

# GROWING UP LGBTQ IN MONTANA



*By Daphne Herling*

## Introduction

Imagine having dog feces stuffed into your school locker, being told by your parents that they don't love you or pretending to be someone you are not. I heard stories like these from LGBTQ young adults who went to high school in Montana.

Montana KIDS COUNT previously produced an academic white paper and a shorter issue brief on growing up LGBTQ in Montana. Missing from these pieces were voices from the LGBTQ community. As the mother of a gay son, I felt compelled to write this companion piece to give space to their stories. These are experiences from people who wanted to share their journey with the hope of opening minds and changing attitudes. I talked with Montanans from rural, reservation and urban areas to give a broad view on how growing up LGBTQ in Montana's diverse places play out. However, individuals and places are not identified.

I spoke with gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender young adults. It's worth noting that transgender people (gender identity or who you are) often

face different issues than those who are gay/lesbian/bisexual/etc. (sexual orientation or who you are attracted to). All of the stories are unique, but some common themes emerged. They demonstrate the stereotyping, rejection and prejudice these young people have experienced, as well as the resilience, courage and insights they have shown.

A litany of data tells us that LGBTQ youth are at risk. Nationally, the data tells us that:

- Suicide is the second leading cause of death among young LGBTQ youth.
- Sixty-percent of LGBTQ students doubted they would graduate high school because of the hostile climate in their schools.
- Around 30 percent of youth who become homeless are LGBTQ.
- Thirteen percent of incarcerated adolescent males are gay.
- Twenty-three percent of incarcerated females are lesbians.

Straight Montanans – no matter how accepting, liberal or politically correct – might have a hard time grasping what these young people internalize from their schools, families and communities. I was humbled and moved by the trust they placed in me to share their personal stories. Their resilience and determination to be who they are despite growing up in a society that would prefer they conform to traditional sexual and gender norms was encouraging.



When I started, I hoped to find young LGBTQ adults who could look back on their experiences with insights and thoughtfulness – I got this a million times over. Their stories give flavor to why changes in school policies, family education and community support groups are needed.

## Schools

### Bullying

Nationally, just under half of LGBTQ youth commonly avoided school bathrooms, locker rooms and gym classes because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable in those spaces. Ninety-six percent of LGBTQ students have heard homophobic remarks, such as dyke or faggot. Fifty-eight percent of LGBTQ students feel unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Twenty-four percent of LGBTQ students were verbally harassed in the past school year.

**“My school didn’t deal with bullying – even though they claim to have zero tolerance,” said a transgender youth who identified as lesbian in high school. “It was a joke.”**

Knowing they were different was a theme from all the LGBTQ young adults I interviewed. “I knew I was gay in second-grade,” declared one gay student.

“My school didn’t deal with bullying – even though they claim to have zero tolerance,” said a transgender youth who identified as lesbian in high school. “It was a joke.”

Over and over the bullying issue was mentioned although these young people professed to be immune to it, one claiming, “I was called dyke, but I can deal with name calling.”

Montana does slightly better than the nation in having a designated staff member at school to whom students can confidentially report bullying or harassment. Many did share experiences that were similar to one gay high schooler from rural Montana. A trusted teacher told him, “If someone gives you a hard time, let me know.”

Even so, most of the students felt they had to put up with the name calling and no one knew of any policy adopted by their schools to address bullying. It is hoped that schools have good policies in place and respond to incidences of bullying of LGBTQ students in an intentional, coordinated and appropriate way. But letting students know these policies exist would be an important step in showing them support.

Participating in sports was challenging too. Even though she excelled in sports, one lesbian said she quit because of bullying in the locker room. A gay student from a reservation said, “I had to actually





go to the principal and make them see what some other kids did to me wasn't OK. But I was out and willing to be really in their face about it!"

**"When I came out as bisexual at school, the reaction was mixed. One friend said, 'Don't ever talk to me again,' and then two days later everything was fine. Some were fine – most just accepted and it was good coming out."**

Coming out or disclosing their LGBTQ identity to others is a key developmental milestone for LGBTQ youth and is associated with better psychological well-being. But revealing one's sexual orientation in high school is not always possible. Several students I interviewed didn't come out until they went to college out of fear for their personal safety and/or internalized shame. "I really excelled in school and I was afraid everyone would stop talking to me," said the same young man from a reservation.

Another young person from rural Montana said, "When I came out as bisexual at school, the reaction was mixed. One friend said, 'Don't ever talk to me again,' and then two days later everything was fine. Some were fine – most just accepted and it was good coming out."

### Peer Support Groups

Even though social support from peers is a strong protective factor for LGBTQ youth, only 16 percent of Montana schools have a gay/straight alliance, also known as a gender and sexualities alliance (GSA) or similar club. But GSAs do not work in all schools. A former rural school student said, "A GSA would put a target on the back of anyone who joins. In a bigger high school it would probably be okay. In my situation, it would have been me with one other kid. The last thing I would have wanted is to do anything that would identify me as gay."

A bisexual student from an urban Montana school was not interested in the school's GSA either, saying, "It was a group of really close friends. Also, I still had a bit of fear about being out."

One student from a reservation who tried to start a club at school eventually gave up saying, "There was so much unspoken discouragement" mainly from the school staff and other students.

### Professional Development

Nationally, 44 percent of LGBTQ students reported hearing negative comments from teachers or other school staff, and 48 percent of the time neither school staff nor other students intervened when hearing homophobic remarks. Of the students who reported harassment or



assault, 64 percent said the staff did nothing, took no action or told the student to ignore it. Twenty-seven percent of students were told to change their own behavior.

**“In sex ed, we heard nothing about homosexuality,” said a bisexual student from an urban area. “We need more resources. What is gender? What is sexuality? No one talks about it, which totally reinforced that it’s a taboo subject.”**

Professional development for teachers and school staff is a necessity. Making school staff more aware of their own homophobia is a good start, however, most of the students I talked with felt that staff needed basic education and information. Additionally, they themselves needed information about sexual orientation and gender differences.

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One young man who grew up in rural Montana said there were a list of terms referring to LGBTQ nomenclature that were not allowed in his school.

At a time when young people are questioning and exploring issues around sexuality, to ban LGBTQ words is to set young people up to internalize shame. It is naïve to think that just by not saying words, we can stop youth people from questioning their sexual orientation or being who they are.

## Family

Coming out to family was the biggest fear and challenge for everyone I spoke with no matter where they lived in Montana. Research shows that LGBTQ youth rejected by their family are at higher risk – 30 percent of youth who reveal their sexual orientation or gender identity to their families are victims of verbal and/or physical violence by family members.



The way families reacted covered the gamut of, “I knew you liked boys,” and “They were totally supportive,” to “It became clear I am gay and my life was a living hell.” The last comment came from a young gay man who chose to stay and work in his home town, indicative of his steadfast love of family despite their rejection.

After their initial rejection, given time, his family “has grown to be less horrible and have sort of accepted my boyfriend and our relationship.”

Coming out as transgender is even more challenging because of the confusion and ignorance of what being transgender means. Those students I spoke with were still struggling with parental acceptance. “My mom felt like her child was dead,” said one.

Another said that their mother, “was not going to tell anyone in the community and won’t call me by my chosen name.”

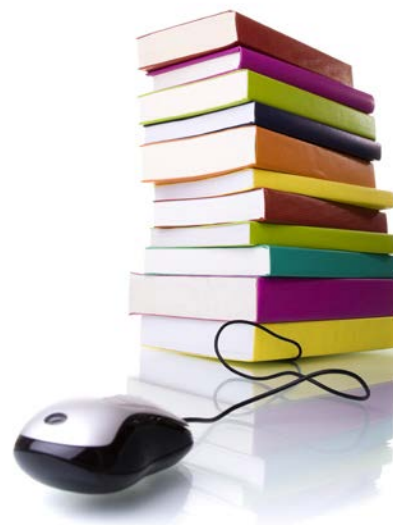
There were positive responses. For instance, one young man laughingly told of his mother’s response. “We were waiting for you to say something.” He admitted being terrified about his father’s reaction, but his fears were unfounded and his dad was completely supportive. After his parents expressed this unconditional love, he said, “Once I knew that, then nothing else mattered.”

The young adults whose fathers were present at home found their dads to be mostly accepting. One transgender youth said, “My stepdad told me that nothing is going to change – the only thing that will change is what you want to change. It totally surprised me as he is typical, conservative, straight white male.”

Likewise another transgender youth said, “He always says he doesn’t understand, but he still loves me.”

**“The largest need of LGBTQ youth is for their parents and families to get education and support.”**

Overwhelmingly, these young LGBTQ adults wished their parents and families had more information about sexual orientation or gender identity, so they didn’t end up having to explain it to them. This was especially true for transgender



youth. “My mom thought I was saying I was a lesbian. She couldn’t make sense of transgender,” said one young person.

Even supportive and accepting parents said things that indicated a lack of understanding of sexual orientation. “Mom knew I was gay, but she was afraid to bring it up as it might precipitate things,” said one student. In hindsight he understood that most parents were doing their best, “but just don’t know – they are confused.” When asked what he and others need he said, “The largest need of LGBTQ youth is for their parents and families to get education and support.”

### Religious Families

Coming from strict religious families compounded the issues for some young people. One lesbian from a religious rural family was told by a family member, “I hear you are gay. I would like to lay my hands on you to cure you.” She concluded the story with a wry smile saying, “Since then our relationship has been strained.”

One young gay man said his church pastor personally delivered an excommunication letter. He related how, “lots of my friends were super Christian. It was a big deal in rural Montana. Their



parents didn't really want their kids to hang out with me and I was never asked to sleepovers."

Although these young people showed a resilience that helped them survive their high school years, many youth do not. Nationally, LGBTQ youth rejected by their families are eight times more likely to die by suicide than youth from accepting families.



## Community

Living in a small Montana town can be a double-edged sword for LGBTQ youth. One transgender student said they had an easier time in a small community. "If anyone bullied me, the word would get out. Small communities hold people accountable for their bad behavior." The same point was made by other youth – that small communities protect their own.

**"What are people going to think of you – how is this going to reflect on us?"**

This was not universal though. Two young people said their families were scared about the reaction their community would have. One dad said, "What are people going to think of you – how is this going to reflect on us?"

**"Everyone knew everyone," and he was afraid to, "blow the image of who my family was considered to be."**

Another young man from a small town said, "Everyone knew everyone," and he was afraid to, "blow the image of who my family was considered to be."

As one said, "Montana as a whole meant bad things to me. I still have inward animosity to the state and feel abused by it because of my internalized fear."

## Finding Support Online and in the Media

Communities of support and information were often found online. Students were unable to find any resources in their schools or local communities. A lesbian urban youth admitted she found out everything via Google. In fact, the internet and social media were the avenues by which all the young people educated themselves.

One student admitted getting into LGBTQ chat groups when he was too young because, "All I really wanted was a friend." Growing up transgender in rural Montana meant there was no information readily available. "So I turned to the internet and my exposure to transgender information increased. One online group showed me that you can be liked even if you are transgender."

**“Nationally, there has been a social shift, but Montana is still in a time bubble. Cultural shifts don’t trickle down to Montana very quickly.”**

Media can be hard for transgender youth to navigate. Another transgender student I interviewed said, “The media’s portrayal was really bad and being transgender was the butt of the joke.”

They spoke about a movie where, “the leading woman was actually a man. When she’s revealed as a man everyone started retching and madly brushing their teeth to cleanse themselves. The message was that as soon as someone finds out, they will be disgusted.”

This is a far cry from some of the positive portrayals in the media today – American attitudes toward LGBTQ people have evolved. “It is almost in vogue to be gay these days,” said a gay youth from a Montana urban center.

However, rural Montana may be slower to shift. As one young person said, “Nationally, there has been a social shift, but Montana is still in a time bubble. Cultural shifts don’t trickle down to Montana very quickly.”



### **Mental Health and Well-Being**

Because LGBTQ youth are more likely to be rejected and are more likely to experience mistreatment than non-LGBTQ youth, they experience more mental health challenges, which can lead to engaging in risky behaviors. Suicide attempts, suicidal ideation and depression among LGBTQ youth is considerably higher than national averages and is a critical issue. Those who lived in rural areas were clear that they did not have access to mental health services. One young gay man admitted, “I became so depressed and almost became an alcoholic. I was a horrible person.”

**“My rural community has no mental health support,” said a lesbian from a rural small town. “At the time, depression wasn’t understood and lots of people didn’t believe in it.”**

Suffering in silence with depression was the primary mental health issue most of these young people remembered. When it became an obvious problem, their parents didn’t see depression as a mental illness. “My descent into depression freaked my mom out and during a visit to her,” said one youth I spoke with. “She sent me away and I didn’t go home for a year or two and she blamed it all on me.”







“My rural community has no mental health support,” said a lesbian from a rural small town. “At the time, depression wasn’t understood and lots of people didn’t believe in it.” Her experience was fairly recent and unfortunately the availability of and access to mental health services has not improved much in rural Montana.

### Conclusion

There is no doubt that the young adults I visited with are the success stories – they made it through the hard process of growing up LGBTQ and are moving on with their lives. But despite their resilience, these LGBTQ youth were subjected to society’s negative perceptions, intolerance and stigmas, which resulted in believing they were lesser people. This was described by young people from all areas around Montana as “internalized shame” that was conditioned into them. It was sad to hear a young person say he still could not walk down the street in the large city, in his gay community, and hold his boyfriend’s hand.

Even though time is changing outdated homophobic attitudes and younger generations tend to be

more supportive of inclusivity, we need to do more so that LGBTQ youth feel safe and have a sense of belonging. All the young people with whom I spoke did have a sense of overall optimism about the future for LGBTQ youth. They cited the federal decision on same-sex marriage, the rising acceptance on the national level for inclusion, and the fact that politicians and/or other public figures no longer feel obligated to hide their sexual identity. In their own ways, they have helped pave these changes.

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*This report was written by Daphne Herling for Montana KIDS COUNT. Any errors or omissions are, of course, our own.*

