



GIFT Rap

The Newsletter of Gays In Faith Together

Spring 2008

SOCIAL WORK INTERNSHIP

Looking Back on My Year With GIFT

By Sarah Poulisse

On May 2nd of this year I graduated from Kuyper College with my Bachelors Degree in Social Work. This was the culmination of four years of work there, including this past year with GIFT, which has been one of the richest experiences of my life. I worked hard to get this internship, and each moment was worth the work. At every turn I met beautiful new people, and I was challenged and stretched in ways that have truly helped to mold me into the social worker I just graduated to become.

By far, my two favorite parts of this year with GIFT have been 1) the survey data that I got to spend much time calculating, recalculating, analyzing, and discussing, and 2) the relationships I have been able to form. The survey results you can read about elsewhere in this newsletter; it's the people who have been a part of my year with GIFT that I want to talk about here. The people I have met—participants in GIFT's TNT, leaders at Grand Valley's



Rev. Jim Lucas provided Sarah Poulisse with much guidance during her internship.

Out And About, parents of gay children, my social work supervisor Stephen Sigelman, Jim Lucas, and so many others—have instilled me with a much deeper understanding of what it is like to be a person of faith, who happens to be gay, in West Michigan. Moreover, through all of these people I have also been given encouragement and hope for the future.

I want to give a special thanks to Stephen Sigelman (a retiring GIFT Board

member with a Masters of Social Work), who worked with me every week to give me valuable insights as my supervisor.

A year ago I would not have been able to fathom how large and “out” the LGBT community is in West Michigan. Though I may have seen only a small part of the community, I have seen individuals with unique passions, careers, dreams, and at least one shared hope: to be able to live uncloseted, safe, and accepted lives as individuals and sometimes even as people of faith. Whether I saw people imagining this openness, working for it, or simply longing for it, I have seen the corporate hope, and believe it will continue to amount to a shift in how current and future generations understand faith and sexual identity.

Seeing this hope fueled a passion within me to continue to reconcile faith and marginalized sexual identities in my own personal life and potentially in my future career. And I just wanted to say thank you for making my experience so worth it.

TAG (THE ALL- INCLUSIVE GROUP)

Forgiveness, Films, and Food

By Elizabeth Lucas, Administrative Assistant

GIFT programming exists to bring the topics of sexuality and faith into discussion, into new light, into an atmosphere of openness and acceptance. This year we touched on those topics in a couple different ways.

During the stormy, cold months of January and February, we looked at forgiveness in a series of meetings that focused on several aspects: What is it? Why do we need it? How can we achieve it? We all need forgiveness and need to figure out how to give it. Discussions in those sessions most often touched on forgiving those people

and institutions who have seriously hurt us in the past.

As spring came around, we showed a series of films that spoke specifically about the different areas in our lives and our culture where sexuality and faith cross each other, sometimes painfully: in families, in churches, and even in the Middle Eastern community. We also dished out some pretty good food.

We will continue to probe deeper into the mystery of the relationship between sexuality and faith, a relationship too often scorned, repressed, or denied. We hope you'll join us next time.



During one of the Films and Food sessions, attendees sat down for a homemade meal.

The Blessings of Being Gay

By Elizabeth Lucas, Administrative Assistant

I wrote an article in the last newsletter introducing myself as the new GIFT administrative assistant, and now I am writing to say goodbye. I warned the Board that I would only be staying for one year, and they hired me anyway, for which I am grateful. In the fall I will begin a Masters in Journalism at the University of Missouri, and I'm moving to that hot and heavy climate in July.

I have a lot to think about as I plan this major life change. But before I face the future squarely, I'm given the opportunity here to reflect on the last seven years: my life in Michigan.

I started college with my fair share of teenaged sexual confusion, mostly because I knew I liked girls. But I would very rarely allow myself to even *think* of the world "lesbian;" I would allow it into my consciousness for a brief moment, wondering, before pushing it away, back into denial and repression. This no longer worked when I fell in love with my dearest friend. I pushed her away because I couldn't talk about my real feelings for her, but internally I began to process and understand them. I began to name it in my head: homosexuality. By this point I was starting to feel a bit desperate, and quite low. I feared telling anybody, especially my parents, and some of my more conservative friends. I feared being alone, with nobody beside me, supporting me.

Later I came to think of this period in my life as a time of fire – refining fire. Despite the scars I still bare, somehow I was made new, stronger and more confident in who I am and what I believe. All of this because of the people who

proved me wrong, who told me they wouldn't judge me, abandon me, or condemn me. At the time I was stunned; it was an overwhelming blessing to be loved and accepted by



Jessica and Elizabeth at their commitment ceremony in September, 2006.

friends and family.

We talk a lot about social justice, civil rights, acceptance in the church – important goals for the LGBT community and an organization like GIFT. But I'd like to talk about blessings that aren't contingent upon our rights or our acceptance. Blessings we receive simply for being gay. Whatever you believe about homosexuality – Is it genetic or environmental? Did God create us this way? Was it part of His plan? Are we thwarted from living out God's perfect will? – I know I have experienced blessings specifically because I'm gay.

When I came out to my mother, she cried, but her first words were "I love you, I love you so much." Her instincts told her she would need to say this: it would need to be reestablished. And she was right – so many parents react with cold shoulders or angry condem-

nations, rather than love. Those words from my mom were somehow stronger than they had ever been before. My father says "My daughters!" when Jessica and I walk in the room. Every time they reach out to involve her in our family circle, it is a blessing. Their presence at my commitment ceremony was not taken for granted, but treasured. The supporting presence of eighty of our friends and family was not expected; it was extraordinary. As for Jessica, my partner of almost two years now, I'm convinced she's the only person in the world who can coax out of me the best possible person, both in life and in faith, that I can be.

Working at GIFT has been another blessing, mostly because it has put me in touch with some incredible people. I'm honored to be a part of the work of GIFT, and I'm proud of the goals we strive for, but ultimately we are a community of loving, caring people, and *that* to me seems like the most important thing.

There's a danger and a gift in being gay. The danger is that you will always take note of what you're denied, and it will make you feel weak, angry, or bitter. The gift is that while you take note of what you're denied, you can be even more aware of what you *do* have, and even more blessed by it.

I want to note in conclusion that we are all God's children, and we are all blessed in some way or another. While we look ahead to future changes and challenges, and gear up for a fight, let's not forget to give thanks for the things we already have.

God On the Beach and At the Zoo

By Jessica Robinson

Summer is fast approaching. The weather is warming up, students are finishing the school year, and the working world patiently awaits a time when they can unwind and partake in the activities of summer. It is indeed a busy time of year. It is during this time that we need to specifically focus on our relationship with our Creator, our Lord, our God.

During the busy seasons of our

lives it is easy to lose track of God amidst the noise. TNT will be specifically focusing on what it means to intentionally quiet down our lives to a point where we can hear God, and also what it looks like to do so this summer. And of course we will continue to focus on creating and solidifying a sense of community.

We plan to take advantage of the summer weather by taking part in activi-

ties beyond our normal meetings in The Vine. Some of these activities will include barbecuing on the beach in Grand Haven, having a picnic at a park, and a taking trip to the zoo. Our meetings will have a more relaxed tone to them throughout the summer. We look forward to seeing new and old faces and building on what we have established.

The Holy Spirit is Moving!

By Rev. Jim Lucas, BCC, GIFT Chaplain

"Beyond Seven Passages"

As I met this past May with four students from the Masters of Social Work program at Grand Valley State University, I found myself saying, "The Holy Spirit is moving!"

Earlier in the semester the students had contacted me because they needed to develop a grant proposal as part of a class project, and they wanted to write it in such a way that a real organization could use it. They asked if they could write the proposal as if it were coming from GIFT. Of course, I was grateful for this offer and said yes. What amazed me, however, was the program the students were proposing: a community education outreach focused on the healing of misunderstanding and prejudice related to gay and lesbian people—a program analogous to the Institute for Healing Racism.

What was so amazing was that I had already been working with members and friends of GIFT to begin developing a program with this very same description. After last fall's GIFT benefit performance of *Seven Passages: The Stories of Gay Christians*, Director Stephanie Sandberg had presented her idea for a program like the Institute for Healing Racism that would carry forward the educational impact of *Seven Passages*. Two anonymous donors had made initial contributions toward this project, and I had begun working with some folks on developing it with the working title "Beyond Seven Passages."



COMING SOON

SEVEN PASSAGES: THE MOVIE

In early September of 2008, Actors' Theatre will release for sale the movie "Seven Passages: The Stories of Gay Christians" based on the play that debuted at Spectrum Theater last fall. We will keep you updated on a world premier showing of that movie at a local theater.

Now these diligent and excited students were showing me their well-crafted grant proposal for such a project. A coincidence? I think not. The Holy Spirit is moving!

"Got Inclusion?"

Members of GIFT and others have already launched another new community education project called "Got Inclusion?" The purpose of the program is to encourage greater inclusion of LGBT people in Christian communities by facilitating respectful and engaging dialogue among people with diverse perspectives. After one initial pilot session, we had our first "real" session this past winter at the Catholic Information Center. After a panel of gay and lesbian people presented a variety of stories and perspectives, attendees divided into small groups led by trained facilitators. The response? A number of people remarked that they had never seen a group of people with such differing views on LGBT issues sit down and talk with each other!

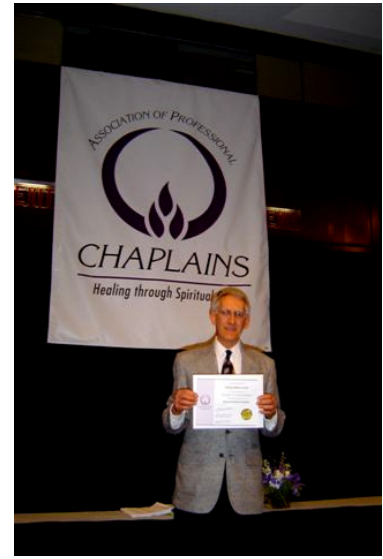
If you know of other Christian churches or community groups that would like to host a "Got Inclusion?" event, please call the GIFT office.

Pastoral Care

The emails requesting pastoral care appointments continue to arrive regularly in my email inbox. I consider it a great privilege to walk with people as they take important new steps in their life journeys.

For example, this spring I have talked with a number of Christian gay men in the early stages of "coming out." One of them told me that I was the first person he had ever told he was gay. He spoke of the fear of telling family and friends as well as the relief he felt in finally beginning to talk with another person about his being gay.

Also this spring I have had the privilege of leading a lesbian couple through a series of pre-commitment counseling sessions. They asked me to lead a commitment ceremony for them, and they were glad to have these sessions for preparation.



Jim Lucas received his BCC certificate at the conference in Pittsburgh.

Board Certified Chaplain

At the annual conference of the Association of Professional Chaplains this past March in Pittsburgh, I received my certificate as a Board Certified Chaplain. I am grateful to God and all those who encouraged me in my twelve years of working toward this professional goal.

Thanks to Sarah and Liz

What a joy it has been to work for the last several months with two extraordinarily talented and energetic young women—Liz Lucas and Sarah Poulisse. I am grateful to both Liz and Sarah for offering their time and talents to GIFT.

Liz has done an amazing job as GIFT's administrative assistant for about a year now. Not only has she been friendly and efficient with the office details of GIFT, but she has regularly been two steps ahead of me in making sure that tasks are done in a timely manner. I wish her God's blessing as she begins graduate studies in journalism this fall.

Sarah has been a bright and spunky addition to the GIFT team over the last school year as a social work intern. She has been dedicated to co-leading the GIFT TNT (Teens 'N' Twenties) group, and she conducted an extensive survey that the GIFT board and staff will rely on as we engage in a strategic plan process over the next few months. Congratulations to Sarah on her graduation from Kuyper College!

A Glimpse Into Numbers

By Sarah Poulisse



At some point many of you may have seen, received, or even taken a survey titled, "After Years of Service: What Can We Still Do for Our Community?" This survey was my year-long work as the GIFT social work intern. Together, with the help and support of Jim Lucas and my social work supervisor, Steve Sigelman, as well as the willingness of the community to participate, I found a few answers to the research question: What sort of programming can GIFT develop that will be useful and used?

Through the responses of the 125 surveys that I got back I found, first, that a disconnection exists between LGBT youth and LGBT adults, with each finding support amongst their own age group and neither seeking to communicate and learn from the other.

Furthermore, the survey revealed that GIFT was mainly reaching people in their 50s and 60s, with few 20-somethings aware of GIFT or the services it offers.

Another revelation was that the people who participated, in general, felt personal self acceptance. However, most participants still felt low acceptance among the greater West Michigan community for various reasons. This may not seem like an issue which a faith-based organization like GIFT should tackle, but GIFT seeks to make faith relevant for LGBT individuals. While GIFT can address the faith of individuals, it must also work for an environment in West Michigan where LGBT people are safe and accepted enough that their having faith in a higher power is no longer seen as an oxymoron.

The bulk of the survey consisted of statements suggesting possible programs and services that GIFT might offer. Of the many suggested, a few rose to the top. One such option was a mentor program for both LGBT individuals and couples. Another was public education about LGBT issues in area schools, churches, and other venues. Participants also desired family services, such as a group for the enrichment of LGBT partnerships and resources for current or hopeful parents.

The results of this survey are not about me and my internship. These results are about you: they came straight from West Michigan's LGBT

community and its allies. With the survey finished and the results in, GIFT is now at a place to make decisions about which issues and programs or services to pursue. With a new Board of Directors coming in this summer, and a plan to refocus GIFT and its mission, these results have helped to give a clear picture of what LGBT people in West Michigan really need from GIFT. Although I will no longer be working with GIFT, I'm glad to have played a part in its future.

For a supplementary summary of these results, with fewer words and more graphs, visit the GIFT website at <http://www.gaysinfaithtogether.org/images/SurveyResults.pdf>.

New Board Members

- On June 3rd, GIFT welcomed the following new members to the Board of Directors: **AJ Bertin, David Ellens, Maureen Malane, and Jessica Robinson.**
- The GIFT Membership also reinstated the following incumbent members of the Board: **Alice Apol, Warren Boer, Mark Glowacki, Laure Mieskowski, and Cara Oosterhouse.**
- We are grateful for the services of **Matt Lind, Stephen Sigelman, and Judith Snow**, who are retiring from the Board this year. Thank you for all your hard work!

2008—2009

What is GIFT?

Mission Statement

GIFT is a faith-based community of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons, their families and friends. Through pastoral care, mutual encouragement, and education, GIFT offers support for spiritual journeys and provides a reconciling presence for individuals, churches, and society.

GIFT Board

Alice Apol
AJ Bertin
Warren Boer
David Ellens
Mark Glowacki
Maureen Malane
Laure Mieskowski
Cara Oosterhouse
Jess Robinson

GIFT Staff

Rev. Jim Lucas
Chaplain

Elizabeth Lucas
Administrative Assistant

Memberships, Inquiries, and Gifts Welcome!

GIFT
207 East Fulton Street
Grand Rapids, MI 49503
(616) 774-0446
www.GaysInFaithTogether.org

Gays In Faith Together, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. U.S. contributions are eligible for tax deduction by the donor. Financial statements are available upon request.

For a calendar of events or to sign up for our various mailing lists, visit us on the web at www.GaysInFaithTogether.org

