

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 as 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

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.

"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," Mary Milam says.

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

says. Dennis preferred to play with girls, to color, skate or read.

- He was neat, always cleaning his room without being told. Everything had a place. His father said Dennis reminded him of "an old maid in pants."

- Dennis and his father didn't get along. Mrs. Milam doesn't know why. "It was something subtle," she says.

- On picnics to the beach, Dennis ate inside to avoid the bugs. His father always got mad and tried to make him come outside.

- Dennis was friends with many girls, but the relationships were always casual.

Mrs. Milam can't put her finger on any one thing; she still silently wonders what went wrong.

Dennis was born in Victoria, Texas. His brother was 6 and his sister was 14 when



AP Photos

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When Dennis Milam told his mother he was a homosexual, he knew she wouldn't disown him. She was liberal, progressive, he says. "Besides she gets a lot of strength from her children. I knew she would hurt herself if she rejected me."

'The Sexual Image of Gays Has Been Talked About Far Too Much'

BY CONNIE LUNNEN
Chronicle Staff
(Last of Two)

There is no welcome mat, but a verse on the wall that reads: "I do my thing and you do your thing. I am not in this world to live up to your expectations . . ."

Four years ago, when Dennis Milam was 16, he told his mother he was a homosexual; he knew she wouldn't disown him.

"My mother was too liberal and progressive to throw me out. Besides she gets a lot of strength from her children. I knew she would hurt herself if she rejected me. We had a lot of trust in each other," says Dennis.



He is 20, a junior at the University of Texas. He wants to be a teacher or a counselor.

His apartment is small, like a trailer house. Everything has a place. The plant on the refrigerator. The purse on the kitchen table. The only trace of color is the patchwork quilt on the sofa.

He has finished the breakfast dishes, taken out the trash, let a restless cat outside.

Dennis sees his mother Mary, who lives in Houston, every few months. Sometimes she comes to Austin, going with him to gay bars or dances at night.

"I take her to gay bars just to let her see a whole variety of gay people, from wild, long-haired radicals to conservative businessmen. She can see drag queens and the most feminine looking women dancing together," he says.

Most gay men aren't "effeminate hairdressers who see analysts and cry all the time," Dennis says.

He feels he is not that way.

"I wish to emphasize those things about gay people that usually don't come up, the cultural, political and social things. The sexual image of gays has been talked about far too much. Sometimes we feel like some women must feel when they're defined simply as sex objects. It's an ugly feeling."

Tall and lean, he has a mustache and beard. Big round eyes are set in a wide face. He has curly hair. His mother thinks he dresses like a hippie these days. He wears jeans, a shirt and tennis shoes. Until he left for college, she bought his clothes.

Has he ever felt like a woman? "That's a ridiculous question. I am a man," he snaps. Between sociology classes, he attends a "men's awareness" class sponsored by the campus YMCA. He wants to see how much of a man he is.

"I have a feeling of myself as a man, with the word 'gay' in front of man. I want to know how much I am like other men. I've already discovered that most men in the group have the same worries and fears. Even though I am the only gay member, the same things make us lonely and happy."

Dennis says he is a "multiplicity" of qualities, like the patchwork quilt his sister made. Strong and independent, weak and emotional. "Some days I feel really together. Other days I need someone to comfort me." Roles don't restrict him; he doesn't believe in them.

"I would like to see women become more powerful and independent and men more sensitive," he says.

Dennis' older brother lives out of state. As children, they weren't close. Now Dennis sends him piles of information on gay liberation, hoping he'll understand.

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Dennis Milam

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Dennis won't father a child, but that doesn't bother him. The world already has too many people, he says. His mother felt differently at first. She wanted grandchildren. "I told her not to be so selfish," Dennis says.

He hopes to find someone, a man, he can live and be happy with. "I don't envision a binding contract, but a union of trust, support and mutual independence," he says.

No fighter, he's a conscientious objector who makes his point with words and footwork. "I want to help myself by helping other gays." He has marched and demonstrated, had television and radio interviews, talked gay lib to state congressional committees and counseled other gay students at UT.

Last summer he worked for the Metropolitan Community Church, a gay church in Denver, and for the Institute for the Study of Non-Violence in California.

"Coming out," or admitting publicly he is gay, wasn't easy. Insults have hurt him, left him angry and furious. Strangers have knocked him down. "The thing I'm really proud of is that I'm learning to deal with my anger in a non-violent way," says Dennis.

He wonders why he is a homosexual, but has no answers. "It could have something to do with the models kids perceive when they're

growing up," Dennis says. His mother was a more positive figure than his father. She was warm, tender and affectionate. He was cold, distant and absent a lot, Dennis says.

Dennis always had more female than male friends, but he rarely got serious about girls. "The feelings I had for girls weren't the same as those I had for boys," he says.

Dennis grew up in New Braunfels. When he was 10 and in the fifth grade, he began to get crushes on boys. He didn't think his feelings were strange. But when he noticed other boys holding hands and going steady with girls, he felt left out.

"By the time I was in junior high school, my fantasies became more and more sexual. I would think of being friends with a certain boy and wanted to be with him. The boys I idolized were the non-conformists. They were older. I would sit and think how good looking they were," Dennis says.

In junior high school, he suspected he wasn't like other boys. He went to a library near his home and read passages about homosexuality in a book on sex. He was careful not to let the librarian see him.

"For the first time, I realized a whole group of people were like me. Most of the references to homosexuals were unfavorable. That was the only time I really came close to feeling guilty about the way I am," Dennis says.

In the eighth grade, he got

a crush on a boy in the same political club. Dennis followed him around, watched him play tennis and rode by his house.

"My feelings were basically positive about myself. I wanted to love somebody and be loved. There is nothing wrong with that. Yet I couldn't talk about it and I couldn't write papers on it at school," he says.

The biggest influences in his life are the Unitarian Church and the gay liberation movement, he says.

When Dennis was 16, the family moved to San Antonio. He joined the Unitarian Church and became a leader in the youth group. "It was the first time I was able to identify with people. Many of the kids were like me,"

He got deeper into politics, draft counseling and civil rights.

Then his father died. Dennis was 16. His mother wanted to move to Houston, where she had family. But Dennis balked. He had met a boy, Bill, in the church youth group and didn't want to leave.

"I didn't exactly tell my mother why, only that Bill was the first close friend I had ever had. We moved anyway. I really got depressed, but Bill and I kept writing and seeing each other on weekends. I had his picture up in my room and talked about him constantly," Dennis says.

A few friends knew he was gay; he hadn't told his mother.

In Austin to join a statewide antiwar march, he saw a gay liberation group marching and joined it. It was a big step, his way of announcing he is gay.

Since parents of a few friends saw him marching, he could no longer keep the news from his mother.

"I wanted her to know because I felt I was being dishonest. I had always placed a real premium on being honest with her."