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**Correction:** *The Teen Project, a joint project of the Tarrant County Lesbian Gay Alliance and Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, can be reached at 332-8382. The phone number is incorrect in this story. (10/11/96)*

## Accept me for who I am

### National Coming Out Day highlights pressures gay teens face

PATRICIA RODRIGUEZ

Star-Telegram Writer

ARLINGTON - **Clint Thomson** had made a conscious effort to pass himself off as straight since the fourth grade. But last year, at 17, he got tired of the charade.

"I don't want to pretend I'm something I'm not," says **Thomson**, 18, a native of South Africa who now lives in Arlington and attends **Martin** High School. "It takes too much work. It's a strain to constantly keep up that face. . . . You're always thinking, 'Am I saying the right thing? Am I doing the right thing? Am I dressed correctly?' " And so, slowly, over the past year - to his closest friends at first, then to acquaintances and finally to his mother - **Thomson** acknowledged publicly what he says he has known for years: He is gay.

Tomorrow is National Coming Out Day, in which activists encourage closeted gays and lesbians to share their true identities with friends, family and colleagues. But there will not likely be many teens who are as willing as **Thomson** to come forward.

"I think it's easier for gay and lesbian teen-agers to self-identify as being gay because of positive media coverage and positive role models," says Alan Detlaff, 26, who volunteers as a facilitator with the Teen Project, a support group sponsored by the Tarrant County Lesbian Gay Alliance (TCLGA) and Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (P-FLAG).

"But all of the problems and fears that gay and lesbian teens had 30 years ago are still the same. As far as actually coming out, it's no easier for teens now than it was then."

Those fears are the same ones faced by gay adults, but they are exacerbated for teens because teens are still developing mentally and physically, says Rita Cotterly, director of the Sexuality Education Center in Fort Worth.

Gay youth fear being rejected by family, friends and schoolmates; they fear being thrown out of the house, losing a job or being harassed at school or work, or even being physically attacked, Cotterly says. They may also feel alone, isolated, alienated from their peers, and suffer from low self-esteem.

Gay adolescents also struggle with substance abuse problems. One 1992 study of gay adolescents for the New York State Psychiatric Institute reported that 68 percent of boys and 83 percent of girls had used alcohol, and that 44 percent of boys and 56 percent of girls had used drugs. The study did not include comparisons with heterosexual teens, but 1995 federal studies of teens in general reported 21 percent used alcohol and 11 percent used illicit drugs.

Finally, gay teens may account for as many as 30 percent of all youth suicides, and are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual youth, according to a 1989 study for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Cotterly helped start the Teen Project almost two years ago because she wanted there to be a positive gathering place and adult role models for gay, lesbian and bisexual teens.

"If they are respected and accepted for who they are, they will be less likely to drown their fears and rejection in alcohol and drugs and promiscuity," Cotterly says.

"Also, they will not get married to prove they are straight, and then 15, 20 years later come out of the closet, and then the husband and wife and children are all devastated."

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Further, if teens begin dealing with their homosexuality early, they stay on track developmentally.

"We all have to go through a developmental period from 13 to 18," Cotterly says. "We have to fall in love, fall out of love, understand that we're going to survive. And if teens are unable to interrelate with each other, they end up having to learn that as adults. It's developmental delay."

Conservative groups, however, question the wisdom of encouraging youth to explore sexuality issues early in life.

"Adolescence is a very difficult time because there are lots of changes going on in their bodies," says David Miller, director of the Tarrant County chapter of the American Family Association. "They don't know what they're feeling."

The national AFA is among several conservative and church groups that are sponsoring a National Coming Out of Homosexuality Day, to "increase the visibility of individuals who have successfully walked away from homosexuality," according to a memo about the project. However, Miller says no local events have been planned, though his group's weekly action lunch did address Coming Out Day in general last week.

Miller says he would encourage teens who are questioning their sexuality to approach their parents for advice. If they are unable to do so, the next best place is to try a youth counselor at their church, he says. Programs such as the Teen Project give teens the wrong message, he says. "We need to point them in the right direction. Heterosexuality is the norm, and that's the direction they should be pointed toward," Miller says.

Others scoff that anyone, including teen-agers, can be pushed toward homosexuality unless that is their orientation.

"We had four children, and they were all raised exactly the same way," says Jim Surles, president of the local P-FLAG chapter. "My gay son is a twin, and they were together all the time. Well, that didn't make my straight son gay, and it didn't make my gay son straight."

Surles and his wife, Ann, volunteer with the Teen Project because they want a safe place for teens to meet, socialize and gain support. They say they wish there had been something similar for their gay son, now 36 and living in another state. He suppressed his identity for years and did not come out until he was 24, they say. The facade put a strain on their relationship.

"He was so uneasy at family gatherings that he would avoid them . . . or stay briefly and leave. He was just a bundle of nerves," Ann Surles says. "Once he came out, it was like the walls fell down. We talked and now we know him in a way we never knew him, and I wish we had known when he was in high school."

Their son did not believe he would be accepted at school if he had come out as a teen, the Surleses say. And he thought he was the only person in the world who was gay.

Both continue to be fears of teens today. "It's just constant. Every day people are saying things to you, harassing you," says one Fort Worth gay teen. "They're bored and they don't have anything to do, or maybe they're not really comfortable with their own sexuality, or they just want to have someone to harass."

Even though **Clint Thomson** says he is much happier now that he is openly gay at school, he tried to hide it for his first year in the United States, with varying degrees of success.

"I have a lot of girlfriends. That's how a lot of guys make it seem as though they're straight," **Thomson** says. "Because they always have a lot of girls around them, people think, oh, he's a big man, he's dating all these girls."

But his friends began to suspect otherwise, and began pushing him subtly to come clean with them. **Thomson** had begun realizing he was attracted to other boys as early as age 10, and he had begun discreetly dating slightly older males when he was 13 or 14.

"They'd start with hinting questions, 'Don't you think he's cute?' " **Thomson** says.

Donna Graves, a **Martin** senior who has been friends with **Thomson** since he moved to Texas two years ago, says it wasn't a big surprise to her when **Thomson** confided in her. Nor did it make a difference in their friendship, she says.

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He was still the same friend - funny, smart, interested in the same things that she is. And, for the most part, she hasn't noticed a big change in the way others treat **Thomson** at school.

"Most people are OK. They think about it for a while and go on about their business," Graves says. Still, she admits she worries sometimes about his safety; that someone who doesn't like gay people will harass him or even physically attack him.

**Thomson** says he has never been physically threatened, and besides, he doesn't take chances: He doesn't go many places alone and he always drives with his car doors locked and the windows rolled up. He does get verbally harassed sometimes, he says, but he has learned not to take it seriously.

"You think there are going to be a lot of people badgering you about it, but it doesn't happen as often as you'd think, and it's not as constant as trying to keep up the myth that you're straight," **Thomson** says. "You can deal with people being nasty, but you can't live with constantly lying about yourself."

For more info

The Teen Project offers confidential telephone counseling weekday evenings and weekend afternoons; call 763-8382. It also sponsors a social/support group for teens that meets the first and third Saturdays of every month. Call 763-8382 for location. For parents and friends of lesbians and gays, P-FLAG meets monthly; call 451-5318 for information.

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