

OUR STORIES: BEING LGBT AND CATHOLIC

A vintage-style microphone with a rainbow gradient, set against a background of colorful diagonal stripes. The microphone is positioned vertically, with its head at the top and its handle at the bottom. The background consists of several diagonal stripes in shades of blue, purple, pink, orange, and yellow, creating a vibrant, rainbow-like effect.

Presented by the
LGBT Catholics And Friends
Ministry of the
Church of St. Ignatius Loyola

Introduction

All ministries within a parish are “graced movements” that arise when the community discerns a need and responds to it. Over the years the ministry program at the Church of St. Ignatius Loyola has blossomed to include over two dozen distinct areas of activity and support.

During the summer of 2017 a small group of parishioners met with our Pastor, Fr. Dennis Yesalonia, S.J., and the parish staff to explore a ministerial outreach to the gay community within the parish. The group grew in number and was formally created in the fall and called LGBT Catholics And Friends. The focus of this ministry is to support members of the gay community and parents of gay children while at the same time reaching out to the larger community of St. Ignatius to ensure that, indeed, all are welcome and cared for within the Church community of St. Ignatius. The group has been meeting monthly ever since.

On December 7, 2017, the LGBT Catholics And Friends Ministry extended an invitation to the parish to come and hear individual stories of what it means and feels like to be a member of the gay community within the parish today. Those stories are included here. There are four first-person accounts of how the faith journey as a gay Catholic unfolded for some members of this ministry. There are two other accounts of what it means to be the parent of a gay child.

All the stories reflect a compassionate view of developing faith and love as each person’s story reflects, like the facets of a diamond, the many ways in which people come to understand their place within the community of faith at St. Ignatius and the larger Church community. Each of the stories is an invitation to the parish to gain a richer appreciation and deeper understanding of a new ministry that extends the welcoming embrace of the Gospel to all members of the parish community.

We warmly invite you to join our LGBT Catholics And Friends Ministry. See the *Next Steps* section for more information.

— **Anthony Miserandino, Ph.D.**
(Parent Member)

LGBT Catholics And Friends Ministry:

Our Goals and Values

Who We Are

We are a group of LGBT parishioners and family and friends (and parents) of LGBT persons. We are a parish ministry of, by and for our lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender sisters and brothers in Christ and those who love and support them. Our ministry extends to, and embraces, the mission of the entire parish, our home.

What We Are About

Our ministry is inspired by the words of St. Ignatius: "God loves us, creates us, and wants to share life with us forever."

First and foremost, we are creating a home at St. Ignatius Loyola where all LGBT persons and those who love and support them are welcome, and where LGBT persons are fully affirmed and celebrated.

Second, we strive to be a beacon of hope for persons who have felt marginalized and cut off from our Church, inviting them to renewal through a ministry of reconciliation and justice. We foster mutual respect, compassion and sensitivity between our parish (and other ministries in the parish) and the wider community on LGBT issues through education and dialogue.



Michael Beiser, a St. Ignatius Loyola parishioner since 1982.

My father worked for the Social Security Administration and was transferred a lot in my early life, hence I lived in seven different localities in Illinois and Indiana while growing up. My mother told me that when I returned on the first day from my second kindergarten, I asked, "Where am I from?"

From 5th grade through high school I lived on a road, not a street, near La Porte, Indiana and I have always identified as a country boy. My saintly grandmothers were and my parents are devout Catholics, and I attended two parochial elementary schools where I was taught by Franciscan nuns who championed love and forgiveness above all things. I was loved unconditionally and intensely. My family's life, you would say, was idyllic. That was until my father was killed in a car/train accident in 1971 when I was 14 and just starting high school.

In high school, I dated a number of girls and was especially attached to two. In college, I also had a girlfriend for the first two years. Girls had crushes on me, I think, because I was gentle and funny and I took great care to listen to them. They may have been drawn to the blond curls that I had at the time. I am still close friends with all of these women. The hitch was that I was also falling in love with boys, though I processed this as a quest for a best friend and not anything sexual.

In 1975, I left Indiana for good, choosing to flee to the East Coast to attend Yale. There, I attended St. Thomas More, the university's Catholic center. I never drifted away from the Church during my college years, though I deeply questioned her position on the theology of the body and human sexuality. At the time, mine was beginning to rumble.

I spent my junior year in Hamburg, Germany. And that is where, one night after I had prepared a spaghetti dinner for a visiting Yale buddy, I was hit, as if by a lightning bolt, by the realization that I wanted much, much more with him. Then began an agonizing time of melancholy, explosive romanticism and unrequited love. I dressed in black, and read Kierkegaard, Thomas Mann, Freud, and Nietzsche along with German medieval courtly love songs and 19th century romantic poetry. I was in a period of what one might call

in German, which happened to be my major, my own personal *Sturm und Drang*. Finally, during my last semester senior year, I did indeed have a stormy fling, cut short by graduation. By then, there was no question. I was 21. After graduation, I came out to one of my sisters on Cape Cod, then to the other. No problem as far as they were concerned. I did not tell my mother. And, I thought, thank God my father is dead.

I moved to New York in 1979, and quickly found a job, an apartment, and a dashing new boyfriend. We were living the wild 20-something life in the City in the early 80s at the end of the disco days. But something terrifying and ominous was on the horizon, and we first thought it far, far away. Namely in California, where gay men were being stricken with pneumonia and a hideous sort of skin cancer, dying in droves, and no one knew what was causing it. In 1983 I moved to France for two years, having accepted a job managing a villa in Cannes. My boyfriend and I had an unwritten "When in Rome" rule and I had a great deal of fun without him as he did without me. I returned to New York to reclaim my apartment, cat, and boyfriend and found a new job. Not long after, I was startled and horrified to find out that I had a case of oral thrush in my mouth, a tell-tale, terrifying sign.

When tested after the virus was identified—mind you, my infection probably preceded even that—we both found out that we were HIV-positive. This was 1985 and the plague began to hit full force. My best friend died in 1989. The doctor's waiting room alone filled me with unspeakable dread. The clinical prognosis was 18 months from infection to death, and I had little reason to think that I could escape the scourge. My panic only grew day by day.

I knew that I had to let my mother know NOW. So on one Lenten day—after she, my sister, and I climbed a hill with a crowd saying the Stations of the Cross and reached a chapel with the Pietà in the tiny Catholic town of St. Donatus, Iowa—I tearfully delivered the double whammy: not only infected but gay. I remember swarms of sparrows chirping in the trees and drowning out the confusion in my head: I knew from the Gospel that God the Father watches over the sparrows and why not me? My mother is woman of proud

Swiss stock, strong of will and faith, and she immediately sprang into action. After she put me on a plane to return to NYC, she made in haste to the first gay priest she knew, found me a doctor in Iowa, and built a bedroom in her basement in case I chose to die there. She is an RN and began attending Iowa State AIDS conferences to be apprised of the latest treatments. She also saved me the trouble and immediately outed me to the whole extended family. I was aghast, but came to accept her move and bless it as her way of coping.

Unlike many others, I have been out with my employers and colleagues from the start. Instead of discrimination, I have received extraordinary help from them, especially financial finagling so that my benefits wouldn't be affected. From the beginning, clairvoyant friends have told me that they have had flashes of pure revelation that I was not to be doomed.

And, throughout all of these 32 rough years of survival, the staff and fellow parishioners of St. Ignatius have included me and consoled me immensely despite—or I should say, because of—my rude fate with this disease. At the time just preceding my infection, the Holy Spirit took hold of me in a “second conversion.” (Which I prefer rather than saying that I was “born again,” but I was.) I had a primal Emmaus experience: my eyes and ears were opened up to the Scriptures. I joined a fraternity of Secular Franciscans and took vows at St. Stephen's. I also happened to walk into St. Ignatius Loyola Church. A priest in the parish, Fr. John Gallen (may he rest in peace) snagged me following Mass one Sunday after I had started attending regularly and invited me to join the parish. Soon I was involved in parish life, perhaps over-involved in my fresh zeal. Among many other roles in the parish that I undertook, I began serving as a lector and have remained in that ministry ever since.

But the sand was sifting through the hourglass (kind of like in *The Wizard of Oz*) and the disease was destroying me at the same time. I was put on AZT and other earlier medications that I didn't take religiously. In retrospect, this contributed to preserving my life. AZT, taken every four hours, massacred a lot of people. In 1995, my immune system really began tanking. I could call my very few T4 cells, the fighter white blood cells, by name like Snow White with the

seven dwarfs. I embarked on a manic trip to Montreal and Quebec during which I blew out all my credit cards and totaled a rental car.

Upon return, my doctor wanted to send me to a psych ward, but I agreed to go on Lithium. She found out the real culprit after an MRI: I had advanced toxoplasmosis, which had hijacked my brain, found covered with lesions. Then I began taking 50 pills a day in a state of eternal nausea. But something else miraculous was on the horizon: protease inhibitors. The nausea didn't abate for quite some time, but suddenly I was awash with hope. And when it was the worst, Father Bergen stepped in with his spiritual direction. I remember him telling me, "Michael, shave!" when I was letting my body go to hell. His spiritual direction, consolation, and support have literally kept me alive. I have come to believe through the Church that whether the problem is physical, emotional, or psychological, the solution is spiritual.

I still have gigantic issues with Church teaching on human sexuality and the theology of the human body. I never have felt shame about my own incarnation. For the Franciscans, it counts as "Original Blessing" and my body is made for Love in Action. The Church, as I have participated in it and have been embraced by it, does the bulk of its saving work on the parish level, not in Rome, not even on Fifth Avenue. We, the People of God, are the Church. I believe in the priesthood of all Christian believers. May we keep on healing each other as we bear the wounds—and still the glory—of Christ in our own bodies.

In closing, I would like to echo the words of philosopher Simone Weil, a convert to Catholicism from Judaism:

In a moment of intense physical suffering, I felt, without being in any way prepared for it, a presence more personal, more certain, more real than that of a human being, though inaccessible to the senses and to the imagination. Christ Himself came down and took possession of me. I felt in the midst of my suffering the presence of a love, like which one can read in the smile of a beloved face.

— Michael Beiser



Ivan Briggiler, with his wife Maria, have been parishioners of St. Ignatius Loyola for the past 20 years.

God has blessed my wife and me with three children. My oldest son, Marcos, is gay.

When Marcos was around five, my wife began saying that she thought Marcos might be gay. My reaction at the time was cold and rational. I said it was too early to tell, and I wanted Marcos to figure this out and to let me know on his own terms. In other words, I was telling my wife that it was not possible for her to know this about our child at such a young age.

I was wrong.

Looking back, I can see that I was not ready to accept the possibility that my child might be gay. I could have been more supportive of my wife. I could have been more open to dialogue. I could have been more sensitive and open-minded to the possibility that, yes, kids can start expressing their true selves at a young age.

My wife's instinct was correct. She could sense something different in Marcos even before he did. All she needed was for me to listen to her, and I chose not to. She walked a lonely road for quite a few years until Marcos came out. I'm sorry for not being more supportive and open-minded.

But even if we weren't sure, or couldn't agree on whether Marcos was gay or not, from the beginning we both agreed on something: we wanted to make sure that we created an environment where our son would feel comfortable and safe growing in our family. We wanted to make sure Marcos would come out first to his family.

When Marcos came out, it was a true moment of joy for all of us. I remember it as a happy moment, and also as a relief: finally we knew and would be able to move on.

And that is when my inner voice said, "Now is your time to run with the ball." I told myself that if my son had the courage to come out

so should I. I chose to come out as the father of a gay man. I chose to start telling my boss, clients, colleagues, and friends.

To me this has been a learning process, and I still have a lot to learn. The best way to begin the process was by asking Marcos questions because I was curious and eager to learn. I also wanted to show my love and support by asking questions. It was my way of trying to tell Marcos that I was by his side.

And the first thing that I needed to learn was the meaning of each of the letters of "LGBTQ." This is what I have learned so far:

L stands for Love and also for Learn.

Through my son I'm learning new ways to love. And the best way to learn is by being curious, by asking questions, by engaging in conversations, by being willing to meet other people where they are.

G stands for Grace.

By God's grace, I have Marcos in my life. Marcos is God's creation and I'm lucky to be an instrument chosen to take care of him.

B stands for Born and Being.

My son was born gay. That is an important lesson that I learned. My son did not choose to be gay: my son was born gay. This is part of his being.

T stands for Trust. Trust your inner voice. T also stands for Time. And it is time. Some people have been waiting for decades to be welcomed in our Church, to be welcomed and accepted in our Church, to be who they are, to have no fear of being rejected.

It is time for us, as members of the Church, to come out and welcome them. All of them are part of God's creation. I'm a middle-aged man but my mind is not of a man from the Middle Ages.

Q might stand for Question:

Maybe I'm wrong in my beliefs or preconceptions?

Maybe I'm not welcoming enough?

Maybe God is giving me a break compared to others, by blessing me with someone special that will show me new ways to love and respect others?

Q could represent the unknown—what I can't understand or explain. And, that is fine. I don't need to understand all of God's plan, all I need to do is love God's Creation.

I want to share a few of my hopes. I hope that in our family we are planting the seeds for our future generations, where any of the LGBTQ letters will feel loved and welcomed and safe.

I used to dread giving my daughter to another man. Now I dream about the day when Marcos will introduce us to our new son-in-law joining our family. I dream and hope about grandchildren. And, I hope I can walk together with my son down the aisle.

To finish, I want to go back to the first letter, *L for Love*. Fr. Anthony de Mello, the Jesuit spiritual writer, says that there are two forces in the world: fear and love.

I choose to move from fear to love.

I choose not to fear about what might go wrong.

I choose to dream about what can go right.

I choose to love for the greater glory of God.

— Ivan Briggiler



Marcos Briggiler, a life-long parishioner.

My name is Marcos, and I am a 17 year-old and have been a parishioner at St. Ignatius since I was born. I am a son, student, and friend. I am a runner and a retreat leader. I love going to the movie theaters with friends, and I hate it when they force me to play fantasy football. I want to leave New York City for college and in the future I am thinking of going into medicine or engineering. I am also gay.

When I first came out in my sophomore year of high school, people failed to understand that being gay is just a part of who I am; a part that I am incredibly proud of now but still just one piece of my identity.

I quickly became the gay kid of the grade and it seemed as though my past was erased, even among friends. At school, I felt uncomfortable most of the time. Even though I was out, I did not feel like I could fully be open and be myself. I can't complain though. Thanks to the work and the fighting of the generations before me, I can go to school without the fear of being shoved against the lockers. Thanks to those who came before me, I was able to come out at the age of 15 in an all-boys, Catholic school. Thanks to the people before me, whenever I am called a fag or am harassed, I have no fear in fighting back. I have been able to stand my ground and either shut them down or have some fun with it and begin flirting with my homophobic aggressors.

Yet the one thing that the previous generations were not able to give me was a place or sense of belonging. That was something I had to find on my own.

I tried my school community and my friend groups. I tried a city-wide gay teen group. I also went to my religion and the Catholic Church (with a capital C). In each I felt accepted but only partially. There was too much of one thing and too little of another. With my friends, I lost the normalcy of being a teenager. With the gay network, I had to hide my Catholic identity. I remember being aggressively challenged and interrogated because of my 'stupid and ignorant' beliefs. In regards to the Church, I felt as though I had to lose my identity as a homosexual boy. Although things

have definitely moved forward in the last decade or so, I still felt like the Church shunned me and had no respect for a large part of who I am.

I did, and do not want to have to, sacrifice anything. I am Marcos Briggiler and with that comes my many layers. I want to be a normal, gay, Catholic, teenage boy anywhere and everywhere.

Disillusioned, I felt lost and out of place for a while. It was only when I stopped trying to find a home by looking externally and, instead, looked internally that things began to clear up. I started to try to be comfortable with myself instead of expecting to receive it from those around me. I found myself gravitating towards my family, the place that had been with me and loved me since day one. My awesome parents and crazy siblings support and love me and helped me be natural and be myself. My other family was the Wallace Hall community. I had gone to that Mass every Sunday since I was born and I grew up with the people there. My 'siblings' Arielle, Arthur, Celine, and Kathleen, my 'aunts and uncles' Nick, Michael, Teresa, and Emily, my 'mothers' Meg and Pat, they all had been with me growing up. I realized that I was trying too hard to find a new home when I just needed to open myself up to the one I already had. In St. Ignatius I could be and am a normal, gay, Catholic, teenage boy.

The only thing missing was more people like me. I had always seen the gay couple that sits across Wallace Hall from me with their beautiful daughter but I never really interacted with them and that connection felt like something to keep hush-hush.

That is what I want from the LGBT Catholics And Friends Ministry. What I want from this group is a place where I can be myself. I also want to be able to learn from the older generations. I have only been out for three years. There is so much I can learn from the people I will meet in this group. I want to learn how to truly embody being gay and Catholic because, to be honest, I am not there just yet. I still find myself sometimes doubting these pieces of my identity as a whole. I also want this to be a place where the LGBTQ+ community can mend itself. We are at a point where if we

want to be included in society we must be supportive of each other and work as one. The older generations and younger generations must not be against each other. All the leaders of our community must be fighting for the same goals. We must be able to speak our minds and disagree, yes, but when the conversation becomes a challenge to see who can interrupt the other more frequently, we know we are headed in the wrong direction.

Here we have a chance to actually listen to each other and grow together. Let's take this opportunity and run with it. I want to be a part of a community that can be the model for others of how to love and accept.

I am at home in St. Ignatius, but this group adds a sense of warmth to my home. I envision a community of acceptance and support within our entire church, with LGBT Catholics And Friends being just as integral a part of it as any other group. I feel the love, the potential, the hope, everything I want. I see everyone here and I hear everyone who shared and I just want to smile. The smiles around the room should represent an invitation to others. This group does not and should not end inside the confines of this hall. We welcome everyone that identifies as LGBTQ+ and all of their allies. Basically, my invitation goes out to everyone who knows or wants to learn how to love.

— **Marcos Briggiler**





Lou Csabay, with his husband Mike, have been parishioners of St. Ignatius Loyola since July 2017.

I grew up in a religious working-class family. On my father's side, they were all devoted, determined, devout Catholics. On my mother's side, they were all Bible-thumping, born-again Baptists. My mother was the smart one: she converted and I was raised Catholic, as an only child, in New Brunswick, New Jersey.

We attended St. Ladislaus Church, dedicated to the King of Hungary in 1017. Here, the Franciscan priests said Mass in Latin and Hungarian. I recall wonderful memories of church with its many festivals and celebrations and I lived a pretty much typical childhood until around the age of seven.

That was when I had my first boyhood crush. But atypically, it was for a boy named Wayne. In only a few years, I realized I was a homosexual. The realization was overwhelming and devastating.

All my secret readings told me that I was suffering a grave mental illness and I was destined to live a lonely, secretive life, lurking in dark parks and dangerous back alleys looking for others like me, to commit sinful acts with each other.

However, my family was somewhat unique; I was lucky. Even though it was the 50's, "men like that" were well-known relatives and it was just considered something that ran in the family.

My godmother, who was a very significant influence in my life (she was the inspiration that lead me to be the first to attend college in my family), once remarked, "Oh, we knew you were that way at 5." ("How," I asked, "does a five-year-old choose his or her sexual preference?")

My favorite aunt, Dorothy, who attended Mass daily, would tell me stories about "those men," and how many had committed suicide at young ages. She used to tell me never to despair at who I was. It was she and my uncle Tom, who took in my cousin Donald—suffering from AIDS after he could no longer care for himself—until he died.

However, I remained resolute to be “cured” and, at 19, entered into “reparative behavior modification therapy.” I was in college, working part-time. And, while my friends were saving up for a car or fancy sneakers, for two years, my money went to being administered electro-shocks and nausea-producing drugs. Determined to live a normal life, I told my girlfriend, Eva, that I was gay. We agreed to make a go of it and were married by my parish priest.

We lived together for 28 years, had a daughter, whom we raised Catholic and who has since blessed us with two amazing grandsons. Eva and I remain best of friends to this day. We were very active in our church with CCD, men’s spiritual retreats, and fundraising.

Around that time, I also joined a gay fathers group here in NYC and over the years met hundreds of gay men, living with heterosexual women, most of whom had children. (You see, there is no such thing as a “typical” gay lifestyle.)

But shortly after my daughter was confirmed, I began to turn away from the Church. I started listening to the “din” of the voices of the Bishops and lay leaders declaring “unrepentant Catholics had no right to Christian burial, should not receive holy communion and had no right to any form of civil union accepting their sinful lifestyle.”

I pursued a long, successful career as a businessman and eventually turned to Unitarian Universalism, a faith that openly welcomes members of the LGBT community. During that time, I met Mike, a physician, a very kind and generous man beyond measure. Partners for 20 years, Mike and I were married at All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church, right across town at Lexington and 80th.

But that faith left us spiritually empty. I could just not reconcile myself to Jesus Christ “being just another good teacher,” and the discomfort church attendees would express when the term “God” was used.

I recall Mike and me attending the dedication of a shrine to Our Lady of Mariapocs, Hungary commissioned by my Godmother and her sister. They asked me to take a picture of them and the Bishop;

the joy on their faces was overwhelming to me, and I was saddened that I too could not share such joy in his presence.

But recently, a series of amazing events occurred. Early in 2017, Mike and I traveled to Italy to celebrate his retirement. There, we both experienced an intense spiritual experience. Not in the Basilica of Rome or the Duomo of Florence, but in the quiet chapel of Assisi and in the 9th century St. Andrew's Cathedral in Amalfi. There, I am convinced I heard the words of Christ and the Holy Spirit, calling us home.

Returning home on a Saturday, I opened Facebook to see a posting from a friend "thanking Father Martin for his talk" on his book *Building a Bridge* at St. Francis Xavier. I was surprised and encouraged to hear of this kind of work being presented in a Catholic Church! Mike and I had read Father Martin's book and we were elated to read a work that was even-handed and optimistic. The thought of coming home grew greater in us both.

Later I learned an LGBT ministry was being formed here at St. Ignatius, and we started attending Mass. This experience lead to an amazing homecoming for me and Mike, and an overwhelming feeling of being welcomed by a community of priests and parishioners who have embraced us.

We are proud and humbled to make St. Ignatius our spiritual home.

— Lou Csabay



Ellen Stilwell, a St. Ignatius Loyola parishioner since 2004.

I am a parent of a gay son. I love my son with all my heart and soul. And, I have been taught and believed from a very young age that God is love. We became parishioners here at St. Ignatius Loyola thirteen years ago.

I am a Eucharistic Minister to the homebound here in the parish. I was active in forming the Ignatian 40s group and facilitate with the parish retreats. My son was part of the children's choir from the sixth grade into junior year of high school.

To give you some of my background, my mother was a devout Irish Catholic immigrant. I am the sixth of seven children. There was no doubt in my mind that I would also raise my children Catholic.

My children are twenty-one and twenty-four, Troy and Stanley. Before he was five, I knew my older son was gay. My late husband and I both agreed and talked about it together each time we witnessed something in Stanley's actions that confirmed this was true. My husband was a Lutheran and went through the RCIA program at our parish on Staten Island. He did this in order to go to church as a family. Both children received their First Communion at our parish on Staten Island.

How did I know Stanley was gay? First of all, in nursery school, all his friends were girls. Our close friends at the time, parents of these nursery school girls, said "either Stanley is going to be a ladies' man or he is gay." Stanley is also artistic, sensitive, and compassionate. One afternoon, he was outside with Ryan and Sean, two neighborhood boys. They were playing on a swing hanging from a tree. They became bored and said, "What should we do now?" Stanley says, "Let's kiss!" The boys just looked at each other, shook their shoulders, and said "nah." Then ran off. Another example, for me, was on a rainy day Stanley decided to sew an evening gown. And, he did.

When my husband passed away in 2003 of pancreatic cancer, one of my thoughts was, "Oh my God, I have to handle this on my own!"

When Stanley was in the fifth grade, he was accused of being gay. This created such an uproar in his small private school. What

amazed me was that Stanley seemed to be very surprised by this accusation. At ten years old, it was nothing he had considered about himself. The three of us moved here to Manhattan that same year. The narrow-mindedness was frightening to me. All I wanted for my son was acceptance and his safety.

August of 2004, here we are on the Upper East Side. On one Sunday, we went to three different churches—St. Monica, St. Stephen, and St. Ignatius Loyola. The kids were exhausted, but I heard what I wanted to hear here. Fr. Modrys was presiding and in his homily he welcomed the gay community. Now, I thought, “Did I just hear that?” I sure did, and this has been our parish since.

Both children started CCD or IREP the next month. I enjoyed Bible classes in the parish house. This was our new neighborhood, and I looked to the church for community. The following year Stanley joined the wonderful children’s choir here at St. Ignatius Loyola. I gave him a choice of being an altar server or joining the choir. He happily agreed with the choir.

In the sixth grade, the bullying started in his public middle school with other students accusing him of being gay. This was, of course, hard to endure. Preparation for Confirmation was also taking place. And, the Choir. The children in the choir who attended this elementary school were fast becoming his best friends. As these kids got older, they asked Stanley if he was gay. They all still remain “best friends.”

With high school testing and choices upon us, he refused to test for Regis. Stanley was accepted to Xavier. As I was in midair, jumping for joy, Stanley proclaimed, “If I am accepted to LaGuardia, I am going there!” LaGuardia High School requires an audition and is a wonderful arts school. Xavier is an all-boys Catholic high school. He went to LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts. Unbeknown to me, the majority of the student body at LaGuardia is gay. This atmosphere helped Stanley.

For college, he outwardly thrived at Fordham University at the Rose Hill campus. But internally he was struggling. Struggling because he wanted to be one with society. He wanted to fit into societal norms. Stanley tried to date girls during his freshman and sophomore years. It was at Thanksgiving time of sophomore year

that he decided to be true to himself and just surrender to the fact that he is gay. He called me, and this was our first real conversation about this. He wanted to know "When did you know, Mom?" You see, for many years he was battling this truth and did not want it to be true. What followed was a period of anger. He only shared it with his closest friends. Thank God they accepted him. He actually was mad at me for a period of time because, you see, I gave birth to him. Stanley was born gay.

Junior and senior year at Fordham he chose to reveal this truth to only those closest to him. I needed to talk about it though. I asked if I could discuss this with my brothers and sisters. He said "No." "Why," I asked. Clearly, he stated, "Because that would make it true."

Around that same time, I was invited into a group of ladies here at St. Ignatius Loyola who meet every month. They host at each other's homes and have a spiritual topic to discuss. These women are holy women; I found whom I could discuss this with. They listened to me and accepted me with this truth. I have always had a deep faith. Stanley believes in God. It was no coincidence that we found St. Ignatius Loyola.

When I was a little girl, I remember my grandmother being upset with the changes that Vatican II brought. It has taken decades for the substance of Vatican II to take shape in the Church.

When Stanley was eleven years old, we were walking throughout St. Patrick's Cathedral and stopping at each altar. We walked behind the large altar. It was Christmastime. We stopped and prayed at the manger. As we exited, going up the long center aisle, Stanley looked up at me in such excitement and asked, "Can I get married here?" I was in such anguish... and just squeezed his hand.

My son, Stanley, is a good, genuine and generous person. He did not choose to be gay. Thank God he has learned to accept it and be comfortable in his own skin... Me, too.

My fondest hope would be that he could marry at St. Patrick's Cathedral or right here in our own parish.

— Ellen Stilwell



John Vernon, a parishioner at St. Ignatius Loyola since 2011.

I've been a leader of the Ignatian 40s group, facilitated Meeting Christ in Prayer, arranged retreats, run a prayer group, and am a follower of the Ignatian way.

I am originally from Northern Ireland. I have one brother and three sisters. I was raised Catholic, and was taught by the La Salle and Christian Brothers. I studied computer science at university, and then lived in France and England for around 6 years. My plan was to live abroad, build up career experience, return to Northern Ireland and settle down with a wife, and have a family.

After 5 years in England, I moved home and got a job that enabled me to travel around the world. With the anonymity that comes with that, I began going to gay bars while traveling. I wasn't going to the bars because I was gay. No. It was because I was curious. At least that was what I thought subconsciously. Then on one trip to Hong Kong, I met someone who I really liked. My feelings for him were so strong that I quickly came to the realization that I was gay. I was in shock, however, and I felt devastated. Being gay wasn't what I was planning on at all. After a week, I came to terms with myself enough that I decided that I needed to tell everyone who was important to me, the reason being that if I ever met someone I had strong feelings for in the future, I would want that person to be part of the family. I had to build up my self-confidence before I told them because, without that, I knew I would worry the family and I didn't want that. I remember thinking that even though I was 32, I was emotionally only a 16-year-old and had a lot of learning to do. Wondering if this was a 'passing phase,' I decided to read books to help me know what it meant to be gay. And, I reflected a lot. What came from reflection was, yes, I was gay. My first awareness of being gay was at the age of four, and it was serious denial and a lot of fear that stopped me from realizing it sooner.

Over the next 18 months I came out to everyone who was important to me. The reaction ranged from very supportive to concerned, but not rejection. One friend said it was the most honest thing anyone had told him. My mother said she figured it out few years

earlier. I replied I was glad she hadn't told me as she would have upset me considering I didn't know at that time myself. I didn't tell others unless I could trust them, and unless I needed to tell them. Coming out to others has been a slow process and isn't complete yet. At work, only colleagues who I'm close with know that I'm gay. Outside of work, I have built up a circle of friends in the LGBT sports community as an outcome of being president of New York's Gotham Knights Rugby Football Club and a member of the board of the New York Ramblers Soccer Club.

Until the LGBT Catholics And Friends Ministry came along, it was a similar story at church, with my coming out on a need-to-know basis only. I have been participating in the Magis program since the beginning of 2017. At the first retreat in March 2017, I volunteered to create a Facebook page for our cohort. After I created it, I realized I couldn't invite members to join it because if they joined they'd see my profile picture, which is of me and my partner, Rob. So, I didn't send out the invitations. What a waste!

This ministry was founded in May of 2017. I went to the second Magis retreat in September 2017. When I arrived, members were glad to see me and asked what I'd been up to. I told them about the work of creating this ministry and guess what? None of them batted an eyelid. I believe I had gained enough confidence to tell them because, since my parish had accepted me, I expected them to accept me also. And, that's what happened.

I plan to be married in 2018.

— **John Vernon**

Next Steps

All members of the Church of St. Ignatius Loyola, as well as friends from the larger community outside of the parish, are warmly invited to join the LGBT Catholics & Friends Ministry.

You can find out more in the following resources:

Social Media

You are invited to visit the Facebook Page at
LGBT Catholics and Friends at St. Ignatius Loyola
(facebook.com/groups/sil.lgbt.caf).

Monthly Ministry Meetings

Meetings are held on the third Thursday of each month in the Parish House. All are welcome to join the meetings and to share in the fellowship of the ministry.

Parish Bulletin

The weekly parish bulletin contains information on all parish ministries and is available at
ignatius.nyc/weekly-parish-bulletins.

Email Address

If you have any questions, you can contact the ministry at join.lgbt.caf@gmail.com.

If you would like to share your story or to talk with a member of the ministry on a confidential basis, contact us through the parish at (212) 288-3588.

