

THE MAMA DRAGON STORY PROJECT

About the Photography and Photographer

The photographs and essays featured in this issue of *Dialogue* come from Kimberly Anderson's *Mama Dragon Story Project: A Collection of Portraits and Essays from Mothers Who Love Their LGBT+ Children*, which is available at <http://www.magcloud.com/browse/issue/1105633>. Mama Dragons (<http://mamadragons.org>) is a support and advocacy group promoting "healthy, loving, and supporting environments for mothers of LGBTQIA children." They seek to protect and defend their LGBT+ children against the dogma inflicted by both religion and society. The Mama Dragons are predominantly Mormon or have a Mormon background, but all mothers are welcome, including those who have abandoned organized religion altogether. They aim to share and educate. She has photographed nearly eighty Mama Dragons within eight western states since February 2015. Using an old portrait lens from 1907 and 5x7 Tri-X film, Anderson makes AZO contact prints in a darkroom.



Her goal is to show these women without the slickness of digital technology. Just as they have an unconditional love for their kids, she accepts them as they come to the camera. The “average-ness” of this group of women serves to underscore just how widespread their stories are. The book features full-page images of the women with essays they wrote themselves. Their words bring to light some very real issues they face when their children finally come out to them. Confronted by the knowledge that their children identify with something outside cultural and religious norms, these women now must make a choice. For some it is easy, for others it is tragically difficult. Many of their stories are filled with heartbreak and sadness, while others are overflowing with love for their children as well as reconciliation with God. All express the unconditional acceptance and love of a true mother’s heart. The portraits themselves serve as a conduit to help the viewer want to learn more about each woman’s journey. Anderson’s goal is for the women’s fierce and loving voices and faces testify that hearts can be touched, attitudes can be changed, and lives can be saved.





Carla Brown—Atlanta, Georgia

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“Mom, I’m gay.” Even two years later I can still remember that moment. The sun was beaming down and my porch was warm, but I suddenly felt like I could not feel the warmth anymore. I remember saying, as if I were looking from outside my body, “Are you sure?” I so regret those words; of course he knew he was gay! The next hour is in bits and pieces. I know that I told him that I loved him no matter what, and that everything would be all right because I would always be with him. That’s what came from my mouth, and I meant each word, but inwardly my heart was breaking.

Questions came at me at a fierce pace. Had I known and refused to see it? How will my family react? They are of Spanish and Italian descent and not open-minded. The “what will people think” of the Southern society suddenly seemed so huge. I had always thought of myself as a modern woman, but I was ashamed of what friends, family, and church would think of me as a parent. Would I be blamed for this? Why not when I was blaming myself? What had I done, or not done, to cause this in my child? I barely slept. I felt pain that I had not felt before.

I reached out to the one person I believed would give me the support and answers that I needed. I called my bishop and requested a meeting. I needed guidance, and he is the person I had gone to in the past to find solace. My bishop was kind but honestly shocked and clearly uncomfortable with my news. I poured out my fears and pain and I got nothing in return. He actually said that he had nothing to offer me. This was not something he had any knowledge of. I left his office feeling angry and disappointed. I went home and I railed at God. Why me? Why my child? How do we fit in your plan? I went through days of anger and confusion. I found it hard to sleep. Finally, exhaustion forced me to approach God in humble prayer. I gratefully received the answers that I had been seeking. Austin had been created by his Heavenly Father just as he is and that He loved him. A wave of

love and comfort filled me. I knew that it was not Austin who needed to change, it was me.

It was during this time of searching and learning that I learned that I would have a second battle. My youngest child, ten years old, sweetly explained to me that his guy friend had a crush on a girl in class, his girlfriends all had crushes on a boy, but that he liked a boy. This time I did not falter. I explained to him that he was perfect, that some liked the opposite sex, and some would like the same sex. That God had created him just as he is and that he was perfect. He smiled at me in the rear-view mirror. I had done it right this time.

I have a choice to make. I can be a voice of change in my church, or I can sit quietly. I have chosen to fight like a dragon for all of our children.



Anne Wunderli—Boston, Massachusetts

Twelve years ago my daughter was dating a girl in her Young Women class. I was in denial and desperate with longing to find any Mormon mothers with LGBTQ daughters with whom I could talk. In place of any flesh and blood mothers, I dreamed of women with whom I could cry, share, and learn. Perhaps it was the Spirit or Mother in Heaven who buoyed me up during that time, or maybe it was just the hope that there were other mothers out there like me. I'm grateful I found the Mama Dragons. Virtual and real-life friendships have made a tremendous difference in my life.

When our daughter, at the age of twelve, told me she might be gay, I did what I could to dissuade her from making a firm decision at what I felt was a young age. When she told me at fifteen that she and her girlfriend loved each other, I told her I didn't think she was gay. When our daughter attended college in Utah, she had a year-long relationship with another woman. During her years in Utah I spent many days, and

all Sundays, crying. I was grieving the loss of the future I had envisioned for her. I cried because I was concerned for her safety as an LGBTQ woman in Utah. I cried because I felt like I had failed as an LDS mother. Although I worked through our entire marriage at increasingly responsible and challenging positions, I was committed—pridefully—to being the mother of active, LDS daughters. I associated my entire success as a mother with that goal. The much-hackneyed phrase “No other success can compensate for failure in the home” became the cat-of-nine-tails with which I would lash myself. I have a journal I kept during that time that has that phrase written dozens of times.

Facebook groups like “I’ll Walk with You,” “Mormons Building Bridges,” “Feminist Mormon Housewives” and “Exponent II” helped me envision a new reality and a new identity. I came to see my success as a mother defined not by whether or not our daughters were active in the Church but by their self-confidence, compassion, and charity. I became a passionate supporter of my daughter and her wife, and about supporting in any way I could those in marginalized populations. Joining the Mama Dragons helped to make me feel whole and I was ecstatic to be part of this amazing group. Knowing other Mamas has been life and sanity saving. I’ve been able to share deep, dark feelings and experiences of reconciling a church I’ve loved with a daughter and daughter-in-law that I adore.

I’m a Mama Dragon because I want to help other Mamas walk this path with as light a step as they are able. My process of reconciliation has frequently been painful. In meeting women who’ve been able to experience joy while going through their own evolution, I’m learning from them how to find joy and peace. If I can help other mothers in a similar way, I would love that.



Anne Wunderli—Boston, Massachusetts



Leslie Cordon—Syracuse, Utah

Leslie Cordon—Syracuse, Utah

My son, Tyson, told me he was gay in the spring of 2011. I was not surprised when he told me, but I was scared. I always suspected he might be gay when he was growing up. I would think to myself, “What if he is gay?” I was worried for him, what his life would be, and if he’d be mistreated. Now that I look back on it, I’ve realized something: I didn’t think, “What if he chooses to be gay?” I just thought, “What if he is gay?” I knew deep down in my subconscious that it wasn’t a choice. But, after so many years of society and the LDS church telling me it was a choice, I believed it.

Tyson gave me a few books to read. These books helped me understand more fully that being gay isn’t a choice. He would periodically send me a video to watch. One that really touched me was called “Just Because He Breathes.” It is about a very religious couple and their journey with their gay son. It was heartbreaking. But it gave me permission to love and defend my son. It was a permission I was not getting from my church.

My son came out to the world on Facebook in January of 2014. He wrote an amazing essay about his life, his journey, and how he was a proud gay man. His bravery inspired me. I shared his post on my Facebook wall and said how proud I was of him and how honored I felt to be his mother. Watching his bravery gave me courage to speak up. I haven’t turned back. I am an advocate and an ally. I feel like being gentle and speaking from a place of love helps others understand the struggles this community faces. I feel very lucky to have an amazing and very supportive family.

In the summer of 2015 at the Utah Pride Parade, we had fourteen family members, spanning four generations, who marched together. Love from our family makes all the difference in the world. I see the joy it brings to Tyson and that makes my heart sing. I have come to the conclusion that this is what life is all about. Helping others on their journey. My new motto is “Whose journey can I make easier today?” My heart aches for all the years Tyson struggled alone. For all the things I may have said or done that broke his spirit. For him being so afraid that I wouldn’t love him if I knew. I think I love him more because he

is gay. He is so strong! He has taught me so much. He has opened my narrow mind and increased my capacity to love unconditionally tenfold. I would do anything to help him live a healthy and happy life.

I have had another realization: This is my mission. I will have no regrets. That is why I am a Mama Dragon. I will fight for my child to be treated equally and with the respect he deserves.



Shauna Jones—Idaho Falls, Idaho

My oldest daughter Annie sent us an e-mail several years ago saying, “I’m gay.” As I read her message, I was so thankful for the tender mercy of having known a man named Ben. Ben was the best man at my temple wedding. I didn’t know it at the time, but besides being a caring, considerate, and all-around compassionate guy, Ben was also a closeted gay man. He had been a close high school friend of my husband and was one of our favorite people. I knew the kind of loving, honest, decent, wonderful person Ben was, and I knew it didn’t fit my ideas of what it meant to be gay. After learning about Ben’s sexuality, it made me revisit everything I thought I knew.

As I read my Annie’s message, I knew immediately that I needed to love her unconditionally, emphasize her worth, and not discount her words and feelings. When I got her e-mail, I went down to Annie’s room and sat on her bed, hugged her, and told her it was all going to be fine. We’d figure out this new path. I will admit, when I was alone later in my closet, I cried desperate, tempestuous tears. Loving and supporting your gay friend is one thing. Realizing you have a gay child is an infinitely more complex reality. I had many misconceptions about homosexuality, and it was a difficult thing to reconcile.

Despite the tender mercy and change of heart I received many years ago, the grieving process is real. I realize that the dreams I had for Annie’s mission, her attendance at BYU, her temple wedding, her cute future husband, the adorable grandkids, the Mormon life map that I had in my head for her was gone.

My testimony is that God knows each of his children. I truly believe that he is big enough to have a plan for every single one of them. Every. Single. One. Just because we don't understand how our LGBT brothers and sisters fit into the plan does not mean that he hasn't known all along. I do not fear for Annie's place in heaven. I know she did not choose this part of her.

Having a gay child has been one of the greatest blessings of my life, and I will be forever grateful for my part as her mother. I'm reminded of the story in the Book of Mormon where the angel asks Nephi if he knows the condescension of God. Nephi's response is, "I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things." I, too, do not know the meaning of all things. But I know that God loveth his children, and I love my children, too. And that, for me, is enough.



Lisa Dame—Salt Lake City, Utah

As my daughter became a teenager, she went through some very rough times. It was so hard to watch this creative, intelligent girl struggle in so many ways. One of my strongest desires was for my daughter to be happy and joyous in the gospel. I prayed continually for this. There came a very dark episode that I not only felt worried and scared for her but it felt as if I had a continual pain in my heart that wouldn't ease. I was praying once again about this daughter when a feeling of amazing peace and stillness came over me. I heard words in my head say, "Everything will be all right." I felt strongly that it didn't mean it would be all right the next day, the next week or maybe even the next year, but I had this feeling that it would be all right in the future. It helped me immensely and I knew that I would have the faith and patience to wait.

As my daughter got older, she found a man that she felt she wanted to marry and they set a date to be married in the temple. When she broke off the engagement, I was devastated. It confirmed to me something that I had known at the edge of my consciousness all along. I knew that my daughter was gay. I kept this inside of me and didn't talk about it with



Shauna Jones—Idaho Falls, Idaho



Lisa Dame—Salt Lake City, Utah

anyone, but I was in mourning. I started the process of letting go of things that weren't going to be. There wasn't going to be a temple marriage to a returned missionary. All of my own upsets became secondary in my mind as I watched her continue to struggle to find happiness and peace in her life.

That winter, on a cruise with my mother, I met a recently married lesbian couple. We were on an excursion together and I struck up a conversation with them. I wanted to talk to them about my daughter but my mother was with me and I couldn't say anything. After we were back on-board, I went for a walk by myself and ran into them on a quiet part of the ship. I was able to talk to them about my daughter and give voice to the thoughts in my head. I said the words "My daughter is gay" for the first time. I cried with these women whom I had just met and they were comforting and helpful to me. I grieved for what was not going to be and started the process of accepting what is. I turned away from the fear that I had felt for my daughter for so many years and moved toward hope.

Not long after that, when my daughter came for a visit, I was prepared. I told her that I was ready to hear her, that I wanted her to tell me her truth. The visit passed quickly, and finally, right before she was getting in the car to leave, she told me she was gay. We hugged and cried and I felt such a relief that she and I were both finally ready for this. After she left that day, I sent up a prayer of gratitude. The feeling from long ago that "everything is going to be all right," returned to me again. I knew that this was the plan all along. God was aware of, and loved, both her and me.

