secret

Galina, UKRAINE

Again and again I think where to start...My dear son, we had been waiting for so long and once he was born both my husband and me lost ourselves in our overwhelming parental love. We spoiled him and were ready to do anything for him. When our son was two years old, doctors diagnosed him with a slight form of infantile cerebral paralysis. We spent so much time going to different health centers, looking for new doctors and ways of treatment. Of course, we have seen many horrible cases of other kids. Even after all this, our son remained with a limp. So, from the very beginning our boy was different from his peers, and what was normal and easy for them, always came with additional obstacles, for our son. We saw it but it never really mattered, we did our best to help him. Therefore, that his behavior was different from that of his friends or peers also seemed natural to us. This is why I did not take it seriously when my 15-year-old son told me he was gay. Of course, I thought, silly things teenagers come up with, it must be trendy now, let’s wait until he changes his mind and gets obsessed with something else. For some time, we kept it secret between my son and me. Some time later his father found out and also thought it was kind of a joke.

A shock came with revelation when his boyfriend, the man our son loved and with whom he lived in a rented flat, broke up with him (while we believed our son shared a flat with a girl!). Tragedy in our son’s life took place in front of our very eyes. Of course, we took him back home and tried to show support. Yet since then, the wave of panic and pain had been growing inside of me. I had all those typical thoughts: what is he going to do, would he be alone, and what about AIDS, what about

grandchildren, what went wrong, where did I make a mistake? And there were all those questions from people, like does he have a girlfriend? Why is he not getting married? Obviously, I prayed and prayed, and tried to talk to him, to read some materials. I also hoped the things would become “normal” by themselves. They never did. It became harder and harder to cope with it and I often found myself crying desperately once I was left alone.

Soon our son started dating a new boyfriend, a guy who lived next door. We accepted it and tried to help them whenever we could. Although we did not approve of the choice of our son, we observed their love, how gentle and caring they were with each other, and it kept us calm. Slowly, I started telling the truth to our friends and relatives. Not to everyone, of course, but I told those I trusted. By that time, I was very tired of standard questions. It helped me, but my son said softly to me: “Mom, why do you tell others without asking me?”. I was ashamed, because I was only thinking about my own feelings, but what about his?! Yet on the other hand, I saw that this outing I made to my son changed nothing in our relations with the family, with our friends, people we loved and respected. Their attitude remained the same and now when everything was open and I did not have to hide, it became much easier for me to bear the pain I shared with the others.

But the most important thing for me, a mother of a gay son, happened three years ago, when I discovered Parents’ Initiative TERGO and asked permission to join them. And all mothers in this organization who had similar experiences and went through the same things embraced me, listened to me, cried with me, invited me to attend meetings and events. I did not even understand when this happened: somehow the pain cured itself for a short time, the shame disappeared and the relations in the family changed. At first I was afraid to take part in open events, take pictures or to give interviews. But also this fear has left, and I now without hesitation attend March of Equality in Kyiv and

meetings in public. During these three years I have changed a lot, and my friends and family have seen it. But most importantly, there have been good changes in my son’s life. He now has a new interesting job. It’s been more than a year since he met his true love, his partner who is intelligent and caring. Friends of my boy (who are gays and lesbians, and bisexuals) like to meet me.

Sometimes I think that my child’s homosexuality has drastically changed my life. Since joining the community of parents who have LGBT children, I have met so many talented, clever and incredibly interesting people I have never met before in my life! Thanks to TERGO I visited different countries and different cities of Ukraine. Now I am ready to answer difficult questions. Now I have confidence and I am happy that I have grown to be a professional mother of a gay son.

Metro station

Salih, TURKEY

I had a son after having two girls, I was the happiest father in the world. We worked so hard for the education of our kids: Courses, schools, exams, school reports... It was as if we had started our education together once again, together we prepared for the exams, together we stressed, and together we froze due to the cold weather in the morning. We woke up before the dawn in order for our children to have a nice breakfast. We wanted our children to win the best schools. My eldest daughter got into a law school, my younger daughter got into an engineering faculty. We were over the moon.

When her sisters left the house for college, my son had just started high school. From now on we wanted to spend more time with him. I used to wait for him in front of the course building inside the car so that he wouldn't get wet but he would scold me "Why did you come so far?". Then he would walk home in the rain. He would spend extra effort so that he wouldn't encounter any of his friends while we were outside. He would change his path if he saw one of his friends coming. Due to the school rules his hair had to be always short but he always said that he was curious how his hair would look if it was long and that he will grow it longer when he got into university, just like his sisters' hair. When one of her high school teachers consistently hinted that he wanted to sit with girls, I always thought "That's natural, he grew up with his sisters". When he finished high school, he got into the interpreter-translator faculty of one of the long-established Universities in Istanbul. We achieved our goal. Finally, all of our three kids were in college. Yet our minds were always filled with them because they had never been

outside of Istanbul (except on school trips).

Until our last child left the house I didn't know that I was so keen on my children. Each morning, I woke up with a feeling of emptiness, each night I felt as if something was pressing on my heart. All these years, I had never organised that I was such an emotional person. During the holidays we eagerly waited for them.

I began to suspect something when my son who was a sophomore in college called us one day and said "Dad, I really missed you. I am really bored at the dormitory anyway. Can you pick me up? I don't want to stay here with my boyfriends. There is something that I want to talk with you at the weekend." He hadn't been home for a long time. When I came across him at the bus station he had long hair, for the first time he also let his beard grow. I remember because I couldn't wait until my wife saw my handsome son.

The next morning after breakfast when he said "Dad I have to talk to you", my suspicions grew. What could our son want to talk to us about? What could our son, whom we knew for so

many years, tell us that we didn't know already? I was worried and I wasn't sure if I wanted to hear what he would say. Finally, he was the first to speak "Dad, first I will explain to you some terms". Then he started to explain to us terms about LGBTI+, which in future we would become familiar with at LI'STAG. I listened to him without saying anything. He went on to explain. In between, my wife and I would catch each other's eyes. I saw that her eyes had the same doubts which I had. "I want you to see me as I am, dad I am a transgender woman" We were both frozen, we looked each other in the eyes, we both couldn't talk. This was impossible for us to accept, he was our son for 20 years. "How come?" I said. Out of nowhere, our son slipped away



from our hands. "I thought about a lot of different things in order to not upset you but I didn't want to leave you, dad." he said. We were both crying when he said "Can you love me as I am? I love you the way you are."

In the hopes that he would heal I went to doctors as fast as I could, without the knowledge of my son. But in the end, I learned that this came from birth and there was nothing to heal because he wasn't sick. With the guidance of our child, we called LI' STAG and asked: "What can we do, and are there more people like this?" Then CETAD supported us. We started going to Istanbul more often and we stayed with our kids. We shared this with his sisters too. Their first reaction was just like ours "This cannot be, don't we know our brother for 20 years? Something like this is impossible, we would have noticed." When we as the parents stood by our son proudly, first his sisters then everyone we opened up to accepting him the way he is.

His graduation was close. I preferred that he wore pants but he went to look for dresses saying that he wanted to wear a dress for the first time. However, he wasn't comfortable in the stores so he tried each of his sisters' dresses at the house. Then he picked one and went to graduation in that dress.

One day, we got out so that we would go to Kadıköy. He was going to meet a friend and I would go back to the city. His red lipstick looked so good with his long dark hair. We walked together without looking at each other. Sometimes like a father to son, sometimes like a father to daughter, sometimes like a stranger to stranger but we were always heart to heart, never separate. Maybe we both wanted the same thing, walking in these streets without worry, breathing without worry, walking without worrying about the people looking at us... As we arrived at the metro station the number of people around us increased.

We continued without caring about the looks but in the end, my kid, who was tired of all those looks, wanted to get in my arms. Until that day my son had never got into my arm. Was he completely turning into a girl, it was impossible for me to accept that. Unknowingly, I pulled my arm back. He looked at me with dead eyes, saying nothing he turned back. I followed him with my eyes without blinking. His long hair, thin body moved fast, soon she disappeared in the crowd.

We didn't see each other after that, I went to my hometown. After that, I received a text message: "Did you ever think, why you are ashamed but I am not? "Since my childhood you psychologically abused me, didn't take my ideas seriously, didn't listen to me... How did I get so confident by my own effort, right? Because you are a dad who wants their kid to obey you. They can't have their own ideas. Whenever we fought, you always asked a third person "Who was right?". As if you didn't know the answer of that person. Of course, you are the boss, of course, they will think you are right. To this day you have always thought that you were right. I actually feel sorry for you... I don't know where you place yourself but I have the power to overcome your ideas. You and your advocates have played with my confidence, my selfness. Finally, together you turned me into the disgrace of the family. From now on keep your ideas to yourself. If I were you I would also be ashamed but not because of my child, rather because I don't understand my child. Dad, I don't expect you to understand any of your mistakes anymore".

I hid the message like a secret for days, I didn't even tell my wife anything. Whenever it came to my mind I read the letter, each time I read it I cried because I learned from various doctors and CETAD educations that my kid was born this way and there was nothing that he could do. This message taught me a lot of things. One day during one of LI' STAG's storytelling meeting I read the message out loud. Other

people also knew the story, not just me and him.

Nowadays we are better. With LI`STAG and CETAD we have seen that we are not alone. As a matter of fact, at our child's graduation ceremony, there were also people that we met at CETAD - I want to thank them for their support. Yes, we are better as a family, her sisters, who at first had trouble accepting the situation, even bought her a makeup bag. We all walk together: my wife, my girls, and I. I take her picture as she takes firm steps towards the metro station.

Translation: *Arda Enfiyeci*

From "Gökkuşağından Hikayeler" (October/2018) story compilation book of LISTAG families in Turkey.

STORY 21

Did you ever...?

Louisa Grech, MALTA

Did you ever feel lost and insecure, not knowing where you are going or what you are doing?

Did you ever feel confused and anxious, trusting no one, afraid to speak because you will be judged? Did you ever feel as if your heart was being broken into a thousand million pieces that could never be put together again, sobbing and yearning to scream because of the untold pain you are going through?

Did you ever feel alone, not knowing who to turn to?

Did you ever need to speak out, but the words stuck solidly in your throat?

I have!

Did you ever find yourself in a reality that was worse than your greatest nightmare, and yet knowing that this reality is here to stay and you can do nothing to change it?

Did you ever find that there is no way that you can travel the road of this reality alone, and then found solace in someone?

Did you ever find out that you were thrust into a battle that will never end? A battle with yourself, and a battle against the world that is so full of prejudice and intolerance, a world whose actions and words are cruel and hurtful, a world which finds it extremely difficult to accept diversity.

I have!

When I learnt that my son was gay, all these feelings came to haunt me and taunt me! Would I stop loving him? Never! Yet having experienced the harshness of this world, I feared for his safety, for his



life! I was afraid that others might make his life a living hell. I knew that he had been teased and bullied during his school years, and that, in spite of all the legislation that had since then been passed, people were still biased. The rampant belief that being gay is a choice. The erroneous belief that LGBTIQ persons are promiscuous and/or paedophiles. And so many other mistaken ideas being spread around and so much hatred ignited against this community. When will it ever stop!

So yes, I have had these feelings!

It has been a long journey; I was long suspicious about my son being gay, but I did not want to accept it. Hoping against hope that I was wrong in my assumptions. Believing or wishing that things will turn out differently. Never getting the experience of a 'coming out' with my son, but rather having to ask him, point blank, quite a few years down the line, whether he could kindly let me know if he was gay! And the answer, quite nonchalantly, "*I thought you knew!*"

Could I ever stop loving this son of mine? Not in a million years, not ever! A kind and caring soul, sometimes infuriating, but always loving! A man of many talents, a man of sound values. When he decided to go live, study and work abroad, it was heart wrenching but I knew he needed the space to grow, to learn and to expand his horizons.

It took my husband and me quite a while to pluck up the courage to share this experience with family members and even close friends. We did encounter some setbacks, much as we had expected, but nothing untoward. Slowly but surely, the love within the family brought everyone on board.

My son put down his roots in Manchester and he has been very happy there. Finding his soul mate in that city was the cherry on the cake. He not only found a place he loved but also a person to share it with. When we met his partner, we could see that they loved and respected each other and that life was good to them. They made each other

happy. We met our future in-laws and were overjoyed to get to know them. We clicked instantly and got on like a house on fire. We found that we shared so many of the same values and qualities in life, and we were over the moon that our sons had found love in each other. Earlier this year, our sons tied the knot. And, wow, what a wedding! It was a small wedding, just family and friends. The whole thing, ceremony and reception, were totally magical! I couldn't have wished for anything better!

During that time of turmoil in our lives, while we were trying to come to terms with this new reality, we sought and found a tremendous amount of solidarity from DRACHMA Parents, a support group set up by parents of LGBTIQ persons to help other parents find a safe space where they can talk and pray and share their experiences and fears and joys. It has been a wonderful journey where we have found peace and joy in our lives and where we are working to raise awareness and continue to support other parents.

Our belief in a loving and caring God has helped us incredibly to move forward and to be able to share our experience with others. We know that GOD LOVES! He does not exclude anyone from His love! He created each and every one of us in His image and likeness and He loves us all unconditionally! And this is the undeniable truth!

If you are happy, I am happy

Züleyha, TURKEY

When my boy was going to elementary school, he developed warts in his hands. There were a lot of them and he was uncomfortable with them, he was ashamed. He wanted to hide his hands in his pocket but I always held his hand when I brought him to school and when I picked him up from school. Although he wanted to pull his hand, I held it firmly because I had him at an early age, we were growing together and I knew that I wouldn't be able to let go of this hand, the hand which I couldn't let go when he was little, for my whole life.

We were like friends, we could talk about our problems. Until high school... I didn't know back then but my boy had differences. When my boy started high school, the mother of a close friend of his came to my workplace and said that my boy had some issues, she said "He has different behaviors and I think he has a boyfriend" It felt as if I was shot in the head because I didn't spot anything similar to that. Of course, I was sad, I got pissed. I decided to talk to him when I went home after work and I said to him "Is this true? We can overcome any problem together just like the ones we overcame before" But he cried and said that this was a misunderstanding. I chose to believe him. We continued our classic happy lives.

Because I had never gone to University, it was really important for me that he did. When he finished the first year of University, coincidentally, I came across an Internet chat that he had with another boy. This was not the chat between two friends but rather one of two

lovers. It felt once again as if I was shot in the head, there was nowhere to run anymore. This time I was scared to talk because he was a University student, living in another city. I was scared that he wouldn't return but I had no choice to face him about the truth. "Yes mom it is true, there is no solution to it, I have been like this since I have known myself", he said but I promised to him that there was a way to solve this situation. Although my boy cryingly said that it was impossible to solve, I thought that we could solve it or I secretly hoped that he denied the whole thing again but he didn't. I was sad and I was once again hospitalized. I tried to talk to him nicely; we argued too, I mistreated him because I was uninformed. Although I was a mother who usually loved reading I knew nothing about this subject. At that time because of my lack of knowledge both me and my boy suffered a lot. One day my boy came up to me and said "I no longer want to make you sad, I'm leaving the house" This was devastating because he was my whole world. I tried to stop him from leaving, but I couldn't. After 1.5 years, a time period, which was really tough for me, he said that he wanted to talk to me. When he came I hugged him and inhaled his smell. I had really missed him. He said that he was living in Istanbul and that he couldn't do it without me so he invited me to his house. To him, I responded "Of course I will come, I am always by your side you shouldn't forget that because I love you a lot. You are my whole world" and we started seeing each other once again. But my boy was still uncomfortable around me. One day when he came up to me and said "I did something", I don't know how but I understood what happened. I thought my boy was homosexual but really she was a transgender woman. She had breast implants. She was crying when she told me this but I didn't cry. I acted strongly because if I didn't, I could have lost my kid once again. I hugged her and said, "If you are happy, I am happy". Since then my kid really became happy, she was more comfortable, yet I wasn't. I knew nothing. I didn't know how I would deal with the



situation. In one of the hospitals that I went to, the doctors told me about a place for mothers and families like me. Back then I didn't know what "transgender" meant so I wrote "mothers of homosexuals" to the Internet in order to find this place. There I came across LI' STAG. I called it and had a chat with a mother. She told me about the CETAD meeting. I attended the meeting. At the meeting, I couldn't even say, "My boy is transgender." because I didn't know what that meant. When I started talking with the other mothers who were going through the same thing I learned that this wasn't a fad, it wasn't something you could solve, it had nothing do to with being a wannabe rather it came from birth. I felt more encouraged after each meeting. When my kid was coming home I used to hope that my neighbours' doors were shut because I didn't want them to see my kid but now I want all of them to see my kid because my kid did nothing to be ashamed of, she harassed no one. Allah made her this way, it came from birth and I had to be at her side. I wanted to see her stronger because unfortunately, my kid was in the excluded part of society.

Let me tell you a bad memory. While we were looking for an apartment we struggled a lot. The owner of the house was homophobic, due to that I rented the place. After cleaning the place we were having dinner, we hadn't even settled in. The owner of the house called and said that he wanted to come. My kid left the dinner table because if the owner saw her he would realize the situation. This stuck in my gizzard. Then I started questioning myself - Why was I not telling people about this without being ashamed? I decided to spend my time fighting for LGBT+ rights. I started to go to LI' STAG meetings each week. Now our relationship with my kid is pretty good. Now everywhere I can call my kid "my daughter". Just as it is with her, I am also in good relations with her friends and other people like her.

Now I am here with LI' STAG. I want to do as much as possible because I have been away from my kid for 1.5 years. Still to this day I don't know what happened to her during this time. Now I want to reach as many families as I can and tell them "Whoever your kid is; even if he wears a skirt, wears pants, has long hair, has short hair, does make-up, whatever he does, when you hug and smell him; you will realize that his smell never changes. Be by your kids' side. Just love them" My mother was also keen on my kid. I told her about the situation and made her go to the CETAD meeting. There when I heard my mother say, "I now love my grandchild more than I used to." I felt so happy... Because in reality, my kid didn't change. Now when I see someone looking at my daughter while we are walking arm in arm I look at her eyes even more. But the most important thing is, the person I was before learning about her sexual identity and who I am right now, are as different as chalk and cheese. I have been enlightened, I have changed. We no longer have masks, we are happier, we are better and we have a stronger bond.

Translation: *Arda Enfiyeci*

From "Gökkuşağından Hikayeler" (October/2018)
story compilation book of LISTAG families in Turkey.

STORY 23

On coming-outs and relationship

Liesma Ose, LATVIA

I remember myself as a young Latvian educator, standing in front of a flipchart with a drawing containing three words: TEACHER CO-OPERATION STUDENT. It was during my first international workshop on prospects of civic education. I tried to explain myself in poor and clumsy English, but my sense of conviction was very high. The main point was – no one in the centre, but what was central is – cooperation, what we do and experience. I believed in non – centrism in education, and I believed in productive relationships – in life as such. It was in 1996.

I still do. In general, I am a lucky one: I have experience of enriching and happy relationships in my family, with my parents, with my partners. As a kid, I was loved and completely spoiled by my loving father.

So, potentially this high love-load has helped me in complicated situations such as this story regarding my daughter's and my personal coming-outs.

It is probably the right place to mention that I have experience of two marriages and from the first one, I have two fantastic – bright, sincere, beautiful and happy – children. Linda and Edgars.

Linda is 32, she is a scientist and queer. In relationships, I guess, Linda prefers love, respect, sincerity, and attraction over masculinity or femininity. And she is an extremely lovable person.

She is not living in Latvia. Well, for many reasons, but I believe queerness is among them. She came out from the closet – 'mom, I'm with Stine' – in summer 2008. Initially I was shocked and speechless

... for a while. And not kind enough to my daughter, I must admit, and I am sorry about it still. Linda, would you forgive me, please?

Then thoughts like ... 'when you tolerate this your children will be next'...run through my head. Here it's worthwhile to mention – I worked as a human rights program director in an international foundation, and LGBTI advocacy was among my professional duties. In addition, I had several gay people among my stakeholders and friends. And, above all, I believed in their cause.

However, when this cause happened to be very personal, my reaction changed. So, I thought, now it is happening to me. And my daughter, nobody else but her, will experience all the 'rainbow' of socially shared negative attitudes towards those 'different' in terms of sexual choices: intolerance, condemnation, distance. But, I must admit, at the end of the day, it was exactly my professional positive experience that has helped me to deal with this personal confusion. Plus, sensitive support from my Buddhism – oriented husband, who just calmed me down with; 'do not go crazy like this, please. What matters here, is Linda's happiness. If she is happy, that's fine'.

Other reactions in the family were extremely diverse: my son was supportive and understanding from the first moment, and still is. Edgars, you are amazing! My mom painful experience to her and to all of us, especially Linda. She refused to talk to us, laid down and threatened to die. She feels ashamed of her friends still and tells no one. And is sad about not having grandkids.

My coming out as a mother of someone queer went rather slowly and with some sense of confused feelings, regardless of the open and trusting organizational environment in the foundation where I used to

work. I felt unsafe and different, when my colleagues shared the stories of their grown-up children. Then, almost a year after Linda came out to the family, I came out in front of my colleagues. When asked, is Linda in a kind of relationship, I said, 'yes, she lives with a girl.' This phrase had an absolutely easing effect. Of course, my colleagues were totally fine with the fact that the sexual orientation of my two kids differ.

It was 2009 back then. If you ask me whether I have come out in my new job, current one as administrator in higher education, my answer is no. By no means! I am ready, but my colleagues are not. It is what I experience in everyday professional interactions and by immersion in the organizational culture as such.

And this is tricky, because my video on the same matter of my 'coming out' here, was broadcasted on national radio and via internet television.

You may ask me what have I learned being a mother of a queer daughter. By the way, I am still learning from her: on how to enjoy a little happy moment of life, on how to let go. And I have learnt that coming out is a never-ending story, because this challenge will face you in every new social set-up, both personal and professional.

Do I have any advice to my fellow parents? Yes, I have. Facing the difference of sexual orientation of your kids, you have only two options: to accept it or to lose them forever. No other way.

STORY 24

We try to understand the situation

Olena, UKRAINE

In 2011, my daughter came out to me telling about her desire to live her life as a man. She felt that way. I did not understand this and did not accept it. Our relationship worsened. My daughter dropped out of school, went to another city and then, moved to Kyiv. We rarely saw each other; and when we did the meetings were not enjoyable for either of us.

I do not know how long this cold undeclared war would have lasted in our small family, but a real war came to our country. Suddenly, explosions of shells and the whistling of bullets became my everyday reality. The war took lives of people I knew, it violated the usual way of life, brought pain and suffering from unexpected, and unjust losses. But this war made me understand that on this earth I had my only child and, whatever she was, I loved her and did not want to lose her. And I organised that even if the whole world were against my child, I would then become that home front, where she can feel safe.

Just think about it. We wait for our child for nine months, we try to find out who will be born, hope for a destiny for her or for him that will be better than ours - everything is so beautiful in our dreams. And then comes the day when our child confesses that he is gay or that (s)he has unconventional gender identity! It seems to us that the whole world has just collapsed, all our hopes and expectations have just turned to dust. We cry, we try to do something, do not know whom to talk to, we close ourselves in, we look for salvation in prayers, clever books, we blame ourselves for what happened. We do not know where to go with our misfortune. Sometimes we even simply turn away from it, we stop

communicating, thinking that it's our punishment for something. Then we try to understand the situation, we are looking for books, we goggle, we go to a psychologist, a psychiatrist. I am not an exception; it is simple, in my life one of the worst troubles happened - war. This is what helped me to understand that life, no matter what, is the most important value. Our children are not our property, they have their own way, their own destiny, and all we can do is just love, support and believe in them.

My child, who has now become my son, advised me to contact the organization of parents who have LGBT children. And I am grateful to fate that I, after all, came to TERGO. It was not easy. I could not even explain why I tried to find a thousand reasons not to go there today, maybe tomorrow. I am grateful that in my life a meeting with TERGO took place, our trainings, meetings gave me support, understanding that something that happened to my child is not a perversion, it is natural. I was not only understood and supported. There, I seemed to be in a big family, friendly and loving. Now my son and I have a new life and a new home!

STORY 25

How do you feel when you're the mother of a gay man?

Shpresa Kodra, ALBANIA

My message to everyone!

Over the years I have known many people from the LGBTI community – sincere people who are not afraid to say what they want and what they feel. I have known many parents facing dilemmas, unable to understand what is happening with their son or daughter. They have told me that they have often thought of giving an end to their life or just close their eyes, to try and forget what they see wishing it were not true. Of course, I really feel sorry for the parents, but I have a bigger regret for what happens to their children. In most of the cases such youngsters become “jugglers” of their lives by appearing to their family members as different persons. Thus, just to please their parents, they distort their true selves little by little and in many cases, they risk that this lifestyle becomes their everyday reality.

I've often wondered when it was that I organised that my son Arber was actually “different” from others. I have tried to give the right answer many times, until I organised that I had always known and I had felt that Arber was special. I am not a professional, nor a prominent speaker. I had never spoken before and I had not spoken to anyone about my son's inclinations. Although emotions had put me down at that moment, the strength to support my son Arber, still keeps me here. It is not easy to convince ourselves about reality, it is not easy to tell yourself that yes, you have a gay son. It is difficult ... it was. As a child Arber was so lovely and sweet, always connected to me and incredibly delicate and gentle. Today I say to myself that if I had the information I



have now, then I would have organised my son was gay since as a child, his delicate and almost perfect being was so obvious in everything. I would have probably saved myself and especially Arber, some intense suffering during his adolescence.

I was unprepared for what was happening to Arber. He began to retreat inside his shell and not communicate at all about what he was going through. Arber, once very strongly connected to me, was slowly becoming foreign and distant. The long nights when Arber was out of the house and the questions of my husband about him, together with my child's strong signs of nervousness had begun. In the beginning, whatever was happening to Arber, I blamed society for having shoved him astray and taught him to resort to alcohol. At that time Arber was camouflaging things by bringing home also female friends. In such a chaotic situation I decided to transcend any ethical code and dig through Arber's items, until one day I found the answer in his trouser pocket. It was drugs.

But why did such a guy need to get drugged? Now began one of the darkest and most painful periods for my family. Thus, the night services began, the guard of Arber, following him every step wherever he was going, every detail that will help me understand how to manage the situation. Little by little I began to understand what was happening. I began to realize that drugs were only one of the reasons and not the main factor of my son's suffering. Then I stopped saying anything to my husband fearing that he may know what was happening and I started following my son in the streets of Tirana. You cannot imagine the suffering and humiliation I felt when I walked all alone in the dark streets of Tirana, streets without illumination, followed by the ironizing jokes of the taxi drivers. It was really painful when I failed to find my son, when I had not been able to follow him on time and he just got out of my sight. Then I used to go back home in tears, with a heart that would explode from resenting every moment. I was waiting for him until morning in his room filled with large posters of half-naked

women, and teddy bears. It seemed like I entered the room of someone who was living between two worlds. We would often fight in the morning for my having entered his room. I was finally expelled from his room. It was useless to sit close to the door and wait for him to talk to me. When he wanted to go out I tried being authoritarian by asking him where he was going but I would always lose the argument and he would leave by leaving behind some broken furniture. One of those regular nights out, it happened that we met near the neighborhood and I got into his car and I began asking such questions as: "Why do you use drugs? Why do you destroy yourself? What's so big and bad that makes you do such a thing to yourself and kill yourself? It was the first time that my son after all that time looked me in the eyes. - You know! - he said. You know! Normally I knew. I had already understood what was destroying my son. I told him that I knew, but I wanted to hear it from him. I wanted him to say it to me. I remember that we went somewhere near Tirana Lake, in the midst of darkness and there he confessed to me his real feelings. Using drugs was the only way to approach the Albanian male models, strong, and agile. It was the night when I cried a lot with my son.

Today I am surrendered to the actual reality: the reality of my son being gay and the use of drugs to kill this reality; I chose my son. It was during the long period of Arber's recovery, my presence in almost every hour of the day with the purpose that he would not fall into the arms of some other fate.

I'm happy that I had the opportunity to know my son. I am happy that my son had the courage to find his own way and I am proud of what my son is doing. Arber and all the other boys and girls whom I have had the opportunity to know have nothing to be shameful about. They do not have any bad characteristics. They are our children, the ones we brought to life that God or something else had decided for them, to be special because they love in their own way. I am proud of my son because he has not disappointed me. I'm proud because everything he has achieved and will achieve is because of his hard work and good will.

I am also proud for the work he does, his dedication and sincerity every single day of his life. And today I can say that if I had had some more information, or had I admitted what I knew a little earlier, my son would not have suffered as much as he did. But it was meant to be like this, I had to know my son through suffering, and it is important that everything went well. I do not know what advice to give to other parents about their children, but if they show some care, some more attention to their children's silence. Instead of preconceived judgments, just think, they are our sons and daughters! Listen to them, because they are trying to talk to you every moment through their silence. What "destroys" your children are neither the sexual orientation, nor being gay, but the great pressure and great fear of prejudice from family, friends, society in general. And either way, it is not the sexual orientation that makes them good or bad. The freedom to live the sexual orientation, the way you have it, allows you to grow and succeed in other areas of life. They are our children and they need us, and they are wonderful!

In May of this year my husband and I received an award from the Annual GALA of the Shelter of LGBTI People in Albania. We got awarded as the most supportive parents in our country. We are so touched about that and we dedicate that to our son. We are happy to be an example of unconditional love.

I do not know how happy a mother can be if their child is gay, but all the cases I know, the parents are angry, frustrated and hostile to their children. I am sure about one thing: each person who is basically different would not like to be so, in order to avoid the daily problems that come from it. I know many non-gay people, who may prefer not to talk about such realities but it is good to talk without necessarily bringing God into these kinds of realities!

STORY 26

For my sumru/tern bird

Neşe Tamer, TURKEY

I wanted to have one more child. First of all, I thought it would be a lifelong companion for my oldest daughter. Then I wanted to have a daughter. I wanted her to have a big heart and know how to receive love and give it away. Then I got spoiled a little bit. Speaking of these things: I wanted her to have black curly hair and green eyes.

Soon I was going to find out that all my wishes had been fulfilled. A miracle had happened. My daughter was born.

After seventeen years, I learned that my daughter was lesbian. At the same time, I also learned that the world was really crashing all around me. I was stuck under a huge wreck. I was blindfolded. I couldn't breathe. The world had stopped. The colours were faded. There was no light. My constant history of living with my child was in ruins. My dreams for the future were destroyed. But today, I was stuck where I was with the horror of what the people would think about us. My daughter was lost. Therefore I, maintaining a large part of my existence through my motherhood, was lost. The bad thing is, I was okay with my condition, and I didn't want to be found.

Another miracle saved me from under this rubble, my daughter. She reached forth and I held her hand. I reached forth and she held mine. The world began to turn again and the colours began to revive. Love was around. She said she was not wrong. I told her she is not alone. She told me that love doesn't have sex or gender. Love was everywhere, for



the ones who know how to find it and be touched by it. In nature, in the mountains she loves so much, in a shooting star in the sky, and for today ... in a girl. It was the love she went after. It didn't matter where and by who it was embodied. As she told me, I wanted to be a part of my daughter's world. I wanted to be my daughter. I was liberated like Tern Bird, who could fly for days without landing anywhere.

Although our story resulted in a happy ending for us, life is not easy for us, nor for our children. Discrimination, marginalization, hate speech and harassment are everywhere. We, as their parents who are afraid of any tiny thing that could harm our children, we continue to fight for our children and with our children. We continue to raise awareness and shout that we are not wrong and alone. "Even if nothing else changes, everything changes if I am changed" said Balzac.

So, are you going to change the world, to discover what might happen?

Translation: *Arda Enfiyeci*

From "Gökkuşağından Hikayeler" (October/2018) story compilation book of LISTAG families in Turkey.

Conclusion

To change the world, we need to act together. We need to organize ourselves effectively. Fifty parents collaborating together and forming one umbrella organization such as ENP, can accomplish much more than what 500 individual parents can ever achieve, each working alone and in isolation. So join us today and register yourself as a full member.

For more information about the
**European Network of
Parents of LGBTI+ Persons**

write to:

info@enparents.org



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