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Growing up gay and Christian

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Darlene Bogle, Robynne Sapp and Loren Dokke all left Hoquiam in part because they believed their homosexuality was something they could never talk about in the community they grew up in.

All three came back recently to do just that, in light of the controversy over the Hoquiam United Methodist Church's decision to hold a day of celebration for gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered people.

"I've been all over the country talking about homosexuality and Christianity, and I'm finally doing it here," said Sapp, who is 42.

Dokke, 46, finally came out to his family and to the pastor at Immanuel Baptist Church, the church he attended as a child and volunteered at extensively as a young man.

Bogle, 63, returned to be at the church Saturday for a showing of the documentary film "God and Gays: Bridging the Gap." It features her experiences coming out as a lesbian after years of working in Exodus International, a ministry that says it is possible to become straight through religious study and prayer.

"It's not" possible, she says, "because I would not be a lesbian if I could have prayed away the gay."

Conflicted

All three say they grew up in conservative religious environments that did not condone homosexuality. All three say they began adulthood conflicted about the messages they got from their churches, which said one thing, and from their hormones, which said another. They were desperate to reconcile their sexual identities with their faith.



[KATHY QUIGG](#) | THE DAILY WORLD Hoquiam High School graduates, Loren Dokke, center, and Robynne Sapp right, say it was hard growing up gay and Christian. Dokke and Sapp, whose spouse Dotti Berry is at left, shared their stories with The Daily World in advance of Saturday's showing of "God and Gays: Bridging The Gap." Sapp is holding the couple's dog Rylee.

"You simply couldn't be gay and Christian at the same time," Bogle said. "And in Hoquiam they didn't say 'lesbian,' they said 'queer,' or 'fag' or 'dyke.' "

For Bogle, there was no way she could live without being Christian, so she went to Seattle Pacific College to further study the Bible.

Dokke did the same.

Bogle said she had a lesbian relationship with a classmate there who later committed suicide out of shame for her homosexuality.

Choices

Bogle went on to become a minister in the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, an evangelical Pentecostal denomination. She said she would have periods when she would "decide to be gay." At those times, she would put her faith to the side and go to gay bars to drink and pick up women. Neither being a celibate minister nor being a freewheeling lesbian appealed to her, but she couldn't conceive of a way of being both.

In the late 1970s, Bogle said she made a commitment to be Christian — and straight — and became a leading speaker for Exodus. She wrote articles, books and went on talk shows to discuss how it was possible to change sexual orientation through Christian prayer. At the time, she said, it was a relief to feel that she had made the right decision. But it wasn't fulfilling, and although she said she was heterosexual, in reality she was simply celibate and asexual.

"When I made the decision to be straight, I died inside," Bogle said.

Bogle said she came back to life in the early 1990's when she met Des Lambson in, of all places, a church seminar she was leading on how not to be gay. Lambson soon would become her partner. Bogle and Lambson maintained a "don't ask, don't tell" policy about their relationship, especially with their families. That would change after Lambson's death from breast cancer in 2005. She had commissioned Bogle to tell the truth about their sexuality.

Struggle

Sapp struggled with her sexual identity from age 17 until well into adulthood. She decided, at age 36, that she was going to take one year to study what the Bible had to say about homosexuality, and if it was really true that she could not be lesbian and Christian at the same time, she would commit suicide.

"I could not live without God," Sapp said.

Sapp considers herself lucky for having discovered books and people who helped her reconcile her homosexuality with her religion. Particularly key was meeting Mary Lou Wallner, an Arkansas woman whose daughter committed suicide because she was a lesbian. Wallner, featured in the documentary film, "For The Bible Tells Me So," not only shared her religious journey to accepting homosexuality with Sapp, she introduced her to Dotti Berry, the woman Sapp would end up marrying (three times, in two states and Canada).

"Didn't question"

Sapp said reconciling her faith with her sexuality was difficult in the beginning, when she started questioning some of the basic tenets she grew up with in the Copalis Community Church.

"In the religion I grew up in, you didn't question," Sapp said.

Once she examined her religion's stance on homosexuality, she began to doubt everything she'd ever been taught. "It was a spiritual tsunami, and I had nothing to hold on to," Sapp said. "But it took shaking up to get me to where I could find freedom in God and freedom in faith." Sapp said she emerged from her experience more profoundly Christian than she had ever felt in her life.

Sapp and Berry settled in Blaine, where Sapp worked as a medical assistant and Berry worked as a life coach. But in 2005, the couple found themselves profoundly moved by the story of Lars Clausen, a heterosexual Lutheran minister who unicycled across the country to promote gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender rights. They decided to replicate his journey, but in a vehicle, and to take a year to try and communicate with straight people.

They sold some property and their car to finance the endeavor, and drove a donated purple Suburban with their logo ("Gay into Straight America") painted on the side, towing a donated trailer.

They took their poodle, Rylee Joy, with them, and she became their "connector," enticing other people to make conversation while they petted Rylee's silky fur. The women said they had friends and family who worried about their safety, but not once did either of them feel threatened. Even in the deep South, with its stereotype of intolerance, when people saw the logo on the side of their car, the only gestures they got were thumbs-ups.

"I found out on this trip how much I love America," Berry said.

Sapp and Berry continue talking around the country, but they have resettled in Blaine.

Unfolding

Dokke's story is still unfolding. He tried to not be gay before accepting that this was who he was. For years, he said he has kept his life in Seattle quiet from his family and friends on the Harbor. But he was moved to come out because of the strong reaction from his first church family, and especially the decision by his former church to splinter from a community Vacation Bible School because United Methodist of Hoquiam has chosen to welcome gays.

"That was a very vital part of my growing up," Dokke said. "It told me that I could no longer be silent with my friends and loved ones." Although he isn't really much of a participant there now, "These are my people," Dokke said, taking his cue from the Bible.

Dokke said it wasn't until he came out that he realized how pernicious his own silence had been. When he has met parents of gay children who committed suicide, he feels an overwhelming urge to apologize to them for being silent all those years. He said he feels responsible for contributing to his "own oppression," and that of others.

The impact

Bogle said it wasn't until after she and a group of other former ex-gays issued a formal apology last year that she began to feel the impact of her work with Exodus. It's hard for her to imagine all the shame her work engendered in people, she said. There were people who believed her when she said they could change, and Bogle doesn't know what happened to all of them when they couldn't.

"I did a lot of talking as a preacher, as an ex-gay," Bogle said. "When I started listening, I was devastated. I saw how much damage I had done."

Bogle was moved to bring the "God and Gays" documentary to Hoquiam when a producer sent her a link to an article in The Daily World about the issues faced by the Hoquiam United Methodist Church. Bogle passed along the message to Sapp and Berry. They agreed to speak at the church and show the film. Sapp and Berry are holding a special meeting about non-violence and dealing with any potential protesters that may show up.

Coming out has been difficult for all three of their families. They all say they have some family members and friends who are more accepting than others.

"My mother still cries about it," Sapp said.

Dokke said he is still coming to terms with coming out. Although it was nerve-wracking, he said

he felt enormously relieved. The Bible does say that the truth shall set you free, Dokke, Sapp and Berry noted. And they say their truth is they are homosexual and their Christian faith is stronger than ever.

"I see that who we are is a gift from God, and it's what we have to give," Dokke said. "If we edit or are disingenuous about who we are, the gift is lost."

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