

### **Background:**

The meeting that took place in the Riverton Parkway Ward came about because of the counsel given by President M. Russell Ballard in a 2017 BYU devotional. We took this counsel to heart after having spent the last 6 months getting to know many of our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters and volunteering at Encircle (an LGBTQ+ family and youth resource center in Provo, UT). The speakers had become our friends and we already knew their stories and felt like they could give our members different perspectives. Some were gay and active members of the Church; some were gay and no longer active. Some were parents who had lost their gay son to suicide. All of these situations needed to be

heard so our members could understand them and then be able to show an added measure of love and support to them. It was a beautiful meeting where Heaven was truly felt on earth for those few hours. It was an honor to be a part of such an impactful meeting.



### **President M. Russell Ballard**

"Mormon leaders, along with the rank and file, need to listen to and understand what LGBT members are feeling and experiencing. We must do better than we have in the past until all feel they have a spiritual home ... a place to worship and serve the Lord."

(Nov 2017 BYU Devotional).

### **Bishop Augenstein's Introduction to the Meeting:**

I would like to thank everyone for being at this very special meeting today. As many of you know, Susie and I have been very involved this last year in serving and getting to know many of our LGBTQ brothers and sisters. We have spent hours at a place in Provo called The Encircle House which serves members of this community in helping to prevent teen suicide and homelessness. Believe it or not, these difficult circumstances not only exist but are currently skyrocketing. While tragic on one hand, it has brought so much love and joy into our lives as we have sat and really listened to our new friends about what it means to be gay. I am humbled and quite frankly in awe of some of the people you are about to meet today and their stories. In this meeting, we are going to hear from three different perspectives all of which need our love and support.

We are going to hear from people in the LGBTQ community who are active in the LDS church and need you all to understand what it feels like to be in a church where people still view them at times like they don't belong and explain what they need from us. We are going to hear from some who have stepped away from the church but still have beautiful ties and families in the faith and still desire to be loved and valued even though their viewpoints don't coincide with LDS doctrine.

Lastly, we will hear from families in the church with LGBTQ children who desire love and support from their ward families and a great desire for their children and grandchildren to be loved and accepted by their ward members whether their kids choose to stay apart of the mainstream church or not.

The people within the LGBTQ community need us, and today I am giving you a chance to hear their stories and to ask yourself at the end of this meeting "what would my savior have me do? How would He have me talk about and treat people who are not exactly like me? What is it that Heavenly Father would have me learn? I pray that the spirit will be with all of us during this meeting and that we can not only listen with our ears, but really listen with our minds and hearts to gain a better understanding about those within the LGBTQ community. And from that, create an increased level of pure love for God and ALL of his children.

The agenda for the meeting will proceed as follows:

Kent Carollo – Graphic Designer and presenter at the annual "Affirmation" symposium which is an outreach program for Mormon LGBTQ families and friends

Ben Schilaty – Spanish Professor at BYU, also a presenter at Affirmation.

George and Alyson Deussen – Proud parents of their son Stockton who recently lost his life to suicide.

Musical Number "Nearer My God to Thee" by Cole Rasmussen and Max Eddington

Jordan Sgro – Chief Program Officer at Encircle House

Our concluding speaker will be Sister Debi Day and her daughter Morgan Burdi

### **Meeting Conclusion:**

Thank those who participated today in our program.

I pray it was as informative, edifying, and faith promoting.

Matthew 12

46 While (Jesus) yet talked to the people, behold, ... his brethren (and sisters) stood without, desiring to speak with him.

47 Then one said unto him, Behold, .... thy brethren and sisters stand without, desiring to speak with thee.

48 But he answered and said unto him that told him, who are my brethren and sisters?

(I'd like to ask those who are with us today who are part of the LGBTQ community and their families to stand if they feel comfortable to do so.)

49 And he (the Savior) stretched forth his hand toward his disciples, and said, Behold ..... my brethren and sisters!

50 For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother and sister, ...

(thank you – you may sit down)

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My Brothers and sisters – Friends - the will of Our Father in Heaven – what our Heavenly Father really wants for all of us - first and foremost -- is that we “love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first “and great” commandment.

31 And the second is like unto it, namely this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.”

But like Nephi in the Book of Mormon, “I do not know the meaning of all things. But I know that He loveth His Children.”

Continuing the dialogue in the B of M, the angel speaking with Nephi in this exchange goes on to ask him, “do you know the meaning of the tree that your father saw? Nephi answered,” Yea, it is the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men; wherefore, it is the most desirable above all things. 23 And he spake unto me, saying: Yea, and the most joyous to the soul. “

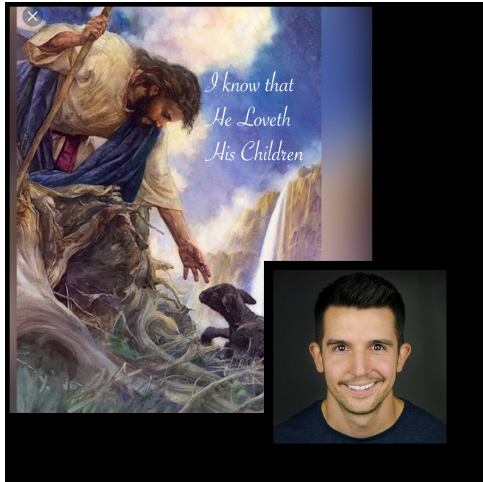
However, brothers and sisters, that joy is fleeting and difficult to come by for many, specifically, our LGBTQ friends. Elder M. Russell Ballard said the following in a speech given at BYU on November 14th, 2017: “Every member has a place in God’s kingdom. It may be difficult sometimes for gay Latter-day Saints to see ‘where you fit in the Lord’s church but you do.’ Mormon leaders, along with the rank and file, need to “listen to and understand what LGBT members are feeling and experiencing. We must do better than we have in the past until all feel they have a spiritual home ... a place to worship and serve the Lord.”

I too believe, with Elder Ballard, that we must do better in assisting our LGBTQ brothers and sisters in helping them find a spiritual home so the joy of the restored Gospel can be efficacious in all who enter here. Someday, the sign outside our churches might say “ALL are welcome” not just “visitors.”

In conclusion, I have tasted of this fruit of which the Angel spoke, and it is truly desirable above all things. The love, understanding and compassion I have for my friends within the LGBTQ community has grown immensely and caused me to reflect deeply on “who my brethren and sisters are” and what my role is in their lives. Our role—our purpose—is to love...love unconditionally without judgement or condemnation.

I hope that this afternoon you have, in the Prophet Alma’s words, “felt to sing the song of his redeeming love” as we all apply the power of Christ’s Infinite atonement in allowing it to transform US into the charitable sons and daughters he intends for us to be, and I say these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior, Amen.

Bishop Paul Augenstein, Parkway Ward, Riverton Utah Summerhill Stake



### Kent Carollo's Talk:

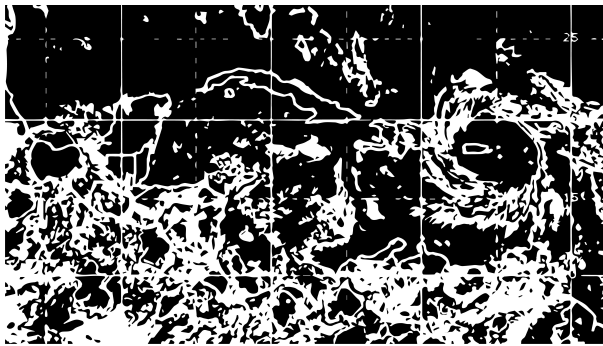
My name is Kent. Speaking in a setting like this can be daunting. This is a full room. But I also have a full heart, and this is going to go just fine. It's important to me to say to you that I see you as family. I attend a ward in Herriman. Most of you have never seen me before, but even so I can see you as a ward family—as the family of my faith, and I talk about hard things with my family. That's who I choose to speak to about difficult topics such as this. And frankly I feel that it is in our ward families that discussions like this should be taking place. This is where I want to talk about the most difficult parts of my life because I believe that my faith family are the people who are going to help me best to address the most difficult

trials that I'll face. So when I say that it's a blessing to be here, I mean that. I am at ease because I look out and see the family of my faith. And this is the very place I want to discuss these topics. I want to be clear that my aim today is not to prove a point. It's not to convince you of anything. It's not to stand here and demonstrate how correct I am in my belief. It's simply to share my perspective. And if science and journalism, and the gospel, have taught me anything, it's that one perspective is never enough.

We owe it to ourselves to be educated—to consider different perspectives, even those that contradict our own, and then to allow our Heavenly Father and the spirit to teach us truth. So I hope you'll hear my perspective today for what it's worth—mine, unique, personal, not necessarily correct. It's still very fluid. But it's an opportunity for you to consider something that you hadn't considered before. And because this topic is something that can be uncomfortable, and difficult, and perhaps a bit nebulous at times, I want to start with something that is familiar. So we're going to talk about nutrition fact labels first. So, a nutrition fact label gives us a very quick review of the contents of a product, or a food, before we buy it and before we consume it. Every nutrition fact label has a list of ingredients at the bottom, and all those ingredients are listed from most abundant, to least abundant. The ingredients that there's most of will appear at the top, while the least abundant ingredient will appear toward the bottom. By way of introduction, my personal ingredient label looks something like this: male, 31 years old, a son, an uncle, a brother, a friend, Mormon, designer, journalist, BYU Hawaii graduate, returned missionary, scientist, foody, music buff, divorced, and gay. But about a year ago my label looked a lot different. Very different. It may have looked something more like this: Gay, hopeless, scared, sinful, trapped, fake, disappointing, and several other ingredients, and may have contained less than one percent of those other ingredients. I grew up in an amazing community, with amazing family, wonderful friends. But well-meaning people would sometimes make remarks like, "That musician is so talented, but...they're gay." Or, "That person is so kind, but...they're gay." And at an early age I began to realize that no matter how talented or kind or wonderful someone might be, if they were gay, then somehow that became the most vital component of their identity and of the ingredients that made them up. I began to believe that no matter how kind, or talented that I was, that if I were gay, that I would never be acceptable, that I would never be enough. And as I grew up, I began to feel that every one of those other ingredients started to slowly make its way to the bottom of that list, to be less and less significant as they fell underneath that ingredient of being gay.

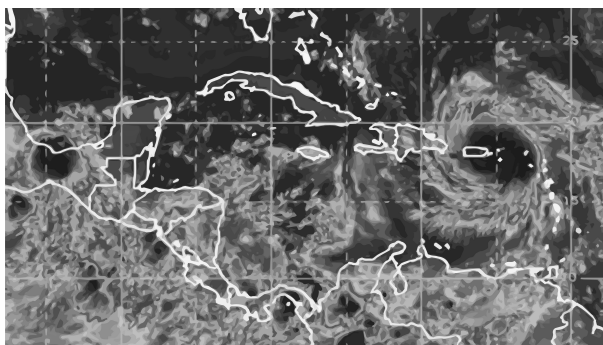
I want to speak briefly to a few perspectives that I've had in my life. Some that have changed in the last few years, as I've divorced, as I've come out to my family, and as I've learned through my Heavenly Father.

The first perspective that I'd like to speak to is the perspective of black and white versus color. In my upbringing, I tended to see things as very black and white, as very stark, much like this image:



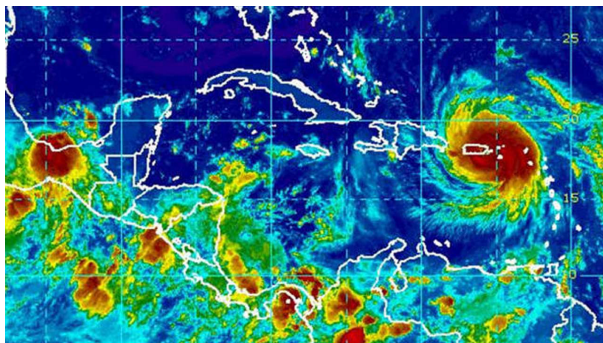
This is a picture that has been reduced to only black, and only white. We call it a vector in the design world. While you may be able to tell what this is an image of, it doesn't really serve much purpose when you only see it in these two extremes of black and white. My view was very similar throughout much of my life. There was good and bad, there was right and wrong, and there was Mormon, or gay. There were a number of these extremes, and my view was very much like this

vector. But watch what happens when we introduce new values between the two extremes:



The detail sharpens, the picture is more clarified, and we start to see more significantly the detail included in this image. We no longer have just black, and just white, but rather an entire spectrum of values between these two extremes. And while this does give more detail to the image, it's still an incomplete image. You may be able to tell that it's some kind of map, but without the addition of color, it still won't serve its purpose. My new perspective on myself and

on the world is in full color:



If you don't recognize this image now, it's a Doppler radar image—a weather map. In black and white, it won't serve its full purpose, even if we have a full spectrum of grey scale values in between. To serve its purpose, to have utility, we need every one of those colors. Black and white just doesn't suffice. And my view has shifted to a degree that I now see that there are going to be members of our faith, members of our family, and

members of our community who don't simply fall into black and white. We're going to occupy every different value. And I think that title is perfect for this spectrum: values. Every person, every personality is, in fact, a value, and most importantly, there is room for those values. When we see them completely, beyond just black and white, we realize that there is room in the plan of our Heavenly Father, and certainly room in our communities, and our homes, and our congregations, for every one of God's children. This new perspective has taught me that each person has value that is beneficial. That these values can improve wards, families, and communities, and it's up to us to help everyone find their role and value through personal revelation. If I want a family one day, that's going to look different for me than it is for my six sisters. They will all likely marry men at some point, possibly have children, so that's going to look a little different for me. But I know that my role still has value in my family, and in my community, and in my faith.

The second perspective I'd like to address is the idea of surviving versus thriving. My old perspective was such that being gay was like having an addiction to overcome, like an illness to be treated, or something to be fixed. I believed that if I could pray it away, that if I could dedicate myself enough to study and prayer, that it would eventually disappear, because I was doing the right thing. And at worst, as long as I tried hard enough, everything would be made right hereafter. This old perspective led me to survival mode. I figured as long as I could hold on tightly for dear life to what I thought was the right thing, then I'd be OK. But one of the problems of survival mode was that I was in a mode of scarcity, of limits. I could only see to the end of the day. If I could make it to the end of the day, I thought, I'd be OK. If I could just hold this conversation long enough, if I could just convince my family and my friends that I was OK, I would be alright. But my resources were limited. It felt like I would never have enough time, that I may not last long enough to be happy, and that I may never be able to emotionally sustain this mode of survival, and it was a very limited frame of mind. My new perspective, however, is not one of feeling limited. It's not one of feeling that my time, my resources are limited, but rather, unlimited. I've since learned that being gay is a blessing that comes with special gifts and talents just like anything else. And as a result, they can be used to love, and lift, and serve others. And most importantly, while things may be made right after mortality, things are so much better in mortality if we can embrace these gifts either in ourselves, or embrace them in others. This perspective led me to learn how to thrive. I learned to use my unique talents to love, to serve, and to bless. And most importantly, I learned that while holding on for dear life may have kept me safe and given me a sense of security while I was surviving, my closed fists could not open to those who needed me. And that was the most important thing for me to realize. I may have been safe closing my hands around that rope, clinging on for dear life, but as long as they were there, they could not open to those who needed me, and that was not the life I wanted to live.

The third perspective I want to address is active versus inactive. Now I know that sounds silly, so let me explain. In our common understanding, we use the phrases, "Are you active? Are you active in the church" or "are they active in the church? Are they inactive?" And so our common understanding might look something like this: someone who is active we would likely define as someone who attends meetings weekly, holds a calling, and has a temple recommend. Someone who is perhaps inactive by our definition, might not be engaging in some, or all, of those activities. The black and white thinking that I once held would suggest that if you were active in the church then you were great. You were fine. You were happy. That you were doing the right thing and everything was OK. And if you were inactive in the church, then you weren't OK. Maybe you were in survival mode. You were desperate, and experiencing hardship, and maybe not being blessed, and all these number of things. But as I mentioned, that black and white thinking wasn't serving me well at all. Our common narrative in our community is often that those who are inactive are perhaps rebellious, maybe just apathetic, misled, or drawn away by something. Perhaps they're ensnared by Satan; maybe they're just confused. But we tend to believe that those who are inactive have likely fallen subject to one of these scenarios. But this is not always the case. Many approach leaving the church the same way they entered it: prayerfully, deliberately, and in some cases, painfully. We all thrive in different ways, and in different places and "active" does not always mean that we're thriving, just like being inactive doesn't mean that we're only surviving. Choosing to divorce someone who I love dearly after a temple marriage was one of the most difficult choices I've ever made, and it wasn't made in a rash decision, or in a reckless act of frustration, or the pursuit of something I thought was better or more exciting. I had to pray continuously, for months, to seek professional help, to get input from those I loved who knew me best to make that decision. We often hear a word like divorce or coming out of the closet as something that seems like, "Well they just didn't try hard enough, just didn't dedicate themselves to making it work. They just didn't pray hard enough." That's simply not always the case. My new

perspective is such that I no longer ask if someone is active in the church. Instead I ask the more important questions, “What are you active in? Are you active in your faith? Are you actively feeling the spirit in your life? Are you actively engaged in a good cause? Are you active in the community? Are you active in your family?” Because being active in the church by that definition doesn’t guarantee that we’re active in our faith. It doesn’t guarantee that we’re active in our families, and to me these have become more important key indicators to our happiness and to our thriving, not just surviving.

Lastly I’d like to talk about my personal perspective. It’s overwhelming to see the number of people here today, and remarkable to be in a place I never thought I’d be. I never thought I could have these hard conversations with anybody, let alone a room full of people in a place as familiar as this. As you engage with people in the LGBTQ community, you can help them learn what vital role they play no matter where they are on the spectrum of mortality. You can help them shift from surviving to thriving so that they can love, and lift, and serve, and not spend every day just trying to make it through the next 24 hours. You can also respect the nature of personal revelation and offer support whether someone remains active in the church, or active elsewhere. And the remarks this morning were wonderful about being a support to wayward children or family members.

That applies here as well. Because the truth is someday someone may approach you. Someone in your family, someone in your workplace, a friend, a loved one, and they may tell you that they’re gay. They may tell you that they need to step away from the church, this beloved faith system they’ve been part of. And you have an opportunity in that moment to help them. Because when they approach you, their label may look a lot like mine did. They may feel that one trait defines who they are. That there’s one ingredient that’s more important than any other part of their makeup, and you can help them rewrite it. You can help them realize that they are a child of God, that they are loved, that they are valued, that they are needed, that they are capable, that they are welcome, that they are vibrant, and talented, and wanted, AND gay. Not BUT gay. AND gay. And when we approach people in that respect hearts change and doors open.

Brothers and sisters, my testimony is that God loves each of us perfectly. We don’t always. We try, but we don’t love perfectly, not yet, and that’s ok. We’re learning. That’s why we’re here. I hope that you’ll open your minds, and then you’ll open your hearts, and then you’ll open your doors to members of not just the LGBTQ community that I’m a part of, but to anyone who may be a bit different, who may think differently than you, or look differently than you. And if you don’t know where to start, pick one of those three. Open your mind, open your heart, or open your door, because one of those will lead to the other. If you can open your heart to somebody and really get to know them, then in time you’ll open your door to them. You’ll realize that they aren’t a threat. That they’re not scary, that you can have them in your home, you can have them around your family, around your kids, and you’ll marvel at what they can bring spiritually, and emotionally, and mentally into your life. If you don’t have it in you to open your heart, then start by opening your door. Open your door and say, “I don’t know you and I don’t understand you...yet, but I want to. So please come over, sit down. Let me ask you questions. Ask me questions. Let’s get to know each other.” Because when you open your door, in time your heart and your mind will also open. It is my testimony that our Heavenly Father wants us to learn to learn to love each other perfectly. And He knows we’re going to make mistakes in the process. But I know that He will help us as we make those earnest efforts. I know that He loves each of us, and I’m so, so grateful to be here to share this insight with you, and I leave that with you in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.



## Alyson Paul's talk:

Story – *Will you still love me if.....?* By Catherine LeBlanc

Would you still love me if I was gay? Our son at the age of 13 years old came out to us and was afraid that we might not still love him. To say that we were ill equipped to help our son was an understatement and we were soon on the fast track to learning. One thing that I was sure from the very start was that Stockton would be loved unconditionally and accepted fully. I knew if I was going to help our son thrive I needed to have open and honest communication. I needed to learn everything I could about the LGBT

community and find him safe places he could land. I needed him to feel like he could talk to me without feeling shame and guilt. Loving without condition and choosing to love was the first of many beautiful things I gained from my son. I chose love and for that I will be forever grateful.

When Jesus was criticized for reaching out to so-called outsiders, he responded by saying, “What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after [the one].” As members, our time, vision, and outreach should really be focused on the one, which, for today’s meeting, represents our gay brothers and sisters.

I for one know that I can show more compassion. Compassion for those cast on the side of the road whom the Levite and priest passed by. Elder Ronald Rasband recently stated: “Reaching out to rescue one another, under any condition, is an eternal measure of love....As members of the Church, we each have the sacred responsibility “to bear one another’s burdens, that they may be light...to mourn with those that mourn,” and to “lift up the hands which hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees.”

It is my goal to express more love for and to my LGBT brothers and sisters. I learned that from my son. My son Stockton was a long awaited gift that I was blessed with for 17 very short years. As Paul shared we lost our son 19 months ago to suicide. (As a side note—suicide is another subject that is very difficult to discuss, but in an effort to save lives we need to be able to talk openly with our loved ones about how they are feeling. The church just released an updated website on suicide with helpful information, be willing to ask the tough questions to those around you when you notice things seem off and I would ask that if you know someone who has lost someone to suicide that you don’t be afraid to reach out and offer a hand of love and compassion.)

How thankful I am that my son left this earth knowing how loved he was exactly the way he was. Unfortunately during those teenage years our youths focus become less and less on family/parents and more and more on peers and their sense of community. He felt like a square peg trying to fit in a round hole. It wasn’t the mean word said or occasional bullying that hurt as much as it was being ignored, being left out or not being acknowledged. My son felt a great deal of pain losing his community and wanting to feel a part of something he had known all of his life—his ward, neighborhood and peers at school. We cannot pretend they are not in our wards, stakes and families. They are there and need our love. We also need their love. Ask them about their experiences and

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feelings. These are real people with real lives and feelings. Remember there are real LGBT members in our wards. At church, in the closet or out. They and their loved ones are there and need us to change how we talk about and to them. We need to simply learn to love more generously. Our youth need leaders and mentors who will reach out to them with love and kindness and welcome them into our classrooms with love and compassion. Above all they need to learn and know they have a loving heavenly father and savior.

A quote I love from President Uchdorf—we must realize that all of Gods children wear the same jersey. Our team is the brotherhood and sisterhood of mankind. This mortal life is our playing field. Our goal is to learn to love God and to extend that same love toward our fellow man.”

Recently I was at an LDS LGBT cottage meeting where Senator Adams shared this after working on and passing a few bills in regards to the LGBT community: he said I had to stop protecting my religion and start living it. This is the beautiful gift my son has given me. Having spent 5 years on this journey I have had regrets, heartache, sleepless nights, worry, joy, love, anger, happiness and meaning because I have a gay son. I have a greater understanding of unconditional love—a beautiful gift that was given to me by my son. Something that I now know has been a refining moment in my life, something that has sustained me during the days following his death and continues to be a guiding force for good. I’m sure you are familiar with the song “For good” from the Broadway musical *Wicked*. These words resonate with me

I’ve heard it said  
that people come into our lives for a reason.  
Bringing something we must learn  
and we are led  
to those who help us most to grow  
if we let them  
and we help them in return  
well, I don’t know if I believe that’s true  
But I know I’m who I am today  
Because I knew you...

It well may be  
That we will never meet again  
In this lifetime  
So let me say before we part  
So much of me  
Is made of what I learned from you  
You’ll be with me  
Like a handprint on my heart

Like a ship blown from its mooring  
By a wind off the sea  
Like a seed dropped by a skybird  
In a distant wood  
Who can say if I've been changed for the better  
Because I knew you  
Because I knew you

I have been changed for good.

Our LGBT brothers and sister young and old need us to link arms and become one as our Savior would want us to do. They need to be included, surrounded, sat by, invited, seen, smiled at, picked up—just as the Savior did. This can go for all people of all shapes, sizes, colors, genders ethnicities etc.

As ward and church members we can create an environment and culture for all members to feel welcome and loved.” Be aware to make kind, loving comments in classes and talks. Our LGBT brothers and sisters listen intently to comments made at church to discern who in his ward would be accepting of his or her orientation and who may be unkind. Insensitive comments may unintentionally close the doors to friendship, which may be desperately needed. “As ward members become aware of [the sexual orientation of other ward members], help them to show love, support and encouragement.” “Seek to remove shame and combat stereotypes and myths.”

Avoid only preaching the “ideal.” Our wards consist of many unique situations and all should feel included, not isolated. Our messages of the “ideal” Mormon or the “ideal” life can potentially push souls away from the gospel they so desperately want to keep in their life. I found this quote amongst some notes I keep on LGBT Mormons: “What if gays are part of the plan to see if Christians really would love one another.” Our wards should be the place for developing that love.

From the words of my friend John Bonner (speaking of his friends and LDS community):

“I know their first instinct is to reach out, to assure us that as long as they have a home, we will have a place in it. That when their table is spread, we will always have a seat around it. And that whenever we decide to celebrate our love with the person we've chosen to make a life with, they will be there in the front row applauding louder and weeping more tears of joy than anyone.”

Let's commit now as brothers and sisters regardless as to where we sit at the table to make a place. One where everyone knows of each other's love, support and most importantly a love of our Savior whom knows each one of us personally. Who understands our pain and has died that we may live again.

This life experience is about finding our way back to love. All the rest is just part of the tough journey we call life. Thank you, Stockton, for being my teacher. My promise is to learn to love with all of my heart, forgive in ways I thought were not possible, release anger that no longer serves me, reaching out and loving your tribe whom I have been so lovingly welcomed in and return to meet you again saying I did it! I lived for you! I honor your memory by loving and finding joy again. I

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hope you too will find greater joy by reaching out and learning to love and understand our LGBT brothers and sisters.

With love,  
Alyson Paul Deussen  
#StandingforStockton

### **George Deussen's Talk:**

I am honored to be a part of this vital conversation today. It is my desire that the Spirit be with us all as we direct our hearts to following our Father in heaven and His beloved Son, Jesus Christ, by subscribing to the tenets, principles and power of LOVE.

As I embark on this talk, these comments, I choose to honor my son, by loving, seeing him, receiving him and loving him, just as Father created him, and by so doing, honor my Father in heaven and one of his beautiful creations.

I am blessed to have a gay son and to have had and the continued gift of associating with the LGBTQIA community.

Moroni 8:17

And I am filled with charity, which is everlasting love; wherefore, all children are alike unto me; wherefore, I love little children with a perfect love; and they are all alike and partakers of salvation.

Mathew 22

37 Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

38 This is the first and great commandment.

39 And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

I don't believe that the Lord put the focus on LOVE in the first two great commandments by some freak chance. I believe that He was teaching us that Love is the way for us to engage all things in our lives

From the moment I set my eyes on my son, I fell in love with him. His infectious smile, laugh and mischievousness were an instant hit with me. His precious hugs and endearing stare would melt any frustration and would heal any sadness. His light was powerful. His light continues to be powerful.

My son and I shared a great love for music. I have found myself listening more to the music he loved. On many occasions I would listen to him practice the guitar in our living room. He had a song that he would sing that is a favorite of mine, "Falling Slowly" from the musical, "Once." As he practiced I would ask him to play it. He would oblige me, each and every time. As I would listen to him, I couldn't help but get caught up in how it felt so personal. For a moment, he would let his guard down. He and I would get lost in that moment together, he expressing himself and me, admiring his openness and vulnerability. He would always ask me, "Do you like it?" And once I

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collected myself, I would respond with, " WOW!" He would smile big and always say, "Really, you really think so?" I am grateful for those sacred moments.

We all want to be appreciated and valued, seen for what is great about us. We all want to be cheered on! We all want to be loved for who we are.

My son didn't always feel accepted and appreciated by others. Ward members, peers and leaders in my ward and stake treated him in way that left him asking questions about what might be wrong with him that these people would treat him in such a way, especially, members of the church. As I watched and felt the pain of these experiences I realized how vital it is to create safe spaces in our homes and in our communities. Safe places are places where our family, friends and others feel that they don't need to hide themselves from the potential harm of others.

I love these words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu: "There is no situation that is not transformable. There is no person who is hopeless. There is no set of circumstances that cannot be turned about by human beings and their natural capacity for love of the deepest sort."

On June 27 2016, my world changed in a most significant way. It was the day that my son took his life.

Discussing the loss of my son is a challenging subject matter. Men don't normally talk about the things that hurt them.

As a father, I felt a great need to not only deeply love my child and all of my children, but to also protect them. The grief I feel includes the struggle of wondering why I needed to protect my son from people that should have treated him differently.

I also feel the loss of a community that I thought was and would be so much different in this moment, the one that was going to bare my burdens with me.

If you love someone, you are always joined with them—in joy, in absence, in solitude, in strife.  
~Rumi

## **LEARNING TO LOVE WITHOUT BOUNDARIES**

Many years ago, my wife approached me and wanted to purchase flower baskets to be placed around our home to add color and beauty. I was at first a bit resistant when she told me the cost, but as is usual in our home, I relented and quickly appreciated them for many reasons. It became my responsibility to care for these flowers and ensure that they received the water they needed. One day my wife asked that I remember to water the edges of the baskets. She said, "George, please remember to water the edges of the baskets. If you don't, the flowers will die." Little did I know how profound her comments would affect me after Stockton's passing.

Just after his funeral, I was out in our yard watering those same flowers and her words came to me with such force that I began to cry. Those precious flowers on the edge of the flower basket were my son, as well as the LGBTQ community. Put on the edges, marginalized, and even abandoned.

They weren't put there by our Father in heaven, or by His Son, Jesus Christ. They were put there by fellow travelers.

As I composed myself and took a deep breath, I thought more about the significance of the flower basket. It was beautiful, all of it. It was filled with many colors, all adding to the beauty of the whole. I began to think how often we believe, myself included, that others must change to be more like us. I thought how drab the flower basket would be if all the flowers were green, or the same color, having no variation and difference. Just like my flower baskets, we all need water, nourishment, love, kindness and appreciation for our divine design. And just as my flower baskets, there is great beauty and benefit in differences. We are created with differences for a grand and divine purpose. He created us with identities, after His holy image. I am also a firm believer that Father doesn't make mistakes.

As much as this is incredibly difficult, I have gained an understanding of what my son felt and I learned through this how vital the community can and needs to be. This experience has moved, motivated and inspired me to reach out to the community and to look at each one as I would look at my own child.

The loss of my son has ultimately provided fuel to raise my words and deeds, seeking to create a safe place, encouraging a community of deep love.

As I was preparing this talk, I felt a pull to discuss the parable of the lost sheep, leaving the ninety and nine and going after the one. It is one of my favorite parables, if not my favorite. I love the message and the power of what it is telling me and everyone in this room. That message is this: our Savior, Jesus Christ, sees each one of us as precious and important. We are important enough that he would come after us. It also says to me that we are truly never alone. That He is and will be with us always. This parable is truly the Atonement. All that we are, all that we might struggle with, anything that weighs us down, sickness and infirmity, rejection and abandonment. He knows these things because he bore them, because He loves us deeper than we might fully comprehend. I also strongly believe that He is sending us all a message. Be even as I am! Go after the one. See all around you as precious and beautiful as I see them. Don't reject anyone because they are different. Go find them, love them, lift them, minister to them. I am so grateful for this parable, this gift, this powerful example of what it truly means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. I pray with all my heart that each of you, all of us, will awaken to this beautiful message that our Savior has given us in this powerful parable.

Yesterday, was the 19th month anniversary of my son's passing. An anniversary that brings a great deal of pain and grief. An anniversary that reminds me that each one of God's children is precious and loved by Him. It is also a powerful reminder that when God commanded us to love, He did not segregate that love. I challenge you to get comfortable with loving those that you think you can't love. I challenge you to step up to the commandment of love, to embrace it. I too have struggled with this and, because I took the challenge, my life has been blessed. Getting to know and love the LGBTQIA community has been one of the greatest and most cherished gifts in my life.



### Jordan Sgro's talk:

My name is Jordan—I work as the Chief Programming Officer at Encircle, the wonderful organization that has been mentioned a few times today. I feel really grateful to be here today to hear the stories that have been shared before me as well as the opportunity to share my own. I truly believe that everyone's story is equally as important and equally as true, and I admire everyone who is here today for being willing to listen and to share this experience with me. What I am going to talk about and share with you today is from my own perspective and it is my own truth. It's a part of me

that most people don't know the full extent of. I am going to be vulnerable about that part of me today, and I think that it will be worth it.

I was born and raised in Las Vegas. My parents divorced before I was born, and I spent the majority of my time growing up with my mom—and she was my best friend. I loved spending time with her more than anyone else. If I could choose between hanging out with friends or going to dinner with my mom, it would be my mom every time. She was the most incredible woman I had ever seen—she worked tirelessly as a single mom to give me a life full of opportunities and privilege that I didn't even realize that I had growing up. She motivated me to become a successful, hard-working, independent young woman. She raised me in the LDS church and taught me valuable life lessons about Christ and about His love for me. And on top of everything, she was a blast to be around. She taught me how to waterski, she loves ziplining—she was just incredible. Right after I graduated from high school, she was called to be the Beehives teacher in Young Women's, and every Sunday after sacrament meeting would end, all of the beehives would just run to her—she exuded this love and this grace, and people just wanted to exist in the same space as her. We were really close for pretty much my whole life.

I was 21, almost 4 years ago, when I really came to terms with my sexuality and who I was. When I came out to my mom, I have to admit that I wasn't in the best place. I was on a string of highs and lows, and I had never felt so depressed and so alone. Even when people tried to be there for me, I pushed them away. I felt worthless. When I told my mom, her response wasn't one of disbelief—she actually wasn't surprised at all, and after she told me that, the conversation just ended. After I hung up the phone, I just remember sitting on the floor crying for hours. I look back at that moment and see how desperately I wanted my mom to just tell me that she loved me no matter what. That we were going to figure this out together. That she was there for me. That she would always be there for me.

I realize that that my mom had her own process she needed to go through, and I don't blame her for not giving me the perfect response. However, nearly 3 years later as I stand in front of you today, I still long to hear those words from her.

After having multiple heated and tearful conversations with my mom about my sexuality, my religion, and what my future would look like, I think I just hit a breaking point. I had never felt so rejected. My mom was my best friend. I needed her. I needed her unconditional love. And I don't feel like she gave that to me.

During my coming out process and sort of figuring out who I was and who I wanted to be, I wrote my mom letters, letters that I never gave her and still have yet to give her, but the letters just gave me the space to tell her how I was feeling without actually telling her and risking receiving that feeling of rejection that I had felt so many times. I'd like to read you a part of what I wrote from a couple years ago. I think it's the best way to really describe what I was feeling and what I needed from her.

I wrote this letter to her on February 17, 2016, so almost 2 years ago. I had come out to her November of 2015 so it had been a few months since everything came out and I had just recently started dating my now wife, Aimee.

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Dear Mom,

Something happens every single day that I want to tell you, that I want to talk to you about. Most of the time though, I feel like I can't tell you. Not because I don't want to, but because I know you don't want to hear it. I hope someday that you do want to listen to me, that you want to know about my life and the happy parts of it. Today is a really good day. Aimee and I went and drank hot chocolate and watched our favorite TV show. It's pretty incredible how loved and cared about she makes me feel. I feel like I don't have to do things to constantly impress her, to make her proud, to show her how capable I am in school or at work. I'm enough for her. Just me. Alone. Without anything else. I've never known what that's like before. I wish I could call and tell you more about what that feels like.

You've made it clear that you don't feel as if you know me anymore, which brings tears to my eyes and a knife to my stomach. I've always been me, Mom, and I always will be. I've been through things that have shaped me into the person I am and the person I have yet to become, but those things have not nor will not change who I am at my core as a human being. I'll always be your daughter. I'll always love your cheesecake and hate vegetables. I'll always cry in frustration when I can't master a skill in less than an hour. I'll always be motivated, hard-working, and dedicated. I'll always be bad at taking out the trash and cleaning up my room. I'll always get overly emotional when I have to make big decisions. I'll always have my same sense of humor. I'll always be me. Always. I hope more than anything that you see that one day. I love you.

Jordan

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Sometimes, I still write letters like this. Sometimes, my letters consist of what I did that day or what I feel grateful for, or what I miss about being home. I imagine what it might be like to be able to have these conversations with my mom one day in person, and I just can't help but long for that day.

Part of the reason my mom and I were having such a hard time was because of my decision to step away from the church, as well as my decision to marry my now wife. I understand why my mom was hurting. I don't hate her for that. I only wish that I felt like I had a space to be myself and like who I was was still important and of value to her.

The church has caused me a lot of pain, but I don't hate it. And I don't hate the people in it. Many of my closest friends and family members are extremely active, and it really isn't a problem for me. Because I was raised in the church, my life and my values are very similar to my active friends' and family members. I dream of having a family with my wife. I value authenticity, service, love, and compassion—all things that I was taught were important and Christ-like in this faith.

Many assume that since I have left the church, I don't miss it. And that it was the easy thing to do. For me, it was the opposite. There are a number of things I miss about having the church in my life, and having a sense of belonging and community is near the top of that list.

One summer while I was at BYU, I went by myself to Italy for an internship. I was terrified. I barely spoke the language and didn't know anyone going, but I did have this: I knew there was a ward down the street from where I was going to be living. And I knew that all I had to do was get there. I knew that if I could just get there that they would make sure that I felt safe, seen, embraced, and loved. And that is exactly what happened. They gave me that community and that sense of belonging that I had at home, and it made me feel so good. I miss that.

Until my wife and I found Encircle, we didn't really have that same community, and we both missed it. We are currently building a home together in American Fork and we frequently discuss how nervous we are that our neighbors will be uninterested in being our friends or that they will be judgmental towards us. Having this large community of people that you know care about you and your well-being and want to know about your life—it gives human beings a sense of belonging, one that Aimee and I both dearly miss. It's one that I long for within the church and within my own family.

When I go home to visit my mom and her side of the family, my wife is unwelcome. I go home without the single most important person in my life. I go home knowing that not one person in my family will ask how I am doing. Or how my wife is doing. I go home knowing that who I am as human being is someone that my mom thinks is gross, sinful, and wrong. If I want to see my mom and my little sister on Christmas day, I am forced to choose between seeing them and abandoning my own wife, or not being with my family at all. What kind of choice is that?



When I married Aimee, I felt like I was choosing to live my truth. 100% Jordan. For me, I had to do it. It felt right. I couldn't lie about that. I knew what that would mean though. I felt like I had to choose between making my mom proud and feeling her love by being someone I wasn't and potentially being miserable and suicidal forever, or potentially losing my mom forever and marrying the love of my life. Please don't make your LGBTQ brothers and sisters choose. It leads to unbearable heartbreak. Unnecessary heartbreak.

As Dieter F. Uchtdorf says, "love is the healing balm that repairs rifts in personal and family relationships. It is the bond that unites families, communities, and nations."

I dream of the day that I can sit down at a Sunday dinner with my wife and my mom. I dream of the day where we can sit, and laugh, and play games, and joke. I dream of the day when my wife will finally be able to meet my little sister whom she has heard so much about, and come see the home that I grew up in. I've had really incredible people fall into my life, my wife's family included, and I am incredibly grateful for them. They have shown me what unconditional love and acceptance looks like. But, those people will never replace my mom. They will never replace that person that I desperately needed during the lowest points of my life, that every child wants. And they will never replace the person I still long for. As Boyd K Packer has stated, "family is the source of human happiness."

I want to close with another part of a letter I wrote to my mom. I wrote this in November of 2016, so it had been almost a year since I had come out to my mom.

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Dear Mom,

I hope you know that I still look up to you. You are one of the most incredible women I have ever met. I will always think that of you. I hope one day you realize that you never really know a person until you consider things from their point of view, until you crawl inside of their skin and walk around in it. I know this has been incredibly difficult for you, and I don't take that lightly. Just know that I am still me. Only now, I am all of me. I am learning to embrace who I am more and more everyday, even though I know it pushes you farther and farther away from me. Living our truths is the best part of living once we realize what that truth is. I love you.

Jordan

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Again, I'm extremely grateful that every single person in this room is here to give me the space to share this with you. I leave that with you in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.



### Ben Schilaty's Talk:

I'm gay.

I know most people who read this blog know me fairly well and so this will surprise few people. Even so, it's still a little unnerving to be so vulnerable online because I feel like I'm placing my heart in the hands of my readers. About a year ago I felt very strongly that I needed to be more open about the fact that I'm gay and Mormon. I first started telling people in 2007 when I was 23 and for next seven years only some family and my closest friends knew. Over the past 12 months I've come out to dozens of people and it has been an amazing experience.

One of the first people I told was my friend Craig. When he and I were roommates at BYU we started having dinner at his aunt and uncle's house. They took great care of me and made me part of the family. Even when Craig moved away they continued inviting me over for holidays and Sunday dinners. I often stay at their house when I travel through Utah. I had been part of their family for seven years and yet I had hidden this huge part of my life from them. It had gotten to the point where I felt uncomfortable keeping this from them. I just came out to them in November. It feels so very recent.

A few days ago I received a note in the mail from Craig's aunt that said in part, "We really appreciate you sharing your story with us. Nothing changes. We still love you as one of our own." For me, telling people that I'm gay has been a really wonderful experience because over and over again I've heard people say, "I love you. You're the same person you've always been." I've told more than 100 people and no one has ever responded negatively. However, I hear stories of gay Mormons who are rejected by their families or who lose friends or who are shunned by members of their congregations simply for being gay. I don't know why I have been so fortunate when others have not.

That's the reason I've decided to be more open about my experiences. I want other gay Mormons to know that there are other people who know the inherent struggles of being gay and Mormon. I don't want anyone to feel alone or to feel like they aren't welcome in the church. They can leave if they choose, but I don't want them to feel forced out. There is a place for us here. And I want straight Mormons to have a little glimpse of what it's like to be gay and Mormon and of the heart wrenching decisions we have to make. I want them to know that we need to be loved and accepted. I want them to understand the remarkable impact they can have on a gay Mormon when they treat them with love and respect. A lot has already been said and written online by gay Mormons (like Mark, Jimmy, and Josh). I'm simply trying to add my voice to the many who have already spoken.

In November of last year I got an email from BYU announcing a BYU alumni essay competition for the BYU Quarterly. I immediately wanted to write an essay about being gay and Mormon because I felt like it was time to be open and stop hiding. I took a day last January and wrote what I thought was a pretty good essay. I submitted it to the essay contest and it won zero awards. Even though it wasn't published, I was still able to share it with a number of people after coming out to them.

Since BYU didn't want to publish the essay I wrote in 2014 I've decided to publish it here on my blog in 2015 in an attempt to be more honest. It was written for audience familiar with Mormonism.

### *That Your Burdens May Be Light*

My cell phone rang. "Do you want to go for a walk tonight?"

Both relieved and surprised by this invitation I responded, "Uh, yeah, that sounds great."

Mitch and I had been best friends in high school but had grown apart in college, especially after he got married. It's not that we didn't get along, we just didn't see each other very much. We had never invited each other to go on a walk before which is what made his invitation so unexpected. Mitch surely didn't know that I had been holding in a secret for some time that I needed to talk about and that he had suddenly given me the perfect opportunity to talk to someone I trusted.

I hung up the phone and said to my roommate Craig, "Hey, I'm going to go on a walk with Mitch. Do you want to come?" Craig and I had met the previous year in our BYU ward and had been roommates for some months at this time. He had met Mitch once or twice, but they were only acquaintances. And yet, my new best friend readily agreed to go on an impromptu summer walk with me and my old best friend.

Craig and I got in my car and I drove us to Mitch's apartment. That's when I started to get nervous. It was the summer between my junior and senior years at BYU and I'd been feeling increasingly lonely and sad because of a secret I was keeping. It was something that I thought I could handle on my own, but as life got harder and harder I knew I needed help, but I didn't know who to reach out to or how. I was incredibly embarrassed by it and felt like I would be rejected or shunned if anyone else found out. I had wanted to tell Craig for months, but he was my roommate and I thought he would feel uncomfortable if I opened up to him about my secret. And so I kept it inside.

We got to Mitch's apartment and the three of us went on a summer evening stroll through Kiwanis park in east Provo. We engaged in small talk as we walked along the park. I tried to sound jovial and carefree as I spoke, but I felt exactly the opposite. I so badly needed to talk to someone about what was going on in my life, but I was petrified to reveal something that I thought my friends would find disgusting. I felt like I was about to drop a bombshell on them that they wouldn't see coming and I didn't want to put them in an awkward position. As I smiled a forced smile and talked about the daily comings and goings of university life I was struggling internally with whether or not I should tell Mitch and Craig. I was so afraid, but I also needed them to know. I thought about how odd it was that Mitch had invited me to go on a walk which was something he'd never done before. And yet, his invitation had brought me to a private place with my two best friends. It was as if Heavenly Father knew what I needed and orchestrated the optimal situation for me to share my secret.

I gathered my courage and interrupted the commonplace chitchat saying, "Do you mind if we sit down on the grass? There's something I want to tell you guys." We sat down and I started to feel so nervous that I thought I was going to puke. Stalling, I began slowly pulling out blades of grass by my feet so that I would have something to look at instead of looking into the faces of my puzzled best friends. As I tugged on blades of grass and stared at the ground I almost chickened out, but I reminded myself that I had been wanting to do this for months, that I needed to do it, and that God had put me in the best possible situation to do it. And so, I took a deep breath and for the first time

uttered the words that I had carefully chosen weeks before: "For as long as I can remember I've been attracted to men instead of women."

At the time I wasn't comfortable calling myself gay and so I described my situation instead of labeling it. Gay just didn't feel like the right label for me since I had never had a physical relationship with another man. I had been attracted to men since puberty, but I always thought it was something that was temporary. Surely my mission would cure me, I thought. I would work hard, God would see my honest efforts to serve faithfully, and I would be rewarded with a wonderful wife that I was genuinely attracted to. However, when I got home from my mission I disappointingly discovered that I was still attracted to men. I felt very let down by God. Nevertheless, I decided to square my shoulders and be like Nephi who said: "I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them" (1 Nephi 3:7). I had been told that now that I was home from my mission that it was time for me to find a wonderful woman and get married. Certainly the Lord would help me find success in this righteous pursuit.

A few months after my mission I returned to BYU and I started taking many girls on dates. I took out several wonderful girls and some of them were even interested in me, but I had a hard time finding one that I was really interested in. In April 2007 I had been taking a really great girl on dates for a few months. She was kind, witty, beautiful, and her dream was to someday play Maria in *The Sound of Music*. She was perfect for me. One evening I expressed interest in dating her which led to a conversation about our relationship. She told me that she thought very highly of me, but felt like we just had a good friendship, not a romantic relationship. She pointed out that after more than two months of dates I hadn't kissed her or even held her hand. She was right and I hadn't done either of those things because there was nothing in me compelling me to. My guy friends would talk about how hard it was to wait to kiss a girl they liked and yet I had found an awesome girl that liked me and I had no desire to kiss her. Something was obviously different about me. This girl and I decided to just be friends.

After two years of sincerely trying to find a girl to date I was still single. I had always felt like I was different than other guys. That difference, obviously, was that I was attracted to men. I finally had to face the reality that it was my same-sex attraction that had made my search for a wife so unsuccessful. Why did I have these feelings? How could I find a woman I was attracted to? And even if I did, what woman would ever want to marry a man that experienced same-sex attraction? These questions plagued me and caused me to give up on dating altogether.

I was feeling increasingly lonely and sad each day. A number of my friends noticed that something was wrong and kindly asked what was going on. I wasn't ready to talk about it so I just avoided the question and withdrew more and more from the activities I usually did. One evening a friend stopped by my apartment and told my roommates and me that a close friend had just come out to her at dinner. She was shocked and was trying to process the whole situation. I immediately perked up when she mentioned that her friend had said he was gay because at the time it hadn't occurred to me that there were other gay people at BYU. I had thought that I was the only one which left me feeling incredibly isolated. She mentioned that there were a number of anonymous blogs written by BYU students who experienced same-sex attraction. I was stunned. There were other people going through what I was going through? And I could read about their experiences? I then played a delicate dance of trying to get as much information out of her as possible without trying to look too interested because I didn't want her to suspect that I was gay, too.

As soon as she left I went into my room and typed "gay byu student blog" into Google. I quickly found about half a dozen blogs written by my peers experiencing same-sex attraction at

BYU. Some of the blogs had more than a year of history and dozens of posts. I would start at the oldest post and then read through each entry of the blog. I devoured their words and spent many hours reading. At first just knowing that there were other people experiencing the same thing I was experiencing helped me to feel very included. However, the blogs started making me feel worse and worse. They often began with the writer sharing his testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ followed by a statement of determination to stay active and faithful no matter what. Then as months and sometimes years passed the writer would develop feelings for someone, decide staying active in the church wasn't right for him, and eventually decide to leave. Not all the blogs followed this pattern, but enough of them started out with strong testimonies and ended leaving the church that I worried that that was the inevitable conclusion to my story.

One evening early in the summer of 2007 I sat in my room pondering the blogs I had been reading. I thought about my life and what I wanted and hoped it would be. Then I considered the reality of my life and what it actually could be. I concluded that I had two options: leave the church and pursue a gay lifestyle or remain active in the church and stay single for the rest of my life. Both options seemed inconceivably hard for me and I couldn't imagine being happy in either path. I let my mind wander as I envisioned my future if I chose either path. As much as I was afraid of being alone for the rest of my life, I knew that I had to stay active in the church. Other people in the same situation as me have made other choices and I respect their decision, but I knew that staying in the church was the right thing for me.

I knelt down in my room and said a prayer. I told Heavenly Father that no matter what I was going to stay in the church and if I needed to spend the next 60 years of my life alone I was willing to do that. I then sat down on my bed and with a heavy heart pulled out my scriptures. For no particular reason I started reading in Alma 40:8 and was stunned when I reached the following phrase: "...all is as one day with God, and time only is measured unto men." The rest of my life seemed like a long time to be alone, but these words jumped out at me and reminded me that sacrificing for a time really wouldn't be a long sacrifice when viewed in the eternities. My mind then jumped to a line that I had always loved from Preach My Gospel. It says, "All that is unfair about life can be made right through the Atonement of Jesus Christ" (p. 52). It felt so unfair to me that I had to choose between staying in the church and being married to someone I was attracted to. Straight people don't have to make that choice so why do I have to choose? It really does seem unfair, but I knew and felt that night that everything that was unfair would be made right and that I would be okay.

Life wasn't quite as bleak for me after that night. I had made a firm commitment to remain active in the church and I had felt peace and comfort that someday, and maybe not until the next life, everything would be okay. This knowledge provided me with great comfort, but it didn't change my circumstances. I was still a single man longing to love someone and be loved in return. I knew that I was going to be single for a long time and that scared me to death. In spite of all the good I had felt, life hadn't gotten any easier. That's when I decided that I needed the support of my friends. It took me two months to get up the courage to tell Mitch and Craig because I didn't know how they would respond.

After revealing my secret on the grass in Kiwanis park, I looked up expectantly at Mitch and Craig to see how they would react. They both said that they were surprised and caught off guard. Then they did exactly what I needed them to do--they said that they cared about me and that I could talk to them about what I was going through whenever I needed to. I looked over at Craig and said, "I understand if you don't want to be my roommate anymore." He looked surprised and replied, "Why wouldn't I want to be your roommate? You're the same person you've always been." Even though I didn't know it, that's exactly what I needed him to say. I had felt broken and

unworthy, thinking that no one would like me if they knew that I experienced same-sex attraction. Hearing Craig say that he still wanted to be my roommate even though he knew I experienced same-sex attraction changed my world. I saw that I wasn't broken and that I was whole the way I was. I'm still very good friends with both Mitch and Craig.



Here's a picture of me with Craig's family.

My life changed for the better that evening. I didn't anticipate the remarkable transformation that was going to take place in my life when I shared my secret with my friends. As I talked with Mitch and Craig I felt an enormous burden being lifted off my shoulders, a burden whose immense weight I had not even realized I was carrying until it was lifted. In the Book of Mormon Alma taught his people that when we are baptized we covenant to "bear one another's burdens, that they may be light" and "to mourn with those that mourn" and to "comfort those that stand in need of comfort" (Mosiah 18:8-9). My friends willingly shared my burden with me and it did indeed

become light to me. As I opened up to more and more friends and family members I felt my burden get lighter and lighter. There have been many times that my friends listened to my sorrows, cried with me, and hugged me when I need them. I could not have made it alone. I would not be the person I am today without the love and support of my friends. I do not think that I would be an active participant in the church today if Mitch and Craig had not reacted by expressing love and acceptance.

An unexpected thing has happened throughout the years as I have told people about my experiences with same-sex attraction. When I open up, the person I'm talking to often opens up and shares his or her struggles as well. It has been very eye-opening for me to see the varied and unanticipated struggles that my friends have. I have come to understand that my same-sex attraction does not make my life harder than anyone else's, it just makes it different. Everyone has a burden to bear. The hymn "Lord I Would Follow Thee" sums up what I have learned in the second verse: "In the quiet heart is hidden / Sorrow that the eye can't see" (Hymns #220). We very rarely know of the burdens being carried by those people we interact with every day because our deepest sorrows are often hidden away in our hearts.

After describing the conversion and baptism of Alma's people, Mosiah 18:30 describes the place where all these events took place and says, "...how beautiful are they to the eyes of them who there came to the knowledge of their Redeemer..." Kiwanis Park will forever be a beautiful place to me. It was there that I learned of the Christlike love of true friends and that our burdens can truly be made light. Since that summer night in 2007 my heart has felt so much lighter. My life isn't as ideal as I would like it to be, but it is filled with so much joy and peace. And thankfully, it is filled with many friends who are willing to share my burdens and make them light.



### Morgan's talk:

I am grateful to be here today to share a part of my life and experience with you. My name is Morgan Burdi, I am the youngest of 5 children to Ken and Debi Day. I grew up as a tomboy playing everything from tackle football to going to cub scouts with the boys in my neighborhood. My mom said I would have been her first Eagle Scout, had I not been a girl. Thankfully, the Boy Scouts of America are now allowing girls into the club I always wanted to be in. In 2006, I was in a secret relationship with a woman and it lasted 5 years. During this same time, I was in a state of full fledged addiction to pain killers and other narcotics prescribed by my doctor.

I was living in a nightmare of not only addiction but insurmountable shame. Shame from the inability to stop taking the meds and shame that I was living 2 different lives. Nobody knew about our relationship. I was still going to church at the time and I felt there wasn't a place for me in the church. On July 30, 2011, I was spiritually, mentally and emotionally bankrupt. My addiction, depression, and shame led to me try and take my life. I drove my car to a street near the Oquirrh Mountain Temple and I took over 100 prescription meds and laid my seat back, closed my eyes in the hope that I wouldn't wake up.

Someone informed my mom that this might be happening and she started calling my phone, not knowing where I was. She prayed and prayed that I would answer my phone. She called and called. And somehow in this blackout I answered the phone. I told her that I was coming to her house. I started driving and I was not aware of anything happening. In this blackout, I hit a parked car and kept driving, I popped the tires on my car and kept driving on the rims. My dad was driving the neighborhood, searching for me. He found me.

My mom drove me to the hospital, where they ended up intubating me because I was in respiratory failure. I was in the ICU and I remember coming to for the first time, my two sisters were on the side of my hospital bed and my first thought was "Oh no, it didn't work, now what?"

I was so ashamed and felt unworthy to be alive.

Lets fast forward a bit. I went to rehab and did 18 months of Intensive Outpatient Therapy. On day 1, my therapist asked me who I was.

My response was, "I'm Morgan, Ken and Debi's daughter."

She said, "no Morgan, who are you?"

To which I realized I had no idea.

So we started on an 18 month+ journey of working on characteristics and qualities of who I wanted to be. I made a list. I wanted to be kind, honest, loyal, loving, a good daughter, sister, aunt, and

friend. I wanted to be spiritual and have a healthy relationship with Heavenly Father. In working on my 12 step program, I was working on my 2nd step. “Came to believe that a Power greater than myself could restore us to sanity”

I had a hard time with this because I was angry with God. I knew that God would be my final judge, and I didn’t know him well enough to realize what a loving God he was. This was a breakthrough for me. Once I realized that, my heart softened about being a child of God.

In March of 2014, I met with my mom for lunch and came out to her. I told her that I was still me but my future is going to be different from what anyone has imagined it to be. I told her I’m not going to marry a man, not marry in the temple and one day I will have children but my child will have two mommies.

In 2014, I met and fell in love with Toni. We dated long distance and finally it was time for her to meet my big Mormon family. It was overwhelming for her to meet 25 family members all at once. She was welcomed in with open, loving arms.

These past 4 years since coming out, my life has been filled with happiness and peace. Five important factors in that happiness are...

- I am no longer living in a state of shame. I know who I am.
- I married the most amazing, wonderful woman, Toni and she is the best thing to ever happen to me.
- We have a little boy Beckham who is the light & joy of our lives.
- My family has been by my side through everything. We have an incredible bond of friendship and above all love. We support one another and that bond has grown even stronger since my dad passed away suddenly and unexpectedly 3 months ago.
- I have a new understanding of the Atonement of Jesus Christ and I have a relationship with Heavenly Father that is stronger than ever.

To my LGBTQIA community, I love you. You are worthy of love and belonging, you always have been.

I say these things, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

### **Debi’s Talk:**

I’m so touched to be here today and to hear stories from so many wonderful hearts. “No love in mortality comes closer to approximating the pure love of Jesus Christ than the selfless love a devoted mother has for her child” –Elder Holland

It’s difficult to put 10+ years into a few minutes, but I will try.... When we discovered that Morgan was using prescription pain pills, prescribed by a doctor, who first gave her something for her “pain” and then 14 other prescriptions for anything and everything else...our world turned upside down and we couldn’t imagine why she would turn to drugs. Her pain was so deep inside of her that she thought it was her body, but it was her soul.



Pain has a way of clipping our wings and keeping us from being able to fly, and if left unresolved, you can almost forget that you were ever created to fly in the first place. After a few years dealing with the addiction....during which time I had asked her several times if she thought she might be gay and she had always firmly answered NO....Morgan finally told me she was gay.

So much soul searching went on after this. Morgan is one of the most wonderful, amazing people I have ever had the privilege of knowing and loving. Anyone who knows her will tell you that. Side by side, we have been through her life with every up and down. Side by side we have experienced the highest highs and the lowest lows imaginable. I never left her side. She has influenced people all around this country for good. She has stood up for her church and talked with every sort of person imaginable about being a gay Mormon whose family and friends love her and cherish what she has brought into their lives. The only thing that matters is love and compassion.

I had to learn how to deal with it in my LDS setting. I was doing pretty well until the policy change....that nearly broke me...along with thousands and thousands of others. I came to realize that I had to know exactly what I believed to be true. I decided to pray, fast, read everything I could, seek information and help from sources I choose CAREFULLY. All the resources, websites, forums, and Facebook groups weren't as readily available then....or I wasn't aware of them. I asked Heavenly Father to help me with understanding. I knew He loved me dearly, and I knew He loved her dearly. I asked him to send me helpers in my life and good information. Through a miracle of a sweet divine gift, Morgan was a flight attendant and met a wonderful young missionary on a plane, spoke with him, said she wanted to tell his mom he was ok and doing well, got her number, called her, she then called me, and Susie and Paul Augenstein came miraculously into my life and saved me. A little later on, in reading and searching on Facebook, I came across another angel named Richard Ostler and became his Facebook friend. His goodness and Christ-like words jumped out at me and grabbed my heart. I later met him for the first time at the Augensteins' home and a few times since. I will forever be grateful for these angels and examples in my life.

At one point during Morgan's addiction, I took a big step when I turned her over to God. Then I realized, she was never really mine; she was always His and He has a plan for her and He loves her with all his heart. His plan is always better than mine, and I finally trusted in that. I choose to stay because the gospel of Jesus Christ is a part of my being. I believe in God and my Savior Jesus Christ and I know their characters. I choose to stay because I believe. I choose to stay to be a voice of hope and kindness. I can do good work staying. I have no problem with talking to anyone in my church about having a gay daughter, and more often than not....they then tell me about a situation in their family. I choose to stay and I do not believe I have to choose my child or my faith, and Morgan accepts my choice.

I hope to be a voice of hope, not just because how my story has gone but for how many stories can go better in the future with change. I'm years into this process, but to any of you who are newly in....tie a knot and hang on. Going through things you never thought you'd go through will take you places you never thought you'd get to.

I believe there is hope smiling brightly before us and this type of meeting feeds it. It took us years to get to this point....years full of hopelessness and fear and frustration and loathing and then lots of prayer and searching and tender mercies from God.

The sad and tragic and terrible stories move us to action and the happy stories move us towards hope. My dad lived with us for 17 years. He was 97, and I thought he was the epitome of enduring. Looking out at my dear brothers and sisters who are here....I find a new definition and examples of that....I love you for your courage and hope....hang on for the changes. Look for the angels and advocates and let them love you. Their numbers are growing and growing.

My voice now comes from hope and peace and understanding trust and faith in a loving Heavenly Father and my Savior Jesus who have asked us to be like them. They offer a place for everyone, they open doors and invite everyone in, they and they alone are our judges, and that comforts me that the ball is rolling for better things to come for these wonderful, sensitive, kind, and beautiful souls who are sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father.

I say these things humbly and sincerely in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.