

Diversity, Equality & Inclusion

DEI Committee Friday Thoughts

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National Coming Out Day, and My Coming Out Story **by Judith Knee, TVA Resident**

Every year, the LGBTQ+ community celebrates October 11 as "National Coming Out Day" (NCOD).

On October 11, 1987, several hundred thousand people participated in the [March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights](#), and I was proud to be one of them. That march led to the first NCOD a year later on Oct. 11, 1988. By 1990, this holiday was being celebrated in all 50 states and Washington D.C.

NCOD has grown to include more than gays and lesbians. It embraces bisexual, transgender and other forms of sexual identity.

If you're not familiar with the term "coming out", it's when someone who is not heterosexual or does not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth tells their friends or family about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity for the first time.

The term comes from the concept that people who haven't shared that information about themselves are referred to as "being in the closet," meaning instead of being open, they're keeping it secret or "hiding it in a closet."

[Studies show](#) those who know a family member or friend in the LGBTQ+ community are less likely to have negative views of gay people. Rob Eichberg, a founder of NCOD, said the [strongest tool in the gay rights movement is to illustrate most people already know and like or love someone who is gay](#), and NCOD supports people in coming out.

February 28, 2022 was a personal coming out day for me at Hermitage Northern Virginia, the former name of The View Alexandria (TVA) before it was acquired by Goodwin Living on August 1, 2022.

I had come out over the years to many people, but always one at a time. This was a first for me, coming out to a roomful of people, and it took some courage.

It was also a first for Hermitage to have a resident come out, though Gallup estimates that more than [7% of the U.S. population is LGBTQ+](#). I think that it's extremely unlikely that, in the 60-year history of Hermitage, there were no other gay residents. I simply became the first **openly gay** resident.

Regarding the process of coming out, there's no one "right" way or time to do it. Each LGBTQ+ person makes those decisions for their life.

While there's still a lot of legal and societal discrimination, it's a very different world for people like me today than when I became aware of my sexual orientation 47 years ago in 1976.

June 2015 was a huge leap forward for all of us. A Supreme Court decision made same-sex marriage legal everywhere in the United States. It wasn't very long ago, but since then [society has become much more accepting of same-sex marriage](#).

Even though society has become more accepting of us, each person still decides for themselves whether and when it's right for them to come out to family and friends. Whether it's right for them to come out at work or where they live. Many choose not to.

Within the LGBTQ+ community, there's little or no negative judgment about not coming out because no one knows about the risks better than we do. I choose to be openly gay because it's right for me, but every gay person's journey is different.

Discrimination still exists. There are still [hate crimes committed against LGBTQ+ people](#), including murder. And there are still family members and friends who don't accept any sexual orientation other than heterosexuality.

What is far more frequent today is for families to love and accept their family members regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity and expression rather than become estranged from them.

Regarding the term "sexual orientation," I want to distinguish it from "sexual preference." LGBTQ+ people don't choose their sexual orientation. It's not a preference. It's not a "lifestyle." It's who we are.

Why would someone choose to be discriminated against in so many ways? Why would they choose to risk rejection from family and friends, or to risk being physically attacked on the street by strangers?

You don't choose to be right or left-handed. To have blue eyes or brown. Or to be gay, heterosexual, bisexual or transgender.

I was married right after college. My husband and I separated after four years. My sexual orientation wasn't an issue in our divorce because I didn't realize I was a lesbian until three years after we split. Many LGBTQ+ people know far sooner, early in childhood.

Although I came out immediately to my family and friends, I realized being a lesbian in a world that's more than 90% heterosexual meant it wasn't safe for me to be out everywhere in my life.

I worked for 30 years for what used to be called the Bell System, the phone company, in the days when there was only one phone company -- something we older adults remember at our age.

I was closeted for 10 of the 30 years I worked for the phone company. During that time, I worked in Public Relations and Human Resources.

I realized discrimination against gays could negatively impact my career, so I stayed in the closet for 10 years. The first person I told was my supervisor. He hugged me and told me how honored he was that I shared that with him.

Shortly after that, a co-worker told me she was angry I hadn't told her sooner. She obviously didn't understand the potential negative consequences of coming out due to discrimination against lesbians and gays.

My favorite reaction was from a co-worker friend with whom I just hadn't had that conversation yet. She smiled and said, "tell me something I don't know." Quite a range of reactions: honored, angry and already figured it out.

When I moved to Hermitage (now TVA) in August 2018, I decided this was another time to be temporarily closeted. Moving into a place with more than 100 residents, all strangers to me, most of them older than me, I decided to be silent. I stayed silent for more than three years, some of them lost to the isolation of the first years of the pandemic.

On my 75th birthday in November 2021, I decided, "there's no way I'm spending the next 15 or more years of my life in the closet in the place where I live."

So on February 28, 2022, I told the residents and employees where I live about my sexual orientation because it was uncomfortable for me to continue to lie by omission about who I am.

The very good news, positive because it says a lot about TVA and its people, is that no one, no resident or employee, has treated me any differently since my coming out. It's a testament to TVA being an inclusive and welcoming home for older adults.

While it took 60 years for the first openly gay resident to be recognized at TVA, it took only 20 minutes for the second. During the discussion following my presentation, another resident raised his hand, and said "me, too".

Reference links:

- <https://nationaltoday.com/national-coming-out-day/>
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Coming_Out_Day
- <https://www.hrc.org/campaigns/national-coming-out-day>

Goodwin Living DEI Committee: Statement of Purpose: Educate, Embrace and Empower team members, residents, members* and all served by Goodwin Living to support Diversity, Equality and Inclusion.

Goodwin Living DEI Committee Desired Outcome: The Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Committee (DEI) will seek open and honest communication and collaboration that will inform and celebrate the age, culture, ethnicity and sexual orientation of team members, residents, members* and all served by Goodwin Living without bias.

*Members include Priority Club members and Goodwin Living At Home.

Questions or comments? Please contact us DEI@GoodwinLiving.org