Becoming an Advocate for Justice in an Unjust World

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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Abstract

Prejudice is a well-known concept in modern society. This paper explores the ways in which people, particularly children, develop prejudices. Studies relating to racism and homophobia are the main focus. Further, the main purpose of this paper is to explore ways in which prejudice can be overcome or perhaps even eradicated. The latter half of the paper includes reflection on my own personal prejudices regarding homosexuals, influences in my life that contributed to the development of those prejudices, and ways in which I have worked to eliminate such behavior from my life. Ideally, the contents of this paper can serve as motivation for others interested in making similar changes, and it can also potentially be informative for those that might be interested in how prejudices are formed.
Creative Rationale

Originally, the idea was for this paper to be far more creative than it turned out to be. However, Dr. Peterson showed me how using research from the onset could support the stories I was sharing and help to prove the points I wanted to make. Thus, the paper became a sort of research paper-creative writing hybrid. The latter half, the creative portion, is extremely significant to me. In this section, I shared some of the most significant events in my ongoing development as an activist. I could have simply chosen to report on studies that support working for equality, but I thought personal reflection would have a stronger impact. I also thought my stories would be more effective in terms of showing people that I understand it is not necessarily easy to make these changes and that I still struggle with doing so. There were probably more tidbits from my life that could have been included, but these particular portions of my life always stood out as the ones that shaped my identity the most, and that is why I chose them to write about.
Avenue Q, one of the most popular musicals of the current day, includes a song entitled “Everyone’s a Little Bit Racist.” While the show is a comedy, that song underlies a sentiment shared by many today. Some think that it is impossible to get through life without being at least a little bit prejudiced toward some group or another. The truth of that statement is arguable, especially when one considers that people can make the conscious choice to at least attempt to treat everyone else equally. However, if the assumption is that most people start out with some prejudice, then one must consider the origins of these feelings. Are they innate? Are they learned from parents, peers, society at large, or perhaps all of the above? And what can be done to alter these feelings?

According to Kenneth Bancroft Clark’s Prejudice and Your Child, the notion that prejudiced feelings are innate and natural was still held by some social theorists as recently as the mid twentieth century. One such researcher was the late Gordon Allport. When discussing this inclination in humans, he said, “This propensity lies in his normal and natural tendency to form generalizations, concepts categories, whose content represents an oversimplification of his world experience.” (Allport 27). In other words, Allport believed that our natural inclination toward prejudice stems from our habit of placing people into simplified categories. One can certainly see the truth in this line of thinking. Our brains are incapable of operating without making categorizations. Humans are not even conscious of all the categorizing that goes on in the brain as their eyes sweep over a crowd. But the fact that our brains are prone to categorization does not definitively explain
or excuse the existence of prejudice. After all, it is possible to place things in different categories without giving one particular item rank over another.

Most modern research tends to disagree with Allport's natural tendency assertion. Instead, the focus today is often on the idea that prejudice is learned.\(^{1,2,3,4}\) Within that belief, there are a number of tangents that can be explored. Some theorists believe that it is mostly parental influence that governs whether a child displays prejudice, while others focus more on society. Even within those specific ideas, there is disagreement on how particular groups can influence a child's development of prejudice. For example, it is commonly believed that racist children learned their racist ideologies from parents who specifically sat down and imparted racist beliefs to the children. Conversely, other researchers believe that while parents are responsible for passing on racist ideologies to their children, the ways in which they do so are far subtler. One researcher who has deeply studied these aspects, and more, is Phyllis A. Katz.

Phyllis A. Katz is known for her studies on the development of racial and gender attitudes in children. In *Racist or Tolerant Multiculturalists? How Do They Begin?*, she goes in depth about her findings from a six year longitudinal study of the racial attitudes of children from the age of six months to the age of six years old. In some ways, her findings, and subsequent conclusions, echo the assertions put forth by Clark nearly a century earlier.

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Still, her work also demonstrates new understanding of the matter at hand. For example, where Clark cited discrepancies in research regarding the onset of prejudice in children, Katz formed a very solid timeline that outlined this type of development. Where others before had vaguely assumed that prejudice could begin sometime before the teenage years, she found strong evidence of its existence in children as young as six months old.

Katz begins the discussion of her research by citing her experience with Elizabeth, one of her White research subjects. At the age of three, Elizabeth was already showing a very strong bias against Blacks. For young Elizabeth, the loser or troublemaker was always the Black child, while the White child was always the good child. When pressed to explain her choices, Elizabeth's simple reply was always the same. They were good “because they were White” or bad “because they were Black.” Hearing such statements from such a young child would most likely be enough to give most people pause. Children are supposed to be innocent after all. No doubt accusations would soon fly against Elizabeth’s parents. But before any stones are cast, it is important to recognize one key point. By the end of her study, Katz found that over half of the White children involved showed significant degrees of pro-White, anti-Black bias (Katz 897). Without a doubt, that statistic is grim. Surely all of those children do not come from homes in which the parents actively seek to put down Black people. But if that’s true, then how are these children acquiring such a clear bias at such a young age?

Katz notes a lack of correlation between prejudiced children and prejudiced parents. In the case of Elizabeth, the mother was described as having rather liberal racial attitudes. Katz concedes that some parents most likely do purposefully pass on prejudiced ideology
to their children. The mere continued existence of organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan makes that understanding easy to grasp. However, that group isn’t large enough to explain the high prevalence of bias amongst the majority of children. Keeping that in mind, there would have to be other explanations for why a young child would be so blatantly biased toward another group. Katz and her colleagues carefully studied how children’s attitudes about race developed and tried to identify anything that would indicate a potential bias in the future. Their findings were quite surprising.

First, they simply studied how infants would respond to pictures of people of different races after being familiarized with pictures of people of the same race as them. What they found was that infants had a markedly different response to the people of a different race than the people of the same race. Particularly, White infants seemed to be more disturbed by Black faces than Black infants were disturbed by White faces. That aspect may speak to the fact that we live in a society in which Black people, as a racial minority, are constantly bombarded with White images. While one would probably find more Black faces in the media today than sixty years ago, the gap is still quite large. The reverse is not necessarily true. Furthermore, it might also be worth noting that the images than one does see of Black people in the media have a strikingly high tendency of being negative when compared to images of White people. The reactions of these babies to the given stimuli do not necessarily indicate a definite prejudice, but they do make it clear that children are at least aware of differences at a very early age, and perhaps also that they are internalizing negativity that may be linked to those differences. They lack the vocabulary to express what they’re feeling, but their actions speak for themselves.
When the children were between the ages of one and two, Katz began to target the parental aspect of prejudice development. One particular component of this involved having the parents read picture books to their children. The books contained no text, but they did include pictures of people from a variety of races. What Katz noticed in this process was that parents rarely, if ever, mentioned racial differences as they discussed the pictures. However, they did tend to spend more time talking about people in the book that were of the same race as the parents. This does not mean the parents were prejudiced, but it does suggest a level of uncomfortability with issues pertaining to race. In fact, when Katz asked the parents about whether they discussed race with their children, she found that most of the parents rarely did so. It was not a matter of parents putting down one race or another. Rather, they simply weren't discussing race explicitly. But the parents' decision to focus more on characters in the book that were the same race as them does seem to indicate a certain preference for their own race over others. Perhaps the reason that babies as young as six months can display prejudice has less to do with outright prejudice on the part of the parents and more to do with underlying displays of preference.

Katz found that, by the age of two, children are perfectly capable of sorting pictures and dolls into categories by race. Children at this age also tend to prefer to play in groups that are comprised of other children of the same race. Though, the older the children got, the wider the gap in the in same race group preference got. White children were almost always ahead in terms of choosing same race friends. Again, this does not necessarily mean these children are prejudiced. There is a lot to be considered when one studies the development of these friendships. For example, White children are more likely to grow up in areas that are predominantly White whereas Black children are often raised in more
diverse areas. So exposure could certainly be a factor in racial make-up of these friendships. But even if that is the case, there is still the underlying possibility that a prejudice could be growing.

After noting these and other examples of potential bias, Katz and her team focused on analyzing what, if anything, could be labeled as the root cause for these behaviors. One sure indicator, particularly for infants, turned out to be exposure. Simply put, children who demonstrated the most potential bias were those who lived in areas that allowed for very little social interaction with people of different cultural backgrounds. A very basic understanding of how babies operate would support this idea. Some babies do get along with just about anyone, but most do not react well to new people immediately. They take time to adjust to new people in their environment. Since seeing someone of a different ethnic background is probably sensory overload for a child who isn't used to that, it is really not surprising that babies tend to gravitate toward photos that are similar to what they are used to seeing.

An interesting tidbit that goes along with that indicator is that Katz found that children who spent more time watching educational shows that emphasize diversity, such as *Sesame Street*, were less likely to demonstrate bias than their counterparts who watched less television. Perhaps, television is not quite as bad an influence as some would like us to believe. Another connection Katz drew has less to do with any specific action and more to do with understanding the parents. She found that the infants who showed the lowest amount of bias were also the same infants who had parents who explicitly indicated during the study that they valued racial diversity. How the parents choose to demonstrate this
value to the children is unknown, but odds are that it has some effect on their children's development of bias.

In terms of predictors of prejudice in older children, Katz found that if a child showed a strong bias early on, then he or she would most likely still have that bias at the age of six. This speaks, at least in part, to the way in which children are socialized. It's been said that people are exactly who they are always going to be by the age of five. Of course, slight changes over time are taken into account, but it is believed that people will essentially stay the same unless there is a specific and purposeful change in character. The fact that these children were so ingrained in their biased beliefs at such a young age suggests an even larger sense of urgency in the need for multicultural education. Perhaps, if we can get in at infancy and teach students to appreciate other cultures, then we might be more successful at reducing the occurrence of biased behavior later on in life.

Katz's point was that parents are most likely not as responsible for the development of prejudice in children as most people like to assume. At least, they are not responsible in the ways that most people think they are. For example, as stated previously, they do not necessarily tell their kids that they should not play with kids from other backgrounds. But they do make the decisions for their kids that would prohibit them from having the opportunity to interact with kids of different backgrounds, such as choosing the schools the children attend and the neighborhood the family lives in. This is not meant to be an attack on parents. Obviously, any worthwhile parent would want their child to live in the safest neighborhood possible and attend the best possible schools. In our current society, for whatever reasons, these areas are typically White in majority. That being said, parents can
still choose to make sure their children interact with people from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

Parents also affect their children's bias development simply by choosing to discuss or not discuss a matter. Children who came from families in which race was discussed were far less biased at the age of six. Understandably, it may be uncomfortable for parents to discuss these subjects with their young children. They may think the children are simply too young to understand or they may even think they're doing what's best for their children by shielding them from racial problems in the world. Perhaps they believe a colorblind method of living in which no racial differences are ever recognized and everybody is equal is possible. The problem is that Katz's research indicates that not discussing these issues could be even more detrimental for the development of an unbiased society. It may be far more necessary to first acknowledge and understand the issues and differences, and to then find a way to embrace them all instead of simply pretending that we're all the same. Plus, let's not forget that children, especially infants, are intuitive. They can feel negativity even if it is never put into words. It's entirely possible that children who display bias are simply picking up on their parents' negative feelings even if the parents never verbalize those feelings.

While studying an older age group in *Examination of the Link Between Parental Racial Socialization Messages and Racial Ideology Among Black College Students*, researchers found that Black parents who experience institutional racism, racism that is structured with organizations such as government branches or universities, are likely to pass on biased feelings to their children, even if they do not do so on purpose. Parents who
are actively aware of and address issues of racism head-on tend to have children who are
more well-adjusted in terms of race relations (Barr & Neville 151). It is obvious that being
aware of issues stemming from prejudice and making your children aware of such issues is
an important undertaking.

With these findings in mind, how does one go about changing feelings of prejudice
that are acquired as a child? For that matter, is it even necessary? In Prejudice and Your
Child, Clark sheds light on the frustrations that certain groups, particularly Black
Americans, feel as a result of the prejudice they experience on a daily basis. As a result of
such frustrations, Black Americans are often participants in or victims of increased crime
and violence. Those harmful results of prejudice are easy enough to see, and perhaps those
who believe “everybody’s a little bit racist” wouldn’t argue with them, but what about when
prejudice is so engrained into a society that a child’s chance at life could be at stake if
something doesn’t change?

Most Americans know the general history of slavery in America and the troubles
that Black Americans encountered in the Jim Crow and Civil Rights Eras. Most can easily
understand and describe the ways in which prejudice has harmed Black Americans, even
those who are prejudiced against Blacks. But, as we all know, Black Americans are not the
only group in America to have their civil rights taken from them. There are a number of
other groups that receive similar treatment without receiving as much understanding and
support as Black Americans tend to receive today. For example, where most people are
well aware of the impact of slavery, they are far less aware of the negative impact of
homophobia. Names like Harvey Milk are only just now beginning to gain resonance with
society at large, and names like Matthew Shepard have begun to lose their impact for those that are under the age of eighteen. The history is not seen as significant, and simply is not being taught. To that end, homophobia still thrives in American society.

A number of researchers have analyzed the development of homophobia in ways that are similar to the research done by Katz. Homophobia has been described as the last acceptable form of prejudice. Granted, society is slowly becoming less accepting of homophobia. But the simple fact is that homosexuals are still often treated as second-class citizens. This is problematic for a number of reasons, and allowing it to continue is a definite detriment to society. In How Homophobia Hurts Children, author Jean M. Baker discusses ways in which children are being bombarded with homophobia. Yet again, it seems that remaining silent about a serious issue such as this can only lead to negative results. First, there is the fact that never hearing about homosexuality could be extremely confusing for a young gay child. This child may end up with feelings of self-doubt or hatred because he or she never hears about or gets to discuss homosexuality. Then there is also the problem of not addressing homophobia when it is displayed in children. By not speaking out against this, adults may be implicitly reinforcing homophobia in the same way that Katz suggested that parents implicitly reinforce racial prejudice.

Baker says, “When children suspected of being gay are harassed and tormented by their peers with minimal reaction from teachers or administrators, the underlying message is that homosexuals deserve to be mistreated.” It may be cliché and acceptable to write such behavior off as “kids being kids,” but it seems quite obvious that allowing such prejudice to fester is likely to lead to harmful situations. Furthermore, research such as that
discussed in *Homophobic Teasing, Psychological Outcomes, and Sexual Orientation Among High School Students: What Influence Do Parents and Schools Have?* indicates that by simply providing homosexual students with concrete and visible support in both the school setting and at home, it is possible to significantly cut down on the number of LGBT teens who suffer from depression, suicidal behavior, and drug use.

But before one can work toward eradicating homophobia, a better understanding of its development is useful. Researcher Paul Van de Ven found that when he explored the concept of homophobia, much of the research pertained to its development and existence in college-aged students. This research, while useful, typically always yielded the same result. College students generally tend to score fairly low over time on the homophobia scale. It is believed that the college experience is one of the driving factors in this shift, but there has not been much discussion of homophobic attitudes in young people before college, or at least there hadn’t been before Van de Ven began his research. Thus, in *Comparisons Among Homophobic Reactions of Undergraduates, High School Students, and Young Offenders*, he encompasses a far greater age range to get a more complete perspective of the existence of homophobia in not only young adults, but also in adolescents. What Van de Ven found was that there are definite differences between the different age groups in terms of homophobia and that more broad research would be most beneficial if one hopes to truly understand, and potentially correct, the problem.

Van de Ven begins his discussion by citing prior research that indicated that people who are homophobic are likely to be male, older, and less well educated (Van de Ven 117). These findings most likely don’t come as a huge surprise as the typical face of homophobia,
particularly violent acts of homophobia, tends to be male and lower class. Though Van de Ven points out that there has been other research that disagrees with his findings. Prior research also indicated that homophobic males tended to be more aggressively negative toward gay men than lesbians but this seems to have more to do with the individual person's own homophobia than the specific characteristics of gay men versus the characteristics of lesbians. It also seems that, at least in America, our perception of what it means to be masculine plays a part in how some men display their homophobia. For example, some might lash out at a gay man that they deem to be too feminine or at a lesbian who rejects them because they see it as an affront to their own masculinity.

A significant issue that Van de Ven noted before he began his research was the propensity for prior researchers to focus singularly on one aspect of homophobia, particularly issues related to cognition. His goal throughout his study was to incorporate a number of factors including cognition, as well as other areas such as behavior. Van de Ven's research subjects were comprised of the groups mentioned in the title of his study. Of the undergraduates, all were in their third year of college and most were female. Of the high school students, all were freshmen, ages fourteen or fifteen, and there were slightly more males than females. The young offenders were an interesting group in that they were all residents of a juvenile facility. Each young offender was between the ages of thirteen and eighteen, and nearly all were male. All research subjects entered into the study voluntarily, and parents of the high school students and the young offenders were able to withdraw their children if they wished to do so.
One aspect of the research dealt with having the research subjects rate a list of statements such as “Homosexuals are sick.” These statements were used to ascertain general beliefs the participants held about homosexuals. Van de Ven could look at the data and pinpoint attitudes that were shared by the various groups. Another component involved having the subjects read a portion of text containing gay content and use a list of adjectives to describe the content. Responses to that particular portion led to the development of the following three subcategories: homophobic guilt, homophobic anger, and delight. Homophobic guilt manifested itself in feelings of awkwardness, shame and discomfort. Homophobic anger was essentially just as it sounds, a display of contempt toward homosexuals. Delight, however, was a display of positive feelings regarding homosexuals. A third component gave participants a list of questions that assessed the degree to which they would go in order to avoid homosexuals in social situations and their willingness to support the rights of homosexuals. In addition, the high school students and young offenders were given the task of writing a short story that would be used to further assess those particular groups. The collection of data was then broken down into five variables including the three subcategories mentioned previously, as well as homophobic behavior and cognition.

Van de Ven found that young offenders and high school students scored in the medium to high range on all variables. This suggests that the existence of homophobia in adolescents is likely higher than most people would imagine. Conversely, undergraduate students scored below medium on all variables except delight. This seems to suggest the occurrence of a decline in homophobia somewhere along the collegiate timeline and an increase in positivity toward homosexuals. Van de Ven also found that female
undergraduate and high school students were typically less homophobic than their male counterparts. But, in an interesting twist, female young offenders were nearly always more homophobic than their male counterparts. Because the sampling of female young offenders was quite small, it is difficult to say why they displayed such strong homophobia. Perhaps they were trying to display what they viewed as the desired masculine behavior due to the fact that they were in a mostly masculine environment.

Van de Ven’s research is significant for a number of reasons, but particularly for this discussion, because it indicates the occurrence of homophobic feelings in thirteen year olds. One would probably be safe in assuming that these feelings aren’t developed over night. Luckily, through the college experience, it seems that a significant number of students do shift or reduce such feelings, but why should we expect colleges and universities to be responsible for eradicating homophobia? And what happens when someone does not go to college or when someone goes to a college that is not accepting of homosexuals? Going back to the research done by Katz, society would most likely benefit from more open discussion of homosexuals, as well as more inclusion of acceptance of homosexual in programming that appeals to young ages such as Sesame Street.

Choosing to make the necessary changes in oneself is probably the best, and most significant, way to eliminate prejudice. However, it is also the most difficult step to take. It requires a certain level of introspection that many are not comfortable with. In order to make these changes, one would have to admit to being prejudiced. While it is entirely acceptable to make the statement that everybody is prejudiced, most people tend to bristle if such labels are placed on them exclusively. They don’t want to be seen in a negative light,
and they definitely do not want to be labeled as racist or homophobic or sexist. After all, how many people can truly say they would really want to be linked to ones of those labels? But if one does happen to fall into any of those categories, then taking ownership of the title would absolutely be necessary before the potential for conscious change could even be considered.

Since the likelihood of such occurrences is understandably low, there must be additional routes one can take to work on eliminating learned prejudice. While it is clear that many people struggle with the notion of discussing prejudice with children, it is also clear that the educational arena is probably the place that is looked upon most chiefly as a means of increasing awareness and understanding on these matters, particularly when one considers that many of the children aren’t being taught about such matters at home. Most schools engage in some level of teaching multiculturalism, even if it is something as simple as putting up posters of famous African Americans for Black History Month. But one would have to live under a rock to be unaware of the obvious protests that can arise when certain matters are delved into in schools.

For example, the reasons some people do not want acceptance of homosexuality taught in schools are numerous. These reasons vary from the common religious roadblocks to the idea that teaching acceptance of homosexuality will turn children into homosexuals to the idea that children simply won’t be capable of understanding homosexuality.

According to Kerry H. Robinson’s *Making the Invisible Visible: Gay and Lesbian Issues in Early Childhood Education*, many parents and teachers seem to think that teaching children about homosexuals should be a family decision and should take place outside the school.
But as the research earlier indicated, this belief is somewhat ironic. Parents may believe that discussion of homosexuality should be a family matter, but if the research about race can be extended, it is safe to assume that parents are not discussing homosexuality with their children. Perhaps that is what they think is best, but if so many parents are not discussing these issues, how can we be surprised when children continue to grow and maintain feelings of prejudice?

Many teachers are doing their part to incorporate the teaching of multiculturalism into their lessons. In fact, research indicates that early childhood educators can and have been greatly influential in getting students to embrace cultural diversity. The problem is that the definition of diversity in schools still tends to pertain almost entirely to racial and ethnic diversity, issues that are still sensitive, but not to the degree that issues of sexuality seem to be today. In fact, Robinson found that a significant portion of the educators were often champions of nearly all aspects of multiculturalism except those related to sexuality. She says, "Consequently, children are often given contradictory messages about inequality and social justice, in which some aspects of diversity or 'difference' are considered more worthy of attention and respect than others" (Robinson 431).

With this in mind, it is no wonder that we have so many people who are vehemently against racism, but not so strong in their desire to see homosexuals treated equally. This would also explain why it is still so difficult to get legal protections and rights for homosexuals while laws protecting against discrimination by way of race have a generally easier time making it into the law books.
attempting to teach students to be homophobic, they are, by virtue of leaving sexuality out of multiculturalism, teaching students to subjugate such issues.

Even though developing stronger multicultural education practices may not be a cure-all, it is worth noting that research into the success of anti-prejudice education has shown positive results. College is an arena in which educators are typically given a lot more latitude with what they can teach. The researchers of *Reducing Racism, Sexism, and Homophobia in College Students by Completing a Psychology of Prejudice Course* found that students who took a class that was specifically aimed at understanding and reducing prejudice of all sorts demonstrated lower levels of prejudice by the end of the course (Pettijohn & Walzer). These students demonstrated far lower levels of prejudice than counterparts who took a basic Psychology class that only scratched the surface of these issues. Obviously, multicultural education was a success in this case. The only sad part of the findings is that these students were already adults before they finally began to recognize and reduce their biases. Wouldn’t it be groundbreaking if we could embark upon such changes at the elementary school level?

Beyond multicultural education, there are additional steps that can be taken to reduce homophobia. For example, much like the findings of Katz’s study, research has found that exposure can be a key factor in eradicating homophobia. However, it is important to note that the exposure referred to here isn’t something as simple as taking your child to a pride parade and expecting him or her to suddenly be gay-friendly. The type of exposure necessary for true changes to occur is known as contact theory. This type of exposure requires a bit more work from all parties involved.
Researcher Larry M. Lance used contact theory in his work documented in *Acceptance of Diversity in Human Sexuality: Will the Strategy Reducing Homophobia Also Reduce Discomfort of Cross-dressing?* While the focus of Lance’s research was ultimately cross-dressing, it often overlapped with homosexuality due to perceptions of what it means to be a cross-dresser. Furthermore, his use of contact theory here stemmed from earlier studies he completed regarding involving contact theory and homosexuality. Of contact theory, Lance said, “It needs to be pointed out that the application of contact theory to reduce discomfort of cross-dressing and reduce homophobia in college classroom environments is effective under certain conditions. One condition is institutional support for the understanding of diversity. A second condition is social interaction for the purpose of mutual understanding. A third condition is social interaction among people of equal status.” What this means is that contact theory can only be effective in situations in which there is adequate support, genuine desire for understanding and a level playing field. Obviously, this is probably something that many young people will not be able to embark upon solely on their own, but it is entirely plausible to believe that the adults around them could create such environments.

It is obvious that many changes will have to take place in society before we can truly argue that we live in an unbiased society, but maybe the changes won’t necessarily be broad and sweeping. In fact, it is quite likely that changes will start with individuals. After all, while it is true that it is difficult to consciously make the choice to work toward eliminating inner prejudices, it can be done. I know this from personal experience. After all, I did manage to go from being a kid who exhibited prejudiced feelings stemming from religious and cultural expectations to being a committed straight ally. My story may not be
especially unique, but by sharing it, maybe I can spur someone else on to take a stand.

Gandhi said, "Be the change you wish to see in the world." This is my story, and this is me, being the change.

I do not remember the first time I heard the word gay used to describe homosexuals. My earliest memories of the word come from its usage in the theme song of *The Flintstones*. Of course, now when I hear that theme song, I cannot help but chuckle a bit when they say, "We’ll have a gay old time." I can barely recall instances from childhood when homosexuality was talked about directly. The word itself was definitely never used. They were always sissies, punks or fairies, or perhaps they just "had a little sugar in their tanks." Lesbians were even more unknown to me than gay men. I don’t think I can recall hearing anything that even remotely referenced lesbians until I reached junior high.

As a self-proclaimed word lover, I am always interested in words that have multiple meanings. I mention this because even though I recognize now that the aforementioned derogatory terms were directed toward homosexuals or those presumed to be gay, my first understanding of them was that they all essentially meant weakness. For example, if one boy in my neighborhood called another a punk, then I would assume the term was just being used to label someone as weak or not as tough as the rest of us. I am not exactly sure when I first began to realize that these words were also being used to call people gay. It is not as though the gay meaning took over. Instead, it was as though gay and weak became synonymous. Now that I have studied the significance of words more, I realize that this was most likely a link made on purpose. Outside of such derogatory comments, I do not remember any discussion of homosexuals from adults in my family. I am not sure if this
was a conscious decision, but I think the various aspects of our culture and background contributed to this outcome.

My frame of reference regarding homosexuals was incredibly skewed early on due to only having heard negative comments about the community. Regardless, I still managed to be fairly neutral in my true feelings. However, I come from a family in which I literally have hundreds of cousins. I am on the young end of the grandchildren. As an only child, my cousins were my lifeline to fun and games. I imitated things my older cousins said and did because I wanted to fit in with the group. I wanted to fit in so bad that I it did not matter whether I agreed with them. This behavior carried on for most of my childhood, and it was not until adulthood that I fully recognized and accepted the cruelty I displayed as a child.

For example, I have an older male cousin who always carried a purse. From my perspective as a child, it would have been stranger to see him without the purse than with it. To all of us children, this meant that he was gay, or at least what we perceived as gay. He also wore his hair in a stereotypically feminine manner and his speech was very feminized, but those things were not what we got stuck on. It was always the purse. I can remember sitting around with the cousins who were around my age while we laughed and joked about the purse. No adult ever verbally told me that it was wrong for a man to carry a purse, but somehow I got that impression. Perhaps, like the research indicated, this was an implicit belief that I picked up somewhere along the way. At any rate, I was critical of my cousin for this reason and it is something I regret to this day. For a number of reasons, I have lost contact with his side of the family. Last I heard, he was still struggling with his sexuality. And I cannot help but wonder if he heard the things we were saying and if that
had anything to do with his struggle. That thought alone is reason enough for me to want to become a better ally. But as I already mentioned, I did not come to understand the significance of this behavior until many years later.

That cousin was not the only gay person in our family. When I was a bit older, I witnessed another cousin being ridiculed behind his back for bringing his boyfriend to a family function. That was the first moment that I realized he was gay, and I knew internally that I did not really care, but I could tell members of my family did. The general sentiment was that he was utterly wrong for bringing his significant other to a family gathering. Because I still desired to fit in, I echoed this sentiment. I do not know why it was wrong to bring a loved one to a family function, and I do not know why I could not just stay out of the negativity. In some ways, I am glad I have such experiences to look back on because they remind me of just how nonsensical it is to hate someone for being gay. We were as children, suddenly disliking a cousin we had always loved because he was gay. On the other hand, I hate the fact that it took me so long to extend my understanding of the need for equal rights to homosexuals. I hate that I was unable to recognize the harm I was doing. It is not my desire to really blame my family for this behavior. Yes, I was emulating others, but it was ultimately my choice to do so. I wish I could have heard positive things about LGBRQ community from the adults in my life because I think that would have helped me, but I am not sure it would have affected my desire to fit in with my cousins. I think the only way in which that particular development would have really been different was if my cousins had been taught positive things about homosexuals as well.
With the influence from my cousins being what it was and my own unwillingness to stand against them being quite strong, I do not think I truly began to have positive feelings about gay people until I started going to church. Those who are aware of the stereotypical religious view of homosexuality might find that statement somewhat ironic. I would be lying if I said that I attended a church in which homosexuality was completely accepted, though I do know of such churches where that belief is expressed. The fact is that my religious experience was probably what most expect in relation to homosexuality, and I would say that I regret going through that. However, I believe that experience allowed for a necessary wake up call that I might not have gotten otherwise.

My family did not start going to church until I was about eight years old. I did my best to learn as much as I could from the experience. I paid attention for as long as my attention span would allow me to, and I actively participated in Sunday school and the youth choir. I started reading the Bible, and naturally I found the few references it contains to homosexuality, but I didn’t really think anything about them until I heard my Pastor reference them in his sermons. Even now, I can easily hear his words of hate in my ears, and I shudder to think about the fact that he is still putting those words in the ears of today’s youth.

At first, the only problem I had with church was that the services were too long, especially the sermon portion. Sometimes the sermons were interesting and kept my attention. Other times, they were dull or repetitve, and I drifted off. And still other times, I found it difficult to block out what I heard even though I wanted to do just that. I suppose everybody has causes to stand for or against. My pastor had two very specific ills that he
preached against. The first of these was “whoremongering.” As I understood it, he was essentially preaching against rampant sexuality. I never paid a significant amount of attention to that portion of the sermon, but I always perked up when he discussed the other main “ill” that he was against, which happened to be homosexuality. We only went to church for a few years, but I remember him ranting about homosexuality on multiple occasions and it really started to get to me.

I'm not sure why I was initially so annoyed. Maybe it bothered me because I felt like he was speaking badly against my cousins or maybe I just reached a point in development where I began to realize how nonproductive it is to hate. Either way, I did my best to tune him out. Unfortunately, that was not especially effective, and I began to greatly dislike attending church. The absolute breaking point came when our organ player, who we all assumed was gay, suspiciously left. My pastor tried to make it seem like it was the organ player’s choice, but even I could tell that there was no real choice in the matter. What bothered me most was how he talked about the situation. He never explicitly said the organ player was fired for being gay, but the words he used made the situation blatantly clear to me and the other children of the church. From that point on, I no longer felt comfortable in that church and only went when forced to do so. I believe that this event is where I truly made my first choice to change the way I felt about homosexuals. It was not anything as significant as creating new legislation or leading a national march, but it was my own small way of beginning to stand up for the rights of this group. It was definitely one of the first steps of my development as an ally.
One significant thing that I have learned by way of various religious experiences is that spirituality and belief in gay rights do not have to be diametrically opposed. As I have gotten older, I have met a number of people who identify as both LGBTQ and religious or spiritual. For my own part, I still consider myself to be a Christian, but I do not align myself with any particular denomination. My personal belief is that Jesus had it right when he preached about love and acceptance. If people truly love and want the best for each other, then I see no way in which denying homosexual equal rights would be acceptable. I believe Jesus would want me to work for equal rights for all, and that belief makes it easier for me personally to continue to work toward becoming an activist.

I would be doing myself a disservice if I did not discuss the environment I came from, both physically and culturally. I was born and raised in Gary, Indiana. The town is quite unlike the rest of Indiana for a number of reasons that become obvious once you spend a few minutes there. Gary is a town that is almost entirely African American in population. The great majority of people living there are middle class at the highest. Most of the people from my neighborhood never went to college, and some didn’t even make it out of high school. I was lucky in that my mom always pushed me to succeed. That is not to say that some of my friends’ parents didn’t want the best for them, but they didn’t always give their children the best opportunities to achieve. Gary can be a stifling and confusing place to grow up. You are expected to make money, yet you can be seen as a sell-out for doing it in an academic way. Everybody is trying to elevate his or her status without losing street credibility. You are supposed to want to do better, but nobody is surprised if you have kids at young age or get arrested for assault. Those things, while not desirable, are acceptable by many in the community. Being gay, on the other hand, is not acceptable.
My racial community is often viewed as one of the most hostile toward the gay community. I believe one of the biggest reasons for this perception has to do with the Black church. The Black community is, and has been for years, intertwined with and engulfed by religion. In Gary, I doubt you could go more than a few blocks without coming across somebody’s church. From my visits to churches, I would say that many Black churches are just like the one I grew up in. Black kids grow up being taught by the preacher, a person that is supposed to be revered, that homosexuality is evil and disgusting. Furthermore, I believe that there’s a certain perception of what it means to be a man within my community that puts manhood in direct conflict with homosexuality.

Once, when I was young, I got into a discussion with a cousin about who had the better family from the sides we didn’t share. His main point was that while his family did include drug addicts and other criminals, at least there were not any homosexuals. Keep in mind that I do not think I was older than fifth grade at the time, and he was a good deal older than me. That belief system boggled my mind. How could being gay be worse than being a criminal? It seems like boys are always taught to reject that which is feminine, and if a boy does embrace such things, then he’s a “sissy.” That behavior seems to be even more significant in the African American community. I remember boys that I went to school with all throughout elementary school who were sweet and kindhearted. These same boys suddenly turned into wannabe thugs by the end of junior high. I still have a hard time reconciling some of the younger personalities with the personalities they have now. To be a man in the eyes of many in the Black community is to be tough or “hard.” Being gay doesn’t allow you to do either of these things.
I think that the confusing nature of the Black community in terms of homosexuality is part of why I was originally very careful about displaying my pro gay rights feelings. My struggles with the community go beyond this issue, but I did not want to be different in yet another way. It took quite some time, but I eventually decided that supporting equality took precedence over fitting in with my community. But I would be lying if I said that this is something that I am completely over. Just recently, I was placed in a situation in which I was obviously displaying by support for equality in a place where there happened to be a lot of Black people. I felt like I was on display, like I was being judged by the entire community by way of a few obvious stares. Part of me wanted to completely shut down and hide. I am bothered by the fact that this situation affected me so much, and I hope that I get to the point where it does not one day. Until then, it is something that I will have to consistently work on. Luckily, I can derive strength from the savage inequalities that I witness in society. One event in particular gripped my heart at a young age and continues to be one of the most significant events that contributed to my development as an ally.

Matthew Wayne Shepard was born on December 1, 1976 in Casper, Wyoming. Across the country, my mother was halfway through her final year of high school. I was not yet, as my grandmother would say, a twinkle in my mother's eye. I would not be born for another eleven years. When Matthew Shepard died on October 12, 1998, I was part way through my first year of junior high at that point, and only vaguely aware of the politics of the world. I never met Shepard, but I still feel incredibly drawn to him to this day. For me, his death was a major catalyst in my development. It opened my eyes to discrimination based on something more than the color of your skin.
Prior to Shepard’s death, I never paid much attention to the ways in which violence could affect groups that weren’t African American. I knew that my relatives, in both the past and present, were raped, beaten, hanged, and otherwise discriminated against simply because of the color of their skin. I also vaguely knew that some other groups were sometimes targeted because of their skin colors. But until Shepard, I never knew that hatred of other groups existed beyond the scope of race. I essentially thought that all other violent acts were random. I didn’t know that other cultural groups were hated in the same way that my ancestors were, and coming to this realization is part of what I believe made me shift my perspective to that of an ally.

I do not remember where I was when I first heard about the brutal attack that Matthew endured, but the story will forever be engrained in my mind. In the early morning hours of October 7, 1998, Shepard decided to take a ride home with Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, two men he’d met in a bar that night. McKinney and Henderson brutally beat Shepard and left him to die, a fate that came true a few short days later. The response from the public was palpable. Matthew Shepard was definitely not the first victim of violence against homosexuals, but I would say that he’s certainly the most memorable for a generation or two. Across the country, vigils were held while Shepard was in the hospital. Somehow I doubt that all of these people reacted so strongly were gay rights activists before Shepard’s death, but I think it’s safe to say that many people became activists after his death.

I remember my feelings when I learned of Shepard’s death. One of the first feelings I had was shock. I had never heard of a person being killed just because of sexual orientation.
Once I began to wrap my head around that concept, I progressed to immense sadness. I have probably always had a bleeding heart. I could not help but feel sad for Matthew, his family, his friends, and humanity in general. From there, I progressed to anger. I was angry at McKinney and Henderson for committing such a heinous act, and I was angry at the fact that more people around me were not visibly bothered by this incident. I do not think that intellectually I made the connection between discrimination against Black people and discrimination against homosexuals, but I think I began to piece together the idea that human rights are a significant issue for a variety of groups.

Last year, a new play entitled *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later* was produced. The creators of the original play *The Laramie Project* went back to the titular town ten years after the death of Shepard and tried to see how things had changed or stayed the same there. I was lucky enough to be able to see one of the first performances of this new show on the eleventh anniversary of Matthew’s death. It was fascinating to see the different perspectives of people in Laramie about how the town has or hasn’t changed. One thing that shocked me was the idea that the crime wasn’t motivated by Shepard’s homosexuality at all. Instead, a number of Laramie residents think that it was simply a robbery gone wrong. Apparently, this idea is not new, but it was new to me. Personally, I believe that the evidence that indicates that the murder was a hate crime is quite strong, but this different perspective definitely gave me food for thought. Following the production, I attended a vigil for Shepard, just as I’ve done every year since I began college. Each vigil is different, but this one will always stay with me because I could see, yet again, the impact that Shepard’s death could have on people. That night, I watched and listened as people who were just learning of his story on that evening began the journey toward becoming allies. It
was then that I truly recognized the way in which sharing these stories can really contribute to the reduction of prejudice in others. For that reason alone, I will always tell Shepard’s story.

The fact is that while I started the process of becoming a gay rights advocate in middle school, my feelings remained somewhat dormant for many of the following years. That is not to say that I was not still passionate about the cause. I definitely maintained interest, and I tried to become aware. I wanted to see *Boys Don’t Cry* even though I knew it would break my heart. I contemplated the possibility of starting a Gay-Straight Alliance at my high school. But I just was not entirely ready to make the necessary changes. I think that maybe I just did not feel comfortable displaying these feelings in an environment in which I was uncertain of who would support my beliefs, particularly within the Black community. I also do not think I knew what the best step was to take. I lacked the resources that were necessary to become the person I knew in my heart that I wanted to be.

For that reason, I knew that I wanted to go to a school in a place that was totally accepting of homosexuals, or at least to a school that had an active GLBT organization on campus. That was one of my requirements. When I got to Ball State University, I took my time getting acclimated to college life before joining any organizations. I went to my first Spectrum event in the spring of 2006, and I’ve been an active member ever since then. Later that year, on what has come to be known as Matthew Shepard Day, I participated in my first vigil for Shepard. Going into the event, I did not know what to expect really, but any expectations I did have were greatly exceeded. It was the first experience I ever had where I was with a group of people who were as affected by Shepard’s death as I was. In that
moment, I knew that I could get what I needed and grow into the person I needed to be in that group.

Because of my involvement with Spectrum, I got the opportunity to hear Judy Shepard, Matthew Shepard's mother, speak. I do not think that anything she said that evening was profound, but just seeing her on the stage, talking to us about her son's death and about what we could do to help stop similar crimes from happening was inspiring. Since Shepard's death, his mother has been working on getting hate crime legislation extended to protect homosexuals. This piece of legislation is officially the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, but most people probably know it as the Matthew Shepard Act. After many stops and starts, the bill finally made it through the House of Representatives last year. I know that some people have a hard time accepting hate crimes legislation, but I feel that protection is necessary for some groups until we become a more accepting society. The strength Mrs. Shepard displayed on that stage and through her hard work is something that I find it difficult to adequately describe with words. I cannot imagine how difficult it must be to get up each day and discuss the tragic events that took her son away. Yet, she still manages to do so because she knows it's the right thing to do. This understanding gave me an entirely new level of advocacy to work toward. If Mrs. Shepard can make the choice to do what she does each day, then I can certainly do my part here.

As someone who often does speaker panels for Spectrum, I find myself in an interesting place now. I come across younger students, both within and outside the LGBTQ community, who know very little about the history of this community. Even the well-
publicized tragedies such as Shepard, Gwen Arujo, Barry Winchel, and Lawrence King are often unknown until we discuss them on the panels. This lack of knowledge makes me work harder as an ally. I want to help people to understand how this community is marginalized and how we can stop the cycle of hatred if we all work together. As I make the transition from college student to professional young adult, I find my desire to be involved in LGBTQ advocacy to be stronger than I ever could have imagined. I spent most of my college years as a committed member and leader in Spectrum. I'm now looking to organizations like the Human Rights Campaign to further my advocacy.

I am also in an interesting position as a teacher. Prior to student teaching, I was somewhat apprehensive about the level of my personal beliefs that I was going to let my students see. I tried to remain neutral about most political issues that arose in class. However, I still found that my students who identified as LGBTQ were drawn to me. An older gentleman that I know from various Indiana advocacy groups told me that even though I never told my LGBTQ students that I am pro gay rights, the students would be able to pick up on my acceptance of them through the way I interacted with them. One of my students eventually told me how good it felt to know that I accepted her. In that moment, I knew that everything I was doing was absolutely right. In the future, I would like to take a more active role in working with LGBTQ kids in both school and community settings. I know that this might become a problem, depending on what school system I end up in. I am not sure what exactly I would do if forced to choose between supporting gay rights and continuing employment at a school. I hope I would choose the former option, but I am hesitant to say that with absolute certainty. I know that there is a lot more that goes into a
situation of the nature than just being able to walk away from a job. Hopefully, I will end up in a school that does not place me in that position.

I know that the events I have discussed here are not the only ones that affected my growth from a child with prejudiced feelings toward homosexuals to an adult with a strong desire to attain equality for this community. However, they are the ones that are the most significant in my opinion. When I look back at the changes I made throughout my life, these are the circumstances and events that I remember. Because of the research I studied, I believe that it is ultimately the decision of the individual to stand for or against prejudice. I also believe that is the responsibility of adults to speak out against prejudice, so that children who are faced with these decisions understand that maintaining prejudice is not the way to go. Every aspect of my life, from family to society at large, has shaped my development and lead me to the point of writing this paper. My wish is that others may read this and become inspired to make the choice to change as I have, particularly those who have displayed prejudice in ways similar to those I have shared. I hope that they can see my faults and recognize that there is always room for change. I am not saying that it will be easy. If anything, I think I have indicated that the struggle is on going. But I do believe that it is ultimately worth it, and that doing so can potentially create a future in which the words racism, homophobia, and prejudice are truly archaic. That dream may seem idealistic and impossible, but I choose to be optimistic and continue to work toward making this dream a reality.
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