

First Shock, Then Acceptance

Mother Stands Beside, Not Behind, Gay Son



Photos by Larry Evans, Chronicle Staff

Mary Milam, 55, says parents of gay children should "stand beside them to help them achieve their rightful place in this world."

BY CONNIE LUNNEN
Chronicle Staff

Four years ago, Mary Milam's younger son Dennis, then 16, told her he thought he was a homosexual.

Every nerve in her body snapped.

Dennis had said, "Surely you must know. You must have suspected. Bill means more to me than just a friend. I care for him in another way."

Mrs. Milam hadn't known; the events of the last few weeks flashed before her.

Dennis hadn't heard from Bill, his best friend. He waited for letters and phone calls that never came. He was depressed and even morose. No matter what she did, she couldn't pull him out of it. He continued to cry in his room.

"I remember how I cried when certain women friends hurt me because I trusted them. I thought this was happening to Dennis. I didn't realize he was grieving for this boy," says Mrs. Milam, 55.

Sitting in her Houston apartment, she flips through a gay liberation magazine, one of many her son sends her. There are articles on "Accepting My Uniqueness" and "Getting Straight About Gays" and the picture of a woman waving a sign that says, "Parents of Gays Unite in Support of Our Children."

Mrs. Milam waves her own banner. "I don't condone homosexuality. I wish my son weren't that way. But because he is, I'm not going to stand for anyone calling him a pervert. He isn't. I want a place for him. I want him to fit in," she says.

She has two other children, both older than Dennis.

The recent multiple slayings here have made her sensitive: "My son doesn't sit around all day planning to seduce men. He is a normal

as any other man, except for his sexual preference."

Dennis, 20, is a junior sociology student at the University of Texas in Austin.

His mother couldn't be prouder of him.

"He is a warm and considerate young man. He's on the honor society, has been awarded scholarships and grants and despite all the prejudice and intolerance he has experienced, he is still an idealist with faith in his future," she says.

When Dennis told his mother the truth about himself, however, she didn't know what to say or do.

The news splintered her feelings. She wanted to ignore him, think of his confession as a phase, and berate him at once. "I didn't want to reject Dennis, because he was all I had. His father had died a few months earlier and my

she had ever had. Most had been pleasant. If her son were gay, she would accept it, she decided.

When Dennis was a senior at Spring Branch High School, he told his mother he felt sure he was gay. Her disappointment showed. What would she tell her other children, and her friends? What would Dennis' father have thought? "My Lord, you'll never have a child. All the things a mother looks forward to," she told her son.

She suggested he see a psychiatrist. He said he didn't feel he needed one. He said he hadn't changed, that he was the same person she had known all along.

"I thought, my God, he's right. He's my son and I love him. He's not going to go out

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other children live out of state." Hiding her shock, she said only that "Bill turned you this way."

Even as Dennis talked of feelings for other boys he had experienced since he was 10 years old, his mother refused to believe him. "Girls were always crazy about Dennis. I saw the way they looked at him. A mother notices those things," Mrs. Milam says.

She thought he would outgrow his feelings for other boys.

For almost two years, she said little or nothing to Dennis about the subject unless he brought it up.

She thought about it day and night, recalling every encounter with a homosexual

and lie and cheat and steal because he's a homosexual. Being gay doesn't make him a monster, Mrs. Milam says.

She realized how hard life would be for him. There would be insults, much abuse. Loneliness. He might never find a lasting relationship.

Could he be bisexual, she wondered. He told her he could care deeply for a girl as a friend, but that's as far as it could go. "My son, as they say, isn't turned on by girls," Mrs. Milam says.

Friends and relatives had a collage of reactions when they learned about Dennis.

One relative said she wanted to hire a woman "who really knows her stuff" to have an affair with him.

Another said he would do

all he could to talk Dennis out of it and that he would pray for him.

One of Mrs. Milam's friends said, "It's a disgrace, an abomination. How can you stand to be around those disgusting people?"

A relative said, "Thank God Dennis' father is dead. He never would have accepted this."

Some days Mary Milam felt she caused Dennis to be a homosexual. She read books, and they blamed the mother. Yet in digging through the past, she found nothing to indict her.

Certain memories of her son's childhood stand out:

• Dennis didn't like to play with some boys because they were too rough. He didn't like sports, especially football. "My husband didn't push him because he didn't care for football, either," Mrs. Milam

he was born. Mrs. Milam was 35 and her husband, a government financial analyst, was 46.

The boy grew up in New Braunfels and San Antonio. He was a Cub Scout and later worked on the school newspaper and in the drama club. When he was 16, his father died and he and his mother moved to Houston.

"Dennis has always been a thoughtful young man. He loves to read. He wants to do something to help people. He's interested in politics, all social things and reform. And he eats his heart out for the underdog. He was a conscientious objector. He's always been a non-violent person. He's very masculine looking. You'd never guess he's gay."

Mrs. Milam, trying to understand her son's lifestyle, has gone with him to gay bars and gay dances.

At times, she has had to fight the tears.

"At one gay dance, everything was okay until the music started. Seeing two girls dance together didn't bother me. But when I saw two men dance together, I felt as if I had been stabbed. I thought to myself, my God, is Dennis really like that? Then I thought that was an awful thing to think."

She worried about what to wear to gay functions; she didn't want people to think "I was strange."

She was the center of attention at gay meetings. "The kids couldn't believe I knew about Dennis and hadn't thrown him out." Many gays asked her to talk to their parents.

In talking to some parents, Mrs. Milam found they think of their gay children as blind or crippled or give them allowances to keep them away.

"If schools, churches, family and friends would accept and support our gay sons and daughters, we might be able to eliminate some of the prejudices and misunderstandings about homosexuality. We shouldn't stand behind our gay children, but beside them to help them achieve their rightful place in this world," Mrs. Milam says.

Tomorrow: Dennis Milam's story.

Catholic opinion on homosexuality remains divided

By GEORGE W. CORNELL

NEW YORK (U) — Homosexuals "can express their sexuality in a manner that is consonant with Christ's teaching," says a recently formed Catholic organization seeking rights for homosexuals in the Roman Catholic Church.

However, guidelines newly issued by United States Catholic bishops say homosexual acts "are a grave transgression of the goals of human sexuality and of human personality, and are consequently contrary to the will of God."

Although conflicting in their conclusions, the two statements point up an increasingly open concern in the churches to the status of homosexuals, a formerly sidestepped, taboo issue.

It is a "social and moral phenomenon that the church has yet to tackle," says

the Rev. John F. Havey, a theologian-psychologist of Alexandria, Va., who is organizing the first Catholic center for counseling religious personnel on the problem.

Challenges to the traditional negative church attitude toward homosexuality have surfaced in Protestant denominations in recent years, and since last fall, have emerged explicitly in Roman Catholicism.

At its annual meeting last week in San Francisco, the National Federation of Priests' Councils authorized a task force to "formulate a critical and contemporary theological analysis of homosexuality."

The group is to include several "gay men and women" as consultants. The objective is to develop recommendations for the church "in forming practical at-

titudes toward homosexuality and homosexuals."

In taking the step, the federation of 130 affiliated councils, including two-thirds of the official diocesan priest senate in the country, dropped a previous committee's report treating homosexuality as an acceptable pattern.

It had been prepared by a study group headed by the Rev. Ramon Wagner of Milwaukee. It termed the bishops' approach to homosexuality as "at best, inaccurate and insensitive; at its worst, it is a misrepresentation of data and a cavalier disrespect for human lives and dignity."

The report was quashed by the federation's executive board as incomplete, and the further study authorized. However, the federation urged repeal of "all civil laws which make consensual

homosexual acts between adults a crime," and opposed discrimination against homosexuals in employment.

What has sharpened the issue in Roman Catholicism was a letter sent last fall to U.S. bishops by an organization called Dignity, made up of homosexual Catholics and others concerned with their situation.

Contending that homosexuality could be expressed in keeping with Christian teaching in an "ethically responsible and unselfish way," the letter called for "recognition of the right of gay Catholics" to collectively voice their views within the church, for an increased ministry to homosexuals and for steps to "eradicate false stereotypes and prejudices" against them.

Although the guidelines recently used by Catholic bishops reaffirmed the

church's traditional view that homosexual acts are immoral, the statement asserts that individuals do not "will to become homosexual" but come to realize it as a condition.

The statement discusses various degrees of homosexuality, suggesting approaches for counseling about it, and emphasizes the importance of helping persons find deep relationships of love and friendship not involving homosexual acts.

It "represents a new pastoral approach" to the matter, says the Rev. Thomas Kelley, associate general secretary of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

However, some Catholic theologians have urged a re-examination of the former church arguments against homosexuality.

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