

## INTRODUCTION

This book shares the stories of Christian students in same-sex relationships as they encounter oppression, adolescence, first love, and then a passion for social justice. Each of the students had early experiences related to family, religious, and educational socialization, which framed the ways in which they experienced their same-sex relationships as high school and college students. Although there were many positive outcomes of being in a same-sex relationship as a youth, all of the participants described internal and external conflicts that they struggled to manage.

These stories are filled with attempts of suicide, physical and verbal abuse, isolation, loneliness, depression, and hospitalizations; moreover, they are also filled with triumph, self-realizations, community building, and the development of powerful queer leaders. These students turned their oppressive experiences into fuel for queer activism. The major themes focus on seeking family support, hiding loving relationships, seeking community acceptance, deconstructing socialization, and doubting the morality of their romances.

As each student struggled to overcome internal and external conflicts they relied on a variety of institutional and individual resources, which provided support to them as they attempted to resolve challenges with their religious, spiritual, and sexual identities. Some institutional support systems included university lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) campus centers, LGBT student organizations, supportive and well-informed counselors, and openly affirming churches. Some of the individual support systems included university student affairs staff members, close friends, wellness and stress management events, and media venues that positively portrayed non-heterosexual people. These students did more than just survive the oppression they faced from families, schools,

the LGBT community, and religious institutions; they thrived as community and educational leaders. Through their pain they triumphed to inspire others to overcome obstacles and create change in their communities.

This book is intended for educators, parents, community organizers, religious clergy or any who might know a youth who could be LGBTQ. Higher education administrators including counselors, residence life professionals, diversity and LGBT center staff, judicial affairs officers, and many other student affairs educators will gain great insight from these students' stories. Educators are religious or public institutions around the country and those especially in populations with higher concentrations of Christian identified students, such as the Southeast and Midwest, should also be highly interested in understanding the experiences of Christian students in same-sex relationships.

Religious leaders such as youth group leaders, campus ministry pastors, and even other religious leaders not within the Christian faith could greatly benefit from these students' stories of multiple aspects of marginality. Since most of the intense emotional challenges, mental health issues, and suicide attempts occurred in high school, high school teachers, administrators, counselors and parents and family members should read these students' stories.

Little is known about how Christian students experience same-sex relationships and what types of challenges they may encounter; therefore, it has proven difficult for educators to provide appropriate support. In addition to holistically supporting LGBTQ college students, this book is also relevant to the survival of many LGBTQ youth. In the last few years there have been several notable incidents of suicides among LGBT youth.

Within a three week period during the fall of 2010, five nonheterosexual teenagers committed suicide (Hubbard, 2010). Two of the students were college students; Tyler

Clementi was a student at Rutgers University who jumped to his death from the George Washington Bridge after being bullied in his residence hall about his relationship with another man (Hubbard, 2010).

Raymond Chase was an openly gay student at Johnson & Wales University who hanged himself in his residence hall (Hubbard, 2010). The religious identities of these students were not discussed, but non-heterosexual students face intense emotional challenges on a college campus, and religious identity can further complicate those challenges.

It has been discussed for some time now that gay, lesbian, and bisexual people have conflicts as they begin to understand their sexuality, but Christian people usually face more challenges and higher levels of anxiety (Yip, 1997).

When Christian students engage in same-sex relationships and face severe emotional conflicts, their spiritual well-being can suffer. While students are in college their spiritual well-being must be supported in order to foster holistic development. People with same-sex attractions often feel like they must choose either their religion and spirituality or their same-sex relationship (Rosser, 1992).

College students receive messages of what is “normal” from many directions (Savin-Williams, 1996) and portrayals of “normal” gay and lesbian people are mostly of those who are not religious (Poynter & Washington, 2005). In order to support all students, educators should understand the multiple dynamics that take place within students’ lives. Christian students engaged in same-sex relationships may need different and additional types of support. There is little knowledge available for educators to utilize to provide adequate support to these students and few resources available to students on how to manage these conflicts, which is why this book was written. Educators and students can now better understand the experiences, challenges, and resources needed to support Christian

students in same-sex relationships.

## **Methods**

In order to capture the experiences of these students, semi-structured interviews were utilized. The interviews included a portion of pre-written open-ended questions which were asked to all participants. Semi-structured interviews were used because it was assumed that the students defined their worlds in unique ways. There are questions and issues to be discussed, but not in a particular order. Semi-structured interviews allowed the students to share their stories openly and also allowed the researcher to initiate further conversation. The interview questions can be seen in the appendix.

Each student was interviewed for 60-90 minutes on several occasions, and all of the students were given pseudonyms. The interviews were all recorded using a digital audio recorder and then each interview was transcribed. Additionally, reflective notes about observations and speculations were documented. In addition to the reflective notes, demographic details were recorded. The interviews were conducted in neutral spaces, so the students were most comfortable. I traveled to meet each participant in person, and closed office spaces in university common spaces were utilized in order to provide privacy and convenience for the students.

After each interview I would analyze the interviews and develop follow-up questions for the subsequent interviews. The students' stories and experiences were used to describe key themes and sub-themes related to the research questions. The students had to meet specific criteria in order to be invited to be involved with this project. All of the students identified as Christian or did identify as Christian when they were engaging in their same-sex relationship(s). The students were engaged in what they defined as a "dating-relationship" with someone of the

same sex. A “dating-relationship” is here described as a means through which a romantic relationship is pursued, practiced, and established (Savin-Williams, 1996).

The students were currently undergraduate students or had exited their undergraduate experience within the last two years. The students were asked to reflect on their experiences as undergraduate students, so the length of time that has lapsed was minimal. The research project utilized purposeful sampling that was non-probability sampling. The students came from a variety of institutions of higher education within the United States due to the limited size and accessibility of this population. Students were recruited using institutional LGBT centers and student organizations, multicultural centers, academic departments, and by referrals.