



The Media Project

A Program of Advocates for Youth

Growing Up Gay: Inside “Out” in America

Summarized Transcript

Wednesday, January 30, 2002

TV CLIPS VTR (3:01) (ALL MY CHILDREN, BECKER, POPULAR, BOSTON PUBLIC, WEST WING, JUDGING AMY, ALLY MCBEAL, AND ER)

ROBIN SMALLEY, DIRECTOR, THE MEDIA PROJECT: Well, one thing’s clear...homosexuality has come out of the closet and gone straight to the small screen...no pun intended! As these clips showed, TV is really great when it provides information and fresh ways of looking at things...even when it mirrors society’s negative stereotypes. Lately it seems that more and more shows are incorporating gay characters and storylines and the challenge for writers is to make them *compelling* characters and *realistic* storylines without resorting to the easy way of continuing established stereotypes. That’s why I hope you’re all here today for “Growing Up Gay: Inside ‘Out’ in America.”

For many of you, some of the terminology may be unfamiliar. For example, the term “GLBTQ” may be used often today...that stands for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning and is just one indication of how complex and multilayered this topic is. Our wonderfully candid panelists here are going to share with you some of the challenges they face socially, romantically, medically, and legally...and I think it will blow away any stereotypes you’ve ever harbored!

But before we begin, for those of you who haven’t worked with us, let me tell you a little bit about the Media Project. With our partners, the Kaiser Family Foundation and Advocates for Youth, we work with the TV industry on issues concerning adolescent sexual health...everything from teen pregnancy, contraception and parent-child communication about sex to sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS, sexual violence, and sex ed. We provide information, referrals to experts, and, thanks to our partners, access to the most cutting edge research and polling available. We meet privately with many shows and are ready to brief your creative teams on a specific issue or on general trends. We conduct these briefings several times a year and host the annual SHINE Awards in October. And, best of all, our services are free! Such a deal!

Before I forget, you each have an evaluation questionnaire. In case any of you have to leave early, please remember to fill it out and leave it with us...they’re our best way to learn how to serve you most effectively with future briefings.

Now, about today’s topic. Last month I attended Advocates for Youth’s conference and listened to an incredible, dynamic speaker named Verna Eggleston who ran a special high school for GLBTQ youth just blocks from the World Trade Center. She told a story that I don’t think I’ll ever forget. On September 11 as New York and the rest of America was reeling from the senseless violence that had befallen us, Verna decided to let the kids out of school early to return to the relative safety of their homes. Apparently the principal at a nearby public high school had the same idea. Verna and her staff soon heard screams from outside the building and assumed another terrorist attack had taken place. They ran outside and saw that, yes, another senseless attack *had* happened...but to her students, who were bloodied and beaten. As their young attackers ran off, they lobbed two more grenades by yelling “queer” and “faggot.” Against the backdrop of rubble, destruction and war, homophobia still managed to find its place in the world.

We have provided each of you with a packet of information. Included in it is the Kaiser Family Foundation’s survey “Inside Out: A Report on the Experiences of Lesbians, Gays and Bisexuals in America and the Public’s Views on Issues

and Policies Related to Sexual Orientation.” Whew! That’s a lot of words for some pretty powerful findings. Here to tell us about them, please welcome Kaiser’s Vice President of Public Health Information and Partnerships, Tina Hoff.

TINA HOFF: Last fall the Foundation released a major new survey that looked at public views on issues and policies related to sexual orientation. The study included the largest survey conducted to date of self-identifying gay, lesbian, and bisexual Americans about their experiences, as well as a national sample of non-gay Americans.

In total about 2,600 people were interviewed. The data is nationally representative meaning it reflects views and experiences of people nationwide. The survey yielded some hopeful news and some disappointing news about life for gay Americans. First some highlights from the survey. Sixty-four percent of all Americans say there is more acceptance of gays today, two-thirds say they are comfortable with gay people at work, but about one-third of Americans say they would be reluctant to see an openly gay doctor, vote for an openly gay candidate, or have an openly gay teacher teach their children.

Looking at the survey how does this compare with the experiences and views of gay Americans? One in four (23%) say they themselves have experienced **a lot** of prejudice/discrimination because of their sexual orientation; another 30% have experienced at least “some.” In fact, most say sexual orientation has been a greater source of discrimination than other characteristics, like gender or race. One in three (32%) say they have been personally targeted for violence because of sexual orientation. And, 74% of gay Americans have experienced verbal insults or slurs because of sexual orientation. Many also say they know someone who has been discriminated against because of sexual orientation – getting a job, renting, or buying a home or getting health care. One in three say they have felt lack of acceptance from a family member.

In summary, while there seems to be a sense that things are getting better for gay Americans, there is also a recognition that violence and discrimination remain problems – something that many gay Americans say they themselves, have experienced.

When it comes to how you all – the entertainment industry – is doing? Good news. Both gay and non-gay Americans say portrayals have been generally “neutral” or “favorable.”

ROBIN: After reading Kaiser’s report, we were so struck by the number of respondents who said they had experienced prejudice as a result of their sexual orientation that we decided to take to the streets ourselves to find out what people had to say. Take a look at what we found.

VTR – MAN ON STREET INTERVIEWS (APPROX. 2:25)

ROBIN: The last person on the tape said, “*Choosing* a harder route doesn’t make sense to me.” That statement alone poses plenty for our participants to talk about. We are thrilled to welcome actor Wilson Cruz today as our moderator. He’s a particularly appropriate choice because, in addition to being a gay activist in his private life, Wilson gained fame playing a sexually confused teenager in the critically acclaimed drama “My So-Called Life” as well as a starring stint on the teen hit “Party of Five.” He also won the coveted Ovation Award for his work in the Tony and Pulitzer Award winning theater phenomenon, “Rent.” The issues we’ll be discussing today are ones that Wilson has lived through himself and we hope he’ll bring his own experiences to the table.

Gwenn Baldwin is the executive director of the L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center, the oldest and largest center of its kind in the country. She is a member of the California Attorney General’s Civil Rights Commission on Hate Crimes, the Secretary of the Board of the National Association of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Community Centers, and a fellow of the Rockefeller Foundation’s Next Generation Leadership Program. We are grateful that she is joining us and know that her background brings much expertise to the table.

And now for our panelists, 24-year-old Jessie G., 19-year-old Luis, 20-year-old Jessie F., 17-year-old Lexi, 19-year-old Anthony, and 20-year-old Beverly. You’ll find that these are some very impressive young people. Rather than me telling you about them, I thought it would be better to go down the line and let each one introduce themselves with one or two sentences about themselves that best describes their own experience of growing up gay.

JESSIE G: I work at a nonprofit in Washington, D.C. and I run a gay, lesbian, bisexual Web site. I am very active in gay and lesbian causes. I came out 10 years ago. I am 24 now. Back then I felt extremely isolated, not so much now.

LUIS: I live in East LA. The main thing for me is being able to identify who I am and how I can mesh my cultural background (Latino) with my sexuality. I have some acceptance from my peers, but my family has a very hard time with it. I was always so involved in “guy” things like football. I was not the typical “gay” kid playing with Easy Bake Ovens.

JESSIE F: I live in South Central Los Angeles, and have found many difficulties with incorporating my sexuality into my culture and just being a woman. I came out at 14. The transition was very difficult and I had to deal with depression and oppression. I am an advocate for gay youth and started a gay/straight alliance at school. I feel that the media is not portraying the real stories of gay people.

LEXI: I am 17, and a high school senior. I have had no positive gay role models and have lived with a lot of self-hatred. It has been very hard to express my feelings at school.

ANTHONY: I feel I am the exception and have felt very little discrimination about being gay. Gay activism bothers me because it is fueled by negativity. Although, I did start a gay/straight alliance in high school.

BEVERLY: I grew up here in California. I did not come out until I was in college. Partly because I moved here from Taiwan in 6th grade. Gays are not as accepted in my culture being a Pacific islander. My biggest crisis has been transgender related. I feel more like a man on the inside even though physically I am a woman. I work at the China Town Service Center and work with several different GLBT organizations.

WILSON CRUZ, MODERATOR: First let me say how proud I am to be here. We are here to inspire you to tell better stories, truthful stories about GLBT youth. A lot of us thought that with the start of a new millennium, attitudes towards gays would be much further along. And although it is getting better, we still experience much discrimination and fear. Let us begin with how you feel about attitudes towards gays and if you think things have changed?

JESSIE G: Personally, I have had the most difficulties regarding my appearance. People constantly think I’m a man based on the way I look and present myself, even though I am a woman. I will relate this story to you that happened to me yesterday at the airport. Since security has been heightened at the airports, they randomly select people to “pat down” and search. I was chosen to be searched and was sent to the male security person who patted me down. They thought that I was a man. That happens to me a lot. Everyday I have to put on a tough face.

LUIS: I went to an all Latino East LA high school and came out at 15. I went through so much shame. It was hard for my family. My father and mother had a very hard time and they are just now understanding who I am. My parents thought that all gay men would be hair dressers. I always liked guy stuff. I want people to know me for myself and not because I am gay. Being gay is such a small portion of my life.

JESSIE F: I went to a Catholic school and had to change schools two other times because of gay discrimination by students, teachers and principals. I was very sheltered when I was growing up and I didn’t grow up with any queer people. My conflict with my religion has been very hard for me. My parents separated me from my two sisters because they thought my sisters would “catch” being gay from me. I was very suicidal and wanted to runaway. I thought I would go to hell for being gay or just die. I have been beat up in the school bathroom. You have to be very careful in the work world. You must decide what you can and can’t present about yourself to your work.

LUIS: I would like for us to touch upon the aspect of how your religious and cultural beliefs fit into being gay. I know that first you have to deal with just being gay. I lived in a small community. I knew I felt different but I didn’t know why or what it was. The Latino culture does not accept being gay. I am Catholic and they would tell me that being gay is wrong. That filled me with self hate. My parents thought tough love was the way to go. I would always hear the words “coto” or “maricon” which are Hispanic words, bad words, meaning something like faggot.

WILSON: Yes I remember always hearing the word “maricon.” It is such a bad word. How is it different for a Latino, or an Asian or a religious person, etc. “to come out?”

LUIS: I wasn’t exposed to many things. I felt different but I didn’t know why. To be gay in my culture is not accepted...thinking you are gay was such a curse. I felt why was this happening to me? Nobody was saying or is saying it’s ok , they say it is wrong.

WILSON: I used to go to mass with my mother. The priest didn't know how to say "gay" in Spanish. For two hours I heard the word "maricon." I never went back.

BEV: We are 49 different countries, China, Cambodia, Filipinos, Vietnam, etc. I come from a less conservative family. Being in the US made it easier for myself. When I came out my mom was giving me messages, the paternal views: women take care of the house and men will take care of women, monetarily; she was worried who was going to support me? I said to her I was going to support *myself* and my partner.

WILSON: You are dealing with sexuality and also with gender roles. It's not just sexual orientation. How do you feel when in this American society women can support themselves but then go back home and hear that it is the role of man to support woman?

LEXI: I went to Beverly Hills High School. It was like going with the cast of 90210. It was a very difficult time. At school there was a gay/straight alliance but still we had problems. I had so much internal homophobia and I also was very promiscuous. I always heard the word gay and lesbian in a negative context. I had attempted suicide and went to a mental institution. I get upset when everyone thinks my life was perfect.

ANTHONY: I came out at 14. My mother cried every day for a month and my dad was passive aggressive. He just moped around. He tried to ignore my comments but sometimes he talked back. In high school I heard rude comments. My tactic was to ignore them. When I said something they often stopped right there...quite odd.

BEV: I was born in California. My sexual identity came before my ethnic identity.

WILSON: Who was your support?

JESSIE F: I had great fear. I was afraid to ask another student if he was gay? When I left school I met other young people. They were in relationships and also met teachers that came out at school and then I felt great. They helped me through my depressions; they were there, they understood.

WILSON: Any events that triggered something? Did you remember anything that clicked with you?

JESSIE F: After my second suicide attempt I called a hotline. That conversation for two hours kept me alive. Also my family was better about it.

LEXI: I went away to a Jewish summer camp and I had my first gay experience. I came back home and then I was thinking, what is going to happen? I wrote journals dealing with being gay. I had two mentors, both straight. When I told them I was gay, they said they already knew. I said, "Why didn't you let me in on it!" So it wasn't a big deal.

WILSON: Yes, you say, "I have something to tell you, be prepared, what I need to tell you is so huge." And, when I told her, she already knew about me.

JESSIE G: My parents knew too. Also my best friends. People that are close to you in your life know. Now, how do they react – negative or positive – it's another story.

WILSON: How is this stigmatized in the medical community?

GWENN: It definitely has an impact.

WILSON: Obviously this may lead to some higher rates of risky behavior, tell us how?

GWENN: Obviously information is knowledge and if you are informed and aware of how you can protect your health, you will be better off. Just from benignness, you're going to engage in something less healthful and more risky. But I think the major impact from discrimination from the health care universe is the lack of appropriate health care. Thus the risky behaviors if you are not getting the health care and you are getting only a small portion of it your health is going to be jeopardized and I think that that is the largest issue. And on top of that again is your feelings of self worth, and your

ability to take charge of your life can be greatly diminished and that has an impact because what do you do if you are in pain, you medicate. Substance abuse is a serious issue. Alcohol and drug abuse have higher rates of use in LGBT kid communities than they do on the streets. They medicate. And that actually is what leads to risky behavior more than anything else does, not the specific lack of information around. If you are on crystal meth or on ecstasy or any number of drugs, your inhibitions are way down, your need to be connecting with people and to be reinforced in any positive way and at times your positive is you know a sexual encounter. Yes that is where the problem lies.

WILSON: You touched on a topic that I think we should talk about. Can you talk about the difference between a gay man and being a man who just has sex with another man, or a lesbian and a woman who just has sex with other women?

GWENN: This is when I need a chalkboard. Okay, here's the diagram because it is really confusing, even in the community it is confusing. There is no agreement. It would be great if there was one word that covers it all and in many ways that is what "Queer" attempts to do. Queer is an interesting word because it has strong reactions from a lot of people. Queer was the ultimate attempt to create a single word to take back the negative. I'm going to take back a word that was used to harass people for years and years and make it ours. And not only make it ours but make it ours within a broad umbrella. And so you walk up to someone who is let's say over 50 and you say, "Are you queer?" they are probably going to be pretty offended in all likelihood. They are going to be uncomfortable. When you walk up to somebody who is 18 or 19 and you may get maybe one or two reactions. One is "yeah" because it's "the word." But the other is the use of more and more moving past the labels. They don't want to be known as I am this or that. I'm on a continuum. I may one day identify with and feel bisexual and the next day I could identify with and feel lesbian. I may say yes I have sex with women but I also have sex with men. My behavior may be one thing; my identity may be something else. And so there is more of fluidity on the scale.

So as you look at how to approach complex characters or writing characters or writing storylines or any of that, I think it is really important to understand the four issues at play here.

1. The issue of gender presentation, how do you present yourself. And I think Jessie talked about that. If you present yourself in a masculine way and you are physically female there are issues that come into play. But that's presentation... that is not saying, "I want to be a man." It's just how you present. Just saying I'm comfortable, I like this look. And it can be male or female.
2. This is gender identity. You fundamentally believe that your hard wiring is male or female and has that contrast to what your physical being currently is. Again that has nothing to do with orientation, sexual orientation. It has to do with how you identify male or female.
3. And third is sexual orientation, are you attracted to the same gender or are you attracted to the opposite gender? And do you identify that way? How do you identify?
4. And that is sexual behavior, which is not the same thing as sexual orientation. Orientation is identity. I fundamentally love women and that is where my close personal relations are. I may have sex with men, but that's not the same thing. It's not a sexual term like you can say, "Oh you had sex with a man therefore you are bisexual." No, the identity is very clearly your hard wiring and how you believe you are oriented. And so as you look at the issues it is very complicated. There's no question about it.

And when you get into the issues of the transgender community I think that's where vast confusion exists for a lot of people who are attempting to write about it or discuss it. The assumption is that if you are transgender, then you are absolutely queer. So yes in a sense that transgender is a part of the queer community but, in the sense of being gay or lesbian, that is not the case. It depends; you can't assume. Somebody can be born a male, have gender reassignment surgery and become a female, and have heterosexual relationships for the rest of her life. It is important because if you only have one character, that character has to carry the burden of the entire queer community. Oh my god! It can be like anything, you can have one Catholic character, and one Latino character, who suddenly have embody everything. You are never going to get it right. There's no right way to get. There's not that much in the homogenous behavior and the personalities so the benefit of having more and more characters is that it gives you latitude and nuances about what those characters have experienced.

If you take "Fatal Attraction" you know the protests were huge. And rightly so because it was the first time someone was on the big screen who was in, well I don't know what you call it, but it was a woman having sex with another woman. She was involved with Sharon Stone.

WILSON: That was “Basic Instinct.”

GWENN: Yes, “Basic Instinct,” sorry. Wrong movie. “Basic Instinct.” The point is the hugeness of it was that it was the first time so it bore the brunt. Today I don’t think you would see the same reaction. And I think it is for a variety of reasons, one being that there are more people who are “out” there are more examples in day to day life. There are also more examples in film, not enough, and so the burden is on one character to be everything.

WILSON: Thank you. So let’s go back a couple of questions. And can any of you share your experiences with receiving medical attention, medical care. I was told that, Jessie, you might have some experiences.

JESSIE G: Well, I mean, I think the first time I went to the gynecologist, I felt the same insecurities that were exactly what Gwenn said. First, I was asked if I was sexually active and I said, “Yes.” Then she asked, “Do you use condoms,” and I said, “No.” Then when I said I have sex with women, the doctor walked out. And she walked out, and she stayed out for about 20 minutes. And you know that doctors are kind of bad about that anyway, but she didn’t even say anything, she just walked out. And you know that to this day I feel like it’s ridiculous, ’cause I’m the medical health educator in my profession now. Actually I had to go to the gynecologist yesterday, and I had to tell the person what sort of services I need. I had to educate the person and if I’m a 23- or 24-year-old that has to do that, because I am empowered with all this information, that’s great. If I was a 16-year-old that went in, or an 18-year-old and not had this information, because I didn’t have resources that were taught to me in my sexual health class in my school, I would not have been able to take care of myself. I would not have been able to say, “Yes, I need these tests. Yes, I need that information.” I think that it’s important and it’s exhausting trying to, you know, teach your doctor who has gone to school for 7 years that you need these tests. They should do the work for you, right?

LEXI: It’s really hard, like I know when I started coming out, I stopped watching TV because seeing all these stereotypes out there, it’s probably not what you want to hear, but seeing all these stereotypes out there, and you are trying to find your place in the queer community. It’s very complicated. And that is why we are here today and that’s why we are meeting with you. It’s very, very hard because these shows only have one character. And when they do, they’re very stereotypical or very anti-stereotypical but there are so many different facets of being a queer youth and to try to identify tends to be very difficult. And not only now are you not feeling that you identify with the straight community, you don’t feel like you identify with the queer community that you are seeing on TV. And then you don’t identify anywhere, and you are a complete outcast, and it’s the end of the world.

WILSON: What would you like to see, you know, as compared to what’s being shown now. What is it that you need it to be?

LEXI: I completely agree with Jessie and with Luis in terms of labeling... how that is being I guess a movement I could call it, to get rid of labels. But I think that doesn’t necessarily come very easy to parents, to aunts and uncles and priests and nuns, or whoever might be watching TV.

WILSON: The heterosexual community...

LEXI: I think young people are becoming more open and aware of it, because they are being exposed at school, within conversations, within communities, or your best friend or my uncle or my cousin or what not. But when it comes to the media, I think that a lot of people...that’s where we turn to. That’s where we get a lot of our information. I think for that information to be processed, it has to be important to see what information we are providing. For example, I’m thinking of parents. If you are a parent and you love your child, what other resources do you have except media? I think having that information out there is important because people, especially parents, don’t understand that you participated in something, whether they are coming out gay, or whether they’re dealing with drugs...whatever it is, but relating that in a real aspect through television I think is highly important.

LUIS: I think TV needs to have queer youth of color because there are gay people on these TV shows, but not a lot of them and I think I still haven’t found someone that I identify with on television. And you know even though TV has become so open and everything I think that a lot of gay people of color don’t have anyone to relate to in the media. I think that there are some really good shows out there and they are portraying positive images of queer youth, but I think TV is lacking in creed and color primarily. In Spanish TV you can hardly talk about it. I think that one of the biggest stigmas in the Spanish TV community is the fact that queer people are not portrayed as positive role models. They are always effeminate

or hairdressers or something like that. There needs to be characters who show what really goes through their heads, their mind, understanding their sexuality, understanding what goes through a family member when they don't want to talk to you. How it is to go, to live through discrimination and harassment. I mean, it allows you to understand the base of that person. I think ethnic queers of color need to know they are not alone. You need to know that there is somebody else out there going through the same thing, even if it is on a TV show. Even if it's one just one episode, it still needs to be there. Something else that going back to the Spanish speaking community, the Spanish speaking community needs to know, they need to be accepted. And there has to be a very strong role model that saying, "Yes, I'm queer, and I'm Mexican, or Latino, or whatever and I'm doing positive things with my life. I'm not just doing drugs and stuff like that. I'm doing something positive with my life for myself." I think there is not enough of those.

ANTHONY: One thing I would like to see on more TV shows and in the media is the issue of statutory rape.

WILSON: I think there is also ample opportunity to talk about the positive concerns happening in the TV movement. What are some of the positive things that you'd like to see portrayed? And you know it can be funny too, it doesn't have to be drama.

LUIS: I think just showing the fact that queer people are being active in the community would be positive. I think there is not enough coverage of all the movements that are going on out there, for example all the things that queers are doing. They are organizing and creating a positive change for the community. There's not enough exposure to know, to have the non-queer community understand. And I think by doing so you're really breaking the community, making it apart from the community. I think most of the time when we get covered, there's always this gay story. It's just gay. It's never incorporated into religion or into what goes on in daily life. It's always just a gay story. I think if you really start making a gay story part of daily life, it will just become part of daily life and there's not enough of those. There's not enough of those that fit everything together.

JESSIE F: I agree. I'd love to see a story where someone is at a gay/straight alliance where young people are talking about gay rights issues or someone picks up a gay flier in their school, just little things like that. It doesn't have to be a big deal or over dramatic or overworked.

WILSON: Or Gay/Straight alliances. For instance they can talk about those. You know and have them portray those in an honest and positive light. I would think that would be helpful.

LEXI: The other thing is, like in real life, it's not necessarily the main plot. It's not the thing that's going on in the foreground. It's always, being gay and dealing with being gay is going on in the background. I've been doing college visits lately and on the different campuses you see a rainbow flags just randomly posted up where you see that this place is a safe place. There are pink flags, but it's in the background or a rainbow on a car or something when you know it's safe. But it doesn't have to be, "But he's gay and blah, blah, blah." Because he's gay, because that is not how real life is. Yes, I'm gay, but that is only such a small percent of me. I'm this and I'm that and I'm this and I'm that, but I happened to be attracted to women, but I happen to have a girlfriend.

WILSON: I think this would be a great time to open it up to you all, the audience, and see if you have any questions for our panelists.

Q & A CONTINUES

ROBIN: Thank you all so much. Gwenn, your input and expertise were invaluable. Wilson, you did a wonderful job keeping the conversation on target and making sure everyone got the opportunity to share their stories. And, panelists, what can I say? You are all so courageous, bright and committed...your families should be very proud.

We've all gotten a lot of information today and heard some very personal stories of bravery, persecution and positive attitudes. I hope we have been able to break some stereotypes and that you will be able to incorporate what you have heard into your work, creating scripts and shows that treat GLBTQ people with a fresher, more realistic approach.

If any of you would like the opportunity to talk further to a panel of teens about other sexuality issues or would like to have your colleagues share the experience of hearing what is really going on with young people today, please feel free to call me at the Media Project. We would be happy to put together a briefing targeted to your show's needs and present it to your staff at your offices. And, if you are writing a script or considering a storyline that deals with sexual health, please utilize our HELPLine or check out our Web site at www.themediaproject.com. We understand crazy TV deadlines and will drop everything to get you the information you need.

Lastly, I want to thank my wonderful staff...Kerrie Preston, Ellie Baer, Humberto Meza, and Magaly Holtz for pulling this all together with hours of phoning, faxing, and organizing. And, again, don't forget to fill out your questionnaires and leave them with any staff member. Thank you so much for being here and have a wonderful rest of your day.

EVENT OVER