

## Dear Gay Community: Your Kids Are Hurting by Heather Barwick

I loved my mom's partner, but another mom could never have replaced the father I lost.

Gay community, I am your daughter. My mom raised me with her same-sex partner back in the '80s and '90s. She and my dad were married for a little while. She knew she was gay before they got married, but things were different back then. That's how I got here. It was complicated as you can imagine. She left him when I was two or three because she wanted a chance to be happy with someone she really loved: a woman.

My dad wasn't a great guy, and after she left him he didn't bother coming around anymore.

Do you remember that book, "Heather Has Two Mommies"? That was my life. My mom, her partner, and I lived in a cozy little house in the 'burbs of a very liberal and open-minded area. Her partner treated me as if I was her own daughter. Along with my mom's partner, I also inherited her tight-knit community of gay and lesbian friends. Or maybe they inherited me?



- Heather Barwick

Either way, I still feel like gay people are *my* people. I've learned so much from you. You taught me how to be brave, especially when it is hard. You taught me empathy. You taught me how to listen. And how to dance. You taught me not be afraid of things that are different. And you taught me how to stand up for myself, even if that means I stand alone.

I'm writing to you because I'm letting myself out of the closet: I don't support gay marriage. But it might not be for the reasons that you think.

### Children Need a Mother and Father

It's not because you're gay. I love you, so much. It's because of the nature of the same-sex relationship itself.

Growing up, and even into my 20s, I supported and advocated for gay marriage. It's only with some time and distance from my childhood that I'm able to reflect on my experiences and recognize the long-term consequences that same-sex parenting had on me. And it's only now, as I watch my children loving and being loved by their father each day, that I can see the beauty and wisdom in traditional marriage and parenting.

Same-sex marriage and parenting withholds either a mother or father from a child while telling him or her that it doesn't matter. That it's all the same. But it's not. A lot of us, a lot of your kids, are hurting. My father's absence created a huge hole in me, and I ached every day for a dad. I loved my mom's partner, but another mom could never have replaced the father I lost.

I grew up surrounded by women who said they didn't need or want a man. Yet, as a little girl, I so desperately wanted a daddy. It is a strange and confusing thing to walk around with this deep-down unquenchable ache for a father, for a man, in a community that says that men are unnecessary. There were times I felt so angry with my dad for not being there for me, and then times I felt angry with myself for even wanting a father to begin with. There are parts of me that still grieve over that loss today.

I'm not saying that you can't be good parents. You can. I had one of the best. I'm also not saying that being raised by straight parents means everything will turn out okay. We know there are so many different ways that the family unit can break down and cause kids to suffer: divorce, abandonment, infidelity, abuse, death, etc. But by and large, the best and most successful family structure is one in which kids are being raised by both their mother and father.

### **Why Can't Gay People's Kids Be Honest?**

Gay marriage doesn't just redefine marriage, but also parenting. It promotes and normalizes a family structure that necessarily denies us something precious and foundational. It denies us something we need and long for, while at the same time tells us that we don't need what we naturally crave. That we will be okay. But we're not. We're hurting.

Kids of divorced parents are allowed to say, "Hey, mom and dad, I love you, but the divorce crushed me and has been so hard. It shattered my trust and made me feel like it was my fault. It is so hard living in two different houses." Kids of adoption are allowed to say, "Hey, adoptive parents, I love you. But this is really hard for me. I suffer because my relationship with my first parents was broken. I'm confused and I miss them even though I've never met them."

But children of same-sex parents haven't been given the same voice. It's not just me. There are so many of us. Many of us are too scared to speak up and tell you about our hurt and pain, because for whatever reason it feels like you're not listening. That you don't want to hear. If we say we are hurting because we were raised by same-sex parents, we are either ignored or labeled a hater.

This isn't about hate at all. I know you understand the pain of a label that doesn't fit and the pain of a label that is used to malign or silence you. And I know that you really *have* been hated and that you really *have* been hurt. I was there, at the marches, when they held up signs that said, "God hates fags" and "AIDS cures homosexuality." I cried and turned hot with anger right there in the street with you. But that's not me. That's not us.

I know this is a hard conversation. But we need to talk about it. If anyone can talk about hard things, it's us. You taught me that.

*Heather Barwick was raised by her mother and her mother's same-sex partner. She is a former gay-marriage advocate turned children's rights activist. She is a wife and mother of four rambunctious kids.*