



OCTOBER 11



HUMAN  
RIGHTS  
CAMPAIGN  
FOUNDATION

# RESOURCE GUIDE TO COMING OUT

K. Haring '88

# OCT. 11 IS NATIONAL COMING OUT DAY

Every year on this day, the Human Rights Campaign Foundation sponsors hundreds of gay and lesbian public education events, which thousands of high school and college students participate in.

Isn't it time you join us by coming out to your family and friends? Or, if you've already come out, isn't it time you help others by starting a gay-lesbian student organization? Organizing a gay-lesbian awareness day? Or joining the Human Rights Campaign.

In addition to National Coming Out Day, HRC sponsors the National Coming Out Project, an ongoing project to promote honesty and openness about being lesbian, gay or bisexual on campus, in the workplace and at home. Its public education and outreach programs, such as Coming Out on Campus, open a dialogue with gay and straight Americans and urge gay, lesbian and bisexual people to come out and get involved.

**For more information, contact the Human Rights Campaign's National Coming Out Project at 1-800-866-6263.**

## HRC Foundation Board

Vic Basile, DC, Edith Dee Cofrin, GA, Vincent Fria, PA, James C. Hormel, CA, Ellen Malcolm, DC, Hilary Rosen, MD.



## A MESSAGE FROM ELIZABETH BIRCH EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN

Some of the most difficult and important decisions in the lives of gay, lesbian or bisexual people surround "coming out"—that is, deciding to be honest and open about our sexual orientation. The fact that you are holding this booklet is a sign that you may be questioning your sexual orientation or you know someone who is doing so. This booklet aims to answer some of those questions and refer you to other helpful resources.

Gay people are everywhere, and every day, more of us are deciding to live honestly. This is critically important to our community because the only way we will stop the discrimination we face is to reveal our true selves to our friends, our families and our neighbors. National polls have shown that people who know someone who is lesbian or gay are far more likely to support equal rights for all gay people. So in effect, coming out may be one small step for a gay man or lesbian but it contributes to the giant leap we are making for all gay people, today and in the future.

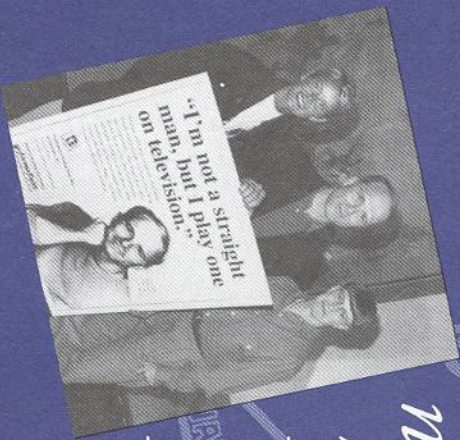
If you are thinking hard about whether and how you should come out, you're probably wondering, "What is this going to do to my life? Will my family accept me, will my friends still like me? How do I know if this is the right thing to do?" These are all valid questions and you are not the first person — nor will you be the last — to struggle with them. But it's my fervent hope that just as the earliest gay activists paved the way for me, today's lesbian, gay and bisexual leaders are helping to make life easier for you.

Let me assure you that while being an openly lesbian, gay or bisexual person in this society isn't easy, it is so much more gratifying than being in the closet. Lying and hiding, worrying that someone will discover your secret, consumes a lot of personal energy and detracts from the quality of a person's life. No one should be denied the opportunity to thrive and flourish as a full human being because his or her sexual orientation is different from that of the majority.

Our community has come a long way in the decades since the rebellion at the Stonewall Inn — which began the modern gay rights movement — but it still has a long way to go. This booklet can't give you all the answers about the coming out process but it will give you some. And then it will point you toward other resources that can help you as you grapple with the life-altering and potentially life-enhancing decision to come out.



Everyone thinks  
they're the only ones  
who have these  
feelings. But that's  
not the truth.



There are  
people who  
came before  
you, and people  
who will come after  
you.

— Candace Gingrich, activist

## INTRODUCTION

Being attracted to someone of the same sex can be frightening — so frightening that you may deny your feelings, or throw yourself into dating the opposite sex, just to prove you are not gay or lesbian.

But then the feelings come up again. You try to put them out of your mind but you can't. Finally, you stop resisting, and in that instant, your world changes. You discover that being with someone of the same sex feels better than being with the opposite sex ever did. But what will this mean for the rest of your life?

Certainly, life is more challenging if you are gay or lesbian. It requires that you develop the courage to honor your own experience of love above anyone else's judgments about it. But you can do it. Millions of people have, and many say it was the best thing they ever did.

In creating this publication, we have talked to some prominent gay men and lesbians about their experiences of coming to terms with their sexual orientation, and coming out to others. Among them: U.S. Congressman Barney Frank, actor Wilson Cruz, and *Essence* magazine Executive Editor Linda Villarosa. We hope you find what they say helpful.

### How Do You Know?

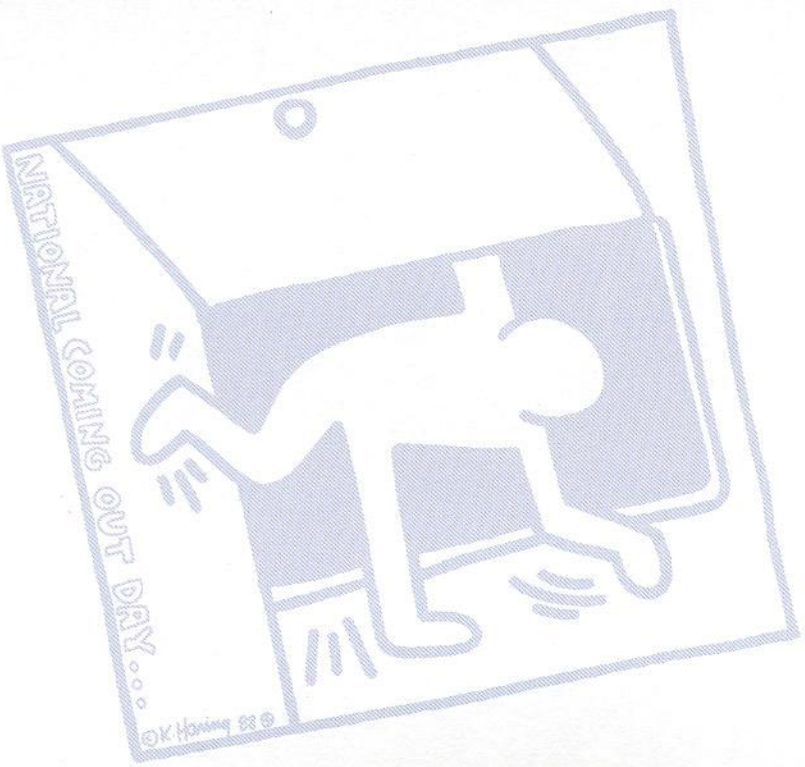
There is no one way people realize that they are attracted to the same sex. Some always know it. Some learn it at puberty. Some figure it out in college. Some recognize it only after getting married to someone of the opposite sex. But whenever the feelings come up, almost everyone wonders: How do I know if I'm *really* gay, lesbian or bisexual?

On the one hand, it's very simple: If your strongest emotional and sexual attractions are to people of the same sex, you're gay or lesbian. If they're equally strong to the same and the opposite sex, you're bisexual.

On the other hand, sexual orientation is confusing because most of us were raised to think of ourselves as heterosexual. Our parents, teachers and our culture told us that some day, we'd meet someone of the opposite sex and get married. No

one ever said we might fall in love with someone of the same sex. That's why we're shocked when it happens.

Unless there's someone gay in your family, you probably never considered the possibility that you yourself might be lesbian or gay. Moreover, you probably have heard many negative stereotypes of gay and lesbian people — but most of these are based on *erroneous* or *inadequate* information; what you need are the facts.



# THE FACTS ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY

No one knows how many people are gay, lesbian or bisexual. The best estimates we currently have indicate that between 3 percent and 6 percent of the population is gay. However, even the most reputable estimates are colored by the fact that many people are afraid or unwilling to be identified as gay or lesbian, even in an anonymous survey. So the true number is probably even higher. But whatever the numbers, the facts are the same:

## 1. Homosexuality is Not a Choice; Homosexuality Chooses You

Some people say that homosexuality is a choice to discourage you from being in a gay or lesbian relationship. But think about it for a minute: Did you *choose* to have feelings of same-sex attraction? Why would you? The fact is: Homosexuality is not a choice any more than being left-handed or having blue eyes or being heterosexual is a choice. It's an orientation, a part of who you are. The choice is in deciding how to live your life.

## 2. Gay People Are Mentally Healthy

In the 1970s, the American Psychological Association and American Psychiatric Association revised their positions on homosexuality. Both determined that homosexuality is not a mental disorder. Nonetheless, some people might try to tell you that you are sick and that you need professional help to "change." There is no scientifically valid evidence that people can change their sexual orientations, although some people do repress it. But because being gay is not a disorder, there is really no reason to try change yourself.

But it's OK to seek help in dealing with the confusing feelings you might be having about your sexual orientation. Coming out is a major life decision and as with reaching any other personal milestone, you might seek professional help through the process. Just remember: The anxiety you are

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feeling is probably the result of family or social prejudice against homosexuality, not homosexuality itself.

## 3. *Being Gay or Lesbian is Natural*

You've probably heard people say that men are "meant" to be with women, and women with men, that being gay or lesbian goes against nature and morality. But if homosexuality were unnatural, why would it occur; generation after generation, despite strong societal prohibitions? The fact is same-sex love has occurred throughout history, in every nation and culture on Earth. It is a natural variation among humans, and if you look hard enough, you'll probably also discover that it has occurred somewhere in your family's history. When people say homosexuality is unnatural, they mean it is against *their preconceived idea* of what is natural.

## 4. *Being Gay or Lesbian is Not a "Lifestyle," It's a Life*

It's sometimes said that gay and lesbian people live a gay "lifestyle," a word chosen to trivialize us and to imply that all gay men and lesbians subscribe to the same values, characteristics and dreams. The fact is we're not all the same any more than heterosexuals are. Some of us have one lifelong relationship, some have many. Some wear distinctive clothing, some do not. Some are liberal, some are conservative. Some are affluent, others are poor. The only thing we all have in common is that we love people of the same sex.

## 5. *Gay Men and Lesbians Constitute Families*

Some people talk as if there are two options in life: You can marry someone of the opposite sex and become a family or

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you can be gay or lesbian and be excluded from the definition of family. This is patently untrue and is a position perpetuated by religious political extremists who have a stake in portraying gay people as outside the mainstream. The fact is that lesbian or gay male couples are as much family as heterosexual couples.

And if you dream about having children, you can do so if you're gay or lesbian. Many gay and lesbian couples have children through adoption, artificial insemination or previous relationships. Plus, all the scientific evidence to date shows the children of gay couples are just as likely to grow up happy and well-adjusted as the children of heterosexual relationships.

## 6. *Some of the Most Talented People Are or Were Gay or Lesbian*

If anyone ever suggests that your life won't add up to anything if you're gay, remind them that: **Plato** was a lover of men. So were **Michelangelo** and **Leonardo da Vinci**. **Bayard Rustin**, a leader of the black civil rights movement, was gay. So were **Oscar Wilde**, **Gertrude Stein**, **Marcel Proust** and **James Baldwin**. **Shakespeare** wrote about a man's love for a man. Poet **Emily Dickinson** wrote about her love for a woman.

More recently, musicians **K.d. lang** and **Melissa Etheridge**, and actresses **Ellen DeGeneres** and **Amanda Bearse** have come out as lesbian; and actors **Wilson Cruz** and **Mitchell Anderson**, record producer **David Geffen**, Olympic swimmer **Greg Louganis** and Olympic skater **Rudy Galindo**, and U.S. Rep. **Barney Frank** have come out as gay.

*Coming out  
was the best thing  
I ever did . . . .  
It took all the fears  
away.*

—k.d. lang, singer



## COMING OUT

Coming out means identifying yourself as gay, lesbian or bisexual. The first and toughest person you have to reveal this to is yourself. Then you can deal with friends and family. For many people, the coming out process is difficult. But most people come out because, sooner or later, they can't stand hiding who they are any more. Once they've come out, most people have to admit: It feels much better to be open and honest than to lie and hide.

**Melissa Etheridge**, singer: *[People] think they'll lose everything if they come out. This did not happen to me at all. In fact, everything came back tenfold.*

**Ellen DeGeneres**, actress: *For me, [coming out] has been the most freeing experience because people can't hurt me anymore.*

**Andrew Sullivan**, writer: *...to me, it was like being in a black-and-white movie that suddenly converted to color.*

### *Coming Out to Yourself*

"Growing up, I felt there was something about me that truly set me apart from other kids. But I didn't have a grasp on what it was," says Candace Gingrich, a spokeswoman for the Human Rights Campaign and half-sister of House Speaker Newt Gingrich.

"I had a few fleeting crushes on girls and, then, a full-blown crush. Inside, they felt right and normal. But at the same time, I didn't have any way to process those feelings because I didn't know any gay people or know that I knew them. I felt that I would risk something if I expressed my feelings."

Candace started playing on a rugby team, and for the first time saw women being openly affectionate to each other. "It was like being dropped into what was originally a foreign country but, once there, I realized it was my country of origin. I thought, *Wow, the feelings I've been having are normal. It is OK to be who I am.*"

Coming out to yourself means recognizing and accepting that you're primarily attracted to the same sex. But how do you get from recognition to acceptance? It helps to talk to someone. But who? And what should you say?

## Coming Out to Others

Some people come out when someone asks them if they're gay or lesbian. Others make a point of pulling people aside and saying, "There's something I have to tell you."

If you choose the latter option, ask yourself: "Who is the most open-minded and caring person I know who is also the least likely to be shocked, threatened or put off?" This might be a friend, a relative or a teacher. Tell that person you have questions about your sexual orientation, or you're trying to come to terms with your sexual orientation, and you'd like to talk. Say you've come to them because you trust them.

If you don't already know someone like this, consider talking to a school counselor, a therapist, or a member of a gay and lesbian student group. Gay-straight alliances exist in many high schools and colleges. There are support groups at most gay and lesbian community centers. Many communities have lesbian and gay switchboards. You might seek out nearby churches or synagogues that minister primarily to lesbians and gay men. And there are many gay youth and coming out sites on the World Wide Web, including the Human Rights Campaign's National Coming Out site, which you can access through <http://www.hrc.org>. (See *Additional Resources* for more details.)

## Testing the Waters

You can get a sense of how accepting your friends and family are by the things they say, or don't say, when the subject of homosexuality comes up in conversation. You might try to bring it up yourself by talking about gay issues in the news — such as the *Ellen* TV show, or the debates over equal rights in the workplace for lesbians and gays. If your friends' or your family's reactions are positive, chances are they'll be



*The goal is not to tell for the sake of telling, but not to hide. The more people you can find and be honest with, the better you'll feel.*

— Barney Frank, U.S. congressman



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more accepting of you. But keep in mind that it's easier for most people to accept gay men and lesbians in the abstract; it's a bit different when it's "my son" or "my daughter" or even "my best friend."

## Telling Friends

When you're ready to come out to your friends, you may be lucky enough to have some gay or lesbian friends to help you. But heterosexual friends can also be staunch supporters. Choose carefully as you reveal this fundamental part of yourself. Many gay people find that the friends they thought would be least judgmental were the first to drop them, while those who seemed unlikely allies offered the strongest support. Along the way, you might lose a few people whom you thought were friends. But you'll learn many valuable lessons about what the word "friendship" means.

Actor Wilson Cruz, who played Ricky on TV's *My So-Called Life*, says he was fortunate. "There was a group of us who had been friends since junior high school. I think we all knew everyone else was gay but we never said anything to each other.

"Then, in the beginning of our senior year, we all started to come out to each other. I came out first, and they were relieved that I told them and then they were relieved to tell me. It was very cool because by the end of the year, we had an incredible support group and didn't care what anyone else thought."

## Telling Family

Most people are afraid that their parents will reject them if they come out. You might be afraid that they'll throw you out of the house, tell you you're immoral, or simply stop loving you. The good news is: You're probably wrong.

It's true that many parents are shocked when their children say they're gay or lesbian. But it is also true that it is nearly impossible for most parents to completely reject their children.

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On the other hand, parents sometimes react in ways that hurt. Some cry. Some get angry. Some ask whether "someone did this to you." Some say it's a sin. Some insist it's a phase. Others try to send their children to someone who will "fix" them.

Candace Gingrich's mother was pretty typical. "She wanted to know what happened to me that turned me into a lesbian," Gingrich recalls. "She wanted to know where she and Dad went wrong. She wanted to know if I hadn't met the right man yet."

If this happens, remember that your parents grew up in a time when some of the misperceptions about homosexuality were more prevalent than they are today. Remember, too, that they're probably trying to keep you safe from something they do not understand. Finally, remember this is big news, and they'll need time to adjust to it, just like you did.

One great source of help for many families is the group Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. PFLAG produces literature aimed at helping parents understand their gay children. It also has chapters in many communities across the country. (See *Additional Resources* for more details.)

"My biggest fear was that my parents would abandon me if I was honest with them," recalls Linda Villarosa of *Essence*. "But my mother asked me point blank: Are you a lesbian? I wasn't comfortable lying. I was also caught off guard: I was so happy. For one split second, I thought, *They'll be happy for me.*"

Instead, her father cried because he was afraid she didn't love him any more. And her mother demanded she go to therapy. "She said, *This isn't really who you are. This is a phase. You can change. You can go to therapy.*"

"But I said, *No, this is who I am, and I'm happy.*"

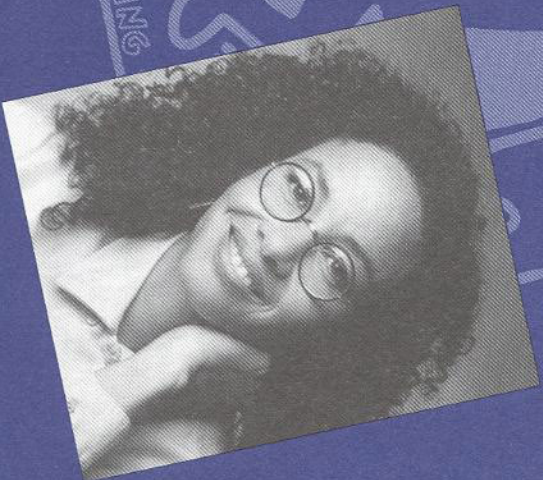
While it took time, Linda says her family finally let go of the fantasy of the person she was and came to accept the real Linda Villarosa.

The worst did happen to actor Wilson Cruz: His father threw him out.



*My imagination  
of how people were  
going to react  
was so much worse  
than the reality.*

— Linda Villarosa, executive editor  
of *Essence* magazine

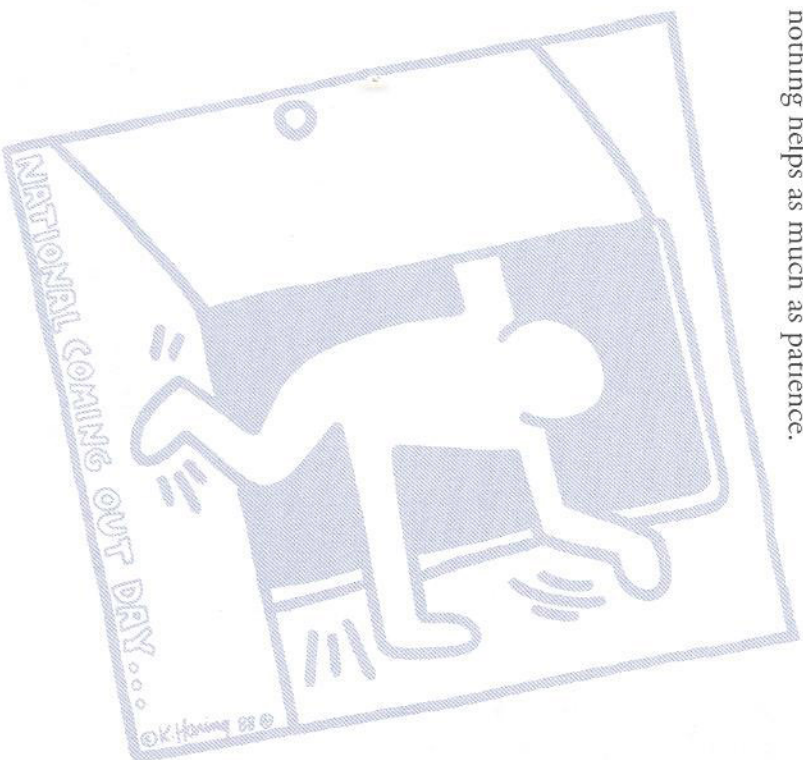


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“I lived in my car for three months,” Cruz recalls. For a year, he and his father barely talked. Then one night, *My So-Called Life* aired an episode in which Cruz’s character was thrown out of his house for being gay. Cruz’s father was watching.

“He called me up after that, and it was very moving. He saw what I went through on an emotional and a physical level, and started to see what he’d done wrong. Now, I wouldn’t say it’s a complete transformation but he’s definitely a lot more accepting of me. We talk all the time, better than before I came out.”

While Cruz’s experience was more dramatic than most, it shows that even people who react negatively at first can come around in time. It may not be easy for you to give them this time. But don’t be discouraged. In the long run, nothing helps as much as patience.



## Spirituality and Coming Out

Many people find strength and support from their faith as they struggle to come out as gay, lesbian or bisexual. At first, this might sound like a contradiction, since so many organized religions teach that homosexuality is wrong or immoral. But most religions also teach that God is merciful. Youth activist Jamie Nabozny was raised Pentecostal and hoped to become a minister someday. But he was gay and thought the only worse thing he could be was Satan himself. So he tried to put his same-sex attractions aside until, one day, he had a talk with God.

"I walked as far as I could into a big field. I was crying, praying and hollering at God. I said, *I've read the Bible. I've prayed, I go to church three times a week. Every time I have a homosexual thought, I rebuke it in the name of God and yet still I'm gay. Either you're not there, or you don't give a damn that I'm gay.* It took me a little while but then I realized God was OK with it. The God I really believed in was not a God that hated or condemned people."

This is an experience many people go through. Faced with a conflict between their religion and their feelings, many people come to realize that the God they truly believe in could never condemn people for loving. Some people, like writer and lecturer Brian McNaught, find their spirituality even helps them come out.

"I found strength in Christ's message about being true to yourself," says McNaught, "in loving yourself, being willing to suffer for the sake of what you know is right, and trusting that a power greater than myself loved me just the way I was."

## If You Already Belong To One Minority Group...

"I was taught from early on that Latinos and people of color are looked down on," says Wilson Cruz, who is Puerto

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Rican. "Then to be homosexual on top of that is one more thing people can look down on us for."

Cruz, who played a gay character on *My So-Called Life*, felt it especially because his Latino heritage strongly rejects homosexuality. "There are certain expectations of what a man is supposed to be, and when you don't fit into those molds, you're seen as less than worthy of your race."

"But I've learned there are certain expectations you will never live up to, and you have to get to the point where that's OK. What's helped me is remembering that I'm only here to be as honest and open as I can be in the life that's been given me. I also expect that anyone who is going to be in my life is going to have to love and understand that."

As an African-American lesbian, Linda Villarosa went through a similar learning experience. Confused and not sure about her sexual orientation, she did not explore her feelings because she was trying to fit into a white neighborhood and didn't want to do anything others could think of as wrong.

Finally, in college, "I came out because I couldn't stand not being myself any more." But then she went to work at *Essence* magazine and was again afraid to come out. "I think what happens when you're black is you feel your community is an oasis against some of the white racist people you know, and you become really afraid you're going to lose that."

But, once again, she found she couldn't stand hiding any more, and she took the chance: "My boss and I were in her car coming back from a weekend editorial retreat, and she was saying something about fixing me up with her brother-in-law. And I just blurted out, *I'm a lesbian.* She was embarrassed about the brother-in-law and very kind. And that Monday, I came out to just about everybody else at work, and everyone was fine."

A year later, she came out to seven million readers in a widely acclaimed *Essence* article she wrote with her mother and was later promoted to executive editor of the magazine.

Almost everyone I  
know has had  
a better experience  
coming out  
than they thought  
they would.

—Barney Frank, U.S. congressman



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Organizations

**The Human Rights Campaign**  
1101 14th St., N.W., Suite 200  
Washington, DC 20005  
202-628-4160  
National Coming Out Project  
1-800-866-6263  
<http://www.hrc.org>

**Parents, Families and Friends  
of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)**  
1101 14th St., N.W., Suite 1030  
Washington, DC 20005  
202-638-4200  
<http://www.pflag.org>

**National AIDS Hotline**  
1-800-342-AIDS  
1-800-344-7432 (Spanish)  
1-800-243-7889 (T.I.D.)  
<http://www.niaid.nih.gov>

**National Latino/a Lesbian &  
Gay Organization (LLEGO)**  
1612 K St., N.W., Suite 5  
Washington, DC 20006  
202-466-8240  
<http://www.LLEGO.org>

**National Center for  
Lesbian Rights**  
870 Market St., Suite 57  
San Francisco, CA 94107  
415-392-6257  
<http://www.nclrights.org>

**National Association of  
People With AIDS**  
1413 K St., N.W., 7th Fl.  
Washington, DC 20005  
202-898-0414  
<http://www.napwa.org>

**The National Gay and  
Lesbian Task Force**  
2320 17th St., N.W.  
Washington, DC 20009  
202-332-6483  
<http://www.nglft.org>

**Lambda Legal Defense &  
Education Fund**  
120 Wall St., Suite 1500  
New York, NY 10005  
212-809-8585  
<http://www.lambdalegal.org>

**National Black Lesbian &  
Gay Leadership Forum**  
1436 U St., N.W., Suite 200  
Washington, DC 20009  
202-483-6786

**BiNET USA**  
P.O. Box 732  
Langley Park, MD 20787  
202-986-7186  
<http://www.norn.org/public/binet.html>

**CDC National AIDS  
Clearinghouse**  
800-342-AIDS  
<http://www.isstev@cdcnaac.org>

**National Minority AIDS  
Council**  
1931 13th St., N.W.  
Washington, DC 20009  
202-483-6622

### More On-line Resources:

**Out Proud, The National  
Coalition for Gay, Lesbian,  
and Bisexual Youth:**  
<http://www.outproud.org>

**Queer Resources Directory**  
<http://www.qrd.org>

**Lambda Rising Bookstore**  
[Lrszaff@aol.com](mailto:Lrszaff@aol.com)

# RESOURCES

## Books

**Beyond Acceptance: Parents of Lesbians and Gays Talk About Their Experiences.** Griffin, Carolyn Welch and Marian J. Wirth & Arthur G. Wirth, St. Martin's Press.

**Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out.** Hutchins, Loraine, ed., and Lani Kaahumahu, Alyson Press.

**Coming Out of Shame: Transforming Gay and Lesbian Lives.** Kaufan, Gershen & Raphael, Lev, Doubleday.

**Homosexuality: The Secret A Child Dare Not Tell.** Cantwell, Mary Ann, Rafael Press.

**Now That I'm Out, What Do I Do? Thoughts on Living Deliberately.** McNaught, Brian, St. Martin's Press.

**Now That You Know: What Every Parent Should Know About Homosexuality.** Fairchild, Betty and Nancy Hayward, HBJ.

**One More River To Cross: Black and Gay in America.** Boykin, Keith, Anchor Books.

**Outstanding Lives: Profiles of Lesbian and Gay Men.** Brelin, Christa & Michael J. Tyrkus, eds., Visible Ink Press.

**Passages of Pride: Lesbian and Gay Youth Come of Age.** Chandler, Kurt, Alyson Press.

**Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis.** Feinberg, Leslie, Beacon Press.



# RESOURCES

## Religious Organizations

**Interfaith Working Group**  
P.O. Box 1170  
Philadelphia, PA 19101  
215-235-3050  
<http://www.libertynet.org/ing/>

**Dignity/USA (National Office)**  
1500 Massachusetts Ave., N.W.  
Washington, DC 20005  
202-861-0017  
800-877-8797  
<http://www.dignityusa.org>

**Affirmation: United Methodist for Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Concerns**

P.O. Box 1021  
Evanston, IL 60204  
847-733-9590

[umaffirm@concentric.net](mailto:umaffirm@concentric.net)  
<http://www.concentric.net/Umaffirm/>

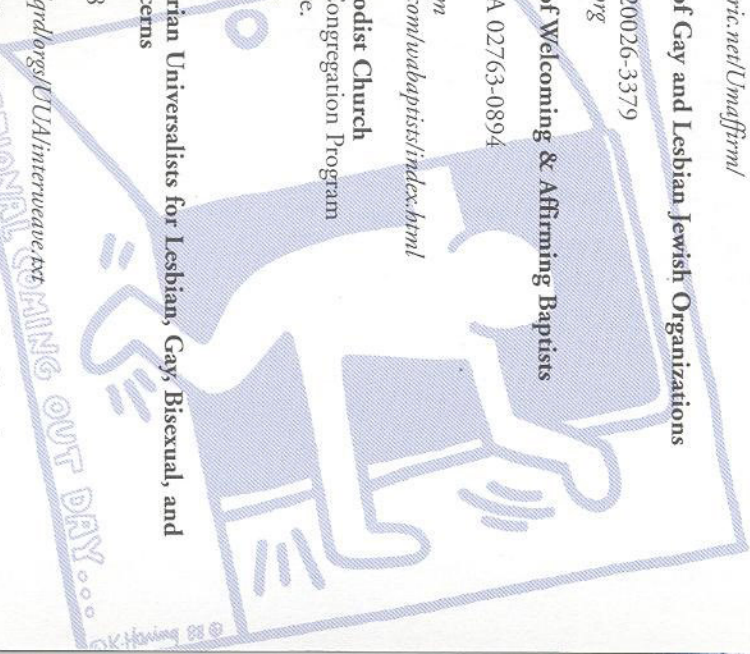
**World Congress of Gay and Lesbian Jewish Organizations**  
P.O. Box 233  
Washington, DC 20026-3379  
<http://www.wogjia.org>

**The Association of Welcoming & Affirming Baptists**  
P.O. Box 2596  
Ardenboro Falls, MA 02763-0894  
508-226-1945  
[WABaptists@aol.com](mailto:WABaptists@aol.com)  
<http://members.aol.com/wabaptists/index.html>

**The United Methodist Church**  
The Reconciling Congregation Program  
3801 N. Keeler Ave.  
Chicago, IL 60641  
773-736-5526  
<http://www.rcp.org>

**Interweave: Unitarian Universalists for Lesbians, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Concerns**  
25 Beacon St.  
Boston, MA 02108  
617-742-2100  
<http://www.gtd.org/gtd/orgs/UUA/interweave.htm>

**Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches**  
8704 Santa Monica Blvd., 2nd Fl.  
West Hollywood, CA 90069  
310-360-8640  
<http://www.ufmcc.com>





HUMAN  
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FOUNDATION

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in memory of Robert H. Eichberg. Friend, activist, visionary,  
co-founder of National Coming Out Day.