

A Conversation With Sara Montgomery, Grandma Lib How to Tell Mom You're Gay

BY RANDY WICKER

With people like Ms. Sara Montgomery around we're sure to have a better world tomorrow. At 75 years of age, she can look back upon a life dedicated to ending oppression, ignorance and inhumanity because since the age of 14, when she took up the suffragette banner, she has committed her life to movements at unpopular times. Sara Montgomery supported the black movement in the '20's, the State of Israel and the peace movements in the '40's, the labor movements in the '50's, women's lib in the '60's. She knew her son Charlie was gay, and marched in the first New York Christopher Street Liberation Day parade in 1970, and has marched every year since. Tragically, however, within the last two years, her son and his gay lover committed suicide together, victims of economic and social oppression. Ms. Montgomery, a woman of honesty and courage, tells their heart-rending story of how guilt and hiding killed them, and she tells of her work with Parents of Gays in an effort to bring such parents out of their own closets. This interview without question should be required reading for every parent of a gay child.

GAY: Ms. Montgomery, you are 75 years old, and yet I saw you carrying a sign in the Christopher Street Liberation Day parade this year which said, "I'm Proud of My Gay Son." I know you're active with the organization **Parents of Gays** because you had a gay son. But before we talk about that I also know you have been active with various movements seeking social reforms throughout your life. Give us some background on how all this came about.

SARA: I started mainly in the Suffrage Movement when I was 14 years old. My brother could vote at that time and I couldn't see that he was any smarter than me, and it annoyed me that he could vote and I couldn't because I wore a skirt. My parents felt the same way. So I became a passionate suffragette. I was 14 when I marched in my first parade, and to this day I'm in the women's lib movement. From the beginning it has never been hard for me to identify with any oppressed group and it was an easy transition for me to progress through movements that were geared to stem ignorance and bigotry.

GAY: What were some of those movements?

SARA: In the 1920's I got involved with the black movement. I saw how horribly black people were being treated, so I was in many parades against police brutality. Back then the black movement was very tiny, especially in Washington, D.C., where I lived. I'll never forget one hot day in that city. Three little black boys went swimming in the **Reflecting Pool**. The police made

Capitol Fountain and dove in. This time the police brought the children down to headquarters and threatened them by putting them into a room and turning on a hissing sound and saying they were gassing them. The children were ten years old. One little boy, Tommy, got so frightened he came out and said, "Mister, we'll never do it again." And the guards said, "You're damned right," and shot him through the neck and paralyzed him for life. Police would drive through the city, see a black woman standing at her doorstep, get out and break her arm just to make sure black people would keep their place. Next I marched in the parades promoting the State of Israel during the 1940's hearings at the United Nations. I'm not Jewish, incidentally. I have the Mayflower on one side and Quaker on the other, so there is no place to send me if people say "Go back where you came from" except to end up right here.

I am not religious but I also taught tolerance to my children because I respect people's right to be themselves. I understand other people's dedication.

When my son came out I made up my mind never to be a closet mother.



So it is not difficult to understand why when I found out that my son was gay I was eager to fight for gay rights. Of course, as I've grown older my activities have grown more limited because of physical ailments.

GAY: Throughout your life how did you support yourself?

SARA: I am a housewife. I was divorced at age 42 having been married 20 years and had three children, two sons and one daughter. I had to make a hard decision with them: whether to let the bigots influence them or to teach them tolerance. My children felt this hard, my being different and they often had to pay the price for this. As far as income goes I had some alimony and some money from my father. I worked after my daughter was divorced and returned to my home. I left her to take care of her children while I went to work in all-night bookstores where I got involved with the unions. I almost got fired because I stood up at a meeting and said wouldn't it be wonderful if we didn't have to go on a picket line but three days before Christmas when the stores are the busiest we just didn't show up. After that management decided I wasn't very useful. The only major fields of endeavor in my life have been my movement activities. I raised the children, took care of the house and gave full-time attention to the movements. Since they were not very wealthy I never took any money for my work, besides, I felt committed.

GAY: Tell us about your sons, particularly your gay son.

SARA: When you raise a child they will have problems. And the greater the problems the more they need their parents. You can't tell them what to do, but you must be supportive. If they fall on their face, you have to pick up the pieces. That's my attitude as a mother. Parents must earn the right to be loved by their children. It is not just automatic. My youngest son Charles was gay. He came out late in life and went to work in the movement at the age of 36. He was aware of his homosexuality since the age of 14. Because of my son's experiences I urge young gays to come out. I understand why they don't; this is a bitter, bigoted society and until you're educated to make a living it is difficult to be gay. I'm sympathetic and understanding. But I also feel my son's life was totally destroyed because he stayed too long in the closet. He told me he was gay at the age of 18 while in the Navy. Charlie was not bisexual, yet he married because he loved children and wanted his own. His big fear in life was taking big jobs that might expose him as a homosexual and he always refused them saying, "you don't know what it's like, mom, to go to work every day fearing exposure." At that time he had four children and he was always



afraid. But even while married he always had men, even though his wife didn't know. She didn't know until after his second suicide attempt just **before** he came out.

GAY: Did the marriage end in divorce?

SARA: Yes, when he came out. He could no longer live that way and betray his **real** self, despite the fact he loved his children, and in his way loved his wife. Certainly it was a blow to her. At first she thought she could live with him after that, but he couldn't and wanted a divorce. I urged that the children learn about Charlie's homosexuality, but my daughter-in-law said, "I don't want my kids to be guinea pigs." Fortunately she went to a doctor who had some sense and he backed me up that they should **know** while young and before others could tell them a lot of lies. Charlie took the children to meet John, his lover at that time.

GAY: Did your son introduce you to gay life?

SARA: He took me to gay bars, showed me how to cruise. I went to SIR meetings, the gay organization in San Francisco. I was well received, but sometimes I felt their **dark** looks.

GAY: What do you mean, "dark looks"?

SARA: Looks of disapproval. So after a couple of trips to the bars I said to Charlie and John, how do you feel about my being here? They said, if you are willing to go, we are willing to take you, so I entered his gay world. At the SIR meetings I was marched to the front of the room. I felt that perhaps

they thought I was the **enemy**, you know the straight world is the enemy of the gay world. I never questioned **that** and felt they had a right to feel that way.

GAY: As a gay, I found that contrary to what you have felt, that when a mother accompanies her gay children, others become adoptive, as if she became a den mother. And many homosexuals felt envious that people had a mother so open, understanding and accepting while they had to hide and cringe and be hypocritical to their own parents.

SARA: I lived briefly with my son while he was going with John, his lover of ten years. John **trusted** me. He knew I had never had any feeling against gayness. I earlier defended a friend whose mother said to me, "If my son is gay I never want to see him again." And she kept her word. From that time she was never the same with me either, because I defended him. Love is love, sex is sex, and it does not matter what way. Charlie's relationship with his wife was the same as with John. They'd kiss, get supper, talk. They told me about the gay world, educated me, and I read every book they gave to me. Gayness is as normal to me as heterosexuality. There is not one **iota** of scientific knowledge to show homosexuality is any more peculiar than being left-handed. When I met John, I was prepared to love him because he loved Charlie. I wanted him to accept me, and he did. While in San Francisco, I also visited Charlie's former

wife and children, who all lived a few doors away. Our visits were wonderful.

But it wasn't until my last excursion to California that Charles and John wanted to tell me the full story of how hard it was for them to be gay. They didn't spare me anything. They hated day by day facing the guilt, facing the ignorance, facing the threat of job loss. My son was a contractor for the county. John worked in a regular business and had been in the closet until his relationship with Charlie. He had 15 years with this company, and was slated for the top spot in the company but when he bought a house with Charlie to live near the children it branded John and he was demoted to the job he held 15 years earlier. Because he was gay. It condemned two men. Charlie's job was also threatened. The children loved John very dearly. He was very gentle. They were both beautiful men.

GAY: Did this demotion cause economic problems?

SARA: That was the basic trouble. I know now why I so disapprove of hiding in the closet. It piles guilt on guilt. So those two men felt they could not support the children and figured they would be able to leave them the insurance. The money was so tight. I impoverished myself sending them money. There were two households and four children. With their finances gone, they faced financial ruin at 46 and 48 years old.

GAY: I gather things went from bad to worse.

SARA: One day I came home. The phone rang. Charlie and John had sealed the garage, taken pills and left the car exhaust running. They were gone two days before they were discovered. And when my daughter told me I was shocked but not surprised. I knew their problems so deeply by that time.

GAY: Was there any note or explanation?

SARA: No. Except a will left on the table. John left half of his estate to Charlie's children. Helen, Charlie's ex-wife, was eligible then for county help. Plus insurance.

John's family refused to accept the fact that these two men had been lovers and had killed themselves. But I wrote to every member of my family and told my friends right away. I made up my mind the minute I hung up that telephone that I would never be a closet mother. I marched in the first gay parade in New York in 1970, while my son was alive. At that time he advised me to walk with some older gays, that they would be more likely to accept me. But I ended up talking to some young gays on Christopher Street for a while, and then was about to move away, thinking they were getting tired of talking to an old lady. But those darlings said, "Aren't you going to walk with us?" And I was so pleased and touched. I knew by their eyes what they were saying. If only this were **my** mother.

GAY: Then the "dark looks" now no longer existed.

SARA: They were very young, it was
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their first time on the streets. I had, of course, been in **many** parades, I've had horses driven over me. I've had police after me. I wasn't **afraid** and maybe they sensed that. The next year I walked with the women. The younger women had the same feeling in their eyes. The next parade I was out of the country. But in the last parade I walked with the parents.

GAY: What about **Parents of Gays**?

SARA: I hope it will grow. It meets regularly every fourth Sunday at the Methodist Church at 13th Street and Seventh Avenue on the corner. People can call me for information at (212) OR 4-5543. Any gays who want to meet me, or bring their mother, or if a mother wants to meet with me **alone** rather than meet with a group, I am willing to give them my time. But I must have safe credentials from people because I live alone and I've had bad experiences opening my door to just anyone. But I would be happy to talk to any parents.

I don't want to seem critical of parents. I know the world. I wasn't born yesterday. I know parents find it difficult to accept their children. Some parents need support and to this end I feel we should have a positive approach, but one that is not apologetic. The attitudes of parents involve **guilt**, which I attribute to the mishandling of psychiatrists who pose as scientists and they are **not**, and who have made mothers either afraid to love their child or afraid not to. Parents feel guilt for whatever their child becomes, forgetting that a child faces a great big world outside of them. I'm strong on this point. It annoys me to see this guilt. Parents are also so sorry for themselves they ignore the fact that in times of crisis their children need them the most. When a child has the courage to tell them about his homosexuality, then parents should feel pride and not sit around moaning, feeling sorry for themselves. Parents should also follow their child's lead. If the child wants to come out and be **honest** by all means the parent must be completely honest also, because if the parents go into the closet it's in itself a condemnation. But a parent must be prepared, just as any brave, valiant young gay is prepared, to face an ignorant and bigoted world. I have met animosity because I have been honest, but I have been able to educate people that it is the world and **not** the gay person that is wrong.

GAY: Some parents are difficult, then?

SARA: I find that I have to hold my temper and not scold. You have to be patient and understand that this is a new movement. As Dick Leitsch said, "We are the youngest and the newest of