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Storytelling to Create Change: My Family?s Story of Acceptance

Feb. 22, 2011 ? Max Philp

As my mother and I drove through the southern end of San Francisco along a congested Interstate 280, we gathered our thoughts for the oncoming forty minutes. She and I were to record my coming out story and story of my activism for StoryCorps [1], a nonprofit organization whose mission is to ?provide Americans of all backgrounds and beliefs with the opportunity to record, share, and preserve the stories of our lives.?

My mom?s main goal was to share her experiences as a supportive parent of her gay son, and I wanted to share how having a supportive parent allowed me to thrive and reach out to countless LGBTQ youth and fight for LGBTQ equality.

My mother and I had never really sat down and talked about my coming out. There was never a need to; she has always been there for me when I needed her to be, and my feelings about my coming out experience with her were not negative. So why discuss them?

That?s why I found the experience with StoryCorps so magical.

My mom and I connected and got to really discuss how each of us felt when I came out to her. She said some things that really stuck to me. She talked about how I had always been different, that I was the kid in elementary school who would ?literally be picking daisies out in the soccer field.? *My mother really knew me*. I mean, obviously she knew me--she is my own mother. But she *understands* me. I knew then why I was sitting in this silver, soundproof cube in the Contemporary Jewish Museum in downtown San Francisco. The relationship that my mother and I have is so unique, so special, and something that very few seventeen-year-old openly-gay youth have with their mothers--let alone many straight youth.

My mother and I sat down inside the StoryCorps cube, and the conversation began awkwardly, but this was expected and natural. It wasn?t long before we really got into the conversation, and the facilitator even started asking my mom and me questions because he was intrigued by our story. While this was not caught on tape, my story was apparently so moving it made our facilitator cry.

The power that stories have over other people is incredible, and after doing StoryCorps, I realized that maybe if activists used storytelling to convey messages, people would be more likely to listen. We can fight for equality and tolerance, but do we really want people to tolerate the LGBTQ community? We should want them to understand us and not even question us. Because when someone tolerates a group of people, they still believe something to be wrong with that group. They just choose to hide that issue under a pillow, but it?s still there.

StoryCorps is up to something that I think can change the way activists work. *Stories*.

If someone who ?tolerated? the LGBTQ community heard my coming out story, heard about what I went through, and learned about my mother?s support for me, then maybe people could truly embrace the LGBTQ community. We all have our stories, and they deserve to be heard. Whether it?s a story of a gay youth coming out and his mother?s reactions and thoughts, or a story about another interesting life experience, we can all learn from one another.

Now, my entire coming out story, my entire story of becoming myself, and my entire activism career are on a forty-minute recording in the Library of Congress. How cool is that?! Super cool if you ask me. And it all started with my activism career. I pursued my passion of helping others and found myself at GSA Network, who gave me this amazing opportunity. Many thanks to the awesome people there!

Click here to listen to a sound clip of Max and his mother, Lisa, at StoryCorps! [2]

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Links:
[1] http://storycorps.org/
[2] http://www.gsanetwork.org/files/spotlight/Max%20Philp%20StoryCorps.m4a