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# Descriptions of Psycho-Social and Academic Support Systems in Schools for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Questioning Middle School and High School Students

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Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine

Department of Psychology

DESCRIPTIONS OF PSYCHO-SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC SUPPORT SYSTEMS IN  
SCHOOLS FOR GAY, LESBIAN, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER, QUEER, AND  
QUESTIONING MIDDLE SCHOOL AND HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

By Michael Appelgren

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Psychology

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**PHILADELPHIA COLLEGE OF OSTEOPATHIC MEDICINE  
DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY**

**Dissertation Approval**

This is to certify that the thesis presented to us by Michael Appelgren  
on the 7<sup>th</sup> day of April, 2015, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Psychology, has been examined and is acceptable in both scholarship and  
literary quality.

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## Abstract

This research explored the understanding of coming out, using qualitative methods. Through a semi-structured interview, the present study explored: individuals' unique experiences of coming out in middle or high school, the challenges of coming out, supports available while in school, as well as ideas of how schools can support students who decide to come out. A central theme of the study was to uncover opportunities for schools to support GLBTQQ students who self-disclose a homosexual identity. The results of the current study suggest that schools are providing no supports to limited support systems for sexual minority youth. In reference to the unique experiences of coming out, four themes emerged, which include: Coming out as a process, Fear, Disclosure, and Psycho-Social. Themes extracted from the interviews were compared with Cass' (1984) six-stage model of homosexual identity formation. The current study proposed a linear process, which includes: Self-Awareness, Self-Reflection, Self-Acceptance, Self-Confidence, and Self-Disclosure. In reference to challenges, results revealed that individuals faced bullying, rejection from peers and family members, depression and suicide attempts, running away and prostitution. In terms of supports, results revealed that schools should provide psycho-social supports (e.g., Gay-Straight Alliances, Teacher Mentors) and academic supports (e.g., inclusive curriculum, performing arts programs).

*Keywords:* sexual minority youth, GLBTQQ, coming out, gender identity, sexual orientation, school support systems, psycho-social supports, academic supports

“Never be bullied into silence. Never allow yourself to be made a victim. Accept no one’s definition of your life; define yourself.”

**-Harvey Fierstein**

“Every gay person must come out. As difficult as it is, you must tell your immediate family. You must tell your relatives. You must tell your friends if indeed they are your friends. You must tell the people you work with. You must tell the people in the stores you shop in. Once they realize that we are indeed their children, that we are indeed everywhere, every myth, every lie, every innuendo will be destroyed once and all. And once you do, you will feel so much better.”

**-Harvey Milk**

“All young people, regardless of sexual orientation or identity, deserve a safe and supportive environment in which to achieve their full potential.”

**-Harvey Milk**

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Introduction**

Gender is the basis for human understanding of sexual identity, be it heterosexual or homosexual. The most important component of sexual identity is sexual orientation for those individuals who self-disclose a homosexual orientation. It is sexual minority youth who face a myriad of challenges and implications when they self-disclose or “come out.”

Although, “coming out” to others usually occurs during late middle school and early high school, the process of sexual identity formation begins in infancy. Babies are biologically equipped with male or female chromosomes, hormones, and genitals. Babies are curious and explore their bodies including their genitals, from which they receive pleasurable sensations. The sensation of pleasure that babies feel from exploring their bodies is their first learning experience of sexuality. In childhood, an individual’s understanding of the difference between boys and girls is based purely on anatomy. As the child develops cognitively, he/she gains an understanding of sexual intercourse and the union of the egg and sperm. In adolescence, individuals are trying to gain an understanding of themselves and their identities. Adolescence is already a difficult transition period from childhood to young adulthood, with hormones raging, onset of puberty, identity crisis, self-esteem issues, and peer pressures.

Our understanding of identity development is greatly influenced by Erikson’s work on stage theory. Each stage is marked with a specific conflict of identity during which the individual either resolves the conflict and his/her identity is strengthened, or the individual will carry the unresolved conflict into later stages of life. Of greatest

interest is the stage of adolescence during which an individual tries to resolve the conflict of *ego identity vs. identity diffusion*. Adolescence becomes more challenging for those individuals who self-disclose a homosexual orientation, especially in the school environment.

Gender roles play a significant part in our society, eventually leading to sexual identity formation. In practically every society, males and females are expected to subscribe to different gender roles. For instance, in Western culture, boys are taught to like the color “blue” and play with trucks, and girls are taught to like the color “pink” and play with dolls. Children become aware of their biological differences and then adhere to “appropriate” societal behaviors based on their sex. Gender norms and gender roles prevail across the life span from infancy to adolescence.

There are multiple perspectives or theories that address the development of gender roles. The biosocial theory suggests gender development is a product of genetics and sexual organs. Males and females understand that they differ, based on whether one has a penis or a vagina. During puberty, hormones are released and influence secondary characteristics. The combination of sexual organs, release of hormones, and one’s preconceived notion of self can influence sexual identity. Psychoanalytic theory suggests gender develops as a result of the Oedipus and Electra complexes, in which the child falls in love with the opposite sex parent, sees the same sex parent as a rival, but realizes that he or she must identify with the same sex parent to resolve the conflict. According to social learning theory, children learn to adopt masculine and feminine gender roles in two ways. First, through differential reinforcement children are reinforced for “sex-appropriate” behaviors while being punished or not positively reinforced for behaviors

“appropriate” for the opposite sex. Second, through observational learning children learn gender roles through same-sex models. Last, cognitive developmental theory suggests children actively socialize themselves, understand whether they are boy or girl, seeks someone of the same-sex, and find out as much information as they can about how to act like a boy or girl.

Gender roles and gender norms influence our understanding of human sexuality, and are an integral part of sexual identity. Sexual identity is an important part of our general identity and self-image. Sexual identity formation can be divided into five components: biological sex, gender identity, social sex-role, sexual orientation, and functions of sexual behavior. Sexual identity formation spans one’s life from infancy to adolescence.

Cass (1984) proposed a six-stage model of homosexual identity formation, which includes identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis.

An individual may decide to “come out” after the acquisition of a homosexual identity. “Coming out of the closet” is a colloquialism used to describe one’s disclosure of a homosexual orientation and one’s acceptance of a GLBTQQ (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning) identity (Drescher, 2012). Someone “in the closet” is essentially holding back information about his or her sexual orientation from others. The actual process of “coming out” involves a disclosure of one’s sexual orientation to friends, family, and peers, and the development of a positive self-identity as a sexual minority youth (Henning-Stout, James, & Macintosh, 2000).

“Coming out” in the schools has become a widespread practice for many adolescent-aged students. Adolescents are self-identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (GLBTQQ) and are “coming out” at younger ages than in previous years (Calzo, Antonucci, Mays, & Cochran, 2011; Human Rights Watch, 2001). These youths are becoming aware of their sexual orientations by third or fourth grade, but are not disclosing their sexual orientations or gender identities to peers and others until middle school and early high school (Human Rights Watch, 2001). Sexual minority youth issues are being portrayed on the news media, television programs and shows and movies. There have been recent social, political and cultural events that have improved the possibility for sexual minority youth to come out and disclose their sexual orientations at an earlier age in a supportive environment (Gragg, 2012). Events such as civil rights victories for marriage equality in some states, and the President of the United States supporting marriage equality and ending the discrimination of sexual minority youth in the military have encouraged youth who continue to struggle with their own self-worth to be able to accept who they are (Gragg, 2012). On the news there are tragic stories such as Matthew Shepard and Lawrence King; two people who lost their lives because of their sexual orientations. National media carried the news of Tyler Clementi who committed suicide after his roommate broadcast a video of Tyler kissing another man.

Issues such as ostracism and inequality arise when males and females do not adhere to societal gender-roles. Sexual minority youth face multiple risk factors. Risk factors are usually understood as conditions or variables with a lower likelihood of positive outcomes and a higher likelihood of negative or undesirable outcomes. Risk

factors are frequently thought of as things that occur *prior* to some “consequence.” Risk factors, as it pertains to the coming out process, are negative outcomes that occur *after* the disclosure of one’s homosexual orientation. Once a student self-discloses his or her sexual orientation as being gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, there are a myriad of challenges and risks that these individuals face.

### **Statement of the Problem**

“Coming out” in schools pose unique challenges for adolescents and for the schools they attend. Sexual minority youth are vulnerable to being attacked by peers and adults (Human Rights Watch, 2001). These adolescents are trying to navigate multiple pressures from peer groups, social media, television, music, and family. Other challenges they face include bullying, harassment, rejection from peers, and absenteeism. These challenges stem from a lifestyle choice of “coming out” as a gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning. It is important to discuss not only the “coming out” process, but also the implications associated with “coming out” and the types of interventions and supports available in schools. What are these individuals using as resources, and are schools meeting the needs of these students? There are also ramifications for schools when there are no supports or resources available for students who “come out”; these may include such consequences as financial lawsuits for not intervening when students are being harassed or bullied in schools.

### **Need for the Study**

Some GLBTQQ students report that teachers and administrators have turned their backs, refused to take harassment reports, or have failed to hold students accountable for harassment or abuse (Human Rights Watch, 2001). School systems have failed to



provide a safe learning environment for all students, especially for GLBTQQ students. The systematic failure of the public school system to protect these students leaves them with limited options; they either try to survive the harassment as they seek an education or they escape the hostile environment by dropping out of school. There is a need for schools to be prepared to help support those students who decide to “come out” in schools because of the many challenges these individuals face in a hostile learning environment. GLBTQQ students are vulnerable and are at-risk for multiple factors. Schools can provide a safe environment for GLBTQQ students to feel a sense of belonging and security. No longer is the topic of sexual orientation taboo. Students are living in a generation in which GLBTQQ issues are being discussed openly, and individuals are finding themselves being able to disclose a homosexual orientation in a supportive environment at this time, to a greater degree than they were in previous years, but there are still challenges that sexual minority youth encounter.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to uncover opportunities for schools to support GLBTQQ students who self-disclose a homosexual identity. Although the current study is examining gay men, it was hoped that the information gathered will be useful in generalizing to other sexual minority youth having similar experiences. Previous research surveys provide statistics and frequencies of bullying and risk factors, but also identify the benefits of having supports, such as Gay-Straight Alliances and teacher-mentors for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students. The current study examined the coming out process through a qualitative, phenomenological approach by interviewing recent high school graduates who explained their understanding of the

coming out process; they also reported on their middle school and high school experiences when they were going through the process, thus providing a voice to an individual's experience. Through a qualitative approach, it was hoped this research would identify the supports and resources in schools that helped participants cope with the process of self-disclosure, and identify the protective factors that might contribute to a student's resilience. The current research may provide information about resources available in schools that sexual minority youth are not using, so that schools may reconsider the types of supports being provided. The information may shed light into identifying needed areas of improvement for supports in schools for those students who "come out." Furthermore, it was the goal of the current research to identify resources for schools that may not have any supports for GLBTQQ students, which may in turn help schools provide appropriate supports. Additionally, this study identified those resources found in the literature which coincide with those chosen by participants. Finally, it was hoped this research could serve to help sexual minority youth students advocate for themselves, and inspire all students to do so as well.

### **Methodology**

The current study used a qualitative, phenomenological research approach. A semi-structured interview was used to identify how schools are supporting sexual minority youth, including the resources made available to these individuals. The aim of this research was to shed light on the participants' understanding of the "coming out" process. Participants were gay male college students between the ages of 18-21 who had disclosed their sexual orientation to others in middle school or high school (e.g., friend, family, teacher, pastor, etc.). Participants were recruited from various universities and

colleges in the Northeastern section of the United States through their on-campus GLBTQQ student organizations.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Biological sex-** refers to genetics and sexual organs

**Bisexuality-** sexual arousal and attraction to both males and females

**Closeted-** individuals who are unable to acknowledge their homosexual feelings and desires to themselves or to others. Not disclosing one's sexual orientation or gender identity.

**“Coming out”-** becoming aware of one's sexual orientation or gender identity and one's self-disclosure to others.

**Down Low “DL”-** an individual lives a “double life.” He or she may portray a heterosexual orientation in public, but also have a homosexual orientation in private or in secret.

**Gay-** a male's erotic response and attraction to another male

**Gender-** socially constructed roles and behaviors that a given society considers appropriate for men and women.

**Gender identity-** the understanding of one's own sex. Deeply felt sense of being a male or female.

**Gender role/Gender norms-** Gender roles are defined as patterns of behavior both males and females are expected to follow in a particular society.

**Gender-role stereotypes-** are overgeneralized and inaccurate beliefs of how males and females are and how they behave.

**Heterosexual-** sexual arousal and attraction to an individual of the opposite sex

**Homosexual-** sexual arousal and attraction to an individual of the same sex

**Lesbian-** a female's erotic response and attraction to another female

**Queer-** self-affirming umbrella term to identify sexual minorities (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender)

**Questioning-** uncertain of one's sexual orientation

**Risk factors-** as it pertains to the coming out process, risk factors are negative outcomes that occur *after* the disclosure of one's homosexual orientation.

**Sexual behavior-** how a person expresses his or her sexuality.

**Sexual identity-** how one thinks of oneself in terms of persons to whom one is romantically or sexually attracted

**Sexual minority youth-** youth who are attracted to the same sex or endorse a gay/lesbian/bisexual identity

**Sexual orientation-** a person's physical and emotional preference for another individual.

**Social sex-role-** the way in which one is expected to behave because of one's sex.

**Survival sex-** the exchange of sex for food, money, shelter, drugs and other needs

**Transsexualism/Transgender-** an individual's gender identity is the opposite of his or her biological sex.

**Transvestism-** cross-dressing and the impersonation of the opposite sex. These persons are said to have two gender identities. A male transvestite's behavior appears to be "normal" when dressed like a man except for the compulsion of having the urge to dress in women's clothes and take on a feminine personality.

Usually this individual is not homosexual and prefers to be with a female, sexually.

### **Summary**

In summary, gender and gender roles are the basis for understanding how sexual identity is formed, which leads to the “coming out” process for those individuals who self-disclose a homosexual orientation. There are multiple theories of gender role development, which include biosocial, psychoanalytic, social learning, and cognitive development theory. A person’s sexual identity is an important part of an individual’s general identity and self-image. Sexual identity formation can be divided into five components: biological sex, gender identity, social sex-role, sexual orientation, and functions of sexual behavior. Sexual orientation is the most important component of sexual identity. Individuals may develop a homosexual orientation and “come out” to others. Students are living in a generation in which GLBTQQ issues are being discussed openly, and individuals are finding themselves being able to disclose a homosexual orientation in a supportive environment. As a result, adolescents are “coming out” more frequently now than in previous years. “Coming out” is the process of disclosing one’s sexual orientation to others. Cass (1984) proposes a six-stage model of homosexual identity formation, which includes identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis. Adolescence is already a difficult period developmentally with hormones raging, onset of puberty, identity crisis, self-esteem issues, and peer pressures. Sexual minority youth face additional challenges and are at risk for a multitude of factors relative to their sexual orientations. Issues arise such as ostracism and inequality when males and females do

not adhere to societal gender-roles. Sexual minority youth have higher rates of suicidal ideations and attempts, alcohol and substance abuse, homelessness, victimization and bullying, peer and family rejection. At school, sexual minority youth often do not feel safe, have higher rates of absenteeism, and have lower grade-point averages. Despite the many challenges that sexual minority youth face, there is limited research to suggest several benefits of “coming out.” Schools have a legal mandate to provide a hostile-free learning environment for all students. Schools can provide a supportive learning environment by establishing gay-straight alliances, by having inclusive curricula, by anti-discrimination policies that specifically includes sexual orientation, and teacher-mentors. Because schools have failed to provide a safe learning environment for all students, there is a need for schools to be prepared to help support those students who decide to “come out” in schools because of the many challenges these individuals face in a hostile environment. Through a qualitative research approach, the purpose of the study was, therefore, to uncover opportunities for schools to support GLBTQQ students who self-disclose a homosexual identity.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

### **Introduction**

Adolescents are “coming out” more frequently now than in previous years and there are a myriad of challenges that these individuals face when they decide to disclose their homosexual orientations to others, especially as the disclosure relates to the school environment. It is important to provide a review of literature that is intended to explore gender, identity and sexual identity, psycho-social factors, and interventions as a prelude to understanding the “coming out” process and identify support systems in schools for students who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (GLBTQQ).

The literature review will expand upon the existing research on the topic of the “coming out” process and the challenges associated with doing so. In order to understand the “coming out” process, one must initially examine how gender, gender roles, gender norms, and gender stereotypes are defined and discussed. Gender norms and gender roles do not develop in isolation, but develop across the life span from infancy to adolescence. How one develops a gender role depends on several different perspectives or theories which includes those that are biosocial, psychoanalytic, social learning, and cognitive developmental. Second, Erikson’s work on identity development becomes important, especially during adolescence. Gender roles and gender norms influence an understanding of human sexuality and become an important part of one’s general identity and self-image. Sexual identity formation is discussed and divided into five components: biological sex, gender identity, social sex-role, sexual orientation, and functions of sexual behavior. Third, homosexual identity and the “coming out” process is examined using

Cass' (1984) six stage model of homosexual identity formation. "Coming out" is defined and influences to the "coming out" process is then discussed. Fourth, psycho-social factors are examined after an individual decides to disclose a homosexual orientation to others; these include suicide, mental health problems, homelessness and survival sex, substance abuse, and violence. There are specific challenges associated with "coming out" in schools which will be discussed. Such challenges include harassment and assault, bullying, lower academic success, and absenteeism. Fifth, the author examines legal mandates that schools must adhere to in order to provide a free and appropriate education to all students. Last, academic and psycho-social resources identified to support GLBTQQ students in schools will be reviewed.

### **Gender**

Gender is defined by socially constructed roles and behaviors that a given society considers appropriate for men and women. Gender identity is one's understanding of one's own sex and is a deeply felt sense of being a male or female. In other words, gender identity is how one feels and how one expresses his or her gender and gender roles; this includes one's clothing, behaviors, and personal appearance. Gender roles play a significant part in our society; they will lead to sexual identity formation. In practically every society, males and females are expected to subscribe to different gender roles. Gender roles are defined as patterns of behavior that both males and females are expected to follow in a particular society (Sigelman & Rider, 2009). For instance, in Western culture, boys are taught to like the color "blue" and play with trucks, and girls are taught to like the color "pink" and play with dolls. There are specific gender-role norms, which are societal expectations of behaviors or characteristics of what males and



females *should be* like. For instance, males are expected to act “masculine” and females are expected to act “feminine.” Examples of masculinity include being non-emotional, independent, aggressive, strong, active, and competitive. On the other hand, examples of femininity include being dependent, emotional, passive, weak, and sensitive. These masculine and feminine traits usually are dictated by the mainstream culture.

Masculinity and femininity should be considered on a continuum because individuals may express different traits at different times, which may include men expressing more “feminine” traits and women expressing more “masculine” traits. Gender-role stereotypes should also be considered when discussing gender norms. These stereotypes are overgeneralized and are inaccurate beliefs of what males and females are like (Sigelman & Rider, 2009). When males and females do not adhere to societal gender-roles issues arise, such as ostracism and inequality.

Children become aware of their biological differences, as well as patterns of behavior their culture considers “appropriate” for their biological sex through the process of gender typing. Through gender typing, for example, Mark learns gender-role norms suggesting that males are expected to be masculine and strong, and gender-role stereotype suggesting that males do not show emotions. As an adult, Mark may not cry when he has experienced a loss because internally he may have a perception that crying is a sign of weakness, which is a more “feminine” quality. Therefore, Mark is adhering to what is expected of him by societal standards by not crying.

### **Gender Norms**

In many societies the female’s role is usually perceived or thought of as the childbearer. Underlying this gender norm for females is the idea of communality, in

which the emphasis is on emotionality and connectedness to others (Sigelman & Rider, 2009). Females who take on these traits are preparing themselves for their roles as a wife and mother. Females are groomed to take care of the household and raise the children. On the other hand, underlying male gender roles is the idea of agency, which emphasizes individual achievement and competitiveness. Males are groomed to take on the role of husband and father. Males are expected to provide for the family and protect them from getting harmed.

### **Gender Norms And Roles Across The Life Span**

Gender norms and gender roles span the length of every human being's life. It is important to examine how gender norms and roles develop over time (i.e., infancy, childhood, and adolescence).

**Infancy.** From the moment of birth in the delivery room or hospital nursery, parents begin to use masculine terms to describe their sons or comment of the baby's strength (e.g., kicking or crying), and females are described as being pretty or adorable. Another example of how gender norms start in infancy is based on biological sex and observable genitalia; the new born baby's birth certificate will bear a "boy's" or "girl's" name. Soon afterwards the boys and girls are dressed in blue or pink, and are given "sex appropriate" toys and room furniture (Sigelman & Rider, 2009). This means boys would be given sports toys, cars and trucks, and females would be given dolls and dollhouses to play with. Infants are socialized not only by parents, but infants also actively engage in the learning process because they want to make sense of the world around them. Children begin to categorize individuals and by 18 months the toddlers are beginning to understand whether they are like other males or like other females (Sigelman & Rider,

2009). Around the age of 2 1/2, there is a basic understanding of gender identity and children have awareness if someone is a boy or girl. From a young age, children are able to pick out differences of others, which will play a major role later during sexual identity formation.

**Childhood.** During the toddler years and preschool, children gain an understanding of gender identity, gender stereotypes (e.g., all males like sports), and what is “appropriate” behavior for a boy or girl. Children also tend to be interested in activities other boys are supposed to be interested in if they are boys, and be interested in “girl” activities if they are girls. Children learn society’s gender stereotypes once they have an understanding of basic gender identities; they understand there are differences between boys versus girls. Gender stereotypes are reinforced as children grow older. Children learn more about activities and toys that are “gender appropriate” (Sigelman & Rider, 2009). During the elementary-school years, there is a preference to play or socialize with same-sex peers, which causes gender segregation. Children tend to spend more time doing activities with peers of the same sex versus peers of the opposite sex. This gender segregation helps facilitate and reinforce gender norms and stereotypes.

**Adolescence.** Although boys and girls go their separate ways during childhood, it is during adolescence that they come together. We see childhood boys and girls have an understanding of sex differences and are very rigid in their thinking about gender roles. Older children become more flexible in their thinking about gender roles. During adolescence, again males and females become more intolerable of gender role violations and their thinking becomes stereotyped about what is expected of males and females

(Sigelman & Rider, 2009). This rigid thinking plays an intricate role in understanding the difficulties associated in the “coming out” process.

There is also gender intensification during which males begin to see themselves as being “masculine” and females see themselves as being “feminine.” These feminine and masculine characteristics are based on the culture and society in which one lives. Peers have a major influence on gender intensification. Adolescents find themselves having the need to conform to traditional gender roles in order to attract the opposite sex. For example, a male who liked playing with dolls as a child would find himself having to give up playing with dolls and take up more “masculine” activities such as playing a sport (e.g., football) in order to attract females. It is important to note that social pressures to conform to traditional gender roles does not need to be real, just the mere fact of the adolescent’s perception of his or her peer’s thoughts and expectations can easily influence gender intensification (Sigelman & Rider, 2009). This phenomenon helps explain the reason why individuals are so intolerable when a person does not conform to gender stereotypes.

### **Gender Role Development Theories**

One must understand gender and gender roles first to be able to gain knowledge of the process of becoming a “man” or “woman”. There are several perspectives or theories to suggest the development of gender roles. These theories include those that are biosocial, psychoanalytic, social learning, and cognitive.

**Biosocial theory.** This theory states that male (XY) and female (XX) chromosomes are the starting point of biological differentiation of the sexes (Sigelman & Rider, 2009). This differentiation begins with certain genes on the Y chromosome that

instructs undifferentiated tissue to develop into testes instead of ovaries. The testes secrete male hormone testosterone which helps with the development of the internal male reproductive system but another hormone inhibits the development of the female reproductive system. More testosterone is released to develop the growth of the penis and scrotum. After the baby is born biologically, male or female, social labeling and differential treatment begins. Parents begin to label and interact with the baby based on the appearance of the external genitalia. If a baby is mislabeled or if there is not distinct external genitalia, this can impact future gender development. For example, a boy who is mislabeled and is treated as a girl would eventually take on the gender identity of a girl. During puberty hormones are released, which stimulate the reproductive system and the appearance of secondary characteristics. These events, coupled with the person's earlier self-concept of being male or female, can impact the person's adult gender identity (Sigelman & Rider, 2009). This can become distressful for certain individuals who may have had a male gender identity as a child, but becomes confused at puberty due to hormonal changes and secondary sex characteristics. Gender roles and stereotypes can also come into question because the individual no longer has an understanding of his or her gender identity. This theory relies heavily on biological features (i.e., penis or vagina) in order to explain gender formation.

**Psychoanalytic theory.** Sigmund Freud is well known for his psychosexual theory. He argues that a 3- to 6-year-old child in the phallic stage has a strong desire for the opposite sex parent; this causes internal conflict and anxiety, and is resolved by the identification with the same-sex parent. Freud suggested that boys experience an Oedipus complex during which the boy falls in love with the mother, fears the father will

castrate him in retaliation; the boy, therefore, is forced to identify with the father. The boy in essence emulates the father and adopts the father's beliefs and behaviors. On the other hand, a girl is said to experience an Electra complex during which there is a desire for the father and envy for the penis she lacks, and sees the mother as a rival. In order to resolve this conflict the girl identifies with the mother. Freud argues that children adopt their gender roles by patterning their behavior after the same-sex parent (Sigelman & Rider, 2009).

Male and female gender roles may not be influenced by Freud's Oedipus or Electra complexes, but as a result of observation of and reinforcement by parents and others, the child acts according to gender roles and adheres to gender norms.

**Social learning theory.** According to social learning, children learn to adopt masculine and feminine gender roles in two ways. First, through differential reinforcement children are reinforced for "sex-appropriate" behaviors and are punished or not given positive reinforcement for behaviors "appropriate" for the opposite sex. Second, through observational learning children learn gender roles through same-sex models. In this perspective, children learn gender roles through reward or punishment, and on those models that are available (Sigelman & Rider, 2009). By the second year of life boys and girls are rewarded and encouraged for sex-appropriate play. For instance, boys would be rewarded for playing with trucks and soldiers, but might be scolded for playing with dolls. There is research to suggest that the type of punishment is differentiated between boys and girls. Boys may receive a physical form of punishment, but females may be talked to or reasoned with (Sigelman & Rider, 2009).

Through observational learning children understand the concept about the toys for “girls” and those for “boys” and copy individuals of the same-sex. Children begin to pay more attention to the behaviors of same-sex models. Children do not learn behaviors only through watching other children or adults with whom they interact, but they also learn by observing individuals on television, movies, and videogames. Parents should be mindful that children are passive recipients of external influences, and therefore be more aware of the gender stereotypes that are reinforced by what the children are observing.

**Cognitive developmental theory.** According to Lawrence Kohlberg, children must gain an understanding of gender before they may be influenced by their social experiences. In fact, children are actively socializing themselves (Sigelman & Rider, 2009). Unlike social learning and psychoanalytical theory, Kohlberg states that children understand whether they are boys or girls; children seek someone of the same-sex, and then find out as much information as they can about how to act like a boy or girl. This is important because children self-socialize and are not passive participants in the socialization process. They do not act like boys because they are treated like boys; they act like boys because they know they are boys and now they need to find out how to behave like boys. Kohlberg suggests there are three stages in understanding gender roles. The first stage occurs when children understand gender identity (i.e., biological male versus biological female); the second stage is gender stability during which the child understands that gender identity is stable over time (e.g., males continue to be biological males), and the third stage is gender consistency during which children realize that sex is stable across situations (Sigelman & Rider, 2009).

## **Identity**

Our understanding of identity has been greatly influenced by the work of Erikson and his stage theory of identity development (Jamil, Harper, & Bruce, 2013). Erikson proposed eight stages, which are bound by age and developed across the life span. His stages begin in childhood and involve trust and autonomy, progressing into ego integrity in late adulthood until death. There is a specific conflict that needs to be resolved at each stage. If the individual goes through the necessary experiences to resolve the conflict, then his/her identity is strengthened. However, if the conflict is not resolved, then the individual will carry the unresolved conflict into later stages in life. Of great importance is the time during adolescence in which the individual is trying to develop a sense of identity in his/her occupation, sex role, politics, and religion. Although Erikson does not talk about sexual orientation, he does talk about identifying one's sex role through one's masculinity/femininity. Erikson termed this stage in adolescence *ego identity vs. identity diffusion*. If the individual does not resolve this conflict by the end of this stage, he/she will lack understanding of who he/she is and what his/her role is in life (identity diffusion). It is important to resolve one's identity conflict in order to gain an understanding of sexuality and sexual orientation.

## **Sexual Identity**

Sexual identity is an important part of one's general identity and self-image. Gender roles and gender norms influence the understanding of human sexuality, and are an integral part of becoming a man or woman. For example, when meeting a stranger at the club an individual immediately takes note of the person's gender: length of hair, makeup, clothes, and so on. There are also some assumptions about how the person will



behave in terms of gender norms, whether he or she will be “masculine” or “feminine.” One also notices body features such as breasts, waist, height, weight, and facial hair, including how the person smells, and makes predictions about reproductive organs (Brierley, 1984). All this information allows for an understanding of how gender influences sexual identity as well as sexual behaviors. Sexual identity formation can be divided into five components: biological sex, gender identity, social sex-role, sexual orientation, and functions of sexual behavior.

**Biological sex.** This component consists of genetics and sexual organs. Female and male sex organs are differentiated during fetal life under the influence of chromosomes and hormones. Males have testes, and females have ovaries. There are rare occasions in which chromosomes and hormones create a hermaphrodite, that is, the individual possesses both male and female sex organs (i.e., testes and ovaries) (Higgins, Hawkins, Krozy, Orne, Tuttle, & Utley, 1984).

**Gender identity.** Gender identity is the child’s understanding of his or her own sex and a deeply felt sense of being a male or female. Gender involves how one feels and expresses one’s gender and gender roles. It is said that gender identity develops between 18 months of age to 4 years of age. This identity is formed by the identification with members of the same-sex. Gender identity is formulated through the interactions of genetics, of hormones on the genitals and on the brain, cues from others, one’s own experiences, and feelings. There are feelings of “maleness” or “femaleness” that influence one’s gender identity (Higgins et al., 1984). There have been occasions in which individuals are born with both genitals which results in confusion because the individual struggles with identifying with one sex or the other. What happens to those

individuals who are born with both genitalia, and the parents raise them either as males or as females, but the individuals grow up to become opposite of the sexes in which they were raised? These individuals identified with the opposite sex because of hormones and feelings of “maleness” or “femaleness.” Common comments include “I always felt like a man, but I was raised like a female.”

**Social sex-role.** Sex-roles are the ways in which one is expected to behave because of one’s sex. These behavioral expectations are usually dictated by the society and culture in which one lives (Higgins et al., 1984). This is similar to gender norms and roles previously discussed.

**Sexual behavior.** According to Bancroft (19991), there are 9 functions or purposes of sexual behavior; these include assertion of masculinity or femininity, bolstering or maintenance of self-esteem, exertion of power or dominance, bonding dyadic relationships and fostering intimacy, source of pleasure, reduction of tension, expression of hostility, risk-taking as a source of excitement, and material gain. There may be multiple reasons why an individual engages in certain sexual behavior.

**Sexual orientation.** Sexual orientation is one’s physical and emotional preference for another individual. Other aspects of sexual orientation are one’s sexual desires and attractions, which are shaped by one’s culture and language (Drescher, 2012). It is important to understand that individuals can be attracted to one sex yet have feelings of love for the opposite sex (Higgins et al., 1984). Homosexuality and heterosexuality is a product of which sex causes erotic stimulation for that individual. For instance, a male that is erotically stimulated by a female would most likely identify as a heterosexual. On the other hand, if the male was erotically stimulated by a male he most likely would

identify as being homosexual. Sexual orientation should be seen and considered on a continuum of heterosexuality, bisexuality, and homosexuality.

***Heterosexuality.*** Heterosexuality is defined as one's erotic response and attraction to an individual of the opposite sex.

***Homosexuality.*** Homosexuality is defined as one's erotic response and attraction to individuals with the same external genitalia as oneself (Money & Tucker, 1975).

Within a homosexuality identity there are some distinctions; this involves those who prefer to take on a more masculine role versus those who take on a more feminine role.

The masculine-type homosexuals may not be distinguishable from that of heterosexual males, except for their erotic interest in other males. Their behavior does not differ from other men and they may have sex with females, but their primary erotic interest is with men. On the other hand, the effeminate homosexuals differ from the "average" man in their behaviors and responses. They may demonstrate more "feminine" qualities. Their primary erotic interest is also with men.

***Bisexuality.*** Bisexuality is defined as the sexual arousal and attraction to both males and females. They tend to switch back and forth between the two sexes.

***Transvestism.*** Transvestism is defined as cross-dressing and the impersonation of the opposite sex. Those who identify as being transvestites are said to have two gender identities. A male transvestite's behavior appears to be "normal" when dressed like a man except for the compulsion of having the urge to dress in women's clothes and take on a feminine personality. Usually this individual is not homosexual and prefers to be with a female, sexually. This individual changes his gender identity when he changes clothes, but does not want to give up his genitalia (Money & Tucker, 1975). These

individuals are sexually aroused when they wear feminine garments or at least imagines they do.

***Transsexualism.*** Unlike transvestites, transsexuals do not have dual gender identities. The individual's gender identity is the opposite of their biological sex. For instance, a biological male will identify as a female and may claim being a female trapped in a male body. The male transsexual views his penis as nature's mistake and wants to get rid of it (Money & Tucker, 1975). Some of these individuals elect to undergo sexual reassignment surgery in order for their gender identity and "biological sex" to be more consistent.

### **Sexual Identity From Infancy To Adolescence**

Just as gender formation spans the length of one's life, so does sexual identity formation. Sexuality is a lifelong process that begins during infancy. It is important to examine how sexual identity is formed over time in order to understand how individuals become sexual beings; it also helps to explain how individuals become attracted to certain other individuals.

**Infancy.** Babies are biologically equipped with male or female chromosomes, hormones, and genitals. Babies feel bodily sensations although they are not aware of their behavior. Infants can experience sexual sensations because their genitals are sensitive and they have the ability for sexual responses. Infants are curious and explore their bodies as they would to gain understanding of the world around them. Infants enjoy touching their bodies which would include their genitals. Babies will continue touching these areas if they receive a pleasurable sensation. This behavior will continue until an

adult may reprimand the child to stop. From this early experience infants begin to learn about sexuality and how society regards sexuality (Sigelman & Rider, 2009).

**Childhood.** During childhood, individuals understand that the only difference between males and females are purely anatomical. Children begin to gain a broader understanding of sex and reproduction as they develop cognitively. Young children think babies are born because babies are born or believe that they are made just like cars in a factory. As children get older they begin to realize that intercourse has something to do with having a baby, but they are still limited about the specifics. Around the age of 12 children have a deeper understanding of sexual intercourse and the biological union of sperm and egg in order to come up with a description of intercourse and its consequences (Sigelman & Rider, 2009). Children are curious about their bodies and engage in same-sex and cross-sex sexual play and masturbation (Sigelman & Rider, 2009). Children may engage in sexual play such as doctor, and may engage in sexual exploration, such as touching genitals. Evidence suggests that the age of 10 may be an important time of sexual development because children have their first experiences of sexual attraction to the same-sex which may later develop into a homosexual sexual orientation, or the attraction of the opposite sex which later develops into a heterosexual orientation (Sigelman & Rider, 2009). Sexual development is influenced by the culture in which a child grows up. The cultural beliefs and attitudes one holds toward sexuality can mediate sexual behavior. For example, if one lived in a society where premarital sex was permissible and one had a permissive attitude toward premarital sex, then there is a high likelihood the individual might engage in premarital sex.

**Adolescence.** During adolescence individuals seek to gain insight and incorporate their understanding of their gender identities (i.e., male or female), whether they are sexual males or females, and how they want to express their sexuality in relationships (Sigelman & Rider, 2009). Teenagers begin to question which sex they are attracted to and begin to adopt or adhere to specific sexual behavior. For example, a biological male who is sexually aroused by a female may experiment and kiss the female. He may go on several dates and begin a relationship of boyfriend and girlfriend. Experimentation with homosexual activity is also common during adolescence (Sigelman & Rider, 2009). It can be difficult for those individuals who have a same-sex attraction in a society that views homosexuality in a negative way. Many individuals who have same-sex attractions usually are aware of their sexual orientation before the onset of puberty, but may not disclose their sexual orientations until later.

### **Homosexual Identity And The “Coming Out” Process**

Cass (1984) proposed a six-stage model of homosexual identity formation, which includes identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis.

**Cass’ (1984) model of homosexual identity formation.** Stage one is *identity confusion*, during which the individual perceives his or her behavior as being defined as homosexual. There is confusion because the individual begins to question his or her identity and sexual orientation. For instance, a male may hold a heterosexual orientation, but one day finds himself getting sexually aroused by another male and ends up kissing this male. The confusion comes about because the individual’s previously held sexual orientation is now in conflict with the new behavior. The individual begins to consider

the possibility of a homosexual identity or may reject it entirely. According to Cass (1984), at each stage an individual may experience what she refers to as identity foreclosure, which is defined as an individual choosing not to continue in the development of a homosexual identity. This can lead to psychological distress (e.g., depression) because the individual may be ashamed of the possibility of being homosexual, and he or she does not want to go against the mainstream culture. This individual may decide to live a “double” life in which he or she presents a heterosexual lifestyle in public, but engages in a homosexual lifestyle privately.

Stage two is *identity comparison* in which the individuals accept the possibility of a homosexual identity and the individuals face feelings of alienation as they come to see the difference between the self and non-homosexual others (Cass, 1984). The individuals may begin to perceive their self-perceptions as potentially homosexual and decide if it is undesirable or not. These feelings of alienation come from not adhering to the gender norms or stereotypes of the mainstream culture. The individuals may feel as though society will not accept them if they are “different” from the norm. In order to lessen the feelings of alienation the individuals may seek out other homosexuals in order, possibly, to create a support group. They may also be seeking the approval of others that are the same as they are by a characteristic they share (i.e., homosexual identity).

Stage three is *identity tolerance* in which the individual has made a commitment to a homosexual self-image and begins to seek out the company of other homosexuals to fulfill social, sexual, and emotional needs (Cass, 1984). Individuals want to have feelings of belonging or connectedness, so the individual begins to make contacts with other homosexuals on a selective basis; this is seen as being “necessary” rather than desirable.

For example, individuals may feel lonely or rejected by their peers, so they seek out other homosexual individual so they no longer feel lonely. They seek the individual not because they want to, but because they have to in order to gain something in return. At this stage there is a tolerance rather than an acceptance of a homosexual self-image. The quality of the contact with other homosexuals depends on whether the contact is perceived as positive or negative, which may influence different types of behaviors. Disclosure at this point to heterosexual contacts is limited, with individuals maintaining two separate images: a public one (heterosexual) and a private one (homosexual) but only when in the company of other homosexuals (Cass, 1984). These individuals can be considered what is termed “down low”, i.e., the persons may get married and have children in order to live up to family and societal norms, but they secretly have homosexual relations. This becomes a major issue when these individuals’ sexual orientations are disclosed by accident (i.e., caught cheating) or when someone else “outs” (someone else disclosing) the individuals’ sexual orientation. There are also *closeted* individuals who are unable to acknowledge to themselves or others that they have homosexual feelings and desires (Drescher, 2012). For these individuals, the feelings of same-sex attraction are not acceptable.

Stage four is *identity acceptance*, which is characterized by increased contact with homosexual subculture and a network of other homosexual individuals. The individual tries to continue to fit into society, yet retains a homosexual lifestyle, which leads the individual to pretend being heterosexual at certain times. Pretending to be heterosexual prevents the possibility of facing negative reactions of others toward one’s homosexuality (Cass, 1984). The individual fears the possibility of being rejected by others or of being



harassed. These individuals do not want to be seen as different because they may be ostracized as a result of society's difficulty with accepting a homosexual lifestyle. At this stage, individuals begin to disclose selectively to others (i.e., friends and relatives) their sexual orientation, if and when they are comfortable in sharing. There are other individuals who continue to live "double" lives and never disclose their sexual orientation to others. Questions such as "Who am I?" and "Where do I belong?" may be answered, which leads the individual to have feelings of stability and they no longer are confused or question their sexual orientation. It could be argued that these questions are not completely answered at any given point; individuals constantly ask themselves these questions based on society, media, culture, beliefs, religion, background, and experiences. During this stage, the individual tries to accept the idea that homosexuals are regarded as a negatively valued group (Cass, 1984). For example, homosexuals understand that they are not seen as equals of heterosexual couples when it comes to the issue of marriage. Although homosexual couples have been trying to fight for same-sex marriages, they have "compromised" for the moment in accepting civil unions.

Stage five is *identity pride* in which there are feelings of pride towards one's homosexual identity and loyalty to homosexuals as a group. Anger towards societal stigmatization of homosexuals leads to disclosure and confrontation with non-homosexuals to promote the equality of homosexuals (Cass, 1984). These individuals may organize demonstrations or file lawsuits when they feel there is some type of injustice. There are annual pride events and parades across the country during which homosexuals gather to make others aware they exist, to create feelings of pride, and to

highlight some of the changes in society as they relate to the homosexual community (e.g., Stonewall).

Last, stage six is *identity synthesis* in which the world is not viewed through a dichotomous lens (i.e., good homosexuals and bad heterosexuals). A homosexual identity is not seen as the overall identity by which the individual is characterized, but individuals see themselves as having multiple parts relative to their identities, and homosexuality is just one part (Cass, 1984). The views of others and one's view of self become integrated and there is no separation. At this stage, sexual orientation may no longer be hidden and disclosing to others one's sexual orientation is no longer a problem. Not all individuals will reach this level; some will regress to other stages and others may become stagnant at any level in the process.

Although Cass proposed a six-stage model of homosexual identity formation, individuals do not progress through the stages in a linear fashion, as presented. This identity formation is more fluid and individuals may move from one stage to another, or get "stuck" at any one stage. This process spans an individual's life and individuals may revisit any or all stages multiple times, especially when the individuals must decide to disclose their sexual orientation to new people, or when they are in new environments.

### **"Coming Out"**

One must first understand what is referred to as the "coming out" process in order to understand the risk factors and their implications. How people come to adopt a homosexual identity is also known as resocialization, coming out, sexual identity development and identity acquisition (Cass, 1984). A homosexual identity begins with one's perception of being "homosexual", which then leads to a homosexual identity after

interacting with other homosexuals. Because gender roles and sexuality are complex subjects, they are intertwined and connected to each other; homosexual individuals use affective, cognitive, and behavioral strategies in order to navigate through a homosexual identity (Cass, 1984).

Being “in the closet” is a colloquialism used to describe hiding of one’s homosexual feelings or hiding one’s sexual orientation as GLBTQQ. This term is closely related to “coming out of the closet” which is described as revealing one’s sexual orientation and accepting one’s GLBTQQ identity (Drescher, 2012). Someone in the closet is essentially holding back information about his or her sexual orientation from others. For example, a person may disclose his or her same-sex attraction to a group of friends, but not tell every friend. It should be noted that the “coming out” process begins with a homosexual self-awareness, which is then followed by the coming out to others (Drescher, 2012).

The actual process of “coming out” involves a disclosure of one’s sexual orientation to friends, family, and peers, and the course of developing a positive self-identity as a sexual minority youth (Henning-Stout et al., 2000). Developing a positive self-identity is important because it influences one’s self-esteem, and the positive self-identity may lower psychological stress.

**Influences to the “coming out” process.** Disclosing one’s sexual orientation depends on “who” and “how” the individual decides to come out. Sexual minority youth participating in a support group disclosed their sexual orientation more often than individuals in college. Some individuals decided to delay disclosing their sexual orientation until they have moved away and have detached from their families and away

from communities who knew everyone else's business. It is difficult to go against one's family when there is a dependence on them for food, shelter, clothes, and so on. On the other hand, an individual may disclose his or her sexual orientation later on even if the family disapproves because he/she is no longer dependent on the family. Delaying the disclosure of one's sexual orientation may work in the best interest of the individual because sexual minority youth are subject to verbal and physical abuse by family members (D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998; Hunter, 1990).

Sexual minority youth usually disclose their sexual orientation to a same-aged peer or friend first. Sexual minority youth are more likely to disclose their sexual orientation to a friend rather than to a parent, and to their mothers rather than to their fathers because they believe a friend would be more supportive and that a mother would understand and be less likely to become angry and react with verbal or physical abuse (Savin-Williams, 1998). The disguise of one's sexual orientation to family can be contingent on whether or not the individuals receive support from the family or fears they may lose that support based on their sexual orientation. Research suggests that sexual minority youth are more likely to disclose to a sibling rather than to a parent because they believe the sibling would be supportive (Strommen, 1989). Parental and sibling reaction to the self-disclosure of a homosexual orientation also influences the coming out process. Siblings may react with anger and confusion, whereas parents may react with feelings of guilt and failure (Strommen, 1989). It is rare that a parent is the first person to whom a youth discloses his or her sexual orientation and if a youth does decide to disclose, it more likely to be to the mother.

Sexual minority youth differ on how they disclose their sexual orientation. Mothers have usually been told in a face-to-face meeting but fathers, through a letter. Fathers have sometimes been told of their son's sexual orientation by their wives, which might not have been until months or years after the mother was initially told (Savin-Williams, 1998).

The individual's social and family experiences and whether or not the individual receives support from either group are additional factors which influence the "coming out" process (Carrion & Lock, 1997). For instance, individuals may self-disclose their sexual orientation to both family members and friends, and receive support from both groups. These individuals will most likely experience positive psychological well-being and experience low stress levels. On the other hand, individuals who self-discloses their sexual orientation to peers and are rejected or ostracized may experience higher levels of stress and a negative psychological well-being (e.g., depression). Additional factors such as an individual's temperament, cognitive abilities, and defense mechanisms also influence the coming out process.

### **Psycho-Social Factors**

Risk factors are usually understood as conditions or variables with a lower likelihood of positive outcomes and a higher likelihood of negative or undesirable outcomes. Risk factors are usually thought of things that occur *prior* to some "consequence." For example, students who come from lower socio-economic status are at higher risk of reading difficulties in school because reading may not be reinforced in the household. Because schools know this information, they can identify students who are "at-risk" and provide supports in the school so that the student does not fall behind

same-aged peers. Risk factors, as they pertain to the “coming out” process, are negative outcomes that occur *after* the disclosure of one’s homosexual orientation. There are a myriad of challenges and risks that these individuals must face after students self-discloses their sexual orientations as being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. It is important to make clear that identifying oneself as being GLBTQQ is not a risk in and of itself; instead, the risk comes from the environment in which the students choose to self-disclose. Furthermore, risk factors not only affect students who are “out,” but they also affect those who are perceived by others as being GLBTQQ, despite the students’ true sexual identities and orientations (Fisher & Kennedy, 2012).

### **Suicide**

Sexual minority youth are reported to have higher suicide rates when compared with their heterosexual counterparts (D’Augelli et al., 1998; Remafedi, French, Story, Resnick, & Blum, 1998; Marshal, Dietz, Friedman, Stall, Smith, McGinley, Thoma, Murray, D’Augelli, & Brent, 2011; Hunter, 1990; Garofalo, Wolf, Kessel, Palfrey, & DuRant, 1998), and a greater degree of suicidal ideations and attempts due to their sexual orientations (D’Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 2001; Russell & Joyner, 2001). Suicide attempts may be the way in which some of these individuals respond to the coping of a homosexual orientation and the many subsequent challenges (i.e., harassment, victimization, rejection, etc.). Parents and school personnel should be cognizant of those students whose behavior has changed dramatically (e.g., failing grades after having straight A’s). Adults should take note if the student is sad, is talking or writing about death, or giving away personal possessions.

**Mental Health Problems**

Sexual minority youth reported higher rates of mental health problems, such as somatization, obsessive-compulsiveness, interpersonal sensitivity, depression (Marshal et al., 2011; Collier, Beusekom, Bos, & Sanford, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2001), psychoticism (D'Augelli, 2002), posttraumatic stress symptoms (D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002), lower self-esteem (Hershberger, Pilkington, & D'Augelli, 1997; Kourany, 1987), stress and anxiety, when compared with their heterosexual counterparts (Teasdale & Bradely-Engen, 2010; Gilman, Cochran, Mays, Hughes, Ostrow, Kessler, 2001). These mental health issues can impact the individual's daily living as well as increase the risk of suicide ideations or attempts. Due to lower self-esteem, poor self-concept, and depression, sexual minority youth may develop weight concerns and weight control behaviors, which could lead to binge eating and eating disorder symptoms (Austin, Ziyadeh, Kahn, Camargo, Colditz, & Field, 2004). Sexual minority youth may require mental health services to address these concerns.

**Homelessness**

Sexual minority youth are also at-risk for homelessness, and are overrepresented in the homeless, runaway, and "throwaway" population after their sexual orientation has been discovered (Human Rights Watch, 2001). Sexual abuse and disclosure of sexual orientation or engaging in same-sex behaviors are reported by GLBTQQ youth as being reasons for running away or for being evicted from their homes by parents. Twenty-six percent of sexual minority youth leave home because of conflicts with family members over their sexual orientation (Carrion & Lock, 1997). These individuals may feel rejected or not supported by their families; this may cause difficulties with family

members and lead to the individual running away or being thrown out of the house. Because homeless sexual minority youth lack employment, they may turn to a range of survival strategies, such as panhandling, shoplifting, selling stolen goods, mugging, sex work (also referred to as survival sex), and selling of illegal drugs in order to survive on the streets. These activities are linked with a number of negative consequences, which include incarceration, victimization, and death (Gwadz, Gostnell, Smolenski, Willis, Nish, Nolan, Tharaken, & Ritchie, 2009).

**Survival sex.** Of all the activities, survival sex is the most extensively documented in homeless youth. Survival sex is defined as the exchange of sex for food, for money, shelter, drugs and other needs (Walls & Bell, 2011). As a result of homelessness, sexual minority youth engage in survival sex or are coerced into sex work at significantly higher rates than heterosexual counterparts in order to survive on the street. According to Kruks (1991), gay male youth may have been forced out of their homes or rejected by their families because of their sexual orientation, and are more likely to engage in survival sex (prostitution). Sexual minority youth may become involved in survival sex as a means of support. Some may find comfort in the arms of a stranger because their families and friends have rejected them.

***Sexual risk taking behaviors.*** Because sexual minority youth may engage in survival sex, it would not be surprising to see higher rates of sexual risk-taking behaviors. Youth who have poor safe-sex intentions were found to have more sexual encounters and were more likely to engage in unprotected receptive and unprotected insertive anal sex (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2006). In other words, sexual minority youth who see no importance or significance about condom use are more likely



to have unprotected sex. Having poor safe-sex intentions is not the only predictor for unprotected sex. Rosario et al. (2006) argue mental health problems (e.g., anxiety and substance abuse), childhood sexual abuse, and the “coming out” process also predict sexual risk-taking behaviors (i.e., unprotected sex). Because some sexual minority youth lack positive peer support and outlets for socialization, they may downplay or disregard health concerns in order to have companionship and intimacy (Human Rights Watch, 2001). Having unprotected sex leads to an increase in communicable diseases. Sexual minority youth are, therefore, at risk for higher rates of sexually transmitted infections and HIV (Wolitski & Fenton, 2011; Human Rights Watch, 2001). Sexual minority youth should be educated about the need to practice safe-sex when being intimate with others or when engaging in survival sex.

### **Substance Use**

Sexual minority youth use alcohol and drugs to self-medicate in order to cope with the many challenges associated with “coming out.” Sexual minority youth have higher rates of drug use during adolescence when “youth may be less well equipped developmentally to cope with the challenges of having a minority sexual orientation in a stigmatizing environment” (Corliss, Rosario, Wypij, Wylie, Frazier, & Austin, 2010, p 520). Sexual minority youth are more frequently prone to alcohol and drug use than heterosexual peers (Russell, Driscoll, & Truong, 2002; Collier et al., 2013; Darwich, Hymel, & Waterhouse, 2012; Garofalo et al., 1998; Human Rights Watch, 2001). Sexual minority youth are more likely to use marijuana, cocaine, and other drugs, as well as prescription drugs (Corliss et al., 2010), and have higher rates of tobacco use than heterosexual counterparts (Austin, Ziyadeh, Fisher, Kahn, Colditz, & Frazier, 2004). An

increase of tobacco use in sexual minority youth has been found to be associated with symptoms of depression, rejection from family members and peers, stigmatization, discrimination, and a hostile environment (Austin et al., 2004).

Substance use in sexual minority youth is believed to be associated with not being able to cope “appropriately” with the stress related to sexual orientation (Rosario et al., 2012). There is some thought that gay-related-stress theory and pubertal development may help explain this issue of increased substance use. It has been proposed that symptoms of anxiety and depression, harassment, discrimination, and low self-esteem may contribute to gay-related stress. It is argued that sexual minority youth may use alcohol as a coping strategy to deal with internalizing and externalizing issues (Ziyadeh, Prokop, Fisher, Rosario, Field, Camargo, & Austin, 2007). Higher rates of substance use in sexual minority youth can later lead to substance abuse and dependence.

### **Violence**

Sexual minority youth are at risk for becoming victims of violence. According to Russell, Franz, and Driscoll (2001), sexual minority youth are at higher risk for being jumped or attacked, or engaging in a dangerous physical altercation. Sexual minority youth have been found to perpetuate violence against others, i.e., pulling a gun or knife on someone, or shooting or stabbing someone (Russell et al., 2001). Higher rates of perpetuating violence may be a result of feeling fear and a need to protect themselves for self-defense.

### **School Climate**

Sexual minority youth face multiple, unique challenges and obstacles when they “come out” in schools. These individuals must try to navigate a hostile learning

environment; some students have reported being subjected to hearing homophobic remarks at school. According to Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, and Palmer, (2012), seventy-one percent of students hear comments such as “dyke” or “faggot” frequently at school. Students also reported hearing the word “gay” used in a negative way, denoting that someone or something is either stupid or worthless. Sexual minority youth reported that hearing the word “gay” in a negative way is bothersome or causes some degree of distress. The uses of “that’s so gay,” “no homo” are other frequently heard remarks in school, causing distress amongst sexual minority youth. Students reported also hearing remarks frequently about not being “masculine” or “feminine” enough (Kosciw et al., 2012).

The majority of the remarks were usually made when teachers were not present, but teacher’s presence did not change the use of biased or derogatory language. According to Kosciw et al. (2012), teachers were more likely to intervene when a student made a sexist or racist remark (33% and 54%, respectively), compared with intervening when a homophobic remark or a negative comment about gender expression was made (15% and 11%, respectively). Peers were reluctant to intervene when they heard a homophobic remark. They were more likely to intervene when a sexist or racist remark (16% and 18%, respectively), compared with a homophobic remark (6%), was being made. This type of language can cause distress and create a hostile learning environment. The lack of intervention when a homophobic remark is made may send an unintended message that sexual minority youth are an unvalued group.

Schools can feel unsafe to sexual minority youth. Students reported feeling unsafe due to their sexual orientations (Kosciw et al, 2012). These youths spend a lot of

time and energy thinking about how they are going to get to school and back home safely, avoid hallways so that they do not have to hear slurs, and miss gym class to avoid being beaten up; basically, to avoid being verbally or physically attacked (Human Rights Watch, 2001). Sexual minority youth report avoiding locker rooms, bathrooms, gym classes, athletic fields or facilities, school cafeteria, school buses, school hallways, and school parking lots because they feel uncomfortable or unsafe (Kosciw et al, 2012). Sexual minority youth have reported avoiding classes or missing entire days of school because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable at school. It would not come as a surprise that students who spend so much time thinking about avoiding public areas or missing entire days of school would have lower academic success.

**Victimization.** Sexual minority youth are consistently being subjected to victimization (Garofalo et al., 1998) and bullying (Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011) in schools. It was found that boys were two times more likely to get into a fight and four times more likely to carry a weapon at school than females, due to victimization (Nickerson, & Slater, 2009; DuRant, Krowchuck, & Sinal, 1998). These physical altercations and the need to carry a weapon at school stem from feeling unsafe and having a need to protect themselves. Verbal and physical attacks are also common among sexual minority youth, and have demonstrated increased mental health problems (D'Augelli, 2002; D'Augelli et al., 2002; DuRant et al., 1998). The increase in mental health problems and victimization increased the likelihood of suicidal behavior (Nickerson, & Slater, 2009). Research suggests victimization and bullying may be motivated by bias and prejudice (Russell et al., 2011), and sexual minority youth may face potential discrimination at school (Teasdale & Bradely-Engen, 2010). At school,

victimization was related to feelings of connectedness and belonging to school; students with high levels of victimization had a lower sense of school belonging compared with students with lower levels of victimization (Kosciw et al, 2012; Collier et al., 2013).

Students who have a higher sense of school belonging might not have the need to engage in violence, carry a weapon in school, or have higher rates of suicidal behavior.

***Harassment and assault.*** Sexual minority youth experience harassment and assault in school. These students reported being verbally harassed, defined as being called names or threatened because of their sexual orientation (Kosciw et al., 2012). Verbal harassment that is not directly addressed can lead to physical violence, which includes sexual assaults (Human Rights Watch, 2001). It is important to note that students, other than sexual minority youth, are also subjected to verbal harassment; this occurs simply because an individual may be “perceived” as being homosexual. The mere perception of someone being homosexual comes back to the notion of gender roles and the ramifications associated when individuals do not follow or fit one’s societal gender norms.

Sexual minority youth reported dealing with physical harassment (e.g., shoved or pushed) at school. Sexual minority youth reported being physically assaulted at school; this includes being punched, kicked, or injured with a weapon. According to Garofalo et al. (1998), sexual minority youth were four times more likely to be threatened with a weapon on school property. Sexual minority youth spend a lot of time worrying about their safety while trying to get an education. These individuals may also be a witness to violence toward other sexual minority youth, so they too may feel unsafe or fear they may become victims because of their sexual orientation. Due to the fear of victimization

sexual minority youth may not disclose their sexual orientations, which may lead to feelings of isolation and therefore increase depressive symptoms. Furthermore, sexual minority youth may feel deliberately excluded by others, having mean rumors or lies told about them, property stolen or damaged, and cyber-bullying (Kosciw et al., 2012). With the advent of social media sites and the use of smart phones, bullying has taken a different form and bullying is no longer confined to the classroom, alone or to a particular school; now messages can be sent to hundreds of millions of people around the world to see. Bullying can increase mental health problems, and as a result, sexual minority youth may turn to substance use or suicidal behavior in order to cope with the stress. Last, sexual minority youth also experience sexual harassment, which is defined as an unwelcomed physical contact, or sexually suggestive remark or gesture. Sexual harassment has negative consequences; among these are an increase in depressive symptoms and academic difficulties (Human Rights Watch, 2001).

**Lower academic success and educational aspirations.** Hostile learning environments at school can negatively impact academic success and educational aspirations for sexual minority youth. Youth have reported having difficulty concentrating and focusing in school, leading them to feel powerless and to feel that the only option to escape the hostile learning environment is not to complete high school and drop out of school (Human Right Watch, 2001; Remafedi, 1987). Because sexual minority youth are focused on trying to avoid school and classes, and spend time worrying about their safety, it is more likely that they would have lower grade point averages. Sexual minority youth are twice as likely to report that they have no plans to pursue a post-secondary education (Kosciw et al., 2012). Without an education, sexual

minority youth may struggle to find employment, which can lead to a multitude of negative consequences such as depression, substance use, suicide, homelessness, and survival sex.

***Absenteeism.*** Another issue that arises from a hostile learning environment is the problem with absenteeism. Sexual minority youth are more likely to miss school in order to avoid being regularly harassed or assaulted (Darwich et. al., 2012) or miss school out of fear (Garofalo et al., 1998). Sexual minority youth, therefore, have a low high school completion rate because of excessive absences. The problem of absenteeism can help explain the reason why sexual minority youth have low grade point averages. If the student is not attending class, he/she is not receiving the material in order to pass or be promoted to the next grade level.

### **School Legal Mandates**

Although there is no federal law specifically addressing bullying and harassment for sexual minority youth, there have been landmark court case decisions requiring schools to provide safe learning environments for all students.

**Federal legislation.** The Federal antidiscrimination law protects students from harassment based on race, color, national origin, sex, or disability. Federal law does not protect students from discrimination or harassment based on sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. However, courts have ruled harassment based on sexual orientation violates the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, the Equal Protection and Due Process Clauses of the United States Constitution, and Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which protects individuals from sexual harassment (Jacob, Decker, & Hartshorne, 2011).

Under the Equal Protection Clause, a school district or individual employee of a school district is prohibited from treating students differently, based on personal characteristics, such as race, color, religion, sex, etc. (Orr & Komosa-Hawkins, 2013). School districts and school personnel can be found guilty if a sexual minority youth reports incidences of harassment based on sexual orientation and cites the fact that the school does nothing to prevent the harassment. Authorities will then enforce consequences for harassment based on race. The courts have interpreted the law to send a message to school districts and school personnel that there cannot be differentiation when dealing with issues of harassment and intimidation. All complaints should be treated equally.

Under the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution, school districts and school personnel are prohibited from interfering with a person's life, liberty, and property (Orr & Komosa-Hawkins, 2013). The Due Process Clause guarantees children of certain ages the right to an education and requires school attendance. Furthermore, the courts have interpreted the law to state that people have an interest from being protected from harm in the school. A school district or school employee may violate the Due Process Clause if either takes actions that foster an environment in which a student's due process rights have been violated. For instance, a student may file a complaint with school administrators about harassment, and respond with a "get over it" or "boys will be boys" mentality. These types of responses would be sufficient evidence that the school district "affirmatively encouraged" the harassment, creating an environment in which the victim is not being protected from harm.



In another example, in *Shore Regional High School v. P.S.* (2004), the federal court found that the school district failed to provide a free and appropriate education (FAPE) within the meaning of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for a student because of severe and prolonged harassment by other students. Although the federal government does not address harassment due to sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression, the courts have interpreted federal laws to include protection toward sexual minority youth. School districts that violate these laws can face lawsuits and be ordered to pay for damages. Ultimately, schools should be providing a safe learning environment for all students.

In 1984, Congress passed the Equal Access Act with the goal of clarifying the rights of students to organize student groups, specifically for religious groups (Orr & Komosa-Hawkins, 2013). More recently, the Equal Access Act has been used now as an argument for students interested in organizing a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA). Courts have ruled in favor of the students protesting against the actions of hostile school administrators. Under the Equal Access Act, any secondary school that receives federal funding cannot deny equal access or discriminate against any student who wishes to organize a meeting on the basis of religion, political, philosophical, or any other content. If a school allows for one or more non-curriculum activities during non-instructional time, it needs to allow all types of different student organizations. Schools could either allow the creation of GSAs or they could make a drastic decision of not accepting federal funding. A school district would send the wrong message to students, employees, and the community if it bans all student activities or rejects federal funding just because students

want to create a GSA. The latter demonstrates the inequality and social injustice toward sexual minority youth in our society.

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution protects freedom of speech. This law protects GLBTQQ students to express themselves freely as sexual minority youth, and schools cannot ask students to hide their identities or force students to wear clothing matching their biological sex (Fisher & Kennedy, 2012). In the court case of *Henkle v. Gregory*, Derek Henkle spoke out openly about being gay on a local television show. Afterwards, Derek began to be attacked at school; in fact, there was an incident in which his attackers put a lasso around his neck in a school parking lot and attempted to drag him behind a truck. Derek filed complaints with school administrators, but school administrators responded that Derek needs to “stop acting like a fag.” Derek was moved from one school to another instead of the school dealing with the perpetrators. At the end, the district was required to pay \$451,000 in a settlement, and agreed to implement policies to protect future student from discrimination based on sexual orientation (Fisher & Kennedy, 2012).

***Financial implications.*** There are multiple examples of court cases which demonstrate the financial implications for school districts that violate federal, state, and local laws. Of particular interest is the case of *Nabozny v. Podlesny* (1996). In this case (1996), the U.S. Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in favor of Jamie Nabozny and his claim that his guarantee of equal protection under the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment had been violated. It was found that high school officials had not protected Jamie from anti-gay harassment, even after repeated complaints by Jamie and his parents. Jamie was awarded a one million dollar settlement; an amount that school districts cannot just overlook. One

of the important issues that faced the court was the fact the school administrators did not provide the same protection to Jamie as compared with the type of protection given to other students who had suffered other forms of harassment or abuse. In a similar case, *Iversen v. Kent School*, Iversen alleged that during his middle and high school years, the district failed to respond to his complaints of being harassed at school because he was perceived to be gay. The case was settled out of court, but it stands as an example that schools must not only have anti-harassment policies, but they also have to make sure all students are afforded a safe learning environment (Henning-Stout, 2000).

*Other implications.* Besides paying large monetary damages, schools have been required to revise school policies and handbooks to include GLBTQQ students, allow GSAs to meet, allow students to bring same-sex dates to the prom, provide diversity and GLBTQQ-specific training to staff and students, and have compliance coordinators monitor their implementations of the requirements and report these to the courts (Fisher & Kennedy, 2012).

### **Benefits of “Coming Out.”**

Despite the myriad of challenges associated with the coming out process, disclosing one’s same-sex attraction has shown to provide several benefits. Disclosing to a sibling may deepen and strengthen the relationship because the siblings now share a common secret (Savin-Williams, 1998). The individual can gain some support from the sibling and not have constantly to be worried about disguising his/her sexual orientation. Coming out to significant individuals in one’s life has fostered a positive self-concept and self-acceptance (Coleman, 1982), which may lead to psychological adjustment (Gonsiorek & Rudolph, 1991), decreased feeling of loneliness and guilt (Dank, 1973)

higher self-esteem (Savin-Williams, 1990), and reduced stress (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996). Sexual minority youth who “came out” in schools have reported better psychological well-being (Kosciw et al, 2012). When individuals “come out” there is evidence to support the benefits of “coming out” instead of dealing with the negative aspects of self-disclosure.

## **Interventions**

### **Resilience**

Despite the alarming rates of risk factors GLBTQQ students face, it is important to recognize that the majority of GLBTQQ youth do not experience negative outcomes (Fisher & Kennedy, 2012). GLBTQQ students who do not manifest unhealthy or risky behaviors do not do so because there is an absence of risk factors; they do so because they are resilient. Fisher and Kennedy (2012) identified protective factors for GLBTQQ students across five contexts: Social Context (e.g., peer acceptance, supportive friendships, peer advocacy, and peer intervention in bullying or harassment), School Context (e.g., LGBT inclusion, supportive policies, immediate intervention, supportive teachers, staff education, and Gay-Straight Alliances), Home Context (e.g., parental support, sibling support, parental advocacy, and extended family support), Community Context (e.g., urban community, state with inclusive harassment and bullying laws, and higher education levels); and Social/Political Context (e.g., federal recognition and protection of LGBTQ individuals, inclusion of LGBTQ culture in national culture, and representation of LGBTQ persons in the media). Although there are multiple factors that can help support development and promote resilience, the school context is the primary focus.

**School Context**

Today's schools have multiple responsibilities that extend beyond the topic of academics; they must also address students' social-emotional and behavioral development (Fisher, 2013). School staff is expected to support all of these aspects of the students' development. Although there are people who argue that topics of sex, sexuality, and gender nonconformity have no place in schools, students who identify as GLBTQQ are at an increased risk for academic, social, and emotional problems. When GLBTQQ students do not feel safe at school, they tend not to identify themselves outwardly as such; instead, they tend to seek out fewer resources in order to support their own healthy development and learn appropriate problem solving skills. As a result, these youth may develop an internalized sense of inadequacy and poor self-esteem because of their sexual orientation (NASP, 2006). Schools are in a position to foster safe learning environments for all students through academic and psycho-social support systems. Schools must create safe and conducive learning environments in order to provide equal access to education and mental health services for GLBTQQ students (National Association of School Psychologists, 2006). Sexual minority youth begin to feel safe at school when they feel they are being supported. How can schools provide support for GLBTQQ youth? There are several interventions suggested in the literature to help address hostile learning environments for GLBTQQ students; these include teacher mentors, inclusive curriculums, anti-harassment policies, and Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs).

**Non-discrimination policies.** Comprehensive bullying and harassment policies and laws can create a safer learning environment for all students. Although many school

districts have non-discrimination policies, these policies may not include specific language about sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. Including specific language about GLBTQQ students in the policy legitimizes the school's promise to educate all students (NASP, 2006). Districts should explicitly mention *actual or perceived* sexual orientation and gender expression in the policy. This would ensure that students who do not identify as GLBTQQ, but are harassed or victimized as if they were GLBTQQ would be protected. Policies should include the procedures and requirements for reporting bullying and harassment, as well as what steps the school will take in order to address the situation (Fisher & Kennedy, 2012). Students who attended schools with comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment policies were less likely to hear homophobic remarks, and were more likely to report teachers' intervention when a homophobic remark or negative remarks about gender expression was heard (Kosciw et al., 2012). Staff and students should be aware of the school's policy, and consequences should be consistently enforced for all incidences involving intimidation and harassment. It is not enough to have non-discrimination policies, there needs to be strict enforcement, immediate follow up, and consequences. Schools should develop and implement a zero-tolerance policy for anti-gay harassment, hate epithets, and slurs. The policy should include both students and staff. This sends a clear message to perpetrators that harassment of any kind will not be tolerated. GLBTQQ students will feel safer at school when they feel they are being treated with respect and fairness. It is important to note that students experienced less victimization at school because of their sexual orientation or gender expression and are more likely to have supportive resources if the student lives in a state with a comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment law (Kosciw et al., 2012).

However, only about a handful of states plus the District of Columbia have comprehensive laws that include sexual orientation and gender identity. All states should have a comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment policy and law.

**Diversity training.** There is a need for teacher training about GLBTQQ issues. There is research to suggest few teachers are knowledgeable about issues affecting sexual minority youth in schools (Fisher & Kennedy, 2012). This lack of education would help to explain the reason why students report high rates of teachers failing to intervene when there are reports of bullying and harassment, and the reason why teachers fail to intervene when they hear homophobic remarks. School staff should receive professional development training to understand not only the unique challenges faced by GLBTQQ students, but also how schools can better support these individuals. Staff development related to GLBTQQ issues should be seen as a long-term commitment because of the large turnover in schools; furthermore, a one-day professional development workshop is not adequate to address all the issues surrounding GLBTQQ students. Workshops, meetings, and in-services should be viewed as a series and revisited often in order to keep new and old staff up to date with the most current information (Fisher & Kennedy, 2012).

**Student training.** As with staff training, there is a need for student training to understand school policies and expectations regarding the treatment of all students, especially those who identify as GLBTQQ or those whom others perceive as GLBTQQ. Students would benefit from a school-wide program to increase sensitivity and diversity (Fisher & Kennedy, 2012). It is important to get students involved in the discussion of sensitivity and diversity because peer influences increases as students begin to transition

from elementary to middle school. Peer support becomes increasingly important and has been identified as a protective factor for GLBTQQ youth.

**Inclusive curriculum.** An inclusive curriculum can promote respect for all and improve school experiences for GLBTQQ students. Students who attend schools with an inclusive curriculum hear fewer homophobic remarks, students feel less unsafe at school, and miss fewer days of school (Kosciw et al., 2012). Students are also more likely to report that their classmates were somewhat or very accepting of GLBTQQ individuals (Kosciw et al., 2012). Students and staff may have misinformation about GLBTQQ issues and lack information to address the needs of these youth. In order to address the lack of information or misinformation, schools should include an educational context to help demystify sexual orientation and gender identity. NASP (2006) suggests an inclusive curriculum in schools in which issues of sexual orientation and gender identity are infused into the classrooms. An inclusive curriculum would include discussing sexual orientation development theory and gender identity in science class, reading books written by GLBTQQ authors in language arts class, becoming aware of the GLBTQQ movements in social studies class, and discussing the reduction of unsafe sex behaviors and substance use in health class. By including GLBTQQ information into the curriculum, educators assist in addressing misconceptions about this population and bring light to the contributions made by GLBTQQ individuals. A more inclusive curriculum in our schools can help sexual minority youth decrease their feelings of isolation and misunderstanding.

**Counseling and education.** Counseling and education can be effective interventions when dealing with sexual minority youth. Harassment and intimidation



against GLBTQQ youth or gender non-conforming youth should be addressed through consequences and through the education of the perpetrator (NASP, 2006). The goal is to provide counseling and education in order to prevent future incidences of harassment.

Education should stress the GLBTQQ issues and the risk factors these youth face.

According to NASP (2006), schools should provide direct intervention and support for GLBTQQ youth and adolescents exploring their sexuality or gender identity. GLBTQQ youth should be provided with counseling to help foster a healthy development.

Nonjudgmental counseling should be provided for students targeted for harassment, for those questioning their sexual orientation, for those perceived as GLBTQQ, and for those who may become targets of harassment when they decide to disclose a homosexual orientation. Students who have received intervention and support because of harassment or intimidation should gain an understanding of their experiences and seek out resources that can help them navigate a hostile school environment (NASP, 2006). Counseling and education can help GLBTQQ youth gain a sense of belonging if they feel safe and comfortable at school.

*Supporting the “coming out” process.* Mental health professionals in schools can be instrumental in supporting GLBTQQ students with the coming out process. Before working with GLBTQQ youth, mental health professionals should be aware of their own beliefs and biases toward sexual orientation and gender identity, and educate themselves about issues faced by GLBTQQ students. There are several preconditions that support counseling of sexual minority youth (Fisher & Kennedy, 2012). First, professionals must believe and must tell students that homosexuality and bisexuality are not forms of pathology and that GLBTQQ people can live happy and fulfilling lives.

Second, professional should know that discrimination and prejudice can manifest in overt or covert actions. Last, professionals must understand sexual orientation or gender identity is only one part of a student's overall identity. GLBTQQ students report counseling being helpful when they have a counselor who listens to and affirms them, shows understanding and empathy, normalizes their experiences, and provides support and information (Fisher & Kennedy, 2012). Students should be allowed to explore their sexuality even when they display confusion and change their minds multiple times about their sexuality. School mental health workers can also assist when a student is in the process of deciding to disclose his or her homosexual orientation to others. Professionals may have to ask questions about possible positive and negative consequences of disclosure so that sexual minority youth have a realistic expectation of what may happen after the disclosure; the logistics of disclosure should be discussed (i.e., identifying who, when, and where to have the conversation). Professional may help with role-playing how the student will disclose his or her identity (Fisher & Kennedy, 2012). Most importantly, the professional should assist the student in handling the potential "worse case scenario", including how the student will handle that situation. For example, if the student is disclosing to family members and has fears of rejection or of being put out of the house, the plan should include phone numbers for hotlines, sources of emotional and financial support, and alternative living situations (Fisher & Kennedy, 2012). If this level of negative reactions is expected, the professional should help the student prepare for this level of reaction and explore the possibility of waiting for a different time in which the student is in a better position to disclose his or her identity.

**Social support.** Social supports have been shown to have positive effects on sexual minority youth (Komosa-Hawkins, & Schanding, 2013). Social Supports can be informal (e.g., support from peers/friends or an adult outside of the family, such as a teacher, coach, mentor, pastor, or family friend) or formal (e.g., Gay-Straight Alliances [GSAs], support groups, community agencies, or mentoring programs). Social support has been linked to positive mental health outcomes (Komosa-Hawkins, & Schanding, 2013), and can improve a student's overall well-being. Support from school staff can contribute to a greater sense of safety. However, the type of support that is needed will differ from one person to another. It is important to note just because a social support is provided does not mean students will always find this available resource supportive. Schools should examine the reasons why an individual does not find the available social support helpful. These individuals may require additional resources, such as finding compassionate individuals or there may be a need for counseling.

**Teacher mentors.** Teacher mentors can play a significant role and demonstrate positive outcomes in the educational resilience of sexual minority youth. Teacher-student relationships and trust improves academic performance by having GLBTQQ students feel safe and connected. As a result of having teacher mentors, GLBTQQ youth have reported higher rates of post-secondary participation. According to Gastic and Johnson (2009), fifty-eight percent of mentored youth had finished at least one year of college, compared with thirty-eight percent of unmentored youth. It was found sexual minority youth with teacher-mentors had a 32% higher rate of post-secondary participation than those of their peers who had other kinds of informal mentors (Gastic & Johnson, 2009).

It is imperative that sexual minority youth have access to adults at school that can provide support and positive role modeling.

*Supportive educators.* Supportive educators of GLBTQQ students can have a positive impact on these students' school experiences. Sexual minority youth with supportive educators were less likely to feel unsafe, fewer students missed school, these students had a greater sense of belonging to their school, and they reported higher grade point averages and higher educational aspirations (Kosciw et al., 2012). These results and positive outcomes indicate an increased need for more supportive staff in schools to help GLBTQQ students.

*Safe space.* Safe Space, a project created by GLSEN, identifies allies of GLBTQQ students within the school community by placing small stickers outside of their doors, windows, or desk areas identifying them as a "Safe Space" (Fisher & Kennedy, 2012). Staff members identify themselves as safe individuals for GLBTQQ students to speak to, to seek resources from, to discuss any safety concerns, or to report incidences of bullying and harassment. This is important because the research has shown resiliency for GLBTQQ students increases when these individuals have supportive school staff members.

*Gay-straight alliances.* Of all the recommended interventions to address GLBTQQ issues, Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) have the most extensive research. They can also provide sexual minority youth with a safe space in school, and can contribute to a welcoming school environment. Gay-Straight Alliances are usually student led, school-based clubs with the goal of improving the school climate for GLBTQQ students and educating others about sexual minority youth issues (Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2011;

Bishop & Casida, 2011). GSAs provide support and companionship. Students attending a school with GSAs heard fewer homophobic remarks, were less likely to feel unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, experienced less victimization due to sexual orientation and gender expression, and school personnel were more likely to intervene when hearing a homophobic remark (Kosciw et al., 2012; Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006). Additionally, students attending schools with GSAs reported fewer problems with alcohol use, and lower levels of depression and psychological stress (Heck et al., 2011). These positive outcomes allowed GLBTQQ students to have a greater sense of connectedness to their school community.

Although some schools have GSAs, not all GLBTQQ students participate. Research suggests that some students do not participate in their schools' GSA because they do not feel the school is inclusive or that it provides confidentiality (Kosciw et al., 2012). Although schools are required to allow GSAs based on the Equal Access Act, there are individuals who would like to see restricted access to this resource. One tactic is to require parental permission to participate in the GSA. Of the schools requiring parent permission, the majority of the students who were "out" to at least one parent had permission to participate in their GSA, compared with those who were not "out" to a parent (Kosciw et al., 2012). Educators should also be mindful that sexual minority youth may be denied access to GSAs depending on geographical location or based on ethnicity. According to GLSEN (2007), GLBTQQ students in the South and those who live in small towns or rural areas are less likely to have access to a GSA. Additionally, students of color may have less access to GSAs. In fact, GLBTQQ African American/Black students were less likely to report having a GSA at school (GLSEN,

2007). These barriers can hinder access to this much needed resource. These individuals may not seek outside resources, which can increase multiple risk factors. Schools should understand the ramifications and implications involved when sexual minority youth do not feel supported or are navigating a hostile learning environment.

### **Prevention/Intervention**

Prevention/intervention, specifically on sexual minority youth issues, has shown to be effective in improving school climate. According to Komosa-Hawkins and Schanding (2013), it is suggested that to change negative beliefs/attitudes and behavior in schools, there needs to be a generalized primary prevention approach inclusive of character development, social-emotional learning, and diversity training. There is a need to be proactive and a need for primary, secondary, and tertiary interventions to support GLBTQQ students. All students are supported through school-wide interventions (universal/primary level); students identified as *at-risk* are supported by selective interventions (secondary), and those students who demonstrate significant need are supported through intense intervention (tertiary [e.g., psychotherapy]). This allows for a systematic way of supporting all students and of identifying at-risk students and providing them with specific interventions. The goal is for prevention and early intervention in order to avoid more costly or intensive compensatory approaches later on. A prevention/intervention model is more cost effective. Examples of prevention/intervention programs include Project 10 and Washington's Safe Schools Project. Both programs try to address sexual minority youth issues by providing support and trying to reduce harassment. According to Henning-Stout and colleagues (2000), there are several common elements for a successful school program to reduce

harassment, such as including guiding ideas (respond directly to a school's concerns), goals and functional objectives (increase safety and counter heterosexism), and specific processes (emergence of local issues, formation of coalitions, information gathering, action planning, and implementation).

Schools are in a good position to implement universal prevention programs that would not only counter homophobia, but also give students the social-emotional skills necessary to navigate childhood and especially to assist in adolescent development. Social-emotional learning skills (e.g., awareness of self and others, self-management, and decision-making skills) should be taught explicitly in order to equip students with effective coping skills (Komosa-Hawkins & Schanding, 2013). Parents may have to be educated not only about the need for support but also how to be supportive. This speaks to the importance of school-home-community partnerships. According to Komosa-Hawkins and colleague (2013), prevention/intervention should focus not only on preventing negative outcomes (reducing risks), but should also include the fostering of positive outcomes (resilience).

### **Focus of the Study**

The primary focus was to identify support services in schools that validate those support systems already identified in the literature, with the possibility of uncovering additional resources. Although support systems in schools were the major focus of the current study, there may be resources that students have generalized to other settings or outside community resources. By knowing about gay men the information gathered can be extrapolated to other sexual minority groups who have had similar experiences. The current study used a qualitative, phenomenological research approach. A semi-structured

interview was used to identify how schools are supporting sexual minority youth, including the resources made available to these individuals; it was also useful in gaining insight into the participants' understanding of the "coming out" process.



### **Chapter 3: Method**

#### **Overview**

The current study used a qualitative, phenomenological research approach, using a semi-structured interview to identify supports and resources made available to sexual minority youth who are “coming out” in schools; it was also utilized to gain insight into the participants’ understanding of the “coming out” process.

#### **Participants**

The participants of this study included seven undergraduate students enrolled at universities and colleges in the Northeastern section of the United States. Participants, identified as being a gay male college student between the ages of 18-21, who had disclosed their sexual orientation to others in middle school or high school, were included in the current study. The current study focused on gay males specifically because the “coming out” process may differ for individuals who identify as lesbian, bisexual, transgender, questioning, or queer. Participants must have disclosed their homosexual orientation to others in order to understand the implications and ramifications of “coming out” and to identify school support systems being provided to sexual minority youth. The age range for participants was specified because this is period when individuals are at the age of majority, and can participate in this type of study without the fear of consequences from family members or financial support systems. Older individuals were not considered as participants in the current study because person’s comprehension of the “coming out” process can be influenced with age and life experiences. The participants were volunteers and were a sample of convenience.

**Inclusion criteria.** Inclusion criteria will include (a) male, (b) between the ages of 18-21, (c) identifies as being gay, (d) disclosed sexual orientation to others in middle school or high school (e.g., friend, family, teacher, pastor, etc.), and (e) a college/university student.

**Exclusion criteria.** Exclusion criteria will include (a) female, (b) younger than 18 or older than 21, (c) identifies as being heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian, transgender, (d) has not disclosed sexual orientation to others in middle school or high school (e.g., friend, family, teacher, pastor, etc.), and (e) not a college/university student.

**Recruitment.** Participants were recruited through various universities and colleges in the Northeastern section of the United States by means of GLBTQQ on-campus student organizations. A letter (Appendix A) briefly describing the study was sent to the local universities' and colleges' GLBTQQ student organization via electronic mail. The letter introduced the responsible investigator and asked whether or not the responsible investigator would be able to speak to the members of the organization about the current study for a few minutes and ask for volunteers. A copy of the Consent Form was also sent with the letter of introduction. Flyers (Appendix B) were disseminated to prospective volunteers. Attendees were asked to distribute the flyers to other interested participants. The flyers suggested that interested individuals contact the responsible investigator via phone or email.

During the initial contact, the researcher conducted a brief screening on the phone to ensure that the participant met the selection criteria (Appendix C). If the individual did not meet the criteria an explanation was given that the individual did not meet the qualifying criteria for this particular investigation. If the individual did meet the criteria,

that volunteer was provided with information regarding the process. Participants were recruited until saturation was reached.

### **Research Design**

Creswell (2007) metaphorically described qualitative research as an intricate fabric which cannot be easily or simply explained. Likewise, qualitative research studies weave together participants' voices and experiences in order to explore a topic further (2007). Qualitative research gives life to experiences and tries to tell a story. The purpose of this study was to examine the "coming out" process and identify support systems in schools for sexual minority youth. Because the ultimate goal of this study was to describe a phenomenon, a qualitative, phenomenological research approach will be utilized.

A phenomenological study examines the life experiences of several individuals based on a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Through this research approach, the focus is on describing what all participants had in common as it relates to a specific phenomenon. This type of approach begins with identifying a phenomenon; data are collected from people who have experienced the phenomenon, and then a description of the essence of the experience is developed for all of the individuals (Creswell, 2007). The description includes the "what" and "how" they had experienced the phenomenon.

There are two approaches to phenomenology, which includes hermeneutic phenomenology and transcendental or psychological phenomenology. In hermeneutic phenomenology, the focus is toward lived experiences and interpreting the "texts" of life (Creswell, 2007). This type of approach reflects on essential themes, involves a description of the phenomenon, and includes an interpretation of the meaning of the lived

experiences. However, transcendental or psychological phenomenology is less focused on interpretations and more focused on the descriptions of the participants' experiences. This approach also focuses on *bracketing*, i.e., the investigator puts aside his/her personal experiences. In other words, transcendental phenomenology consists of identifying a phenomenon, bracketing out one's experiences, and collecting data from several individuals who have experienced the phenomena. The researcher analyzes the information gathered and takes statements and quotes to combine into themes. The researcher then develops a *textual description* of the experiences (what participants experienced), with the *structural description* of the experiences (how participants experienced), to then combines textual and structural descriptions in order to convey the overall *essence* of the experience (Creswell, 2007).

**Measures.** Two instruments were utilized throughout this study. The first measure was a questionnaire used to elicit demographic information from the participants (Appendix D). The second instrument was a semi-structured interview, designed by the researcher and researcher's dissertation committee, "The 'Coming Out' Process and School Support Systems- Interview Protocol" (Appendix E). This interview was the primary source of data collection. The interview consisted of several broad, open-ended questions. Clarifying probes were utilized as needed to gain additional information or provide clarification.

### **Procedures**

Consent forms , which were provided at the presentation, explained the purpose of the research, as well as the procedures, benefits, and any potential liabilities inherent in participating; this was accomplished in an up to 2-hours audiotaped interview with a

follow up for a validity check of responses, which did not last more than an hour. Initially, the audiotapes were used for assistance in the interview and for information gathering. The informed consent forms included a statement that participants could withdraw from the study at any time. The consent form also contained a statement regarding confidentiality. Consent was obtained for audiotaping.

Interested participants contacted the interviewer by telephone or email. During that initial telephone conversation, the interviewer utilized a screening script (Appendix C) to determine the participants' eligibility. Based on the participants' responses, the interviewer discontinued contact with the interested participant or continued with the process by explaining the procedures, benefits and any potential liabilities of participating in the study. Participants were given one day to decide whether or not to participate. If the participant agreed to the terms set forth, the interviewer scheduled a mutually agreed upon date and time to meet at a public location. Consent forms were signed in person explaining the purpose of the study at the first meeting with the participant.

The interviews were completed in person. The interview began with a brief introduction, as per the script provided in Appendix E. The participants were told the interview would be audiotaped and responses would be transcribed for further examination. The participants were reminded that the interview process would take up to 2 hours with a follow up (in-person or via email), and that the interview questions would focus on the participants' understanding of the "coming out" process and support systems in the schools. It was reiterated to each participant that he had the right to decline any questions he did not want to answer or felt uncomfortable answering. Also, the participant was given the authority to stop the interview at any time if he did not wish to

continue. The participant was verbally assured that the information provided would be held in strict confidence. The participant was then asked if he had any further questions before beginning the interview. Any potential questions the participant had were addressed and the interview commenced. The participant was also asked to provide any other information he deemed valuable to the study at the end of the interview.

Participants were given ample time prior to the completion of the in-person interview to ask questions, pose concerns, or add additional information not requested by the interviewer. In addition, as part of the interview debriefing process, participants were asked the following question, "Are you feeling any discomfort or distress as a result of the interview?" If the participant answered in the affirmative, the interviewer asked the participant if assistance might be offered that what would help or would make an immediate difference in the situation or mood. If needed, participants were offered names of possible therapists.

At the completion of the in-person interview there was a question and answer session available to the participants or there was time available if participants had any thoughts to share. These responses were also audiotaped. The participants were thanked for participation and were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire (Appendix D). The obtained information was transcribed, read and re-read numerous times by the investigator. The information was then coded for emerging themes and categories which were noted for further analysis. The participant was asked to schedule a follow-up at a mutually agreed upon date and time after the interview was transcribed. The transcriptions were returned to the participant in the follow up, in person or via email, whichever was convenient to the participant. The follow-up was used to check the

information obtained during the first interview, to clarify information, and to ask additional questions from emerging themes, if necessary. The follow-up interview lasted no longer than 2 hours for each person. Upon request, the participants received a summary of the results after the completion of the study. Anonymity of participants was assured by assigning each interview case with a pseudonym, thus preventing the disclosure of the participants' identities. Audio recording and other data obtained from the interview and reviews of demographic information were placed in a locked cabinet when not in use by the investigator. The audiotapes and data were destroyed after the completion of the study.

The interview protocol consisted of five broad, open-ended questions on the phenomena of "coming out" process, and the challenges of doing so in a school environment. Additionally, the questions will help identify support systems in schools for sexual minority youth. Probes were utilized as needed to gain clarification or gain additional information in an area suggested by the interviewee.

Participants were recruited until saturation was reached. According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), saturation is simply defined as examining a topic through interviews until no new data is emerging.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing the data, then reducing the data into themes through coding and condensing the codes (Creswell, 2007). According to Creswell (2007), data analysis in qualitative research is best described or represented as a data analysis spiral. The primary investigator engages in

the process of analysis by moving in analytical circles versus moving through a fixed linear approach.

Data analysis used was specific to the phenomenological approach. The first loop is data management. At the early stage of analysis, the primary investigator organized the data by transcribing the interviews, removed identifying information and assigned pseudonyms to each case. After the data had been organized, the primary investigator entered the second loop (i.e., reading/memoing loop). At this point, the primary investigator read the transcripts in their entirety several times, while making margin notes and forming initial codes.

The next loop of the data analysis spiral is describing, classifying and interpreting loop. This is the point at which personal experiences, through bracketing and the essence of the phenomenon were described. Then significant phrases or sentences that pertained directly to the experience were identified. These statements were then grouped into meaning units and clustered into themes. Last, the primary investigator developed the textual description (what happened), developed a structural description (how the phenomenon was experienced), and finally developed the “essence” (Creswell, 2007). To achieve validity, the responses were shared with the participants.



## **Chapter 4: Results**

### **Data Sources and Collection**

The interviews and accompanying transcripts that comprise the database for this study were gathered, analyzed, and interpreted over the duration of approximately eleven months. During this time frame, the investigator recruited gay males through various colleges' and universities' Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning on-campus student organizations. A total of 9 individuals volunteered to participate in the study and provided information in regard to the eligibility questions; however, only 7 participants went on to participate in the study and their data were included for analysis. Of the individuals who answered the eligibility questions and met the study eligibility criteria, two were not able to meet the researcher to complete the interview in person.

The 7 participants in this investigation agreed to complete a demographic information questionnaire and engage in a semi-structured interview with the primary investigator. All seven of the interviews were completed in person in a mutually agreed upon location which included coffee shops, mall food court, and sitting area of a seven-eleven. The investigator spent time prior to the interviews establishing rapport and answering any questions that the participants had before they began the study procedures. The investigator also engaged in discussions about his personal interests and motivations in conducting research on the "coming out" process. The participants responded positively to all interactions with the investigator. The participants expressed the notion that they appreciated someone wanting to hear about their stories with the hope of helping other individuals who have gone or are going through the "coming out" process.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Data analysis in qualitative research consists of organizing the data, then reducing the data into themes through coding (Creswell, 2007). As a result, the phenomenological approach of qualitative research involves a framework of “loops”, which includes organizing the transcribed interviews (data management), reading transcripts several times and making notes of initial codes (reading/memoing), identifying significant phrases or sentences about the experience to be grouped into themes (describing, classifying, and interpreting), and last describing what happened (textual description) and how the phenomenon was experienced (structural description) (Creswell, 2007).

The interpretation of the interview content in terms of the overall themes that each interview contributed was an ongoing process throughout the entire eleven-month data collection period and beyond. The investigator re-read the transcripts and reviewed his process notes (content in the journal entries relating to the evolving themes) on a frequent basis in order to identify the dominant themes inherent in the participants’ stories. The themes the investigator identified through journaling were regarded as the most salient, capturing the essence or nature of the transcript. After roughly the fifth interview, the investigator moved from reflecting on the general sense of the interviews to identifying specific categories and their connections to other categories that surfaced across transcripts. The investigator then sought to group the illustrative examples of the participants’ statements as they corresponded with the identified categories. The identified categories were discussed with the primary investigator’s dissertation chairperson in order to assist with developing more specific themes. In order to reduce bias and achieve validity, the responses and transcripts were shared with the participants.

Participants were given an opportunity to clarify, pose questions or concerns, provide additional information, and check for accuracy.

In addressing saturation, this investigator made a list of initial emerging themes after the fifth interview. Two additional interviews were conducted, transcribed and analyzed. The information obtained from the additional interviews was included and compared with the initial themes, but did not yield additional themes. Therefore, saturation was met at this point.

## **Findings**

**Discussion of findings.** The research findings were divided into two separate sections: a) demographic findings and b) description of findings in regard to the qualitative interview/research questions. The first section describes demographic areas (information derived from the demographic questionnaire) that are pertinent to the gay male college/university student who participated in the study. The second section provides descriptive summaries of participants' responses to the research question in regard to the participants' understanding of the "coming out" process, their experience of "coming out" for the first time and their experience of "coming out" for the first time in school (e.g., challenges, supports, and ideas for support systems), life after self-disclosing and the reasons for self-disclosing, and any additional information related to the "coming out" process.

### **Demographic findings.**

**Descriptions of participants.** The participants of this study were 7 gay male college/university students who disclosed a homosexual orientation to others during middle school or high school. A description of the participants in this study is presented

in Table 1. The age range of participants was between ages 18-21; with 14.3% age 18 (n=1); 28.6% age 19 (n=2); 28.6% age 20 (n=2), and 28.6% age 21 (n=2). When surveyed about ethnicity, three different ethnic groups were represented: Caucasian/White 28.6% (n=2); Latino/Hispanic 28.6% (n=2), and African American/Black 42.9% (n=3). In regard to religious affiliation, participants identified as Christian 42.9% (n=3); Agnostic 14.3% (n=1); Believer 14.3% (n=1), and Roman Catholic 28.6% (n=2).

Most of the participants described the geographical region of their school when they first “came out” as being in the Northeastern part of the United States 85.7% (n=6); the Southwestern part of the United States was represented 14.3% (n=1). Participants described the city/town/place in which their schools were located when they first “came out” as Rural 14.3% (n=1); Suburban 57.1% (n=4), and Urban 28.6% (n=2). The majority of the participants described the political climate of their school when they first “came out” as Liberal 71.4% (n=5); Conservative 14.3% (n=1), and Other 14.3% (n=1). Socioeconomic status (SES) of the students in the participants’ schools when they first “came out” were Middle-Low SES (\$31,000-\$45,000) 28% (n=2); Middle-Middle SES (\$46,000-\$85,000) 57% (n=4), and Middle-High SES (\$86,000-\$100,000) 14% (n=1).

In regard to support systems available in schools, all of the participants reported not having a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) available in their middle schools. 100% (N=7). Additionally, the majority of the participants reported having a GSA available in their high schools, 71.4% (n=5), and a couple of participants reported not having a GSA in their high schools 28.6% (n=2).

Table 1

*Descriptions of Participants (N=7)*

Description	Group	n	Percent
Age	18	1	14.3
	19	2	28.6
	20	2	28.6
	21	2	28.6
Ethnicity	Caucasian/White	2	28.6
	Latino/Hispanic	2	28.6
	African American/Black	3	42.9
Religious Affiliation	Christian	3	42.9
	Agnostic	1	14.3
	Believer	1	14.3
	Roman Catholic	2	28.6
Geographical Region	Northeastern	6	85.7
	Southwestern	1	14.3
Location of School	Rural	1	14.3
	Suburban	4	57.1
	Urban	2	28.6
Political Climate	Liberal	5	71.4
	Conservative	1	14.3
	Other	1	14.3
Socioeconomic Status	Middle-Low	2	28.6
	Middle-Middle	4	57.1
	Middle-High	1	14.3
GSA Middle School	No	7	100
GSA High School	Yes	5	71.4
	No	2	28.6

**Descriptive findings.** The questions from the semi-structured interview included questions in regard to the participants' understanding of the "coming out" process, their experience of "coming out" for the first time and their experience of "coming out" for the

first time in school (e.g., challenges, supports, and ideas for support systems), life after self-disclosing and the reasons for self-disclosing, and any additional information related to the “coming out” process. The participants were assigned pseudonyms, which are used throughout this document to protect the participants’ identities and to ensure anonymity (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Participant Pseudonym and Demographics*

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Religious Affiliation	Geographical Region	Political Climate	Socioeconomic Status
Kevin	21	African American	Christian	Northeastern	Liberal	Middle-Middle
Evan	20	African American	Christian	Northeastern	Liberal	Middle-Low
Ron	19	Caucasian/White	Agnostic	Northeastern	Liberal	Middle-High
Vinny	20	African American	Christian	Southwestern	Conservative	Middle-Middle
Xavier	21	Caucasian	Roman Catholic	Northeastern	Liberal	Middle-Middle
Russell	18	Latino/Hispanic	Roman Catholic	Northeastern	Other	Middle-Low
Roberto	19	Latino/Hispanic	Believer	Northeastern	Liberal	Middle-Middle

The following are the participants’ responses:

**Ron**

**Question 1:** Tell me your understanding of the “coming out” process.

**Response:** so the coming out process.... Would be... coming out to yourself so that is the realization... the acceptance and then... majority of it is coming out to others... friends... family... and then eventually it being public... completely public, like known to those who don’t even know you.

**Question 2:** Tell me about when you came out for the first time.

**Response:** very first time I came out to my best friend... and I identified as bisexual although I knew that was incorrect... I was in seventh grade.... I was just hanging out at her house... and I thought the guy in the Lady Gaga Poker Face... was really really hot so I decided to tell her that... it's one of the backup dancers and... that was my first time ever admitting it to someone else.

**Follow Up Question:** So what were some things that were, like... what was going through your mind... um when you... when you were deciding to come out to your best friend?

**Response:** yes... my friend is Brittney who's a girl... um... I was just nervous to say it... because it... there was always a sense of... not knowing how someone can react; you can't guarantee someone's reaction whatsoever... I was completely confident that she would... it wouldn't be a problem with her.... And I had predicted that she would run around the house like screaming happily... and that was true, but I still did experience, like the anxiety.... the discomfort because there was just a fear... of it becoming a little more real.

**Follow Up Question:** You mentioned that that wasn't really your sexual orientation, so what are the reasons behind saying you were bisexual versus, kind of I guess, flat out saying you were gay?

**Response:** it was just about softening the blow completely... also at the time.... I had dated two girls beforehand... never kissed them... not even a day, not even once... but... it was um at the time I think I still didn't even... I wasn't even ready to date a boy... so... I wasn't completely developed, like in that regard... so.... The idea that I still could potentially, and I was aware of that... to the idea that I could potentially still like girls was in my head, but... like thinking back on it,.. like I was always... always knew that I would eventually... just be... just identify as gay.

**Follow Up Question:** You said you felt, like by saying you were bisexual you would soften the blow.... Who were softening the blow to? To yourself as an individual, or for those that you were disclosing to?

**Response:** At the time I won't say I totally knew that I would later identify as gay, but... it, it did feel like I wasn't approaching... I wasn't really accepting it for everything it was by saying I was bisexual because it felt like I could have eventually retreat if I wanted to, if there was a negative consequence; like say, I did come out to someone and they didn't like it... well saying I still liked girls... it meant that like at that time I felt me being.... It was just a safety net like... oh well it doesn't matter, like I would probably never date a boy anyway; I could come up with these excuses that would make it easier for them to understand if I felt like I had to control their reaction.

**Follow Up Question:** So after you came out... um and I... and it sounds to me that you were very supported... you were supportive... or you were supported... and um... in the decision of coming out and disclosing to your um best friend... how did that feel afterwards?

**Response:** (laughs)... She was.... She's funny because she did like celebrate it so much... I just... copied that feeling exactly... I felt very proud of myself... I was really happy to be saying it... I was like ready throw off like the discomfort and the anxiety and just never go back so that actually.... I was funny... I, when I first came out... I would...I did it slowly, but I started with planning who I would tell next and in each succession because I was looking for that same like "Oh my God!" like celebration... that these girls would all be so happy hear it and they all knew it was true anyway... so... it was such a rush always and it was... it always made me feel so good that I like actively sought it out.

**Follow Up Question:** Was there any... um... was there anybody that you told that had a different reaction than what you expected?

**Response:** There was only one person. Everyone was just like "who hoo"...; everybody celebrated it... cuz... I mean it was so obvious... um... the only person that I had like a bad reaction with and it wasn't even that bad in my opinion... it was my cousin Elizabeth... and her and I had been close when we were younger, but just family issues had kind of separated us, but we still were friends and when I just casually mentioned it cuz at that point that's how I was just doing it... um.. She just said "Well no, you're not because I don't believe that's true. I don't believe that people can be gay"... And I was hurt momentarily and then... not even much long after that her tuned changed and... she was completely fine

**Follow Up Question:** Tell me about the process when you disclosed to your family.

**Response:** Ok; so... I was always happy and more than excited to come out to friends and everything like that... um... I eventually had come out to everyone I cared about besides my family, so then I was approaching... then I was actually thinking about coming out to my brother, who came first and I was just nervous.. I... it's it was always just weird. I wish it was easier to explain, like the feeling, because, but I was very fortunate in knowing I always knew that, like... coming out to anyone, friends and family wouldn't be bad.... I didn't think that I was always going to suffer consequences, but admitting it to them was just uncomfortable. It's like there... it's kind of like a panicky sensation... I would get like that... um... frog in your throat feeling... um, it was just hard to spit out and... I just think it was nerves, just nervous to do it... What I... like tried... like but I tried to remember why I was nervous; it was... not because I felt they were going to hate, not love me, shame me, want to try to change it; it was really just about.... I think it was because they all knew and that admitting it just seemed like this stepping stone that would be so much easier to just skip over, but I knew I had to do it so I just did it anyway.



**Follow Up Question:** So how did that feel afterwards?

**Response:** It was great... we had this like... we had hours of conversation just about it... about me, what it means to be a member of the community.... my brother is very intellectual, very loving...um...it was just... it was the same thing, you know... He.. He didn't parade around like a lot of my friends did or anything, but his level of interest in it, happiness for me, pride...um... cuz he was very proud of me at the time, like was very similar to that same.... Very, extremely positive reaction that like triggered me to be very, very happy about coming out.

**Follow Up Question:** Tell me when you disclosed to your parents.

**Response:** That was like twelve-thirteen, but now I'm like fourteen, going on fifteen.... Um and I just lied to them [parents] because I wasn't ready and I wasn't entirely sure myself, so my mom just was just like... she just like sat down was like "Ok, let's have this conversation." I was like, "I don't know what you're talking about"... and she goes, "the elephant in the room".... And I was like "What elephant?".... and she says, "The gay elephant"... and I was like "oh yeah".... And I didn't... I was just like "Yeah, I'm gay".... And at that time I just like admitted defeat and I was like, Oh why didn't I do this earlier anyway?... and I... maybe I would've waited longer if she hadn't brought it up, but.... Um nervous at the time... that same... like panicky feeling, frog in the throat, hard to say it... um... but I always knew that it was gonna be just fine, and I wasn't too... I wasn't scared in my head; just my body was like rough about it...

**Follow Up Question:** How did you feel afterwards?

**Response:** My mom had been like, "Oh please we knew this for years now"...um so she just was like you know, "We love you; nothing is really changed." She was... I gave her the distinction that I wasn't dealing with any... gender issues I had, but I... but I was completely aware of my sexual orientation as gay and, like that it annoyed me at the time because she was so happy that I wasn't gonna start dressing like a girl. That was a concern of hers and I remember just kinda feeling like that was shitty of her, but I mean it wasn't an issue on my part; that's why I just took it as a win and you know.

**Follow Up Question:** Your dad would make kind of derogatory uhm comments toward the gay community. So when he did that, how did it make you feel when he would make those comments? Because at that point, you still hadn't come out.

**Response:** I just felt like he was ignorant. I never took it much as a personal insult. I didn't believe him when he said these things, the derogatory things about the gay community. It was just more uh, that I felt bad for him. I wanted to be able to help him, but at the same time, it did keep me a little bit in the closet more than I wanted it to. Just because I felt like he had to have some learning to do; he had some warming up to do to the idea. Uhm, in general, I would say that the way that he was, did keep me in the closet longer and that it would just frustrate me at the time, but it didn't go anyway in the name of making me doubt myself or making me believe what he was saying. I always knew that he was wrong.

**Follow Up Question:** So what were some of the comments, not comments, excuse me, some of the questions that he asked you, if you remember?

**Response:** I'm pretty sure he, like my mom, just wanted to make a distinction between sexual orientation and gender expression because both of them had feared that they were inseparable in that. And of course, they didn't even know those terms at the time. But that had to hear. But my dad had asked me, "You know, does this mean you're going to wear makeup? Does this mean you're going to dress like a girl? You're going to buy dresses and stuff like that?" And I was able to just tell him no; it has nothing to do with that. They're completely different things.

**Question 3:** Can you talk to me about your first time "coming out" in school?

**Response:** I kept a journal of who I told. Who I wanted to tell next. Because in honest... I swear, like you can take it back to, like... taking a drug for a little bit... (laughs)... and you're like usually like the response was so great and I felt so energized and happy... that I wanted to keep doing it. I mean it wasn't always pleasant just because I knew that every time I came out, like it was taking one step closer to telling my parents and my family. And that was always very different than telling my friends just because I knew all my friends would be fine.... But um... so there was a little bit... I mean almost something like... so when I say I was always happy, like in the moment it's true, but like there was something in the back of my head that did... that was a little bit uncomfortable just because I knew that eventually I'd have to approach my parents and my brother about it.

**Follow Up Question:** Tell me the first time you came out in school.

**Response:** it was choir class so everybody was fine and dandy and basically. like I felt like I had been acting out of the closet, just not admitting it for a while at that point and... there was one girl and I, just like, I pulled her aside and I told her and then... and... then it was... it was like a slow, gradual process that the whole school became aware that I was admitting it, but there wasn't like... (pause)... ok so then at this point I'll tell you that... This was freshmen year of high school... I didn't come out to any... I only came out to a few people...um... in middle school so.... It was like my best friend and a handful of people, but by the time I did enter freshmen year of high school, a lot of people did know, but tech-...it wasn't...but I wasn't comfortable them telling other people at that point, so they had to keep it their secret

**Follow Up Question:** What was your experience like... in middle school when you started telling those select few?

**Response:** it was... at that time I was more concerned with the privacy than I ever was in high school... Um so at that time I was.... concerned if they would talk... if um... just because I didn't want them to... I wasn't ready for everyone else to know... and then once... again still going back to this idea if everybody else knows will my parents find out?

**Follow Up Question:** Ok, so you had a concern that you wanted to tell some people, but you also wanted to limit the amount of people that knew because you were in fear that your parents would find out?

**Response:** And even though I was... I was thirteen and when I think back on it I don't... I know I didn't have, like all my thoughts in order so at the time even I'll admit that... I wasn't completely... sure and where my whole sexual orientation so... I was reluctant to tell too many people just because I knew that since I wasn't ready to tell everyone, I didn't have it all together at the time.

**Follow Up Question:** Once people found out... were there any challenges?

**Response:** No... I was not picked on um... I was just uncomfortable a lot of the time in middle school and... I wasn't picked on when I came out at all... if anything I may have been targeted when I wasn't out just because everyone knew... I wasn't hiding it very well and I wasn't admitting it and... I just...just described like being picked on... you would really be like... um... side comments about me not being like much of a boy or.. me being weak um... I... just kinda like... it wasn't even... it wasn't even bad; one time I can remember I was called up to do a math problem on the board with another girl and it was boys versus girls and Daniel said "It supposed to be boys versus girls" like not "two girls"... and at that time you know, whatever, it hurt, but I was done with it... it didn't really even bother me.

**Follow Up Question:** Okay, uhm, oh, okay. So how did you deal with, when people would make comments about you or say you're not much of a boy or you were weak? You had mentioned that uhm, that that was kind of one of the things that would happen in high school.

**Response:** Uhm, I don't- it was, I was, it would always roll off my shoulder just because I didn't think that I, I wasn't hurt by the fact that they were insulting my sexual orientation or my personality or my, hell even , gender expression. Like, just because at that time I already understood that these things were pretty inseparable from my identity and I was already proud of them. So dealing with it wasn't difficult. For the most part I would call people out if they said anything to my face or if they said anything under their breath. I would usually ask them what they said and I would - and I've always just been that way. Just because I was always under the impression that they were the...people doing something wrong. I didn't have anything to be ashamed of. So if I was, if people that did say things about me or even other people, especially in regard to sexual orientation, then if I was the one to like expose the haters, then they would usually be the ones to get backlash and not me.

**Follow Up Question:** You stated you were uncomfortable a lot of the time in middle school. Can you tell me a little bit more about that or maybe some reasons why you felt uncomfortable a lot of the time in middle school?

**Response:** I felt uncomfortable in middle school because I knew that I wasn't being completely myself. It's not - I didn't really fear what other people ... I didn't fear any sort of like physical harassment or discrimination. I wasn't afraid of

others. But I knew that I wasn't living up to everything I was and who I was, and I wasn't completely happy with my life. And then when I realized that it was probably due to the fact that I wasn't disclosing my sexual orientation, and I wasn't living as openly as I wanted to, that as soon as I did come out, that that feeling would start to go away. And it was true.

**Follow Up Question:** What were some of the supports available to you to support the coming out process?

**Response:** There was um... there's there's always been... a... I knew in high school her title was student assistance counselor; basically the school did my middle school as well as my high school did have like an onsite counselor that worked there... did their thing and you could go to at any time... um throughout the day... so they were available to me.

**Follow Up Question:** Okay, so how did it make you feel being supported by your school?

**Response:** It was great. Jesus, like if I wasn't, I don't think I'd be much the same person as I am, just because I am like pretty happy and I do my thing, and I - I'm trying to put this correctly. Uhm, I definitely think that part of what makes me pretty successful, in my opinion, is my ability to be so confident in myself and carry myself as a whole person, individual, proud of myself, confident. So if I think that if I couldn't carry the fact that I was gay along with me, uhm, as I took new leadership roles and I excelled as like a representative of like my peers and stuff like that, then I don't think I would have been a complete person. I don't think I would have been able to do my job as well.

**Follow Up Question:** Do you have thoughts about how to support students who do decide to come out in schools?

**Response:** Ok so... I think that one- counselors probably, not like enough for any school... outside, not even just like for LGBTQ issues, but um... I would say that it needs to be widely known that the counselor is there for issues regarding sexual orientation and gender identity... thinking back like there was never... I never really knew that I could go to my counselor for that reason in middle school... Like... I just... and I maybe I didn't think about it hard enough, but there was never any like visibility on their, on the school's end, that like they would receive um... someone struggling with LGBT... like sexual orientation, gender identity issues... like that wasn't an advertised or well known... there's... I feel knowing my school now in retrospect that like if I did go... for those reasons they would have received me, but they weren't reaching out to the student body in that regard.

**Follow Up Question:** So you think that if there was a GSA in middle school the climate would've been more welcoming, um... just like you think your high school was?

**Response:** mm... yes it was established and I even knew going into my high school that it was there and I can only so... I can only imagine then that if I was a

sixth grader moving from my elementary school into my middle school, I probably would have known that there was a GSA.... And there is a whole really good chance that I would have been a member and it would've addressed these issues and come out even earlier if there was such a GSA.

**Follow Up Question:** why do you think GSAs are important or necessary in the schools?

**Response:** GSAs are incredibly important because they capture the whole spectrum of people as they begin to develop and disclose their sexual orientation, because you have plenty of people that definitely need help on the spot. They need a safe space; they need somewhere to go; they need support so that they can begin to move on in their journey. So it's good for people that actually need help. They need attention. But I think that it goes... just as well, it allows ... it creates a different atmosphere; it just develops a culture in a school that allows people to come out if they don't need help because I think that sometimes it can be a perception that the GSA is only for the people there that, like, have to hide their sexuality or uhm, maybe like don't have a lot of friends and can only find friends within like this commonality of sexual orientation. But really, I think that what it does so much more is allow people that - to just choose their own path without the fear of being discriminated upon because there is somewhere there is a support system somewhere; there is a safety net.

**Follow Up Question:** What are some of your thoughts of additional supports systems either both at middle school and high school level?

**Response:** It's probably hard to kind of like classify or qualify whatever, but there in my high school there was like a musical and there were so many more art programs where I felt like that's where... the community tended to flourish and like get.... be open so and there were none of those in my middle school... Actually there....In even in choir class like... I don't know... so I, I don't... so I think that there... there should be more, there should be as much like groups awareness and visibility as possible, but I don't really know what else you can do other than like a GSA... um... a school counselor... .um I do know that at Rider we have this really awesome ally program... and um, but this is higher ed., of course, but it in there's just anybody that undergoes training gets a sticker that says... it's rainbow and it says "ally program member"... And I can only imagine that if they implemented such a system in middle school and high school if you had this sticker on teacher's doors saying like... just admitting that they were an ally to the LGBT community... that would go a really long way.

**Follow Up Question:** You were aware of your sexual orientation during middle school?

**Response:** I was aware that I liked boys... I was dating girls and... had not any sexual attraction to them, but I... it wasn't clear so until it was clear which... but I was.. but I did come out to a few people and... that's still part of this why I said I was bisexual, and... why I... I didn't come out to a lot of people because I didn't feel ready.

**Follow Up Question:** And then you said you felt like by saying you were bisexual, you would soften the blow.... Who were softening the blow to? To yourself as an individual or for those that you were disclosing to?

**Response:** I was absolutely, was doing to both like it would be my best friend and me because the more I like held off on it because and... at the time I won't say I totally knew that I would later identify as gay, but... it, it did feel like I wasn't approaching... I wasn't really accepting it for everything it was by saying I was bisexual because it felt like I could have eventually retreat if I wanted to, if there was a negative consequence, like say, I did come out to someone and they didn't like it... well saying I still liked girls.. It meant that like at that time I felt me being.... It was just a safety net like... oh well it doesn't matter like I would probably never date a boy anyway; I could come up with these excuses that would make it easier for them to understand if I felt like I had to control their reaction.

**Question 4:** After you came out the first time in school, how was life for you?

**Response:** It was better... I was just.... Now I was into it... now I was like... it wasn't living the lifestyle until I came out and now that I was living it... like it just felt a lot more like myself.. I felt like I was being more honest... I was happier... like I'm looking at guys, like doing my thing... just even as something as simple as, like being able to talk to your friends about, like the people you find attractive and oh this and that.... Like those are just small things, but... that are like really like a part of life..., you know what I mean? Being able to be open and just like.

**Follow Up Question:** So you felt like you weren't yourself before coming out? Like you couldn't be yourself?

**Response:** I think that I wasn't being myself, but I didn't even know I wasn't being myself... I don't think I was going through this... dark time of not being myself and feeling like I was living a lie because I was very young and I'll admit.. I mean twelve; thirteen really was when I realized that I was... (pause).. bisexual, gay, that I liked men, but it was just something about it was always so, like incomplete... that I knew that I was still just figuring it out so I... and I was willing to take the time to just like wait and figure it out and let things like let the process go so... when I know now that when I did come out, like life did improve, but beforehand I didn't know that it was bad.... Does that make sense?

**Follow Up Question:** So how did you know you were ready to tell others and your parents about your sexual orientation?

**Response:** I was ready to tell them because I knew that it was like inseparable from my identity and that it was something that was eventually going to have to come out anyway, and I was ready because I knew I didn't fear their reaction as much as I... versus what I wanted to tell them. In fact I wanted to tell them.

**Question 5:** So why did you decide to come out?

**Response:** Instinctually I always knew it's what I had to do, and what I wanted to do... I knew.... With confidence I can tell you I never even like rationalized it... It was just something that... I had to do and I wanted to do.

**Question 6:** What else has been important to you during the coming out process that we haven't um talked about or discussed?

**Response:** Fear of... There's a fear of rejection from others, losing friends... um there was the fear of increased targeting for bullying...um... and I.. I was... the whole point of that was... those fears didn't turn out, so I wanted other people to know that I... cuz I assumed they were feeling the same thing so... I wanted to tell them, like, these are your fears; I'm sure you're reading this and you know, but listen when I just did it... it actually none of those things happened and then great things happened.

**Follow Up Question:** How do you think... um your experience would have been different had you gotten more negative reactions versus what you expressed was more positive reactions?

**Response:** I would've been less likely to come out to more people; I probably would have held onto the idea of trying to control the... Information really, cuz I even in during that time of freshmen year before it was public like I knew where it was and, and I was concerned to who it was... I can imagine holding onto that feeling and then eventually when it was getting bigger I remember getting, like afraid that it was like almost like a bubble was going to pop um, and that was that was...there was anxiety associated with that so... if I had been receiving more negative reactions from people, I can imagine me still wanting to hold onto that control for a lot longer, and that would have been really hard and painful and traumatic.

**Follow Up Question:** And so you say that you had a lot of fears and anxieties. How did you cope... how did you cope with that?

**Response:** I didn't have a lot of them... they were only really... maybe I ignored them... (laughs)... like it was.... At any time I felt them I feel like I just addressed it and that's just kinda my personality like... um, what I felt like maybe I had told someone who was gonna to tell people and I wasn't ready for it to be public I would go right to that person, and I would remind them that this is private or, you know, I... that's kinda of how I would handle it.. I would really do like work to make sure everything was, I had control over the situation and... but then at some point I was just like I don't need to do this anymore.

### **Roberto**

**Question 1:** Tell me your understanding of the coming out process.

**Response:** It's something pointless. Like, you really don't need to say to the world that we're gay or whatever be the case. I mean, straight people don't do it, so...

**Question 2:** So, tell me about the first time you came out?

**Response:** (laughs). It was, I think 8th grade and it was to one of my close friends at the time. Except I didn't really say I was gay, I said I was bi. Things change, and- Uh, it was through Facebook because I was a little punk, and, uh, she was cool with it. We didn't really talk about it in person.

**Follow Up Question:** Ok, And so why did you feel like it was important to come out as bisexual versus now, that you would identify as gay? Why did you say you were bisexual first?

**Response:** I thought I was bi. Like, you know, uh, personal. I watched straight porn, so I was just like, oh, you know, I watch straight porn, I watch gay porn. Eh, so um, and...it's not more ... It's not really like it was easier at the time because my friend is bi and he came out and said his mom is ... and was the question why I came out to her?

**Follow Up Question:** What were some thoughts and how were you feeling before you disclosed to your friend?

**Response:** I kind of felt it was unfair because she would tell me things, and I was like there. I was that person that really wouldn't share, and you know, not really feeling alone, but feeling ... I guess like it was more not being able to share.

**Follow Up Question:** So how did you feel and what were your thoughts after you disclosed to your friend?

**Response:** Uh, nervous because I didn't know how she'd react or if she would tell anyone.

**Question 3:** Okay, so tell me about the first time you came out in school?

**Response:** In school, let's see. Oh, this was probably 8th grade again, except it was a different friend and still bi, and this was in, like, I guess, lunch time because in 8th grade they allowed us to go outside, so I don't want to say it was recess, but yeah. Uh, no. The friend that I told, we were talking and then another friend was there, and I was just like, oh yeah ... words, and she was just like, "What, what?" But it wasn't like an angry what; it was more of a happy, jump around, oh my god, you're this; except she thankfully didn't say that.

**Follow Up Question:** How did you feel before ... before, like you say, you know, self-disclosing to that individual?

**Response:** Uh, kind of, again, the whole sharing thing because she was the only person that would tell me things, and I wouldn't be able to tell her.

**Follow Up Question:** What were some challenges you faced when you came out in school for the first time?

**Response:** Oh, so this is like more down the line ... I would say 11th grade to senior year. Uh, I was an idiot, and you know the color crimson? I wanted to dye my hair that color. It didn't work out, and it was like a bloody ... not a bloody red, um, a very like your lights. That type of a red on my hair, so you know, automatically people were like, oh gay, gay, gay. So, some people that I would talk to, but they didn't know, they, you know, evaded me, and I was fine with it because I always had the mentality, if you weren't cool with it, then go somewhere. No one really came up to me ... Oh, well there was this one time that I was walking and, in the hall and this underclassmen was just like f-word.



**Follow Up Question:** Were there any other challenges?

**Response:** Alright. Uh, with my hair still being red, my grandfather, which I respect dearly ... like, yeah. He kind of said I wouldn't be able to enter his house without dying my hair back black, and yeah ... I mean, imagine that. Uh, my parents kind of felt like ... What's the term? Not disgusted, but they didn't really want to be seen with me outside.

**Follow Up Question:** And so now you have the conversation with your mom, and you disclose, and so what ... How do you feel afterwards? Or ... and what happened afterwards?

**Response:** Uh, she said that she accepted me for whatever it was. She also said that she loved me and my sister and she would never, not love us for whatever we did or were. Uh-

**Follow Up Question:** Um, what were some of the supports available to you when you came out for the first time in school?

**Response:** Uh, by junior year we had a gay straight alliance, so that was like a good one. There was also my counselor, which was in charge of gay straight alliance. Anyone could go up to her and talk to her about it. My friends were cool with it, yeah.

**Follow Up Question:** Do you have some thoughts about how to support, uh, students who decide to come out for the first time in school?

**Response:** Don't make them feel like they're different. Accept, uh, embrace them like any other person. Like, when someone says, oh, "I'm gay", just be like, yeah, and, it's cool. The sky's blue, grass is green.

**Follow Up Question:** Any other support systems you may think would be beneficial for those that do decide to come out in school?

**Response:** I mean if they had, like assemblies at schools, talking about like sexuality, even though it's a very taboo topic ... kind of would help.

**Question 4:** Okay, so after you came out for the first time in school, how was life for you?

**Response:** I didn't have to hide what I was feeling, um, I didn't care anymore. Anyone could ... Anyone ... I don't care who knows. Um, it was a relief of some sort, yeah. That's very ... well-

**Question 5:** Why did you decide to come out?

**Response:** Because I stopped caring. I ... Well, by high school level I stopped caring what people thought.

**Question 6:** Um, what else has been important to you during the coming out process that we haven't discussed?

**Response:** Loving someone in yourself ... I don't know, pride.

**Russell**

**Question 1:** so tell me your understanding of the coming out process.

**Response:** Um, tends to be kind of long, um, usually a lot of inner dilemma with coming to terms with who you are. Um, personally I had a struggle with defining gay, like what it meant to me. Usually a bigger stress is your parents, uh, your friends are, come easier, but some people find it a lot harder.

**Question 2:** So tell me about, um, the first time you came out?

**Response:** Uh, it was my sophomore year of high school, I believe. Uh, I had recently started seeing someone and I felt the need to ... I guess he gave me the push to like come out. He wanted me to be open about it. I don't know, it's hard dating someone in the closet and I felt bad, so I kinda did it for him, but in the long run it benefited me so. Uh, I came out via Facebook, it's kind of weird, but I came out that way and then confirmed it when people like asked me in person. So yeah.

**Follow Up Question:** Who? Did you, so you said that you came out um, via Facebook, but to whom?

**Response:** Um, my friends. I didn't have any of my family members on Facebook, it was only ... basically, my whole entire like class. It's mostly, you're friends, like with your whole entire class; so my whole class I came out to and there were like extra add-ons from like moving around. So anyone I had on Facebook, which was quite a lot.

**Follow Up Question:** So how were you feeling or what were your thoughts before coming out?

**Response:** I questioned it, like a lot, I don't know, I felt maybe I wasn't gay. (laughs) I don't know. I think I thought a lot about just changing my orientation, just for the mere fact of like, saving embarrassment or like, bullying or whatever comes with it. I don't know, so, I had a lot of dilemma before pressing the confirm button when dating someone, so ...

**Follow Up Question:** And how about, how did you feel, before?

**Response:** Nervous. I was scared of judgment, I was like, I don't know; it was my sophomore year; we're all like innocent and vulnerable so I was scared of being like, I don't know, unaccepted by everyone else.

**Follow Up Question:** And so after you came out to everybody what were your thoughts and feelings afterwards?

**Response:** It was kind of empowering. Like I felt like I wasn't hiding any part of myself anymore. Mm, still nervous, but like it gradually and like progressively got better.

**Follow Up Question:** So, um, you mentioned something that was interesting, that when you first came out, you came out, um, bi, as bi-sexual first and then later on went to identifying as just strictly gay. Um, tell me a little bit about that process or

like what was going on, or why did you decide to go, identify as bi-sexual, before you ended up identifying as gay?

**Response:** Um, I feel like when any gay male thinks about it, I, I don't know, most gay males take that bi-sexual step where lesbians do too, but I think it's a transitional step just cause you don't want to fully dive into the water. You rather like dip your toes, see how everyone is feeling, and ... in some cases if you get like backlash or hate for being gay or bi-sexual, you could always take that step back and be like it was a mistake, like it was a phase. I didn't; when I said bi-sexual I was just confused, and it's easy to go back; it's harder to from gay to straight again.

**Follow Up Question:** Did you ever, um, like have that thought in the back of your, um, mind that if I disclose to somebody, like a friend, that you would lose them?

**Response:** Two, about maybe only two of my friends. The rest ironically I had the feeling or, uh, we were walking around in circles between a lot of our friend group about being lesbian and gay and a lot of my friends now are, ironically, gay and lesbian. But there was two in particular that I know are straight and I was inching towards like baby steps towards telling them, and I felt like there was a certain point where I got like blocked by a wall and I got really nervous to tell them so I didn't right away (laughs).

**Follow Up Question:** So then when you told them what ended up happening afterwards?

**Response:** Oh they accepted me like. It was a shock ... very ... I don't know. I had told them of the incident where I felt like they blocked me, and they felt horrible for making me feel like slightly uncomfortable because I had known them for like a vast majority of my life, so they were definitely like remorseful for making me feel a slight un-comfort, in-comfort, so ...

**Follow Up Question:** What was it that caused them or made you feel like they blocked the opportunity for you to disclose?

**Response:** I made a comment on how it was weird that girls could call other girls, like, pretty without being a lesbian. You know you hear girls make the comment all the time "Oh, that girl's pretty," and you don't automatically think, like, do you, are you attracted to her. No, you just assume like, okay, you can accept that.

But I thought it was weird that if a male were to say about another male like, "That guy's a good looking fella," that they would automatically be looked differently as when a girl said it. So I made that comment and then I had a, um, another comment dealing with another male and saying like "Oh, like, he's a good looking guy," and one particular friend was, like, weirded out by that and she was questioning like, "Why would you say that? That's kind of, like, weird."

But, like, later on she felt terrible because that was like the reason why I didn't come out to them that day. Like, 'cause she's not a homophobe at all. Like, she's

completely supportive. She was just caught off-guard, I guess, in the sense, and I don't know. To this day I always, like, tease her about it and she feels terrible, but, it's like, little things like that that people don't realize that they can, like, block the coming out process.

**Question 3:** Talk to me about your first time coming out in school.

**Response:** Um, my fi-, my personal, like my close group of friends knew before I had put it on Facebook, but I guess my first outer experience, like out of my group was within a small, like class setting and it was like a personal like study group and someone had asked, like I saw this on Facebook and they were just curious as to, like the validity of it and I confirmed it. And it was like a shock but it wasn't rude or anything, so.

**Follow Up Question:** And so, when you decided to do that, um, how did you feel beforehand?

**Response:** Heart was beating pretty fast, I don't know. I didn't even view them as, like someone to be afraid of judgment from; I didn't care about them at all really but I don't know. It was still part of me that I had to share with them, so it's pretty nerve racking, like giving yourself up and showing, exposing like another part of your body is kind of scary, so, you never know how people are going to react.

**Follow Up Question:** And how about afterwards, how did you feel?

**Response:** Russell: Again, I felt like, empowered and liberated in a sense; I don't know, it just felt good to get something off my chest like, instead of hiding it, just embracing it.

**Follow Up Question:** Um, what were some challenges you faced coming out in school? Or were there any challenges?

**Response:** Uh, bullying aspect I didn't have a single word, look, or any negative comment made, so that was good. The only challenge I had was within myself 'cause I did not know what gay meant to me. So I started like acting a different way, and dressing differently, and portraying myself to be someone who I wasn't just because I thought that's what I had to do.

**Follow Up Question:** What were some of the supports available to you when you came out for the first time in school?

**Response:** My friends were my biggest supporters because I told them like about a half year earlier with my parents so, they were the only people I really relied on; they were the people I told everything to, biggest fans in a sense, like they stuck it, stuck it with me, throughout everything, when I went through my bi-sexual stage to gay, fully. Um, and I could say that I guess in a sense that, my uh classmates were supportive 'cause they never said anything to knock me down so I felt like I was allowed to be who I was.

**Follow Up Question:** Where there any other supports available to you in school, when you came out?

**Response:** Um, not when I initially came out, cause, I mean I wasn't open about it where my teachers knew in a sense, but when I uh got to the higher grades in my senior year I had especially one teacher who took, um, a particular interest in like protecting me in a sense ... I don't know. She had no like, idea how being gay was in the school, so she was just like very on top of what I was doing, making sure I was okay, but, as I assured her everything was fine, so. It was nice to know there was someone out there who actually cared.

**Follow Up Question:** Were there any groups available?

**Response:** There was uh, oh my God, I'm the president of it, oh Pride Alliance. We actually like ran that group. And it was just to uh ...Not per say for gay people; it was for allies as well, but, um, just to make people aware that there are people in this like in our community not just our school that, um, are gay, straight, bi-sexual, transgender.

**Follow Up Question:** How did you feel having the support systems, you know, like later on with your teacher and then the gay/straight alliance. We'll call it gay/straight alliance, um, how did that make you feel, that your school had those, um, resources available?

**Response:** Um, I would give no credit to my school if I were just like to defend them in any hon-, like way possible. I feel like they're kinda just there; they're just the building that we go into. I give all the credit to like the people who started the organization. The two teachers that dedicated their time to the actual, like alliance and the club and then the individual teacher who, like made me, who, like stuck her neck out to make me feel like welcomed, or like accepted.

**Follow Up Question:** Um, what, do you have any thoughts about, uh, how to support students that do decide to come out? So what are some ideas that you might have of support systems that should be available for students that are coming out, um, for the first time in school?

**Response:** Um, I definitely like the club aspect of it. It was, I don't know, it was very personal for our, for my particular school; like we had the in-school session meetings but, uh, we also had after hours where we would come in and like just dedicate a room, and no one was there so we could sit in a circle and just like express anything that came to mind, and that definitely made me feel like more accepted. So I feel like that was a good support system. I don't know if this is pushing it, but maybe a dedicated counselor in like, who's, like a specialized in gay, straight, like transgender, like that's their study ... maybe like a special counselor for that, 'cause I mean those are a bigger population nowadays so it's not exactly a waste if two students ... a good majority of the school is probably bi-curious at the most to gay or lesbians ... so I feel like maybe they should like dedicate a counselor to just, ...so they are like specialized and they know maybe the exact words to say instead of like sugar coating it.

**Follow Up Question:** Okay. Anything else? So, you said, um, uh, a counselor, um, a group, anything else, any other support systems?

**Response:** I mean your friends, definitely. I mean coming out made me realize who my true friends were. I didn't lose any of them which was the best thing about that, but I know people do lose friends due to coming out and it sucks, but you realize who your true friends are and your true friends are going to help you and support you and make you feel, like accepted.

**Question 4:** Um, so after you came out, um, for the first time in school, how was life for you?

**Response:** Uh, my school life was no different. There was no one ... everyone acted the exact same, which I thought was like amazing. Like to this day, everyone acts the same. No one treats me differently, goes easier on me, like, there is no difference, which is awesome.

**Question 5:** Why did you decide to come out?

**Response:** Uh, I didn't want to hide a part of my life anymore. I felt like if anyone can say how they're feeling, speak their mind, tweet, or Facebook whatever their feeling, like, I should also be given the opportunity to express myself completely, feel like I have a place in my school with who I am, not hiding a part of me.

**Question 6:** What else has been important to you during the coming out process that we have not discussed?

**Response:** My parents eventually played a role in my coming out process, and actually my sister. Um, like about a half year later when they did find out, it was a shock and you can tell there was like a slight discomfort just 'cause it was something new to them, but from day one, like completely accepting. They did everything they could to make me feel like I was still their son cause that was the biggest fear of mine; like I was changing who I was so they didn't have a son anymore, but, from day one they made me feel like I was still the person they had raised and nothing was going to change about that.

**Follow Up Question:** So tell me a little bit more about how you decided to come out to your, your parents and to your sister or to family members.

**Response:** My immediate family, I came up to my mom, I actually dropped a lot of hints; um, I like left a picture of a guy up or I would just like hint at like different things to try to get her like to say the words 'cause I didn't want to, but I would confirm it, but eventually I just, um, one day she asked me if I had a girlfriend, and" I like did that like awkward pause where it was like a "yes but it can't be a yes 'cause it's not a girl", and so I told her that way. And the whole "I love you no matter what thing," she cried, and it was good to tell her and then I had told my dad a week later, uh, he came up to my room about like twelve at night on a school night, and he was just very curious as to why I was on the phone and why I was acting differently. And so I had to like tell him that way 'cause there was clearly something going on and so I told him that way and completely supportive. I think the only, well I know, the only words that came out of his mouth that day," I'm only mad at myself because I wasn't a good enough father for you to come up to me sooner."

**Follow Up Question:** And how did that make you feel that he had said that?

**Response:** Surprising, completely. He's the Spanish father, does the stern Spanish thing and it was weird to see him completely change what I had thought was his, like his moral ethics and how he viewed like gay society or the gay community, and to see him say that was like, it was meaningful and it meant a lot to me that he could say that.

**Follow Up Question:** And, um, so how, how did you, how did you feel beforehand? Like before disclosing to your parents?

**Response:** I was terrified. I thought that they were going to feel like they lost a son. So I tried to hold that off as long as I could, but my mom and I are really close so I felt like I definitely had to tell her sooner rather than later.

**Follow Up Question:** So you told your sister first and then ...?

**Response:** Then mom, then my dad, and we haven't ... actually I told my sister like sort of recently; she's eleven. So, when I came out I think she was probably like eight or whatever. Something around that age. Um, uh, she actually ... we like actually ... we like were slowly introducing the idea of lesbian/gay just so she wasn't overwhelmed because she's younger; we don't want to overwhelm her. But um, I had told my parents to back off just 'cause she's my sister;... she's around me all the time, and like if she's with me enough she's going to know. She's going to know but not know that I'm gay. Like, there's just subtle hints that are dropped or if she sees a boy come around and it's... it's just different and when she, when we did actually, like, ask her about it she did say like "I thought he was but I didn't want to say anything". But like it's cool that someone as young and undeveloped like mind as her can still put together something as me being gay. But she's completely accepting of it; she loves me, I'm her role model, like, nothing has changed; she is still as close to me as ever.

**Follow Up Question:** So how, um, how did you feel after you disclosed to your parents?

**Response:** Scared because there was that awkward point in time where I don't know between my dad more than my mom, but like my dad didn't want to say anything because he didn't want to offend me and my mom just didn't know what to say 'cause she didn't know what I wanted to hear. But slowly and surely we started talking more and now it's just as normal as ever.

**Follow Up Question:** And how did you feel about the need of hiding that, in fact, that you had a boyfriend at the time.

**Response:** I felt bad because my parents are like, a big part of my life; like my family life is one of, like the things that are, like up there on my list of, like importance. So I felt bad hiding that part of me, which is why I felt the need to tell them so soon. I know a lot of people wait 'till college; you know, they have that ability to leave the house before they tell their parents so they don't really have to deal with the direct issue, but I told them my like sophomore summer, junior year,

that I was because I wanted to deal with the problem and make sure we were on good terms before I left for college.

### **Xavier**

**Question 1:** Tell me your understanding of the coming out process.

**Response:** So ... this is hard, um, my understanding of the coming process is a realization and understanding of one's own sexuality and a, and making it known to other people in their network.

**Question 2:** Tell me about when you came out for the first time.

**Response:** So the first time I came out was to my friend who end, I ended up dating and he came out to me first; he told me; he told he was bi and I, I in turn uh, told him that um, I was also bi, which down the road I ended up coming out as gay.... I wasn't sure where I was at that point. I was still kind of questioning but I knew I wasn't; I knew I wasn't into guys at some level and I knew I wasn't into girls at another level, too; so I kind of being bi was a happy medium.

**Follow Up Question:** Okay and what were you thinking about when, before you came out?

**Response:** I was definitely nervous and I was just kind of unsure of what I was. The night before I came out, I wrote in my journal that I thought I was slightly bi, curious was exactly what I wrote. So I knew there was something going on but I wasn't completely sure what it was and then once he came out to me, it was, there's someone I could associate with, and it would uh, face to label and things like that and something that I felt.

**Follow Up Question:** And how about um, how you, how did you feel or um, what were some thoughts afterwards, after you disclosed for the first time?

**Response:** After I came out for the first time it was definitely, it was liberating. Uh, in a sense, I felt freer, I felt like there was also of a burden, but I also felt like it was a secret between my friend and myself, and it kinda, it stayed there. So I was beginning a new chapter of my life but just with that person who knew.

**Follow Up Question:** Okay and how um, what were you thinking um, or feeling before um, disclosing to your brother?

**Response:** Before coming out to my brother I didn't really know what to say or how to say it. I was nervous but on some level I figure he'd be okay with it.

**Follow Up Question:** And nervous for what reason?

**Response:** That he wouldn't be okay with it and would tell my parents and uh, the horror stories that you hear about, kids getting kicked out and parents disowning them and things like that. That was always in the back of my mind.

**Follow Up Question:** And how did you like feel or what were some of your thoughts knowing that your parents were possibly going to be approaching you?



**Response:** I was like uh, I was terrified. Umm ... I think I was shaking. I remember I had set like a tape recorder or like an mp3 recorder, so I was like if, if they like yell at me and kick me out, I'm gonna put this on the Internet. Umm ... So that was definitely a concern in my mind.

**Follow Up Question:** That they might kick you out?

**Response:** Right. I mean, when I came home and my stuff wasn't on the front lawn, I was like okay; this might not be as bad as I'm planning for but I plan for worst always.

**Question 3:** Tell me about the first time you came out in school.

**Response:** The first time I came out in school was to a few friends, uh, the first person was my friend, Samantha. She was pretty accepting and then from there she kind of knew a few other people who would be okay with it, who I was friends with; I came out to them. I was never out to everyone. I think they assumed. I did a project on Matthew Shepard for history class, so I think people knew um, but there are only a few people that I was completely out to.

**Follow Up Question:** And what were your thoughts or feelings before uh, disclosing to your friend, Samantha?

**Response:** Umm ... like before coming out, school was kind of just, I was just kind of there. I had my friend, Evan, who I was out to and we understood each other, but everything else was kind of ... I was there but I not completely there. I didn't feel like everyone knew exactly who I was. So it was ... I don't know how to describe it exactly, but I was, I was there, and people knew me, but I wasn't completely myself.

**Follow Up Question:** And how about um, your thoughts and feelings afterwards?

**Response:** Afterwards, it was definitely, I felt freer and more open and there are people who understood me, what I wanted, my thoughts and things like that. Umm ... I went to a Catholic high school, with 46 people in my class, so it was small and they're just people who I could joke around with and things like that, and they just got me on every level.

**Follow Up Question:** So what were some challenges you faced when you came out for the first time in school?

**Response:** Umm ... The f-, the challenge would probably be having a limited amount of people who knew and the fear of other people knowing; like we would talk quietly in a corner sometimes, like some of my friends would ask if I'm dating anyone and things like that and it was kinda, something we talk about on our own. But once senior year came around I didn't really care, like the last semester of senior year, I was just, I'm outta here, I didn't really care what was gonna happen.

**Follow Up Question:** Any other challenges?

**Response:** My parents were somewhat religious so that definitely factored in to it; their beliefs, um, but that kind of fell through. My mom got mad at, this is kind of off topic, but they were gonna close my high school, uh, that my mom hated like the, hated the diocese and the priest and all that, so she kinda like backed off from the whole church thing, too, at that point. Just, she kinda had a little enlightening too, so that kinda helped me.

**Follow Up Question:** What were some supports available to you when you came out for the first time in school?

**Response:** None. There was really nothing. There was my friend who I came out to... I was seeing a therapist at the time, but I didn't feel, for like family things, but I didn't feel comfortable coming out to him, so that didn't really happen. He was kind of old in all honesty. He was just kinda like, he's like old and just kinda scary. He wasn't someone who I really felt comfortable talking to, so that was kinda, we just didn't match on that level. The second, the second therapist who I went to was a lot more just friendly and opening or open.

**Follow Up Question:** So besides um, your friend and your therapist were there any um, any other available? I know you said that there weren't, none in your school, but any other supports that you used that, you know were not inside the school.

**Response:** Yeah, there was, there is an online chat network, I'm trying to remember the name of it ... It was, it was for LGBT youth. Umm ... I can try to find the name of it. GLBT National Hotline, Peer Support Chat, <http://www.glnh.org/>. I went on there a few times cuz you talk to like uh, like a peer counselor, about things. It was more about like, I feel probably like being depressed at that point.

**Follow Up Question:** And, so you felt that you were depressed at that point?

**Response:** Yeah. So I was, after my breakup and like after my parents weren't too cool with it, so it was just kind of, their, like, a lack of support again. I had a few friends but they didn't get me cuz they were straight so it was kinda; it was complicated. So it was kinda like up and down for awhile.

**Follow Up Questions:** So what were the reasons for why you were seeing a therapist?

**Response:** Initially I was seeing a therapist because me and my parents would always be at each other about stupid little things. Um, which I think was a result of me not being out and being ... Or questioning about so many things. Then I switched therapists. Um, a little after I came out for unrelated reasons, and I kind of, I came out to him, um, but at the time I was feeling s-like a sense of depression because I wasn't completely sure where my life was going, and I didn't have the support of my parents. Um, and I was kind of like grasping for some, some sense of support. Uh, because not having the parental support was definitely, um, was taxing.

**Follow Up Question:** Do you have some thoughts about how to support students who decide to come out for the first time in school?

**Response:** I feel like working it into the curriculum at some point like not avoiding LGBT topics and working it into like into history and I guess that's about it. I don't think you can have gay math or anything, but um, however it fits in the curriculum, just not being a topic or subject to talk about, I think would have helped people who aren't out yet; see who, people who may understand them. Umm ... Yeah, I guess just not avoiding the topic.

**Follow Up Question:** Any other um, resources or support ideas for LGBT students?

**Response:** Yeah. Definitely like a club, like a gay-straight alliance or like a resource center, which again is a little much, but like a resource center would be cool or even just making it in a room that you can talk to this person or like a safe space training; we do that in college.

**Follow Up Question:** Mm-hmm. (Affirmative) So talking to just anybody in particular or certain people specifically?

**Response:** I mean a school counselor would probably be one or just like how we do safe space training; some, for some people it's optional, um, for some people it's mandatory, like the police department does it. But then some professors can go, it's like a two-hour workshop about like LGBT community- how to support them, things like that and they get like a card, with like a little rainbow flag and stuff like that. And professors put it on like their office door and things, like that and it kind of identifies people who are LGBT friendly. So if teachers had something like that, just kind of identify.

I think it sends a statement, in general, um, I think it sends a statement um, just across the board that these people are openly supportive of LGBT community. I think that's a statement in itself, not just to gay and straight people, um, but then also to LGBT people. It identifies the person they can go to, like this person will understand; this person won't, like freak out or anything.

**Follow Up Question:** What do you think um, you or how would you have felt if you had that, you know, either a safe space zone or somebody that you could uh, speak to while you were coming out?

**Response:** I think it would be awesome because it's a visible network and that's how I see coming out and just equality and stuff, in general, as a visible network of people and I think that's what the safe space type of thing does. That's, that's one reason why I'm out and try to express who I am freely is I didn't have any like role models or visible network of people um, or anything I could associate myself with or anyone um, to be like that they understand me; like it's okay to be out and things like that and that's kind of why, when I came to college I was out; like rainbows and glitter and whatever else I could find, like. I also wanted to, to be like a, um, beacon, I don't know if that's the right word, but just being myself so that other people could be themselves equally.

**Follow Up Question:** And so how did you feel that your school didn't have any support available?

**Response:** It's pretty shitty, can I say that? Um, I was just loo-, looking for something pretty much; that's why I talked to people online and I was kinda like grasping for things, um, which may not have always been the best, um, the best way, but I would just kinda, whatever support or uh, people I could identify with that I could find, I would talk to them and try to get some understanding of their coming out process and their, just feel like I was okay to be gay; it's kinda of what I was looking for; just, I don't know what that word would be, reassurance.

**Question 4:** After you came out um, the first time in school, how was life for you?

**Response:** Umm ... It was definitely good. It was, it was getting better at that point for sure and the more people that were accepting aside from my parents kind of or ... my parents weren't super accepting, so then the more people that were accepting just kind of, it just helped. It helped me progress, um, and be like okay, like it's okay and I could just move on with myself cuz having my parents not support me was kind of like again, shitty, um ... that kind of set me back a little bit so I then I have to like move forward from that again.

**Question 5:** Why did you decide to come out?

**Response:** Huh. I feel like it was something I knew subconsciously but I wasn't, I wasn't consciously aware of it until I kinda like, not like, I don't know just until I came out pretty much. It was just kinda there something I was feeling, trying to understand and once I got it, it was like a light bulb; I was like oh! and I felt my life was gonna change when I came out, which in a, in a sense I was happier and freer and things like that, but it was just kinda like a little light bulb went off and I was like oh, okay. And then like I said before, after coming out the first time, it was more a come out so that other people had someone that they could talk to or someone who understood and, like a visible, a visible network of LGBT people who um, I could be resource for, even though I didn't know what's going on myself. I just knew if I had someone, like my ex; I'd no idea about LGBT stuff but he was someone I could talk to who got me and I wanted to be that um, type of person for other people.

**Question 6:** Okay. Um, what else has been important to you during the coming out process that we have not discussed?

I'm trying to think. The, so the supports we talked about um, were good and I was just, I mean TV helped here and there, um, like LGBT characters in TV and things like that. It was just kind of more, more visibility; um, people I could associate with even if not in that way was just, um, but there are people out there and that I could start to identify on some level with.

**Follow Up Question:** So how did it seem watching gay character either on TV or seeing it on/in the media?

**Response:** It definitely helped. We didn't have Logo, even though I tried to convince my parents to get it cuz I want a game show network, so I told them; but

um, yeah, when I can find gay characters, like Will & Grace would be on, um, so like if my parents went out or went to bed, and like I would try to find it on TV. Then there were some stuff in college, I go into that or.....

**Follow Up Question:** You could...

**Response:** Umm... In, I mean college is just like a whole new beginning and that's where I got exposed to like the Gay-Straight Alliance Club and the safe space training and things like that, which I wish I had in high school and which I think would be totally realistic to put into a high school. So coming to college I had those resources that I should have had, um, so that was helpful and it just kinda a shortfall and how high school support.

**Follow Up Question:** So do you think that um, colleges and universities have a lot of support for these, for the coming out process or for um, just LGBT issues in general, um, but that although they're helpful in, in college and in, in universities but that it would even be beneficial for earlier, those resources to be available for earlier grades, let's say in middle school or high school when the individuals are actually coming out or going through the actual process actively.

**Response:** Yeah. Yeah, exactly. I think those resources would be helpful then and might have touched on this a little bit before, but having uh, inclusive, an inclusive curriculum across the board, as I mentioned, history, but um, even like sex ed. and stuff like that. Umm ... Just not assuming um, that everything is just a guy and a girl, um, putting all the options out there, um, and I think that would be helpful. I mean a lot of it is rooted in whatever, just in binaries and stuff like that, but I think consciously try to make an effort to, I mean that's even more down the road, getting rid of like micro aggressions and some things like that, but uh, I think at least for now, starting, having safe space or things like that or clubs, some kind of support systems in high school would be totally beneficial.

### Vinny

**Question 1:** So tell me your understanding of the coming out process.

**Response:** My understanding of the coming out process. So my coming out process was ... I don't know if it was weird. I don't ... Everybody's coming out process is so different so I can't really stereotype it and say it was normal; it was not normal.

**Follow Up Question:** So what is your understanding of it?

**Response:** Um, coming out to me I understand it as letting friends and family or being comfortable in your skin, so letting friends and family know all of you and who you are. So if you identify as gay, straight, bisexual, transgender, like, coming out sexual identity-wise; like, this is where I see myself; this is how I identify myself.

**Question 2:** Tell me about when you first came out, so your experience coming out for the very first time.

**Response:** Um, my experience coming out for the very first time. I came out to my first person when I was 15. It was at a party with some friends. Uh, we were just hanging out, dancing, eating chips no drinking or anything like that. But I just felt like I had to tell someone or I had to say something.

So I pulled my best friend, Kathy outside and I said, “I have something to tell you” and I could never say it. Every time I came out to somebody, I could ... I could never actually say it and they always said it for me which helps so much because if I actually had to say it out, I don't know if I actually could have done it.

Um, she like pretty much everybody that came out to afterwards kinda already suspected or kinda knew, or could have kind of guessed that I wasn't happy with the role that I was pretending to lead and was trying to see myself and present myself in a different light.

And so, yeah, I came out to her. She was extremely supportive. She helped me come out to everyone else, which was great. She's still my best friend. Um, after I came out to her, I came out to some friends first. I hadn't told anybody in my family yet. I came out to my friend, Michael who was also gay.

And then I came out to my best friend, Marie. And so having them 3 as a support system helped me come to terms with how I felt because there's a whole ... there's a coming out process, with coming out to other people; then there's that whole coming out process to yourself, which is really difficult to deal with, which nobody ever seems to really talk about.

You have to be comfortable enough in your own skin or comfortable enough to at least say, “Yes. This is where I am” before you can tell anybody. So having them as a support system helped me come to terms with myself better and be proud of where I was and who I am. And so then I told my brother.

My brother helped me tell my mom and then my mom helped me tell the rest of my family. So ... so from then on it was fine. It was weird at first when I told my mom though because I grew up in a very ... very, very, very religious household. I still am very religious. I ... I identify as Christian.

But, um, for her it was very ... well, the bible says this; it's not this. And so it was a lot of us working together to come to a mutual understanding and how do we view things, how do we interpret things when it comes to our religion. How do we work together as each other and continued to love each other, but we may not always see eye-to-eye on issues.

**Follow Up Question:** How much do you think that, your religion has impacted either the coming out process or maybe under ... your understanding of that..?

**Response:** It's made it harder definitely because people are very set in stone in how they interpret the verses or the passages that talk about homosexuality, or

they think that talk about homosexuality. And then there's a whole other end of the spectrum of people like me that interpret it completely different way and see things in a completely different light.

And so it's kind of like ... I don't want to say old money, new money but like there's some people that will only view it this way, and they will not change their mind. And then there's some people that are more fluid and it made it harder because, for me, I have to explain how I see it and then people are going to challenge me no matter what.

So you have to be very strong in what you believe and also very well read in how they're going to view it; how you view it and how to hopefully make them come to some common ground of where you are as a person. So it made it a little bit more difficult.

But then I've also realized throughout my entire coming out process, people that don't want to be friends with me or don't want to associate with me because of my sexual orientation are not people that I want to be around anyways. So if even after having long debates with people or things like that, like longtime friends, if they don't want to associate with me because I identify as gay then that is ... that's their prerogative and that's not something that I need to worry myself about.

Because I try and surround myself with good energy and good people that will continuously help me be happy where I am so.

**Follow Up Question:** Have you lost, um, friends or acquaintances along the way because you've come out to them?

**Response:** I have friends flat out say, "I cannot support you if you are gay. I cannot be friends with you because you're gay."

**Follow Up Question:** So You had told them that you were gay?

**Response:** That I was ... or they would ... they would hear from somebody else who would come to me and say, "Hey, I heard you told so and so you were gay. Is that true?" I'm like, "Yeah. It is true." And I don't ... I don't ... go to every person I meet and say, "Hey, I'm gay just so you know."

But ... so when they do, we usually end up talking about, they'll say, "Well, the bible say this", and I'll say, "Well, I say the bible says this," because everything is up for interpretation. We can't ask who wrote it, what it actually meant. So, um ... and it gets into this very heated, "Well, I'll still be praying for you and I still love you but I can't ... I can't support this lifestyle and I can't."

And I said, "You know what, that's fine." Like it hurts; like it's not I was gonna feel great, like friends that I've considered like really close for a very long time, losing them in that sort of way. But I mean they wish me nothing but the best. I wish them nothing but the best, and so hopefully our lives will cross again.

They'll come to some mutual understanding with me or I'll see where they're coming from and we can at least coexist in some natural way, but whatever happens, happens.

**Follow Up Question:** All right. Um, I wanted to go back to; you know, you were talking about how, you know, the coming out process. Um, one is you telling other people but, um, there's the aspect of you almost going through it yourself and your understanding. Can you talk to me a little bit more about that or at least what you think your experience or what you went through as your understanding that process?

**Response:** What I went ... what I went through in my understanding. I remember throughout my entire life I never really fit in with the boys, which I feel is so like, contrived and so overly stated like, "Oh, I'm gay" because I don't like hanging out with boys or I don't do boy things. It's like I just never felt like the things that most boys were doing, I never identified with. I could play sports, I like some ... I like some sports. I love baseball. I like some typical masculine things but that was never where I like ... I never wanted to talk about this one ... hang out with girls or be around or um ... think of girls in that way. Uh, so that ... But my friends would notice that also.

And so I remember from a very early age, people would tease me. They're like, "Oh, you're gay" blah, blah, blah. And you always automatically say, "No. No I'm not. I can't be." Nobody ... nobody chooses that. Nobody picks that blah, blah, blah.

But then it takes a lot of ... At least I'm lucky that I grew up in a town that I did, where there was a lot of ... where I can use the internet and research and reach out to people and talk, and read books, and things like that, and go to my library; they have a young adult, gay teen section that I can read about stories where they'd be fiction or not about people like me coming to terms with things.

And so through the use of the internet and talking to the people and just kind of learning to be comfortable in my own skin, I learned to accept the fact that I was gay, which is fine. There are so many gay people that live out like, outrageously wonderfully lives and I can be one of these people.

So eventually after I was able to come to terms with it myself, I'm able to help other people. I'm able to talk with other people who might be going through the same thing and help them come to terms with them, as well as be open and honest with everybody that I meet about who I am and where I am in my life.

**Follow Up Question:** Okay. So it sounds to me, it's almost kind of you became aware of your sexual orientation and then you kind of sought information out. And once you, kind of, almost understood it a little bit more what it meant for you, you accepted it yourself and then was able to let other people know, "Hey, listen. This is my sort of orientation."



**Response:** Yeah, like growing up in a hetero-normative world. Like everything is straight. You, if you were anything off the radar or anything slightly off of the normal heterosexual spectrum, you have to figure things out for yourself. You there, I couldn't go talk to my mom and say, "Hey, I think I'm gay", because she's straight. She has no idea of what I'm thinking or what I could possibly be going through. And while it is different for everyone, at least being able to reach out and get some understanding from people who might have gone through what I've gone through helps me formulate my own ideas and navigate them.

**Follow Up Question:** Okay. And so, kind of, how did you feel and what were you thinking about, um, before you came out for the first time to your friend at this party?

**Response:** Oh my God, it was terrifying. I...I actually think I cried a little bit. I'm 95% sure I probably started crying because it's scary. You don't know ... like while she's my best friend, the biggest fear in the back of your mind is always their not gonna accept me. They're gonna hate me. I'm gonna be made fun of.

You hear all these terrible horror stories. Matthew Shepard, like down the line of things happening to gay teens or gay people because they ... because of their sexual orientation and you never want to be ... you don't want to be one of the bad stereotypes, let alone a stereotype at all.

So, um, it was ... it was really scary but having a good friend to come out to that I knew ... I think I knew deep down that she was going to be okay with it but it's still scary. Having her say, "It's fine; it's okay, like, I'm here for you. I'm not going anywhere, like, I'm going to help you, like, um, whatever you want to do whether you want to tell people or not tell people I'm going to be here for you," was probably the best thing to have when I came out.

Because it ... it put me at ease a lot; while still telling people is still scary, like, meeting new people and telling ... like when they find out that I'm gay, you have no idea how they're going to react because some people can get extremely upset and violent. And some people are like, "Yeah, whatever. I don't really care. I have like 3 gay cousins or whatever." But it's ... it's helped ... Having her around has helped a lot for sure.

**Follow Up Question:** What were you thinking? What was going through your mind at the time?

**Response:** I kept saying I had to tell ... I had to tell someone and I hadn't told her. I had said it in my mind that she was the first person I was going to tell, no matter what, because she's my best friend. Um, I kept saying things like she's not going to like me or she's going to love me or it was ... it's always ... It's so complicated. What was I thinking? That was like 7 years ago. That was like 7 years ago. Um, it was definitely a lot of, like I just have to say it. If I say it, it's over with. Like ... and I can't take it back. If I don't say it, then I can always back out. But it was always a lot of, "Just say it. Just do it. Go for it. Just do it." And then you ... I got up first like "I have to tell you something" and then she said,

“What is it?” And I said “Uh” and then she said, “Okay. I’ll guess.” And then she started get running down the list. And when she got to the “I’m gay” I just started nodding and crying and sobbing everywhere.

**Follow Up Question:** Okay. And so what ... how did it feel or how did you feel after?

**Response:** It was relieving. At least when she reacted positively, I think when she hadn’t said anything like the in between time which was in reality probably like 5 seconds, but in my head like 5 minutes. Uh, it felt like unnerving and it’s like ... what’s a good analogy? Like if you’re standing on like, a surf board on water and you’re like rocking back and forth and you’re kind of not even ground, and you don’t know whether you’re going to fall or you’re going to stay balanced. But then, having her say it’s fine, it was just like, “Okay. I can breathe again”, like I don’t have to hold my breath.

I don’t have to ... I don’t have to fake anything. I don’t have to tread lightly. I don’t have to think about what I’m going to say. Is this going to make me sound gay? Is this going to make me sound straight? Will she question me if I say this because now she knows? So no matter what I say, it doesn’t matter because it’s my honest words coming out, as opposed to me psycho analyzing everything and trying to get the perfect right, straight answer.

**Follow Up Question:** Okay. So you kind of mentioned a little bit that you weren’t really ... it was almost like you were 2 different people kind of, you were starting to ... start becoming aware of your sexual orientation. And so that was a little bit more kind of secretive if you want to say that. Um, because you were still trying to understand, but then you were also then trying to portray this whole, you know other side of you. Um, so tell me about like that experience, like having those trying to compete with the 2.

**Response:** It feels like you’re living like 2 double lives or not 2 double lives but like a double life. You have who you are or who I felt like I was behind closed doors when I was by myself and I didn’t have to really talk to anybody. And then you walk out and you’re around a group of people. You’re around your friends or you’re around bunch of guys. And you put on this facade and it’s like, okay, I have to stand up straighter, I have to stick up my chest a little more. I have to talk a little bit lower with my voice. I have to make sure that I don’t say anything that would make them question or say, “Hey, that’s slightly off.” I have to go along with whatever conversation they’re going on. I can’t break off to a tangent and talk about something random that doesn’t make sense or talk about this weird correlation because it might cause them to say, “Why is he thinking of it this way when the rest of us think of it this way?” I had to just constantly be on guard and make sure that I was doing everything that I perceived as correct. That ... so that way nobody would even think like, “No, he’s fine.” But even then apparently I didn’t do that well.

**Follow Up Question:** And how did that make you feel that you had to live this double life?

**Response:** Oh my God, I hated it. I hated it. That's why I hate ... I am out to everybody in my family except for my grandparents. And it is solely a financial reason because they're the cosigners on my loans for school. And even though I know they'll probably be okay, I am terrified that they are going to not cosign my loans for my senior year and I am going to be a year shy of graduating, which is entirely selfish.

But that's where it is in my life. Um, but ... So when I'm around them, while the rest of my family knows, when I'm around them I feel like I am not being myself at all. I feel like I am saying things that I normally wouldn't say. I am carrying myself in a manner that I don't see myself as, like I'm a completely different person that I don't even recognize. And do....

So that ... And that's what it felt like when I was around people before I came out. It...it felt like I was ... somebody that I didn't want to be or I didn't want to perceive myself in that way. And I didn't want to present myself in that way, but I had to ... to make sure that things didn't change. And I think that's probably the big ... that's probably the biggest fear of coming out in general, that things are going to change no matter what- whether people will accept it or not some ... because you come out things are automatically going to change. And it could change for the better. It could change for the worse. Things could change but still slightly be the same. And if I ... if I present myself as straight or if I present myself as not gay just a little bit more effeminate, then things are going to stay the same. Or they're going to stay how I think they should stay in a way. If that make sense?

**Follow Up Question:** And so now that, um, you know, you've come out and you know you mentioned that you were, uh, you felt good after you came out the first time, especially to your friend ... to your friend and ... and how supportive she was. Um, how do you feel now? What ... How do you ... What's your feelings now in that ... now that you don't have to live that double life anymore?

**Response:** I don't know... I feel very ... see I've been ... I've been out for such a long time. I haven't really thought about how I felt before then because I didn't like where I was before then. I like where I am now. I like ... I like not having to be on guard. I like just talking to people and having a conversation and whether they know I'm gay or not, like that doesn't matter to me. If they will ask me, I will gladly tell them, but it is none of their business; it's all my business. Um, I ...I can do and say whatever I want without of fear of, "Oh, they're going to find out" because if they find out, I don't care. I've been living this ... I've been out for so long that it doesn't matter to me anymore whether people like it or not because I have enough ... I know that I have enough friends and I have enough good people in my life that love me and support me for who I am truly that if you don't want to be around me, "Bye, I don't need you."

**Question 3:** Can you tell me about the first time you came out in school.

**Response:** I think it was my junior or sophomore year of high school. Like maybe a year after I actually came ... started coming out to people. Word of mouth travels quickly. Teenagers can't keep anything secret. Not that it's a secret because I started telling people but anything personal.

If you tell your friend ... if you tell one person, 5 people are going to know in a matter of 5 minutes. But after I told my brother because we ... I'm a twin... I'm an identical twin. Uh, so he's been with me my entire life obviously. So after I told my brother, I think people realized that it was kind of okay to start telling people at school because my brother ... because up to then my brother didn't know.

**Follow Up Questions:** Were there any challenges after you came out in school?

**Response:** Definitely the snide remarks but I don't tolerate that. My friends always knew that, uh, big and black man. They would always like make like sly racist jokes and I cut it like the second it happened. And so the same thing started happening with the gay jokes.

And so I think my friend made some snide like slur or something like that. And I said, "We're not gonna do that" and that was the end of it. And I think also having my brother on my team after people started finding out helped a lot because he, he would say ...he would tell me all the time like, "The football players were talking about you and they were saying all these really like untrue homophobic things and I told them to knock it off."

And so it helped create a nice atmosphere to where I didn't have to worry about really being bullied or anything like that because he had my back and I had friends that had my back. I'm just a no shit kind of person like, "You're not going to talk to me that way or else you can get out."

**Follow Up Question:** In high school people would make kind of any remarks. So how did that make you feel, um, hearing them. Even though ...

**Response:** At first ... at first it's not great. At first, hearing is like it kind of sets you back a couple steps in your coming out process. You're like is this really what I want to do? Is this really, like do I really want to deal with this for the rest of my life things like that?

I hear people say all the time like nobody would choose to be gay because nobody wants to be made fun of or ridiculed or have their rights stripped away and things like that. And they're absolutely right, nobody does want that. But, uh ... So it kind of ... the first few times it definitely made me have to sit back and reanalyze and really think about where I was.

Uh, but I think working through it and realizing that no matter what they say, like words are just words. You can call me whatever you want from here until next

Sunday as long as I believe ... as long as what I believe is true about myself, to be true then whatever you say can't hurt me.

And so it does take a while to get to that point though, like, realizing that it is okay for people to say whatever they want because as long as you're steadfast in where you are, you don't have to worry about it.

**Follow Up Question:** And so how did you deal with that?

**Response:** You're allowed to do whatever you want. I am allowed to walk out on the world and say, "I'm a gay man." Just like some random girls like to dye her hair pink and walk around the world because that is her choice. And nobody can fault her for that. People are going to make fun of her for it and people are going to make fun of me for being gay no matter what. I am steadfast of where I am, that because of their help that I don't need to worry about it anymore.

**Follow Up Question:** Were there any challenges before you disclosed in school?

**Response:** Um, at least in ... at least for me growing up. And it's still a thing people using say gay as a synonym for stupid is very common. So no matter what, people, I would do something, they're like, "That's so gay." That's so blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Or ... I mean, I'm a dancer so everything I did was gay apparently.

**Follow Up Question:** Okay, Um, any other challenges before or after you came out?

**Response:** I mean, religion is always a big one. Being a gay Christian is very, very difficult because some people are either on your side or they're completely not. And it takes a lot of convincing and most of them still aren't going to change their mind. Uh, but you find a group of people that believe the same things that you do like all Christian ... That's why we have some many different denominations. You find a group of people that believe what they believe and you stick with them and you say, "This is my faith. This is where I believe. This is what I believe is going to happen", and you just ride it out I guess.

**Follow Up Question:** Do you think religion is a very big part of who you are?

**Response:** I grew up in a church. I ... I still am very heavy ... heavily involved in the church. It is a huge part of my identity as a person.

**Follow Up Question:** Um, so what were some of the supports available to you, um, when you first, came out for the first time in school? What were some school support systems in schools?

**Response:** I am a performance arts kid so, um, I don't know why but apparently all gay people are performing arts kids or at some point or that's what we were associated with, but at least for me being in choir and being in theater helped a lot because people in there accepting of anything. You could come in and only walk in your hands and they'll be like, "You're the coolest person ever." So, uh, having ...I always call them my choir family. Having my choir family just stand by me no

matter what like I could ... I could shave my head and they'll say, "Whatever we like you still."

So having them ... But also my high school had a gay-straight alliance ... I kind of help revive it my sophomore year. I had a teacher who her daughter was a lesbian ... is a lesbian. And so me, her and her daughter kind of helped restart it and revamp it. And it was just like weekly meetings, before school started, just talking about issues that were going on in gay culture legislation things, what to do. We talked about bullying a lot because obviously kids are ruthless. Kids are vicious. I know this because I'm a music educator. Kids are terrible. They're great but they're terrible. Uh, and they don't realize they're terrible. So it's like how do you deal with bullying. How do you ... what are the systems in place for if you are being bullied, who do you talk to? Do you talk to them, what do you do? And so having ... also having the gay-straight alliance as a support system helped a lot.

**Follow Up Question:** And so you think that because you had the support of your building administrator and teachers, um, that it kind of helped that like push that backlash?

**Response:** Yeah. The principal is in charge. So having him on our side meant no matter what you say he's going to let us stay. So having his support ... I think it also made it a little bit more okay for other teachers to show their support, and lots of students have affinities towards certain teachers. And so when teachers are starting to say like ... When teachers would hear snide comments about like, "Oh, you can't go to that club. It's full of queers and stuff like that. Teachers would squash it. Or say, "That's not okay. You're not allowed to say that. Why are you saying that?" And challenge students and get them to express like, "Well, why do you think like this? Do you think it's okay to think like this?" And cause them to reevaluate and rethink things. And so by having the principal's support and having more teachers' support it kind of help create this overall arching and welcoming atmosphere on campus.

**Follow Up Question:** was there anything else at school?

**Response:** I don't think so. I mean, my friends were ... are always going to be my biggest support system and my brother but that's like ... yeah, I think there's no like big like official like thing so yeah.

**Follow Up Question:** Um, so do you have some thoughts about how to support students who decide to come out for the first time in schools?

**Response:** They're awesome. They're so great because it makes it ... I think the most ... the best thing that can happen for anyone to come out is to have people reaffirm that it's okay to have ... and especially random people. Like because your friends ... Like I said, your friends will support you if you want to change your hairstyle. And so hopefully they'll support you with your lifestyle choices ... well, not choices but your lifestyle. And most of them will, but when you start having random strangers be okay or people that you don't necessarily consider close. But when they started becoming okay and saying this is fine. Like no

matter what like you're ... you're a human being and what you choose to do with your life is your choice or however you want to live your life is how you want to live it, and I'm going to consider that okay. Like once you ... once everybody starts ... once you ... let me reflect. Once people start reaffirming you, it makes it better.

**Follow Up Question:** What are kind of some supports that specific support systems that you think, um, would help support kids that come out?

**Response:** I really like the, um, the safe ... the safe place, um, campaign. I don't know if it's a campaign. My mom talks about it all the time and I kind of wish it was more prominent in my school, uh, because I was able to talk to some teacher about it, but being able to talk to adults. At that age, having known that I could have gone to any random teacher even if I didn't have them and just talk and have them not be ... not judge me or just like talk to me as a person would be really nice. Especially I like the idea of it being not teachers that you normally associate with so ... I'm not a history kid but I would have loved to be able to go to talk to some random teacher because they don't know anything about me. But and tell them my story and have them be a non-partisan party in my coming out process would be really great.

**Follow Up Question:** So having, like the teachers put like either some type of sign, sticker, thing, this is a safe zone so that let's say you would be able to come, kind of walk down the hallway and say, "Oh wait, this person is supportive of gay individuals so if I was having a problem, you know."

**Response:** Yeah. Like counselors at school, things like that. Counseling support services are a great thing, too, because they keep everything confidential. So just knowing that there are people that you can talk to whether you are planning on coming out or just questioning or have questions, knowing that there's somebody that you can talk to and that they will keep your information confidential and talk to you as a non-partisan I think is really important.

Reaffirming that no matter what choice you make whether you identify as gay or not or whether you choose to come out or not that's an okay choice. Whatever choices you make are good ones.

**Follow Up Question:** How did it make you feel knowing that there were support systems available to you in school?

**Response:** Great. I like it. I like knowing that there's somewhere I could turn if I had nowhere else to go. I always felt like there's somewhere I could go and there is somebody that I could talk to. But even if worse comes to worse and I just didn't feel like discussing it with someone. Knowing that there is somewhere that I can go and I feel like I could be completely myself all the time is awesome. It's amazing.

**Question 4:** Okay. So after you came out, um, for the first time in school, how was life for you?

**Response:** I felt different. I felt like ... like you know when you walk outside and you are wearing sunglasses and gets kind of dark and take them off and you realize that the world is a lot brighter than you think it is. That's kind of what it felt like. You see ... I felt like I saw things a little bit differently. And I could interact differently. So ... how did I view life? It was a lot better especially at school because I didn't ...like I am at school now. I don't have to worry about what I'm saying. Like the second you don't have to ... you don't have to think anymore and you don't have to start psycho analyzing everything you do, it's like a huge like relief, like you can breathe a lot easier because you don't have to worry anymore.

**Question 5:** Why did you decide to come out?

**Response:** Because I was tired of ... I was ... I was just tired. Overall I was tired of psychoanalyzing. I was tired of not feeling comfortable around people because I wasn't being myself. I was tired of ...I was just also tired of people not knowing it. It feels like your harboring this huge like gigantic secret and nobody knows. And it eats you inside because you just want to tell someone. You just want somebody to be on your side and support you and ... and reaffirm you. And so when nobody's reaffirming you, it causes you to overthink and it causes you to beat yourself and break yourself down. But once you start telling people it's very uplifting.

**Question 6:** Okay. Um, what else has been important to you during the coming out process that we have not discussed? Is there additional information that you want to share?

**Response:** When I was growing up I think the only gay people that were on television were Will and Grace. It was on the show Will and Grace. Um, but then, there ... more, um, information in mainstream media so there are more television and movie characters and books and things written about all this wonderful fabulous gay people. You start hearing ... you start learning about more gay politicians and gay history and things like that. Just being aware that you're not the only person that's here. You're not the only person that is gay that likes baseball. You're not the only person that's gay and doesn't like sports. Like knowing that there are other people like you and seeing it on television is just really ... it's nice.

### **Kevin**

**Question 1:** Tell me your understanding of the coming out process.

**Response:** Ok, my understanding is more of an individual coming out about their sexuality and hoping to get the best support possible. That is my understanding of it; does it go that way? No.

**Follow Up Question:** So tell me a little bit more about that.

**Response:** Yea, it's not always how it is....I am going to talk about myself, but I have friends who are out to the community, but not their family. And so then such networks it has to be certain things that's reworded a certain way so things can be



placed put up and they are all in fear of just rejection and then rejection comes with... um not.... not associating with the family, kicked out of the house, etc. but for me... um... my story is a little bit different because I have not lived with my family... I think the last time I lived with my mom I was twelve...so... um... she always knew that I was gay, but she just never vocalized it and she... I never even told her.... She just.... I was probably seventeen and she just said, "So when am I going to meet your boyfriend?"... and I never had a boyfriend so it was kinda like confused to me, but the process of when I came out, it was I didn't have any support systems because I moved from house to house... so trying to... cuz once you come out you always have to come out.... Whether you say it to your family... ok that's step one.... And step two is your friends... and step three is your friend's friends, your teachers... whoever you want to share it with, but once you come out you're established as a newly gay person and then you have to keep coming out, so it is a difficult process... You don't want everyone to know at the same time....because of your levels of comfort with everyone, but it's a difficult process.

**Question 2:** So tell me about when you came out for the first time.

**Response:** uh.... I think this is in segments because it wasn't really official probably 'til I was about a junior in high school, but.... It was probably a junior in high school... um.... People would ask before and if they knew, they knew, if they didn't then I wouldn't confirm it... that's the only way you would know if you already knew of it and if I didn't say it; some people would ask.. I think I probably told... no one actually... so, my junior year of high school people started to asking cuz I was hanging out with more friends and I had gay friends and... by association everyone for some reason assumes that if you hang out with a gay person you have to be gay and I have plenty of straight friends so that's not true, but in high school.... I wanna say it was my best friend... uh.... He was in Maryland and it was Black Friday, Thanksgiving break... and he texts me, and he's like "I have something to ask you"... it's four in the morning and I knew what it was and I was "Oh shit"... excuse me... (laughs)... and I for some reason just from the message... I have something to ask you that's random..... I was like "Oh okay go ahead"... he's like "Are you gay?" And I was like, "yea," .... he's like, "whoa"... and then he went off on me... like he had an attitude with me because we've been friends since freshmen year of high school and he's like "You could've told me... it's not like I care".. blah blah blah and all this other stuff... "I don't know why it took this long to tell you. I should have asked you when we first met cuz I already knew it.".... and his reaction was bad at the time, but it was comforting because it wasn't like "Oh... now what am I going to do, I gotta find a new friend". It wasn't anything bad... so it was my junior year of high school I first came out.

**Follow Up Question:** What were some supports that you used when you came out for the first time?

**Response:** It was... it was more so my best friend... I didn't necessarily use any external support groups... it was just him... and it wasn't even a walk through process because I kinda did the process growing up on my own... uh.... I found out a lot of things that I should be finding out through a textbook, but it was

through live experiences, whether it was messing with it.. a guy or... learning about someone else's experience or hearing how someone else is going through pain... I've learned a lot. and I just kinda molded that into where I didn't want to be and where I think I should be and how I didn't want to feel.

**Follow Up Question:** you said that one way of finding out through the process was that you possibly were messing around with another gay individual and then the others listening.... like hearing other people's experience. How did you go about finding those individuals?

**Response:** uh... (pause).... Just being out... it's so weird how people... cuz I'm shy when it comes... I'm a social person, but I'm when it comes in terms to messing with someone... on an intimate level in terms of same-sex world because I don't know if you are really are gay.. If you're even interested...like... I don't even want to... I don't want rejection, I don't want embarrassment... and things like that... so I won't even touch that subject unless someone is approaching me... and nine times out ten every time that person has approached me... and I've encountered the open guy.. I've encountered the down low gay where... not even their brain cell knows because they are so in denial and.... I've encountered... um... I'm gay, but I'm not ready to say anything to anyone yet... so... it's so confusing to me... from different people's experiences... on how you can walk around and be on the down low this whole time, but you're messing with a guy here and there.... It just doesn't make sense to me.

**Follow Up Question:** So you mention the last time you lived with your family you were around 12 years old, right? So, um, can you tell me a little bit more, because I know, like you mentioned grandma and then you, like you were living with grandma or grandma was living with you or something. And then, um, you said that you haven't really lived with your family. That you were living with other relatives at some point. And then you were living with, um, most recently, you were living with your best friend's family. If I understand that right.

**Response:** So, um, and at that time my cousin, my mom's cousin, she had all boys, so I don't know if anyone could relate, but trying to hide your sexuality, and then living in a house of all boys that you aren't really that familiar with, just like on a family vacation kind of thing. Like you only see them once in a blue moon. And having to live with them and also trying to hide your sexuality at 12/13, it's very hard. So, then when they, when they're brothers so they know what, like, they're close, so they know, I guess it's like, I don't have any brothers. I only have sisters. So, I didn't really get it. But they picked up on it. But I would still deny it. No, I'm not gay, no. I would never tell them, no. Even though they were my cousins, I probably could have shared it, but it wasn't like a sibling connection. So I didn't feel comfortable enough sharing it with them. So, that was up until about a year or so. Maybe like, like after I turned 13.

A little bit after I turned 13, so, um, I moved out cause I couldn't take it anymore. It was either I reveal myself, and then still go crazy, or I try to hide myself and go crazier. So it was just, like, at that, you're going through, um, I think I was pretty

much past puberty at that point, so, like, your changes a, a, a young adolescent years, and then, like, you don't know how to handle things. Like, you want your family, like everyone else has their family, and it's just all shit show because, like, you don't have it how you want it at that age, and you don't have the answers; you're looking for everything, a reasoning to justify what's going on with your lifestyle. That's what happened to me, so, it was just, I need my sanity 'cause that's the only thing I have left. I don't have family there, so, just like everywhere, so. And it was just like a trust issue with myself because, like, I thought it so I could have prevented so many things from happening that happened up to a point, but at my age, what could I really do? What could I really say? I'm a child. I need to stay in a child's place.

**Follow Up Question:** So then because you wanted to keep your sanity, um, you then decided to do what afterwards?

**Response:** I decided to move out. It was, I'm, that's when, like, I started grasping my independency, just by taking leaps of, like, who knows what I'm doing, like I had no idea.

**Follow Up Question:** So where did you go?

**Response:** Um, it was, I literally just, like, packed three big, black trash cans. I'm like, I mean, garbage bags in like 13 trash bags on buses and trains. I think I did it in a consecutive of a week. My stuff just started disappearing from the house and it ended up at my sister's house in New Jersey, like, what's going on? "Where are you going?" I said, "Oh, I'm just takin' a vacation", and like, "You're 13; where the fuck could you go?" I said, "I gotta get the fuck out of here because I'm going to go crazy", so I ended up moving all of my stuff myself over to my sister's house in New Jersey via public transportation. I was determined to just, it was just my, um, defense mechanism. I was just going off of that. And, so, I need to keep sanity. I need to be sane, and I just, I wasn't ready to reveal myself, and, I... felt like I had no support to back me up had I done that.

That's what ended up happening. It was just me running away even more. And that's how I ended up living in New Jersey from 13 on til now because I ended up moving to Jersey with my sister, and then I am going to school over there, and then even with her, I would hide my sexuality, but with her, my older sister, I thought it was just go over her head, cause she's, like, we're 11 years apart, so you're 11, I'm just born. You were probably changing my diapers and paying me no mind at the same time. So I just thought it would have went over her head, but then she was digging into my business. It's just, like, I don't need anyone meddling in my business. I am fine.

**Follow Up Question:** And how was she meddling in your business?

**Response:** The disappointing part. Um. Because I thought I didn't have anyone to trust, and when you think about diary journal, you think, oh that's such bullshit, but it's actually really helpful. So it was like, maybe, like, a five-subject notebook and I just ripped off the dividers cuz I needed a really big book. And I just started

writing my thoughts down, and one day I felt like I didn't need the book anymore, but me being young. don't, I don't burn it, don't rip it up, I just throw it in the trash can. And who digs in the trash can? I have no idea. But she did it. And that day was when I said she is an official bitch 'cause she got that title and it stuck till now.

**Follow Up Question:** So in the book, what were you saying?

**Response:** I was basically disclosing in a timeline manner. I, like, went from, like, the beginning of where I can remember my first thought, which was probably like, like, maybe four or five, which was me peeing in the bed and getting a beatin' for it. My family is big on beatins'; I don't really know what's going on and I will probably never beat a child, as it's probably the worst experience you can put someone through. But, um, and then I started from there and I started to talk about when I realized I started liking boys, which was probably seven or eight, and then it was just a timeline from there from my experiences with, like, other students, like, if I felt like I was bullied because of, I was, at that time I was, like, poor and my family's pretty much poor, so it was a lot of factors, not just sexuality.

So I would just talk about that in my book and so forth up until that age about 13/14, when I threw the book away. From the time, like up until that day of 13/14, it was a lot more because it was more in-depth because I was living through day-by-day, so it was a lot more notes in there, and, um, it was just basically me saying how, I saw this boy today; I thought he was cute. I could have had a connection with him, but it didn't work out. And stuff like that.

And I talked about my past experiences and my passing sexual encounters with other people, and she pretty much just read it, and, first of all, it just, that's why I don't have such a network 'cause they're just messy; they're just messy, but I don't want people reading my thoughts. Like I just, it drives me up a wall; it's a pet peeve. It's a pet peeve, so, at that young age, I just started spazzing and crying 'cause I'm emotional and vulnerable and she says, "What's wrong that you just told me?" And I was just like, "You're just a bitch, like, you don't understand." And that's pretty much how it went.

**Follow Up Question:** what were you thinking about before and after you came out? What were some of the thoughts that were going through your mind before, and then after?

**Response:** Before, I, I, um, hm, I was born in 1993, so, growing up homosexuality/gay was never discussed in my household whatsoever, and my grandmother, which would have been, like, the monarch of the family at the time because she was the oldest. She's from Georgia, so, the southern hospitality is great, but the teachings of homosexuality is frowned upon, so that was installed in her, and that was installed in our family, so it was never discussed whatsoever. So growing up, it was just never brought up, like, right after when I did bring it up, it was just that, like, "No, no, don't talk about it." So, I always, it was, you know

today, there was always, like support, for like same-sex marriage, and like helping adolescents, like, prep themselves to come out so there won't be high rates of suicide in homosexuality community and stuff like that.

But that was never, that was never there then. You know how they, there's so much support now, was never there then, so it was never a thought for me to come out until I was probably, like, I reached 12. But I, it was just like, I was always the child to want to have a thought, but I was so afraid to say that my heart would pound so fast that I wouldn't say it. I was like, forget it. And I would just, and I would beat myself out of it. It caused like a little anxiety, but I would never say it, so, um, I think before I was... I had a... it was 12, I wanted to come out, but it was just not the right timing, and like I said before, wasn't it. I didn't feel like I had enough support, but.

What if my emotions did the best of me and I couldn't handle the reactions from family members 'cause that's the only support I had at the time. But it wasn't the support I was looking for it. Like that comforting support where you can count on me any time, any day, any hour. It was just never there, so, 12 was when I wanted to come out, but it just never happened at the time. And then high school was when I officially came out.

Um. And it was to my best friend. And the thoughts before was, is, because he asked me; it was because I said, "Let me just, I'm old enough." Worst case scenario is we'll lose our friendship and I'll be upset, but I'll get over it, and if that's the case, that's going to be a lesson I'm going to learn in life because once you're out, you're going to continue; all this has to come out. Especially if you don't have social networks today because then no one knows that you're like; you're established that way, and then, you have to see a new family member, a new family, oh, by the way, this is my situation.

Then you have to wait for the reaction, whether it's, like, immediately or a processed reaction, but the thought before was, like, is, is it's gonna either be very well put together and the support is going to come how I want it, or I'm gonna lose friends, family, or I'm going to catch attitudes; I'm going to be frowned down upon. So, it wasn't, not really so much, like, nerve, it was more nervous than me being scared. It was just nervous like the, what if, part. This, I'm, I wasn't really scared about losing anything necessarily per se, because I could always make a new friend. I mean, I'll be the friend I originally had, but you can always start over.

Yeah. This is bef, this is my thoughts before I came out, so. This is what I anticipated kind of, like if worst case scenario, after coming out. So, it was just my thoughts before, but after coming out, after I had told my best friend, it was like, his reaction. I think it was his reaction that just made me so much more comfortable. Like, assuming that his view was the rest of the world's view, I just went on a rampage, like, oh my God, I can do this now. It's like, el, but, that's the

reasons I consider us brothers, that s-support I wanted, I needed, and because of that, it was comforting, and it allowed me to go on and say, okay, I'm old enough to say it to everyone else I see now.

So, if you assume yes, you're correct, if you ask I'll tell you, if you don't know, then you won't know. That's how, that's my philosophy today, and I'm gonna stick to it. But I have no problem saying it to people, and now my thoughts after me being black and gay, my first identity is being gay. People always talk about, um, diversity and things like that. And I never, my issues for being black is never relevant to me. Ever. I never experienced racism. If I did, it went right over my head because I wouldn't, I don't know what it looks like. But homophobia, you, I could clearly see what that looks like, and I'm grateful not to experience as much as other people who's had it worse than I did. Like, maybe me. But that's my first identity, so that's my afterthought of coming out is that I'll always have to be worried about being open. Being comfortable around certain people who weren't comfortable around me. And that's pretty much how it is.

**Question 3:** So tell me a little bit more about your first time coming out in school.

**Response:** So this is Thanksgiving break... and I think.... I didn't... it was towards the end of our senior year where people started knowing more, whether people were sharing that information amongst each other or cuz I didn't mess with anyone at my high school well...maybe, yeah... one person, but it was, it was secret.... It wasn't anything open, but other than that I wouldn't mess with anyone at my high school for the sole purpose of them finding out.

**Follow Up Question:** So when you said, um, you didn't really mess around in high school, um, can you tell me reasons why possibly you didn't...you decided not to disclose.

**Response:** uh... I didn't mess with anyone in my high school; it wasn't that I wasn't messing with all these people at my high school for the sole purpose of if I did mess with someone who would find out? And how would they find out? How fast it would spread? What would I do if they found out...It was just a domino effect of how would I save myself from...? I guess you can put the humiliation word in there or embarrassment... so rather than try to justify knowing that everyone already knew and so lie... it was just trying to keep my... um...blindsides protected so I could just not have to deal with it.

**Follow Up Question:** So you thought that if somebody found out you might be embarrassed?

**Response:** Yeah. Because in middle school... when I... like I... people some.... people would say that you become gay... and I can argue that probably a hundred times over... it's probably one of my biggest pet peeves, but... I knew I was gay for, I want to say, I was seven or eight I came to a realization of it and I got a beatin' for it 'cuz I told my grandmother... she was like "What?"... And I will never forget that day... that's another story... um... in middle school I would never get dressed for gym; I almost failed gym in middle school because I was so

insecure.... about me being gay so I... I think that because.... I think that they're going to think what I'm thinking... so in terms that means like "Oh my god I need to get undressed in front of all these boys"... Like they're all doing it so normal, but what about me? I'm the only one in here not... I'm not necessarily trying to look at them, but I'm afraid that if my eye twitches the wrong way I'm in trouble because they thought I was trying to look at them... so... it definitely was a stepping stone process.

**Follow Up Question:** So what were some of the challenges that you faced coming out in school for the first time?

**Response:** Being like peer pressured was a stepping stone and a challenge because it was like it was constant, constant, constant because I'm a social person so I would always go out to parties... blah blah blah... and go on but there was always peer pressure and then, like if it was like a social norm activity and I wasn't participating in it and like... boys would be boys... but "Oh we're about to go fuck some bitches"... I'm not into that obviously so I wouldn't go and then "Why aren't you going?" blah blah blah... so that was another thing... trying to be a part of the crowd, but I had to distance myself from that crowd because I'm not them... I don't participate in that.

**Follow Up Question:** So when people would say "Oh you know they're gonna go out and do things with females"... um.... And you didn't participate in that because that wasn't you... how did that make you feel?

**Response:** uh.... This goes back to probably like... fourteen, fifteen, sixteen... and it relates to this question to... um... trying to fit... like I... I wasn't a follower, but to try and fit in, to feel accepted knowing I had something to hide... that was probably the number one thing I would try and do anything for... to try and squeeze in... and it made me feel like, oh I'm like a loner number one... um... so what do I do?... um... sex with girls I'm not interested so I can't force myself.... Give me a molly... I guess I don't know... (laughs).... Um... I really don't, but other than that it just made me feel like I can never be myself... and be and have friends like real friends... Because I thought that by me not coming out and not being real, that was the only way I would keep friends.

**Follow Up Question:** How did you cope with the fact that you needed to distance yourself from your, from your friends because you weren't into the same things as they?

**Response:** Um. I literally sat in the house and was, like, semi-depressed, like, oh I can't hang out with my friends today cause I have to lie and pretend that I have something important to do, knowing I'm not doing worth anything, so. It's literally just lying and, like, beating myself up... because I wasn't ready to come out, so. That's pretty much just like a cycle of lying and then a semi-depression, and then recycling itself again.

**Follow Up Question:** Were there any challenges or negative consequences when you came out?

**Response:** Uh, my high school is relatively small. My high school's total population's like 400 people. I graduated with a class of 95 people. We're relatively small, and prior to me coming out, I had a friend. His coming out was just much more complicated. He just went about it, not saying that there's a right way to do it, but there is some, like, things that you could, like, go about much easier rather than... he was just a mess, like, he was, he was, it was, he had a thirst for attention. He just wanted things to go his way at the wrong time. It was just bad, but him coming out, people accepted him, even though he was just crazy about it. And it made it easier for me. And, like I give, I, I am grateful for that because he experienced what I could have experienced, but I think because how he went about it; he was in a relationship with someone who, um, who didn't want to be out, and he was the football player and everyone just knew, you know, stereotypes like that's just not supposed to be and stuff like that, so. Um.

That's why his situation was so much more 'crazy cause he wanted him to come out as well and he refused to, so it just drama, drama, drama, but at the end of the day, people still accepted it ...who he was, and he ran track and I also ran track, and so track is a big sport at my high school. And, like, football is. So, with us being the now, then and there superstars for the team; it was just, like, okay, you're doing this good, so we're going to accept you anyway because you're doing this good for the team and you're doing good for the school, and that's pretty much it. And it sucks to say that you're like, eye candy for a sport or for academics so we should accept you, but if you were in the corner reading a book by itself, we're not going to accept you. You get what I'm saying?

Uh. The only challenges there were, were coming out to the academic officials, or like the teachers at my high school. It was... that was the most challenging part.

**Follow Up Question:** Tell me a little bit more about that.

**Response:** Because they, for some reason, like, teachers are people too but they just, I guess assume at school they assume everything is black and white. Just strictly black and white. Everything just fits into its settings. There's no other, other way, so I had a coach that I was very close with, and I came out to him, and he was stunned, and he was just like, What? And then it was, like, okay, I have these tendencies that you can't ignore, so what do you mean, What? How are you surprised? Like his reaction was delayed. It probably took him, like, a total of a week for him to even bring up sexuality around me in general after I came out to him.

It was like an awkward situation at the time. It was my senior year and I think I told him during my, our senior trip; we have senior advisors and he was one of them, and they go on the trip with us. And we were in Disney, so it took almost the whole trip for him to even talk to me again about sexuality. It was just the



most awkward thing, in that thought I lost a great connection. But, I guess, a mentor, and I just thought, okay, well is it one of the sacrifices I have to make for wanting to be who I am, and at the end of the day, he came back around and we had this great connection.

So that's probably like the biggest challenge because my city's small. So I did a lot for the community, and with my name being out there as a community, like, supporter, and then having sexuality attached to that, it's like, uh, then you have like a big, um, religion population in our city too. So it's my, my only challenge is having to confront them and them knowing, and then being, like, uneasy about certain things; not that I've gotten that, but that's always in my forefront of my mind. What if they're not comfortable, so they won't ask me to show up at this event, help out with, because they don't want me there because of my sexuality? That's the only really challenge that I have.

**Follow Up Question:** What were some supports available to you when you came out for the first time in school?

**Response:** It's not direct support... it's more so support you have to seek... and that's basically in a nutshell counseling.

**Follow Up Question:** and so if you were having a problem you would have to be the one that actively sought help...

**Response:** And because being young... afraid... slightly gullible... you're not gonna go necessarily.. go and actively seek the help you think you need because you wouldn't even know where to look and then you would be afraid to be sitting in an office to be judged... "Oh I know why you're in there"... or you're afraid to be seen walking with someone to go somewhere for help... "Oh I know why you went there"... It's just all about protecting yourself, but at the same time hurting yourself knowing you need some type of outlet.

**Follow Up Question:** How would people know who to talk to or seek counseling out if they were looking for that?

**Response:** Because... when you're in... it's like a social worker or a guidance counselor at my high school... um...; it's the same thing... and you go to talk to them about anything. But when you have friends and you don't have any relevant problems that they know about... then it's like why were you in there? You didn't talk to me about that or why did you go? We could've talked it out and stuff like that... so then they assume the worse when it's already a questionable thing about someone's sexuality.

**Follow Up Question:** Can you tell me any reasons why you hadn't used those?

**Response:** Because... I don't think I'm normal in the head, but I think I did just enough like a fine job of... like... waiting and protecting myself from coming out and... when I went to do it... and... who the support I had after I came out. I was protecting myself from peers.

**Follow Up Question:** Do you have thoughts about how to support students who decide to come out for the first time in school?

**Response:** I think that if you're going to have counselors in general, I feel they should all be trained across the board, period, for so many things. You know how you have CPR training. You can include some support for gay students in there somewhere along the lines, or have a counselor specifically for coming out students. Which I don't necessarily agree with because when you have that specific counselor, students who do go, they feel singled out. People know that you're going to that counselor for a specific reason, so. Maybe having training across the board all the way for these counselors would be better or maybe....About the sexuality and coming out.

Or, um, having a mentor kind of thing. A mentor program. They have mentor programs all over, like bit brother, big sister. I would prefer someone that's straight that supports the gay community rather than someone who's not necessarily too big on it because it's the mentee's not going to get the best out of the program, or if this was a program get the best out of it. But the mentor shouldn't, wouldn't be that much older, maybe like a eight-year age gap maybe the, a little bit, I don't know. Just something where they can feel comfortable cuz we have all these other mentor programs out there. We have the PAL program; we have the YMCA; we have Big Brother/Big Sister, and we have so many more that I don't even know about, but they're out there, so why not include coming out students?

**Follow Up Question:** Okay. So it sounds to me almost more direct counseling, where people know, right? And then those counselors, um, having the proper training to deal with sexuality and coming out, of mentorship with older people whether its gay or straight, but hopefully, um, straight mentors that are supportive of the gay community. Is there anything else?

**Response:** Um. I feel like or a facility. I don't really like one spot, one place, one person cuz it feels like you're excluding everyone, and then everyone knows why you're going there, and, I just, but, like you know how we have Planned Parenthood and they educate women about safe sex; we can have the same thing for coming out students.

**Follow Up Question:** Like in the office or something?

**Response:** In the office or like a facility like out in the streets, like they have for other places. Anywhere... wouldn't necessarily matter to me. Just because it's just somewhere these coming out students can go.

And have their parents come in. If their parents understand, now with the religious part, you'll probably won't get that many families coming in case they're really strong about their religion, but overall, just having families come in with their children or having the children come in. It's a breakdown like, "Oh this is what your child is going through, this is how they are." "This is what they

feel.” Just basically an explanation for them, everyone to feel comfortable, rather than it’s just to be a sheltered little thing.

Because the child’s gonna do what they want regardless. Or they’re going to experiment, go or not, or go about finding things their own way. It’s more so the family support ...their caretakers support because they’re the ones that’s trying to shun it away.

**Follow Up Question:** How did it make you feel that your school didn’t provide the supports for those students who disclosed, or wanted to disclose?

**Response:** I feel like it wasn’t a relevant issue for them. We have a nurse. We have health problems in the school that’s relevant to them. We have an administrator. The students who are bad, that’s relevant to them. But we don’t have an educator or a counselor, or a consoler for coming out students because I feel like it’s not relevant to them. Maybe an example, maybe something bad would happen by bullying to the extent where it’s a coming out student that they’re bullied so much that they go to the board and they go to the police, where then there has to be a cause for it to be in effect for something to happen, but I feel like it’s not relevant to them, and I feel like it, that’s in many cases in many places, if there’s no support for that whatsoever; I feel like it’s not relevant. Or they don’t believe in it. Or they could care a less about it. That’s how I feel.

**Question 4:** After you came out for the first time in school, how was life for you?

**Response:** uh... I felt like I would jump off the Empire State Building and survive... honestly, it was a great feeling coming out to my best friend... it was... the fact that I came out to him first... whether it was optional or not... it was kinda... I was kinda of in a position where I thought it was the right moment to answer.... Being truthful without... having to say no then have to resurface that question again... and it felt really amazing and like now it’s not... when we talk about relationships, it’s not “What do you think about her?” It’s “what do you think about him?” Or “Who are you talking to now?” And it’s like a regular conversation between two guys if they were hetero... its just a hetero and a homosexual now... it’s a regular thing we... and we’ve gotten so much closer because of it and he shows so much more respect for the gay community... and its funny because before I came out to him he tweeted one day... “If you’re gay be gay, like don’t let that shit dictate... Don’t let that shit, like others dictate what you do”... and he had, like 57 likes on this one tweet and I was like “Oh my god what’s going on?” I thought he was trying to tell me that he was gay... and in reality he was sub-tweeting to get me to come out... (laughs).... I was like “Oh, wow, now that makes sense”... so and it like I got really happy and I appreciate him a lot because... I just... I mean in high school even coming out to him it was... it was still. “I told once you come out you have to keep coming out... it’s an ongoing process... he said, But you came out to me so its fine...” I said “No”... you’re only thinking that because you’re not in my shoes... and I said I might come out to like... cuz we ran track together in high school so I might come out to our coach and I don’t know...” He said, “Ok, he’s like 50 .. I don’t know what he’s gonna say...” I don’t know what everyone else is gonna say so it’s just all about still protecting, but it was a really good feeling... it was the greatest feeling, but it also it was

still being skeptical and what to say around people... how to act around people... and things like that.

**Question 5:** Why did you decide to come out?

**Response:** uh... this is referring back to my grandmother... uh... I think I was seven or eight; I had a dream... I don't know why I was dreaming about this at this age, but I had a dream about a guy and that I ended up liking him and I don't...and like I just felt like I liked him, but it was different.. it was new... at the age you don't really know what's going on... and I was telling my sister and she's a year younger than me so... she was like six or seven at the time and um... and she's like "You like this guy in your dream?" And she repeated it... and my grandmother heard her and she was like "You said what?" she's like.... And then she used the f-a-g-g-o-t word... and then she started going off on her little spiel about how that's gay and that's not acceptable, that's no... she's from Georgia... and she's now...now she's currently accepted me.... But at the time she... um... she's from Georgia; she's just like "No... you can't be doing that." And then.... Maybe like ten minutes after her whole spiel of yelling I got a beatin'... I was just a bad child, so I was always prone to beatings cuz I didn't learn my lesson the first time, but... um... after that it made me afraid to come out... (pause)... because had it been a more welcoming thing... like "Oh yea okay, we can work on it... It'll.... We're gonna get you, I guess, help."... Cuz most parents, families believe when a child is coming out at a young age that they need help... that there's something automatically wrong... but it was never... I would have preferred medicine at the time, so that way you wouldn't shunning me in... rather helping me release myself out, but that helped me become afraid so I wouldn't come out... and then.. um... going into my freshmen year of high school, it was just like it was always back and forth, back and forth... like I could never be completely happy.... Jim and Jane... Jim and Jane get to walk down the street holding hands, but I can't because I'm going to be criticized or talked about or something like that... I'm not solely that I'm worried about being talked about cuz it's gonna happen whether I do something good or bad, regardless, but it was so much more... Who's to say I can take it for week 1, but week 2 I might just go crazy.... And then I always read about people jumping off bridges, hanging themselves, cutting themselves, and... it's a shame, it's really sad so that puts me more into a shell like "Oh I'm not ready to come out".... and then Monday before it, even coming out to my best friend... I was starting to reach a point where I was just ready because I was almost an adult... What could you tell me at that point? I didn't have to deal with "You can't live in my house" or "You can't do this, that and the third around me"... What could you tell me? So I was ready to come out that point and then I came out to best friend... then it was easier.... It was like... a lot was taken off my plate... after coming out to him and then.... After that seeing how he reacted... and how welcoming he was and how nothing didn't change between us... it just... made me ... I just took it the wrong way, but I... assumed that the whole world would act like that... and so far most of it has been like that.... Will I encounter something negative? Probably... maybe the world will change at the point where I'll just... it'll skip right over, but... I decided to come out because it was time.

**Follow Up Question:** So, kind of going back to your grandmother. Um. At the age of seven/eight, um, you had mentioned you received a beating, um, because

you came out, or that you were talking to your sister and she, kind of, overhead, and she was, like, what? Right? Um. And so as a result, you got a beating. But what do you think specifically were the reasons for the beating?

**Response:** Um. It's crazy cause this memory just sticks like glue. ...glue. Um. The reasons for the beating is because I don't even know if it's like how she was raised or her traditional beliefs, or whatever you my call it. I don't know what it is, but I think her fear is she grew up in the 70s and 80s when she just grew up in a period where being gay wasn't acceptable at all through society... AIDS hit. And then gay had these bad norms and stereotypes, and then you had bath houses, and then you had swinger states, and everything that it was just so much going on that it just ... To sum it all up in one, homosexuality was just frowned upon for so many reasons that I think the beatings were to instill in me, like, this is not good. You cannot be gay. And I was just thinking basically her being afraid, and then fear for me let her turn to instill that in me to be afraid myself so that I would never have to be open and inexperienced with people's experience during her time when she was growing up and seeing what was going on for that.

**Follow Up Question:** So, um, how did you feel afterwards, after the beating? Like, what, what were some of your emotions?

**Response:** From what I can remember, after the beating, I know it was like hysterically crying. I know that. I do know that. Um. I just know I was confused because that's the first time I've ever learned what gay was. That's the first time I ever learned the term. I never really got a definition of it, but I could pretty much sum up with guy and a guy as a big "no" at the time, so that's where I really much got from it. But I just know I was confused. I was hurt physically and emotionally. And that was pretty much it that I can remember after the beating. And it was just something that, as a child, you, first time experiencing it, you don't want to experience it again, especially when you're hurting physically and emotionally, and so you – that's when your defense mechanisms start building as a child. You, especially from bad experiences, and that's why. That's pretty much what I thought after.

**Question 6:** What else has been important to you during the coming out process that we haven't discussed?

**Response:** uh.... (pause)... it's just like an overall scheme thing, kinda thing... uh... it will be, not necess... the support I'm not necessarily worried about because if you can get support whether it's from organization or individual.... Or your family... its important... any type of support is important... I know that everyone's looking for support from someone they can relate to automatically like their family or something like that, but you're not always get it that way... so I feel like support in general is.. um... (pause).... Important and... um... like the SPECTRUM that we have... the um.... Gay straight alliance on my campus. I.... I appreciate what they do... but...it's not enough... it's not enough.

**Evan**

**Question 1:** Tell me your understanding of the coming out process.

**Response:** Well at first... uh... when I first... its one ... just come out of the closet... so when people say “coming out”... it’s like finally being able to express who you are... and being able to.. um... feel comfortable in yourself, in your own skin, so basically its like coming out as a new person. I was thinking of that or like being born, reborn again like... you’re this way first, then now you’re coming out a whole other person to people... so... that’s my... and I had to look it up on the internet when I was younger to figure out what is coming out and stuff like that.

**Question 2:** Tell me about when you came out for the first time.

**Response:** Well... when I first came out I didn’t come out; my mom found a letter... uh... I was talking to some boy who lived around the corner and I remember this day... talking about to this boy who lived around the corner and she found a letter of me just confessing my love... like: “Oh my god I love.... Like I miss you... like I know we can’t see each other, but this is a letter just to let you know I live around the corner” and stuff like that... and I thought I left it in like where he said leave it at, to find out my mom had it... she read it to me she’s like “Are you gay?”.... and I denied it... den.... Couple years later I told her, “Mom I’m gay”... she’s still is like “I don’t believe you” because my parents are... pastors... uh my grandmother’s a pastor; my mom is a minister.. so basically I was raised in the church, so being gay was just like a no stricken... uh... they’re like apostolic Christians so it like down South, like deep in the South type of Christian... so when I first came out... she denied it... didn’t believe me... and I... actually came out like four times before I even went to high school... for her to say “Oh I’m gay.”.... and den one day she was like “Are you gay?”.... I was like “Yes I’m gay”.... I’m not gonna answer the question again... and that was it.

**Follow Up Question:** How did that make you feel like that she found the letter?

**Response:** My heart dropped... cuz at first... my heart dropped because I thought gave the.. put the letter where I was supposed to and left it in a secret mailbox... and I thought I left it and then she comes in my room... she’s like “What’s this?”... and I was like... (pause)... like I felt like I was on a rollercoaster that’s about to drop and... it was just like the emotions.. I started sweating... she’s like “Are you gay?”... At first I told her “no”... then she asked me again... she’s like “I’m gonna ask you again are you gay?”... I was like “yes.”... She’s like... She didn’t believe me.

**Follow Up Question:** What were the reasons for saying “no” the first time when she asked you the first time?

**Response:** Because I knew it was bad... cuz like I was raised in the church... you know what I’m saying? So like my Christian values were... at that time I was young, I was always around...my grandmother’s a pastor. And I’m always...I used to be always be around her so I knew like being gay wasn’t gonna be accepted in my family... at a young age I already knew that... so just saying “no” would get me clear view just to start sneaking around again so they wouldn’t be

on my... my.. my behind... even though when I said “yes”... they were still on my behind, but I still got away with some of the stuff.

**Follow Up Question:** How has that impacted, you know, like your religion and your beliefs on that whole, on the coming out process?

**Response:** Um... for me... now that I am a gay guy...and I still believe in...uh... like... god and still go to church like faithfully... I just feel like it's not about... it's your own connection with... uh... your faith so like say I am gay, but its like.. I don't believe that god is gonna constantly keep judging me because I'm gay cuz like I already told him like... me and him... like I pray to God... I don't know about some people, but like I pray to God and I told him... “Oh yeah, I know I'm gay.. I know it's a sin, but I don't wantchu to like, cast down on me.” And he's like... like any bad... like harm or something like that... and it's just a connection like.. .my religion is still the same... my grandmother still loves me... she still preaches to me. My mom... that's another story, but... my grandmother.. like after I told my grandmother... she... said “I'mma still pray for you... I'mma pray that”.... they say this to me all the time... “I'mma pray the gay out of you... we still gonna love you, but... we still gonna pray the gay out of you.”

**Follow Up Question:** Did your mom find out first and that's how you came out and then you told your cousins? Or did you tell your cousins first and then you mom found the letter?

**Response:** My mom found the letter. She still didn't believe me... and then that's when I was coming out the four times, but why after I keep coming out the four times.. I'm telling little people here and there, like... I trust like my cousins that are my age... because they understand like... “Oh hey I'm gay; you can't change it”... and they love me... like my little cousin and them; they understand, like “Oh okay”... I know we can't change who you are... you're happy. I remember when I was coming out... the depression I was under because I was trying to hide it... trying... uuuhh.... Deny it, not even deny it, but trying to hide it from my family... not have them see me with people... dress a certain way... talk a certain way.... That's why I was into football so they wouldn't like...

**Follow Up Question:** Before you came out?

**Response:** Before I came out... and... I was depressed.... And then I started telling my cousins like “Oh I'm gay”... I'll go hang out with dem... I'll be myself... they'll see how happy I was... so it was like.... It was a different... like I feel like... it's different... different generations in my family... cuz the young generation like my age... understand like being gay isn't so like big or big as a sin as the older generation, like my grandmother, my mother, my aunts... and them who raised like by the bible or in down South that you can't be gay... You can't have a gay son... man takes... provides for wife... uh... they have to reproduce and stuff like that.

**Follow Up Question:** To cover up?

**Response:** Yeah... to cover up... to be like... Cuz like I felt like... my parent... my mom was more interested when I was datin' girls... so... she was more showing more attention to the fact that, "Oh I'm dating girls". She thought she was having a grandson or grandkid... whatever... and then... I told her like sophomore year, like "Ok... like I'm really gay"... (laughs)... "I can't do this no more."

**Follow Up Question:** Because she kept on not believing?

**Response:** Not believing... and she was more excited that I was datin' girls, but literally I'm really trying to show you like these are... like I wouldn't have girls over. I'll have more of my guy friends over, saying these are my.. my friends... and they're really people that I'm like messing with. Girls that I brought over were like fake girlfriends or that come around once in a blue moon... I wanted them to so my mom could just get off my case.

**Follow Up Question:** All right, all right. Um, so, um, talking about your mom, how did it make you feel that your mom kept denying your sexual orientation and that it took, you know, you coming out literally 4 times, um, before she really finally, um, you can kind of say, "accepted" it?

**Response:** Um, cuz it hurts because you know she says tell the truth, tell the, like I said they say, tell the truth; we still love you, and then when you tell the truth and they say you're lying, or they saying, Oh I don't believe you; it's just like then what the hell you tell me to tell the truth for? I might as well just keep lying and say that I'm straight because I'm sitting here trying to tell you I'm gay. I'm trying to tell you the truth about who I am, and the things that I've been doing behind your back and the people that I talk to. You're not going to see me with a girl, so I want to let you know. And to see that you keep saying, "I don't believe you." That's not what you want, no, after you gotta, I keep ... you know how embarrassing it is to keep coming out 4 times and somebody keep saying they don't believe you. It's embarrassing because you're like, how you don't believe me when I'm telling you, like how you don't believe I'm not what I say I am, like you're not me. It still, it hurts, I'm still hurting now, but I just have to, it's days when I just get upset because I'm just like, I have barely nobody to talk to. I can't go to my mom and talk about stuff, so, it hurts

**Follow Up Question:** How did it make you feel once you finally disclosed?

**Response:** I felt free...like I felt like a whole... (pause)... whole...like how they say?...uuuumm... a whole weight just fell off... like after I finally said "Mom I'm gay... I'm serious"... like I had to really be like "Mom no" like... so she's like basically I told them I'm gay... "So you like boys?"... "Yes"... "So...you're gonna be datin' boys?"... That's all the questions nothing else... "So you're datin' boys?".... "Yes".... "You're serious about this?"... "Yes"... "You know that's a sin, right?".... I'm like, "Yeah I do"..... "You know.... This is not going to look kindly in God's eyes"... I'm like "okay"... "You know you gotta tell your uncles and your cousins and 'em"... so that's how it went... "Are you gay? Are



you serious? Now you gotta tell your family because you told me... now you got to tell your family.”

**Follow Up Question:** How did that make you feel that she was outing you?

**Response:** Because I just... I just felt like it was a spiteful thing... cuz I'm like “Oh so you're gonna tell me so now I want you to tell everybody because I know it was hard for you to tell me”... you understand what I'm saying?... so... my mom... the things sometimes my mom like... does stuff to... a level up... so like say if I... like me, me being gay she told me it hurt her. So... now she's like “I know coming out is a hard thing so now I want you to go tell your uncles”... who the people that...my uncles are the guys that raised me.... Even though I told them, it was a hard thing for me to do... but I didn't get to... like after... after I told my mom... I took a...couple of years... for me to tell her... for me to tell my family, but... my mom didn't care because she told them.... before I could...so when I finally told... came out it was like “Oh your mom told me”... so it was just like... “Oh so then why.... Put me in such a situation where I had to come out if you already know”... cuz she like “She's raising a man”... that's her favorite quote... “I'm raising a man... men don't hide from their problems. They go face it upfront.”

**Follow Up Question:** How did you think your family would react?

**Response:** I knew how my family would react, they wouldn't accept it and from til, til to, still to this day they some, some of them don't accept the fact that I'm gay because my grandmother's a pastor; my mom is a minister so I, I was raised in a church. So, being raised in a church, you know, they'll say, so you know that's against, uh, God's, uh, what God want. So, that's the first thing I came to my mind is, like I can't tell my parents cuz like I go to church every Sunday; we in Bible Study. I was just, Sunday I would be a straight boy, Tuesday imma be a straight boy, then Monday through Friday, whatever, I would just be gay (laughs), so. Just know when I go to church I can't be gay and just put on a straight, and put on a mask, because they really don't accept me.

**Follow Up Question:** And to this day you're saying that they still don't?

**Response:** Yeah, they still don't. Some of them, they still have their sly comments; they still come up to me, like, you know you're not supposed to be gay. This is not what God wants for you, and it's hard, but you know I got friends that it was surprising that the people that I thought wasn't gonna accept me accepted me with open arms and said I'm glad that you're telling me the truth.

But when I came out and told the truth, because you know they say the truth, your parents always say, tell the truth; I don't care what it is, tell the truth; imma still love you. And then you tell them the truth and you see them, like, Oh okay, you say you love me, but you got so much to say about me behind my back.

**Follow Up Question:** Okay, so, um, how does it make you feel that even to this day, and you came out several years ago, um, that your family still doesn't accept

your sexual orientation or they might have those sly remarks or, uh, things like that? How does it make you feel that your family doesn't accept you?

**Response:** At first I was angry, like I was really, really, angry, but it's all in love cuz it's what they was raised. It was, it's what, before I was gay, it's what was gonna, I was gonna be either a deacon or somebody with a title in the church, but then I just know it's in love because it's what they taught; it's what they believe in and I can't change what they believe in. It's just the fact that I just don't want it to constantly be an effect on me, or how I think about myself because I don't want to hear it all the time.

**Follow Up Question:** What were some of your challenges when you first came out to your family? Were there any challenges?

**Response:** I got ignored for like three years, like freshmen year through junior year I got ignored by my mom.... My brother ignored me... he told me recently he hated me because of that... he felt like I took all the attention away from him because I came out to be gay... you get what I'm saying? That's just like my intention wasn't to take attention from nobody... I was just trying to let people know like, "This is who I am... I'm not gonna bring a girl around... I'm getting married to a guy; if you're not coming to my wedding let me know now."

**Follow Up Question:** How did it make you feel that your mom paid more attention to you when you were going out with females?

**Response:** I, it was the norm. Like I felt like she was following, like my mom is, I feel like my mom is the norm of a Christian woman. Like, yes you're going out with a woman. Where you going? I'll give you money for the date. You know what I'm saying? It was, she paid more attention to my brother going out with; she pays more attention to my brothers and my sisters now because they go out with boys and my brother go out with girls, and it's just like okay you wanna have a relationship with them like that, go ahead. It's not gonna, it's affecting me yes, I'm not gonna be, I'm upset yes, I still love you yes, but I'm not going to be, pe-; I have, people ... there's gonna be somebody who's gonna be there.

**Follow Up Question:** What was going through your mind and how did you feel when your mom said you hurt her when you decided to come out?

**Response:** I started crying because that wasn't my intention. It's still not my intention to hurt her; it was just my, the fact that women do not, are not something that I want to be with. They are fine to be friends with, but I don't want them laying my bed (laughs), but it's like, I don't wanna; I didn't wanna hurt her, and to say that I'm hurting you because I'm following my heart, it's just like you're hurting me because you left my dad, but you followed your heart.

**Follow Up Question:** How did it make you feel being ignored by your mom and then when you were told by your brother that he hated you? How did you deal with being ignored?

**Response:** When I first started realizing she started ignoring me I, I, I ghosted myself. We could walk past each other without touching each other. We could be

in the kitchen together . We could walk past each other and not touch each other. You know you can be in the kitchen and, you know, you bump into somebody. We got so got at it, it was like a maze game, like we would not get into the way, bump into each other. If she was by something that I needed I would wait. If we had to go somewhere in the same place I would go with somebody else before I would get in the car with her because I'm like, "You're going ignore me, I don't have to be in your presence."

**Follow Up Question:** How did it make you feel?

**Response:** Abandoned, like, like it's a song called A Motherless Child. That's how I felt. Like I didn't have my dad and now when I finally making the decision to open up and be clean, it makes my mom want to not be around me, so I felt like I was just by myself.

**Follow Up Question:** You mentioned that you had depression and suicidal thoughts. Did you have suicidal thoughts when group up?

**Response?** I ran away a couple times. Whoever was gonna take me in they house for a couple of days.... Friends and complete strangers. And that's where the, um, (laughs), I'm not gonna say it again, but you know what I'm talking about. I don't wanna say that again. I don't wanna even put that out there no more, but that's when that started to come apart.

**Follow Up Question:** Do you have any suicidal thoughts now?

**Response:** Just a lot of stuff that's been happening with me and my family and me in general, so, I took 5 oxycontin. I woke up in a panic and started throwing up. I took them, I started to daze out; I was like okay, it's working, and I just went into a very deep sleep, then out of nowhere.... I started just throwing up. I'm really over killing myself already, like I'm really over trying to do it myself. If it's not meant to be, it would've happened already after the 5 oxycontin, which were very strong, it would've happened. After that time I tried to cut myself. I would've killed myself, died; nothing happened. It didn't go deep enough and that wasn't the type of pain I wanted to let, uh, feel when I was killing myself. I just wanted to sleep. Because I didn't want to feel pain, because I already felt it. I just wanted to sleep for the rest of ... that's it. Find me blue.

**Follow Up Question:** How did it make you feel and what were you thinking when you used to participate in extracurricular activities in order to avoid speaking to your mother?

**Response:** Uh, it was a, it just was a time for me not to think about it. Like I get upset when I gotta come home. It's like you know how people get excited, like yes I'm going home; I'm like no.

**Follow Up Question:** Because of the relationship that you have with you mom?

**Response:** Home supposed to feel welcoming. When I walk in my house I feel so cold, it's not warm, it's annoying, but I did those activities so I could keep my mind off suicidal thoughts or depression or trying to find places where I'm not

supposed to find myself and places where I'm not supposed to be at or ... and I found myself at many of those places where I'm not supposed to be at because I didn't have nothing to do, because I didn't want to go home. I'd be out of school at 3:00 and just walk around Jersey City 'til like 6:00, telling my mother I got practice or something.

**Follow Up Question:** How does that make you feel that they changed their, their attitude toward this whole disclosure and sexual orientation?

**Response:** (crying) Because I'm smiling now because me and my sister, both my sisters, just had this conversation because I was on Netflix and I was watching a gay movie, and they were like, you know I love you right, and I was just like you know when you guys were younger I felt like you and my sisters, you 2 were gonna follow mommy, and making me feel like y'all didn't want to be around me, but it's ...it's just big relief because I love my sisters and my brother and even though my mom and I have a rough and rocky relationship, it's just like those 3 people are always there to make sure that, like I know that I'm loved by them and it's just, it's really, I'm just happy about it because I thought it would've been a whole other situation because you know if your mom is upset, you upset; if your mom don't like it you don't like it. And to see that my sisters aren't following their footsteps and it's like they accept it and the only thing they say is don't kiss in front of me. I'm like, "Well, you can't come to my wedding then (laughs). They're like,"I wasn't coming anyway." I was like, "You're coming", and we joke. And it's just a relief because I'm just like I know I have...., I know I have people that really do care even if one person doesn't.

**Follow Up Question:** Tell me a little bit more.

**Response:** Because, all right I've always said, real men, (laughs) like gay men are real men because they can accept who they like, you know. Some straight people always wanna like, I feel like straight people follow the norm. It's always the same thing, but I feel like for a gay man to confess who he is and be okay and stay true to himself, that's the strongest man of all, to just confess and just stay true. And I feel like all the stuff that we always go through and we still go through, like I could walk down the street and get called a name, it just we are strong people and we stand next to each other. We like the Great Wall of China. You can't get through us (laughs).

**Follow Up Question:** Especially in your family, it sounds like it, it was a, religion in your family is a big part, so my question would be, "Do you think your religion has played a big part in your understanding of the coming out process and how?"

**Response:** Uh, because in the Bible it says a man who lives with a man is an abomination, so at first I was just like, wait, is he saying (laughs), I don't, I, I, I don't know, cuz I just look at it differently now; cuz as I say God wouldn't put me on this earth to not follow who I love and believe who I love, so if he did write it was like 20 centuries from now, so he didn't know how the world was going to be after he made Adam and Eve, so you never know. You know people change.

What if God changed? Maybe that's the Bible that he left here, yes that's what he thought in the beginning, but you know after time go past....people change, so.

**Question 3:** Tell me or talk to me about your first time coming out in school.

**Response:** Oh I was gay! laughs)... High school and school was different from me being at home... I came out as "bi" first freshmen year of high school, and all the girls they still loved me you know.... I was still friends with all the girls... I had a girlfriend. She was ok with the whole fact... but... I used to... cuz the thing I played football. I came out... it wasn't like coming out... it was like... "Oh I'm bisexual." It's like winter break, I came back and was like "Okay I'm bi"... and then my friends is like, "You're not bi you're gay"... and I'm like "no.. I'm bi".... So that was just like, uh it was just like a joke because at first I wasn't ready to come out and just to my friends like, "Yeah, I'm gay.. I don't know how you're gonna accept this"... so... the tester....I told them I was bi... just to see... their reaction.

**Follow Up Question:** So you thought that by saying you were "bi", it was... you wanted to see people's reaction versus if you say "you're gay, what do you think their reactions would have been?

**Response:** If I just blatantly came out and was like, "Oh I'm gay"... cuz I went to Tech... County Technical. It's a technical school and... basically... it wasn't a lot of gay people in the school... and my freshmen year... it was some senior gay guys, but you wouldn't know who they were... and... I'm never been the type of person... like I don't like hiding who I am cuz I feel like that's the best side of me... it's like... "Oh you finally get to see the true Evan"... so... sophomore year... I mean freshmen year... cuz I didn't know who I... who people were... it's freshmen year of high school so I'm finally meeting new people from other grammar schools... all the people that I knew... who I went to grammar school with didn't go to the high school I went to so it was just like... I had to meet new friends... so I didn't want to lose those friends that I had... cuz I was becoming a popular kid for once... from the little geeky kid over there or that's Evan or you're gay I can tell... you know what I'm saying... so... that's why I started joining football... started joining sports so... the straight guys could attract to me so I could cover that up, so they wouldn't be like... cuz when I'm by myself you can definitely tell like, "Oh you're gay" by the way I walk like or you're gay... when I'm around a bunch of straight guys you really can't pick out a straight... a gay guy if he's acting straight around a bunch of straight guys.

**Follow Up Question:** What was your experience like coming out in school for the first time?

**Response:** It was rough... like high school coming out was rough because I was... really I was the only out gay guy at that time... like I feel like I had some cojones at the... winter break of that freshmen year... and finally was just I'm done, I'm gay, I'm sorry and... but... I still had a girlfriend... like I was gay, but some attraction to me still was attracted to this girl. Then we almost had a baby... then my grandmother was like, "No you're not having a baby"... and that ended it... (laughs)... then I was just like, "Ok"....so she just ruined that for me... the little

straightness that I had so I'mma just be gay like no more girls, no more nothing, I'm just gonna go straight to being gay.

**Follow Up Question:** what were you thinking about before and after you came out and when you came out in school?

**Response:** Well, for the, when I first came out I was nervous, like really, really nervous because I didn't und-, I didn't really understand what I was feeling at first. So, I was just going with an instinct like, oh you like boys, go see what it's about. And then afterwards I was just like, oh it wasn't that bad.

It's either people are going to accept who I am or just gonna, leave me alone cuz I'm not ... I was tired of hiding. It's too, it's hard trying to hide who you really are and you get angry cuz you can't be yourself and being angry all the time isn't fun.

**Follow Up Question:** What was going through your mind after you came out?

**Response:** I was just like, uhh, it was like a weight lifted off my shoulders cuz it was just so, it felt like after that that one word saying, "I'm gay" changed everything. I felt like my whole feelings and emotions changed after I told people like, "Oh I'm gay". It was just like a deep breath, a sigh of relief.

**Follow Up Question:** So, when you started coming out in school what was going through your mind before?

**Response:** Um, when I came out of school I really didn't care, I was just being me. I was being Evan and I wasn't thinking about what people was going to think about me in high school. I was just thinking about just can't get back to my mother.

**Follow Up Question:** So how about what ended up or what were you thinking afterwards?

**Response:** Afterwards? Um, afterwards seeing how many people accepted me in school it was almost like, oh okay, um, I was thinking bad about it. Well if nobody accept me I don't care, but to see that people really was like, oh we would rather you tell me that you were gay than try to hide it.

And that took, that was a big thing too because I was afraid that people wouldn't like me or treated me different because I don't have time for bullying (laughs).

**Follow Up Question:** What were some of the challenges when you came out for the first time in school?

**Response:** Finding acceptance because... being gay now just... just...

**Follow Up Question:** Accepted by whom?

**Response:** The student body, people, teachers because... now were starting to accept it, gay marriage and stuff like that, but when I went to school which was in 2009... it wasn't... people were still... you still get bullied. That's what I mean

when I was in grammar school... like I was a little bit too flamboyant for some of the guys so I used to get bullied.

**Follow Up Question:** When you were in grammar school?

**Response:** In grammar school... so when I went to high school... I wasn't that flamboyant cuz I had that experience to grow to become like young little... little boy, but it was still like trying to find out where I fit in at... what group of people would accept me for me... but then that's when I found out dancing.. because that's... that's what I'm saying dancing took up a big part of that coming out process in high school too because it allowed me to express myself... to people not thinking of me as "Oh that's gay Evan..... as oh that's the boy that can dance amazing."

**Follow Up Question:** Were there any other challenges?

**Response:** um... finding that... finding out how, where to fit in at... still being able to be true to myself without trying to like hide it constantly.

**Follow Up Question:** So you mentioned about when you came out in school that there were people that made comments.

**Response:** Yes, especially being a football player and being gay, I was always getting called names. Their favorite word was the F-bomb, that's the only one, that's only word people really know I think. I feel like that's the only word people really think that hurts gay people when they call us the F-bomb, and I'm saying the F-bomb because I'm not gonna say it, F-word that rhymes with maggot (laughs), but um ... they'll say it my face. I hang around a bunch of girls, they like you're being an F-bomb; I'm like okay. Like they, people, it's not the fact that they said it, it's just the simple fact that like I could be anywhere. I could walk down the hall and somebody feel like they want to say it today they gonna say it; somebody see my face they gonna say it. It was random times. I never knew when I was gonna hear the F-word from somebody in my school, but then as time got, kept going sophomore year, junior year, and they seeing how cool I am, how all the girls wanna be around me it's just like, "Oh okay, let's make him my friend." I'm like yeah, you could benefit, but you not gonna be my close friend, but I've got some girlfriends that, a lot of girlfriends.

**Follow Up Question:** How did it make you feel that people were, when you would hear those words?

**Response:** At first I was upset, I was really upset, and then I watched, I talked to my music teacher, Mr. Lopez, and he was, like people... I feel like that's where I get this confidence from because, he was like... people are always gonna have something to say. Before you, they used that on everyone. Before you they used it on every gay person that... they thought it was a sickness or mental illness to be gay. It was just like how I felt, I was upset. Freshman year coming out, not even really coming out, but having people call me gay and you don't even know I'm gay, yes it really hurts, but sadness makes you stronger, right.

**Follow Up Question:** How did that make you feel when people would make those comments?

**Response:** Uh, words hurt harder than somebody hitting me, to me, so I just like, it hurts, yes it does hurt, I'm not gonna lie. When people say something to me it hurts me, but I can't wallow or is that the word? Yeah, I don't even know if that's the word, but I can't sit there and be upset. I could be upset yes, if I'm playing in my mind that somebody called me that a bunch of times, yes.

Yes, I am depressed sometimes, yes, but it's just like I can't get upset. I used to when I was, like freshman and sophomore year you're immature and people's words, I used to, I remember I cried once. Like yes, I cried, plenty of times. I felt like I was alone. Like almost got kicked out of high school a bunch of times, but we can't be upset because this is the choice I made and people gonna have they opinion.

**Follow Up Question:** What were some of the supports available to you when you came out for the first time in school? Were there any supports?

**Response:** He was... (laughs)... Mr. Lopez was the music teacher... and... he picked me out of the group and this is why.... Cuz I came to him; I was a computer science major... and... he was going... he was doing Hairspray for the school play... and the dance auditions came up...and I danced... no dance training, no nothing... he was like "It's just something... like it's a glow about you that I'm loving." He's like, come to me early in during the...uuhhhh... come to school earlier we'll talk; I'm going to transfer you from... computer science to dance. We had a conversation; he looked at me and was like "Are you ok?"... cuz like I said I was going through a depression because I'm just like... I'm still sad because like my mom is treating me different because I'm gay... still at this time my mom is still treating me different cuz I'm gay... I came out to her before I came out freshmen year of high school... freshmen year of school, but still getting treated different at my house and... my free... in my house... and the only time I felt accepted was when I went to school and not at all the time accepted, but where I felt like I could be free.

**Follow Up Question:** What is some of that information?

**Response:** Safe sex... he told me about safe sex. He taught me about... um... if I'm going to be active being tested every six months... talked about don't be... the process of getting HIV... if you're gonna get it this is what's going to happen... this is just not the gay disease... stuff like that. Um. Being able to be a proud black gay man at that.... because I used to be... ashamed... like I... a lot of the stuff that... like a lot of the times like a little bit of me still felt ashamed being gay because I was black and my... the stuff that I learned from my parents... and he saw that... and that's why I appreciate him because he... that's why I mean I'm not in the closet anymore because he finally pulled me out... like you have to accept it... you have to accept it if you want someone else to accept it.... You have to love yourself.... You want someone else to see that you don't care what they saying... because I used to let people's words... I said words



affecting more than people's... uh... putting their hands on them... cuz words strike this core... like what you say mean a lot like... it gives off pain like when you hear someone call you the f-word or you hear somebody across the street or driving the car saying the F-word or just throwing them out and it's just like... words back then hurt me... like it used to tear me apart... and he's just like "You can't let that affect you cuz you're going to constantly hear that." And I still hear it now and I used to... I tell people like... "Come up with something different", because I used to hear that when I was younger like I know I'm the f-word; I know I'm gay, but it's a difference of being a proud f-word than being somebody that hides it.

**Follow Up Question:** Were there any other supports besides Mr. Lopez?

**Response:** My friends Gary and Roger...we.... (laughs).... Uh Gary is Goldie... uh Roger is Tolula Tonsoffun and I'm Red Rider.... We made up drag personas; we used to become drag queens in the dance room and those.... And that's when I mean I didn't know any gay people because I was in the computer science room... and then transferring to the acting and performing side of things opened my eyes up to, "Oh there go Gary; there go Roger... wait you guys are gay".... Throw on some wigs and there you go become drag queens... and Rupaul.

**Follow Up Question:** Was there anything else available at your school?

**Response:** GSA. And I'm forgetting one of the biggest people that got me... and he's not even gay... Mr. Clark. He's a teacher who... (pause)... I love... ok, Mr. Lopez and Mr. Clark are the two teachers who took me under their wing cuz I was a rebel kid... and... (pause)... I misbehaved because I felt like I wasn't being understood as a gay person... so being at tech you can be kicked out... I almost got kicked out three times in high school cuz of the application process to get into that high school. I got kicked... almost got kicked out three times... anger management; they're like, "Why are you upset, like tell me why you're mad?" I'm just like "Cuz no one really understands"....Like really this is how I said it I'm like "Nobody really understands what I'm going through... I come to school and I feel like I'm accepted then I go home and I'm just getting bashed or... not being spoken to or ignored"... and Mr. Lopez... who is the music teacher and Mr. Clark, who was the advisor of GSA just took me under... like told me stuff... took me to my first musical.... brought me my first ballet slippers... like they were people who were there... who just supported me and understood like, "We understand what you're going through... this is what I went through", and shared their stories of "Oh yeah my parents kicked me out".... My mom didn't understand neither; so I felt like I wasn't alone cuz I felt I was alone my first two years of high school like... nobody understand what... I'm like... I can't come talk to you, to let you know my mom is trying to kick me out because I'm gay... I can't come talk to you and let you know that my mom is reading me a bible to me and not just any scriptures, but pinpointing scriptures like, "laying with another man is an abomination".... Get what I'm saying? So it's like... I felt like I was scared growing up sometimes.... Because of the...um... of me being, being gay and being in a Christian household because I used to... some of the stuff that...

that's what I mean, the words mean a lot... hurt me more cuz... my mom... I take my mom's words serious... and some of the stuff she used to say... ripped my heart out to say "Wow, you would say that to your own son!"... and that's why I used to do extracurricular activities like doing the play so I could come home at six o'clock so all I had to do was do homework, eat and go to bed... and not have to worry about my mom talking to me.

**Follow Up Question:** When you came out you really did feel accepted at school and that's the only place that you felt accepted, at school, but that when you were going, when you were home it was a different story, and then you mentioned that you were dealing with, um, depression at some point. How did you deal with that depression? What did you do in order to deal with that depression?

**Response:** I still fight with depression now because I still have the, sometimes still have the same, like I said still have the same issues that I had with my parents and my family about me being gay. So, what I did when I was in high school, I started dancing and cuz sometimes I didn't know how to express myself with my words; sometimes I didn't know how to tell people how I felt.

So at that time for me, to make me feel better about myself, I just went into a space of dancing, and it cleared my mind so I wouldn't just be downing myself and always saying this is, it's your fault that they're talking bad about you; it's your fault that your parents are saying that, Oh you're not supposed to be gay, like even though I am gay I can't keep constantly keep saying it's my fault because they don't believe in what I believe in. It's not because I'm doing; I'm only doing what I know best and only doing what's gonna make me happy. I'm not gonna just be walking around sad.

**Follow Up Question:** You mentioned a gay-straight alliance. Did you ever use it?

**Response:** Cuz I was around people who were just like me... who accepted me like... I didn't know any gay people freshmen year because I was a freshmen... didn't know anybody... any clubs.. and only thing I knew about was football, track, school... and that's it, go straight home... den I met Mr. Lopez; he introduced me to Mr. Clark, who introduced me to the gay-straight alliance.

**Follow Up Question:** And how did it make you feel that you were a part of the gay-straight alliance or that it was accessible or... or that you were... had this support or resource at your school?

**Response:** I felt important... finally I felt important because... even though it was a small group... my school didn't ignore it.

**Follow Up Question:** Do you have some thoughts about how to support students who decide to come out for the first time in schools?

**Response:** um... GSAs...or... talking about it more in classrooms so people know... that it's ok...because still, like I said, our society shows dat being gay isn't being constant getting bashed or we're constantly bein'.... thrown under the bus for bein' for negative... like... how can I say... like being... having HIV is

the gay man's disease... you get what I'm sayin'... that it's just not... about... "Oh you can be sick by doing this or the bible says"... It's more about having them feel comfortable because that's what most I feel like most people get into depression or find themselves doing suicide because they can't be themselves... and it's always that one kid who finds out they can't be themselves or... kills themselves because they couldn't be themselves... so... like me, GSA helped. Uh... having people come in like... doing seminars... have a drag queen come in cuz they're not... they're funny... they're not... just a man and makeup. It's actually entertainment for some people like... just making more... about the knowledge and being able to talk to people instead of just... putting down one stereotype. Cuz it's... about talking that... that's what I mean; for me it was about the talking and the people telling me their stories about them coming out and them dealing with the stuff that made it easier for me to be the person I am now. Because I know now I'm not the only one who's struggled because when you're younger you feel like you're by yourself just in that box like... I'm gay; I don't know nobody else who's gay... I don't know where else to look... turn to.... I don't know what teacher talk to who... if I tell a teacher will they go back and tell my mom... that's why I feel some students are afraid to come out and tell students, but now in this generation... it's like a hobby. It's a trend... it's not... it's not as hard as it was... people just come out left and right... one day you're straight the next day you want to talk to a boy.... I.. I don't know... I'm confused.

**Follow Up Question:** So... um... so I know during your... when you were in high school you had the GSA, but you mentioned something of, like giving that information in the classrooms. If you had that information, for example, like a presenter or somebody that would they would incorporate some of that information in the classroom, how would that make you feel?

**Response:** Because... as... like I said when you're younger you don't know nobody gay... your friends not... you're young... you're like fourteen... like eleven to twelve... you're friends not coming up to you be like, "Hey I'm gay" or "Oh yea I know somebody that's gay". Like if I had somebody come to the classroom and actually sit down and say, "It's ok...you don't have worry about it... it's ok... to be yourself... it's ok to... like who you like"... and not be judged, it probably would've made my whole experience different and put me in whole different mindset then where I'm at now. I probably wouldn't been in some of these situations that I was... like... you get what I'm saying?... like I found myself in... to be honest I found myself in many people's beds. Dat told me, "Oh I understand" or I did a lot stuff because I couldn't go talk to somebody who understood where I was coming from... like I found myself doin'... like at a young age, doin' stuff that I shouldn't be able to do... shouldn't be doin' or being exposed to stuff that I shouldn't have been doin'.

**Follow Up Question:** Like?

**Response:** (laughs).... Like... um... I'm going to be honest... um... when I was younger, my mom used to... when I told my mom I was gay she stopped giving money. Younger or older guys used to come up to me, be like, "Hey you're cute."

I used to get paid to have sex... if I would've known it's ok... that it's not ok to do dat... it's to... go on... go find... like... If I had somebody tell me or lead me in a way to say, "You don't have to do that... not every guy that tells you you're cute or... uh... they love you means anything"... (laughs)... I can't believe I just said that but... yes!! Oh my God, that just that was a weight off my shoulders; I just confessed that to somebody... (laughs).

**Follow Up Question:** Are there any other supports that you think would be important for schools to provide? For kids that want to come out for the first time?

**Response:** Counseling.... You could have group sessions with people like... you worry about people, like with drugs and stuff... worry about... have them come sit down and really talk about what they're going through. That's the one thing kids don't like to talk about. We... kids don't know how to express themselves to adults because they're afraid they might get judged or cuz adults don't offer that experience of their life.

**Question 4:** After you came out the first time in school, how was life for you?

**Response:** I was fierce! I was gay! Yes!!! (laughs)...like I didn't care... like... I didn't care... I thought being gay was like dressing in skinny jeans... and wearin' tight clothes... then after I came out I was just like... Fuck it I don't have to wear anymore skinny jeans; I can start wear boy clothes...I can be myself... I dyed my hair... for Halloween I dressed up like a girl.... I wore tutus for dress up day... I was very, like out and gay pride like... oh, so you're gay; it's ok... don't worry about nobody else... someone would come up to me like, "Oh you're gay!"... I was just like "Oh I know... so tell me something that I don't know already!" You get what I'm saying? So... it was more... I felt like a confident boost... I had confidence. Yeah, I used to walk with a strut... that's what they say walk with a strut, cuz that's when you walk with your head held high and you got confidence and nobody can tell you anything...(laughs)... And that's when nobody told me anything... (laughs).

**Question 5:** Why did you decide to come out?

**Response:** Cuz living in this secret... is way harder than being gay... cuz you gotta constantly... after you lie, you gotta lie again and once you lie about that one, you gotta find another lie to cover that lie... so I rather just tell the truth and give it to you blatantly and if you don't like it, it's too bad.. cuz at the end of the day I'm not gonna keep constantly lying cuz that makes you go crazy... being in the closet is like living a double life. I can't live a double life cuz it's hard enough living one life

**Follow Up Question:** Any other reasons why you came out?

**Response:** Cuz I wanted to enjoy life. I wanted to enjoy life and enjoying life wasn't being in the closet

**Follow Up Question:** So you felt that... by having... living a double life like you said...

**Response:** I wasn't enjoying life. I was really... that's what I mean; I was depressed because I was just like I would be smilin' in other people's face and they don't know who I am... and then go somewhere else and be the person that I wanted to be. You get what I'm saying... like I would be one way with other people den another way with another one, which is miserable because you... you get confused, because den I'll probably be straight with this one and when I'm supposed to be straight with this one, but then I end up being gay... you get what I'm saying? So it's just like... (laughs)

*Summary of descriptive findings.* In summary, the participants' responses provided insight into the "coming out" phenomena and experiences, which include four themes: Coming out as a process, Fear, Disclosure, and Psycho-Social.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the “coming out” process in gay men and identify support systems in middle schools and high schools. As a result of participants’ responses there were four themes that emerged; these include: Coming out as a process, Fear, Disclosure, and Psycho-Social. Each theme will be specifically addressed. Next, an overall perspective of the “coming out” process will be discussed, as well as the impact of the current study’s findings for middle schools and high schools. Additionally, limitations to the current study will be will also be discussed. Last, implications for future research will be presented. The specific themes are discussed as they relate to the interview questions asked in the semi-structured interview protocol.

### “Coming Out” As A Process

Themes and patterns emerged among the participants in reference to their understanding of the “coming out” process. There are differing views that individuals have about the coming out process, which includes a linear process, cyclical process, a becoming a “new person,” and a pointless process. There are additional aspects of the coming out process. For example, self-disclosure during the coming out process is on a continuum or spectrum. Additionally, the coming out process is influenced by multicultural issues such as ethnicity, sexual orientation, family and religion. Also, media and television shows have an impact on the coming out process.

**Linear process.** The majority of participants described a linear process of “coming out”, which begins with self-realization or awareness of a homosexual

orientation, then an understanding of one's sexual orientation, and finally self-disclosing to others (e.g., friends and family).

*Self-Awareness.* Self-awareness is the first step within the linear process. One of the participants described becoming aware of being attracted to the same-sex for the first time.

Kevin reflected on his own experience when he first became aware he was attracted to the same sex,

But, um, and then I started from there and I started to talk about when I realized I started liking boys, which was probably seven or eight, and then it was just a timeline from there from my experiences with, like, other students, like, if I felt like I was bullied because of, I was, at that time I was, like, poor and my family's pretty much poor, so it was a lot of factors, not just sexuality.

*Navigating inner dilemma.* Individuals must navigate inner dilemma after becoming aware of a possible homosexual orientation. One participant noted that individuals who decide to come out deal with inner dilemma and turmoil in trying to understand a homosexual orientation.

Russell noted an inner dilemma in understanding what being gay means,

Um, tends to be kind of long, um, usually a lot of inner dilemma with coming to terms with who you are. Um, personally I had a struggle with defining gay, like what it meant to me. Usually a bigger stress is your parents, uh, your friends are, come easier, but some people find it a lot harder.

Russell further explained the challenges he encountered after disclosing to others in school,

Uh, bullying aspect, I didn't have a single word, look, or any negative comment made, so that was good. The only challenge I had was within myself 'cause I did not know what gay meant to me. So I started like acting a different way, and dressing differently, and portraying myself to be someone who I wasn't just because I thought that's what I had to do.

**Self-disclosure.** Self-disclosure is an integral part of the linear process. One participant described that coming out is a simple process of just telling others (e.g., friends, family, coworkers, etc.) of one's sexual orientation.

Vinny shared his thoughts of the "coming out" process,

Um, coming out to me, I understand it as letting friends and family or being comfortable in your skin, so letting friends and family know all of you and who you are. So if you identify as gay, straight, bisexual, transgender, like, coming out sexual identity-wise, like, this is where I see myself; this is how I identify myself.

Vinny continued by stating coming out involves two processes which includes an understanding of the process for oneself, and a different process for disclosing to others,

And then I came out to my best friend, Marie. And so having them 3 as a support system helped me come to terms with how I felt because there's a whole ... there's a coming out process with coming out to other people; then there's that whole coming out process to yourself which is really difficult to deal with, which nobody ever seems to really talk about.

Ron added his understanding of the coming out process,

so the coming out process... Would be... coming out to yourself so that is the realization... the acceptance and then... majority of it is coming out to others... friends... family... and then eventually it being public... completely public like known to those who don't even know you.

**Cyclical process.** In addition to a linear process of self-disclosure, "coming out" is continuous and cyclical. Individuals who come out are constantly coming out to others.

Kevin indicated that "coming out" is in stages, and individuals come out multiple times to different people,

cuz once you come out you always have to come out... Whether you say it to your family... ok, that's step one... And step two is your friends... and step three is your friend's friends, your teachers... whoever you want to share it with, but once you come out you're established as a newly gay person and then you have to keep coming out, so it is a difficult process... you don't want everyone to know at



the same time...because of your levels of comfort with everyone, but it's a difficult process.

Kevin further explained after "coming out" to his best friend,

I mean in high school even coming out to him it was...it was still, I told once, you come out you have to keep coming out... it's an ongoing process... he said, but you came out to me so its fine... I said "no"... you're only thinking that because you're not in my shoes... and I said I might come out to like... cuz we ran track together in high school, so I might come out to our coach and I don't know... he said, ok he's like 50 .. I don't know what he's gonna say... I don't know what everyone else is gonna say so it's just all about still protecting, but it was a really good feeling... it was the greatest feeling, but it also it was still being skeptical and what to say around people... how to act around people... and things like that.

**Becoming a "new person."** One participant explained there is also a notion or feeling of being a "new person" after coming out. Evan commented about feeling comfortable in his own skin and coming out as a new person,

Well at first... uh... when I first... its one ... just come out of the closet... so when people say "coming out"... it's like finally being able to express who you are... and being able to... um... feel comfortable in yourself, in your own skin... so basically its like coming out as a new person. I was thinking of that or like being born, reborn again like... you're this way first then now you're coming out a whole other person to people... so... that's my... and I had to look it up on the internet when I was younger to figure out what is coming out and stuff like that.

**Pointless process.** Another participant reported that self-disclosing a homosexual orientation is also viewed as unnecessary and pointless, especially when heterosexual individuals do not go around telling others of their sexual orientation.

Roberto commented,

It's something pointless. Like, you really don't need to say to the world that we're gay or whatever be the case. I mean, straight people don't do it, so ...

**Coming out on a spectrum.** Another component of the coming out process is that self-disclosure is on a continuum. One participant remarked that there are individuals who are openly gay and disclose their sexual orientations to others, yet there

are other individuals who are sexually attracted to same-sex individuals, but they never disclose to others (i.e., down-low). A few participants recalled the need to live a “double life”, and initially coming out as bisexual.

Kevin elaborated on his experiences meeting individuals who are openly gay and those who are considered on the “down-low,”

I've encountered the open guy... I've encountered the down low gay, where... not even their brain cell knows because they are so in denial and... I've encountered... um... I'm gay, but I'm not ready to say anything to anyone yet... so... it's so confusing to me... from different people's experiences... on how you can walk around and be on the down low this whole time, but you're messing with a guy here and there. It just doesn't make sense to me.

*Living a “double life”.* Before coming out, a participant felt the need to live a double life, during which they presented one way privately yet pretended to be someone else out in public. Vinny recalled the challenges of trying to be two different people,

It feels like you're living like 2 double lives or not 2 double lives but like a double life. You have who you are or who I felt like I was behind closed doors when I was by myself and I didn't have to really talk to anybody. And then you walk out and you're around a group of people. You're around your friends or you're around bunch of guys. And you put on this facade and it's, like, okay, I have to stand up straighter; I have to stick up my chest a little more. I have to talk a little bit lower my voice. I have to make sure that I don't say anything that would make them question or say, “Hey, that's slightly off.” I have to go along with whatever conversation they're going on. I can't break off to a tangent and talk about something random that doesn't make sense or talk about this weird correlation because it might cause them to say, “Why is he thinking of it this way when the rest of us think of it this way?” I had to just constantly be on guard and make sure that I was doing everything that I perceived as correct. That ... so that way nobody would even think like, “No, he's fine.” But even then apparently I didn't do that well.

Evan reflected on his own experience of living a “double life,”

I knew how my family would react, they wouldn't accept it and from til, ... til to, still to this day they, some, some of them don't accept the fact that I'm gay because my grandmother's a pastor; my mom is a minister so I, I was raised in a church. So, being raised in a church, you know, they'll say so you know that's against, uh, God's, uh, what God want. So, that's the first thing I came to my

mind is, like I can't tell my parents cuz like I go to church every Sunday; we in Bible Study. I was just, Sunday I would be a straight boy, Tuesday imma be a straight boy, then Monday through Friday, whatever, I would just be gay (laughs), so. Just know when I go to church I can't be gay, and just put on a straight, and put on a mask, because they really don't accept me.

*Coming out as bisexual.* Throughout many of the interviews, participants shared that they identified themselves as bisexual initially in order to see other's reactions, even though they knew they would later on identify as being gay.

In Ron's words describes "coming out" for the first time,

Very first time I came out to my best friend... and I identified as bisexual although I knew that was incorrect... I was in seventh grade..... I was just hanging out at her house... and I thought the guy in the Lady Gaga Poker Face... was really, really hot so I decided to tell her that... it's one of the backup dancers and... that was my first time ever admitting it to someone else.

Ron continued,

it was just about softening the blow completely... also at the time.... I had dated two girls beforehand... never kissed them... not even a day, not even once... but... it was um, at the time I think I still didn't even... I wasn't even ready to date a boy... so... I wasn't completely developed like in that regard... so... The idea that I still could potentially, and I was aware of that... to the idea that I could potentially still like girls was in my head, but... like thinking back on it, like I was always... always knew that I would eventually... just be... just identify as gay.

Ron further explained,

At the time I won't say I totally knew that I would later identify as gay, but... it, it did feel like I wasn't approaching... I wasn't really accepting it for everything it was by saying I was bisexual because it felt like I could have eventually retreat if I wanted to if there was a negative consequence. Like say I did come out to someone and they didn't like it... well saying I still liked girls... it meant that like at that time I felt me being... It was just a safety net like... oh well; it doesn't matter like I would probably never date a boy anyway. I could come up with these excuses that would make it easier for them to understand if I felt like I had to control their reaction.

Xavier reflected on his own experience of self-disclosing to his friend,

So the first time I came out was to my friend who end, I ended up dating and he came out to me first. He told me; he told he was bi and I, I in turn uh, told him

that um, I was also bi, which down the road I ended up coming out as gay. I wasn't sure where I was at that point. I was still kind of questioning but I knew I wasn't; I knew I wasn't into guys at some level and I knew I wasn't into girls at another level, too, so I kind of being bi was a happy medium.

Meanwhile Russell recalled,

Um, I feel like when any gay male thinks about it, I, I don't know, most gay males take that bi-sexual step where lesbians do too, but I think it's a transitional step just 'cause you don't want to fully dive into the water. You rather like dip your toes, see how everyone is feeling, and ... in some cases if you get like backlash or hate for being gay or bi-sexual you could always take that step back and be, like, it was a mistake, like it was a phase I didn't... When I said bi-sexual I was just confused, and it's easy to go back; it's harder to from gay to straight again.

**Multicultural issues.** Multicultural issues play an important part within one's understanding of the coming out process. Some of the participants reflected on being a double minority (i.e., black and gay), and the impact it had on their identity and the coming out process. Additionally, participants noted how religion and family play a role in the coming out process. At certain times, these issues made the participants' understanding and self-disclosure challenging.

Kevin conveyed his thoughts on his identity in reference to race and sexual orientation,

But I have no problem saying it to people, and now my thoughts after me being black and gay, my first identity is being gay. People always talk about, um, diversity and things like that. And I never, my issues for being black is never relevant to me. Ever. I never experienced racism. If I did, it went right over my head because I wouldn't... I don't know what it looks like. But homophobia, you, I could clearly see what that looks like, and I'm grateful not to experience as much as other people who's had it worse than I did. Like, maybe me. But that's my first identity, so that's my afterthought of coming out is that I'll always have to be worried about being open. Being comfortable around certain people who weren't comfortable around me. And that's pretty much how it is.

Evan added,

Um... for me... now that I am a gay guy... and I still believe in... uh... like... God and still go to church, like faithfully... I just feel like it's not about... it's your own connection with... uh... your faith, so like say I am gay, but it's like.. I

don't believe that God is gonna constantly keep judging me because I'm gay cuz like I already told him like.. me and him.. like I pray to God... I don't know about some people, but like I pray to God and I told him... "Oh yeah, I know I'm gay... I know it's a sin, but I don't wantchu to like cast down on me." And he's like... like any bad... like harm or something like that... and it's just a connection like.. my religion is still the same... my grandmother still loves me.. she still preaches to me.. my mom... that's another story, but.. my grandmother.. like after I told my grandmother... she... said "I'mma still pray for you... I'mma pray that" They say this to me all the time.. "I'mma pray the gay out of you... we still gonna love you, but... we still gonna pray the gay out of you."

Evan continued,

Being able to be a proud black gay man at that.... because I used to be... ashamed... like I... a lot of the stuff that... like a lot of the times, like a little bit of me still felt ashamed being gay because I was black and my... the stuff that I learned from my parents.

*Importance of religion.* Participants stated that religion is an important factor in the coming out process. A couple of participants identified the need to rationalize their homosexual orientations to themselves and others within the context of their religions. The participants accommodated their religious beliefs with their sexual orientation. Evan remarked the influence religion had on his understanding of the coming out process,

Uh, because in the Bible it says a man who lives with a man is an abomination, so at first I was just like, what is he saying (laughs)? I don't, I, I, I don't know cuz I just look at it differently now, cuz as I say, God wouldn't put me on this earth to not follow who I love and believe who I love, so if he did write, it was like 20 centuries from now, so he didn't know how the world was going to be after he made Adam and Eve, so you never know. You know people change, what if God changed. Maybe that's the Bible that he left here, yes that's what he thought in the beginning, but you know after time go past....people change, so.

Vinny further noted,

It's made it harder definitely because people are very set in stone in how they interpret the verses or the passages that talk about homosexuality, or they think that talk about homosexuality. And then there's a whole other end of the spectrum of people like me that interpret it completely in a different way and see things in a completely different light. And so it's kind of like ... I don't want to say old money, new money but like there's some people that will only view it this way and they will not change their mind. And then there's some people that are more

fluid and it made it harder because for me, I have to explain how I see it and then people are going to challenge me no matter what. So you have to be very strong in what you believe and also very well read in how they're going to view it, how you view it and how to hopefully make them come to some common ground of where you are as a person. So it made it a little bit more difficult.

Vinny continued describing his double identity,

I mean, religion is always a big one. Being a gay Christian is very, very difficult because some people are either on your side or they're completely not. And it takes a lot of convincing and most of them still aren't going to change their mind. Uh, but you find a group of people that believe the same things that you do, like all Christian ... That's why we have some many different denominations. You find a group of people that believe what they believe and you stick with them and you say, "This is my faith. This is where I believe. This is what I believe is going to happen," and you just ride it out I guess. I grew up in a church. I ... I still am very heavy ... heavily involved in the church. It is a huge part of my identity as a person.

***Importance of family.*** A couple of participants explained the importance of family and unconditional love in the "coming out" process. Roberto expressed his mother's unconditional love when he came out,

Uh, she said that she accepted me for whatever it was. She also said that she loved me and my sister and she would never not love us for whatever we did or were.

Russell remembered,

I felt bad because my parents are like, a big part of my life, like my family life is one of like the things that are like up there on my list of like importance. So I felt bad hiding that part of me, which is why I felt the need to tell them so soon. I know a lot of people wait 'til college; you know they have that ability to leave the house before they tell their parents so they don't really have to deal with the direct issue, but I told them my like sophomore summer, junior year, that I was because I wanted to deal with the problem and make sure we were on good terms before I left for college.

***Role of media/television.*** The role of media and television assisted in participants coming to an understanding of their homosexual orientations. A few participants shared the impact they felt the media and television shows (e.g., Will and Grace) had on their understanding of the "coming out" process.

Vinny felt he was not alone,

When I was growing up, I think the only gay people that were on television were Will and Grace. It was on the show Will and Grace. Um, but then, there ... more, um, information in mainstream media so there are more television and movie characters and books and things written about all this wonderful fabulous gay people. You start hearing ... you start learning about more gay politicians and gay history and things like that. Just being aware that you're not the only person that's here. You're not the only person that is gay that likes baseball. You're not the only person that's gay and doesn't like sports. Like knowing that there are other people like you and seeing it on television is just really ... it's nice.

In Xavier's own words,

I mean TV helped here and there, um, like LGBT characters in TV and things like that. It was just kind of more, more visibility, um, people I could associate with even if not in that way was just, um, but there are people out there, and that I could start to identify on some level with.

Xavier further noted how media and television shows influenced his "coming out" process,

It definitely helped. We didn't have Logo, even though I tried to convince my parents to get it cuz I want a game show network, so I told them; but um, yeah, when I can find gay characters, like Will & Grace would be on, um, so like if my parents went out or went to bed, and like I would try to find it on TV.

"Coming out" is a linear process that is influenced by multicultural issues and identity, and the importance of family, religion, and media. There is a difference in self-disclosing to oneself compared with disclosing to others. Many individuals disclose being bisexual as an initial step to "coming out" to see other's reactions, which leads to the theme of fear.

### **Fear**

As a results of participants' responses, themes emerged about fear and its influence on the coming out process. The majority of the participants described a sense of fear, being afraid, feelings of anxiety, and nervousness for a variety of reasons before

self-disclosing a homosexual orientation to others (e.g., family, friends, teachers, etc.).

Deciding to disclose and eventually disclosing to others is mediated by the sense of fear.

Additionally, there is also the fear that family members have when an individual decides to disclose.

**Feeling nervous/afraid.** Several participants recalled feeling nervous and afraid before “coming out” to friends and family members. Ron described how he felt leading up to disclosing to his family,

Ok so... I was always happy and more than excited to come out to friends and everything like that.. um.. I eventually had come out to everyone I cared about besides my family, so then I was approaching... then I was actually thinking about coming out to my brother who came first and I was just nervous.. I... it's it was always just weird; I wish it was easier to explain like the feeling because, but I was very fortunate in knowing I always knew that like... coming out to anyone, friends and family wouldn't be bad. I didn't think that I was always going to suffer consequences, but admitting it to them was just uncomfortable... It's like there. It's kind of like a panicky sensation. I would get like that... um... frog in your throat feeling; um it was just hard to spit out and... I just think it was nerves, just nervous to do it... What I... like tried... like but I tried to remember why I was nervous it was... not because I felt they were going to hate, not love me, shame me, want to try to change it; it was really just about... I think it was because they all knew and that admitting it just seemed like this stepping stone that would be so much easier to just skip over, but I knew I had to do it so I just did it anyway.

Evan reflected how he felt after his mother finds a “love letter” to another boy,

My heart dropped... cuz at first... my heart dropped because I thought I gave the.. put the letter where I was supposed to and left it in a secret mailbox... and I thought I left it and then she comes in my room. She's like, “What's this?”... and I was like... (pause)... like I felt like I was on a rollercoaster that's about to drop and... it was just like the emotions.. I started sweating. She's like, “Are you gay?” At first I told her, “no”. Then she asked me again. She's like “I'm gonna ask you again, are you gay?”... I was like “yes.” She's like... she didn't believe me.

One participant recalled how he was beaten so badly it made him afraid to “come out.” Kevin offered his experience of getting beaten after having a dream of liking the same-sex,



uh... this is referring back to my grandmother... uh... I think I was seven or eight I had a dream. I don't know why I was dreaming about this at this age, but I had a dream about a guy, and that I ended up liking him and I don't... and like I just felt like I liked him, but it was different.. it was new... at the age you don't really know what's going on... and I was telling my sister and she's a year younger than me so... she was like six or seven at the time and um... and she's like, "You like this guy in your dream." And she repeated it, and my grandmother heard her and she was like, "You said what?" She's like... and then she used the f-a-g-g-o-t word... and then she started going off on her little spiel about how that's gay and that's not acceptable, that's no... she's from Georgia... and she's now...now she's currently accepted me. But at the time she... um... she's from Georgia she's just like "No... you can't be doing that." And then.... Maybe like ten minutes after her whole spiel of yelling I got a beatin'... I was just a bad child, so I was always prone to beatings cuz I didn't learn my lesson the first time, but... um... after that it made me afraid to come out... (pause)... because had it been a more welcoming thing... like, "Oh yeah, okay we can work on it... It'll.... We're gonna get you, I guess, help."... Cuz most parents, families believe when a child is coming out at a young age that they need help... that there's something automatically wrong... but it was never... I would have preferred medicine at the time so that way you wouldn't shunning me in... rather helping me release myself out, but that helped me become afraid so I wouldn't come out... and then.. um... going into my freshmen year of high school, it was just like it was always back and forth, back and forth... like I could never be completely happy.

**Fear of embarrassment.** A couple of participants disclosed their fear of embarrassment and the need to "protect themselves" from others. Kevin noted his reasons for not getting involved with anyone from his high school,

uh... I didn't mess with anyone in my high school; it wasn't that I wasn't messing with all these people at my high school for the sole purpose of, if I did mess with someone, who would find out, and how would they find out? How fast it would spread? What would I do if they found out? It was just a domino effect of how would I save myself from... I guess you can put the humiliation word in there or embarrassment... so rather than try to justify knowing that everyone already knew and so lie. It was just trying to keep my... um...blindsides protected so I could just not have to deal with it.

Kevin added,

because... I don't think I'm normal in the head, but I think I did just enough like a fine job of... like... waiting and protecting myself from coming out, and... when I went to do it,... and... who the support I had after I came out. I was protecting myself from peers.

Russell explained his thoughts before “coming out,”

I questioned it, like a lot; I don't know; I felt maybe I wasn't gay. (laughs) I don't know. I think I thought a lot about just changing my orientation, just for the mere fact of, like, saving embarrassment or, like, bullying or whatever comes with it. I don't know, so, I had a lot of dilemma before pressing the confirm button when dating someone.

**Fear of lack of privacy.** One participant explained fear of one's privacy and not wanting everyone to know his sexual orientation. Ron stated his concerns about privacy,

It was... at that time I was more concerned with the privacy than I ever was in high school... Um so, at that time I was... concerned if they would talk... if um... just because I didn't want them to. I wasn't ready for everyone else to know... and then once... again still going back to this idea if everybody else knows, will my parents find out?

**Fear of judgment.** One participant commented on the fear of being judged by others for seeking assistance or understanding of the “coming out” process. Kevin remarked,

and because being young.. afraid... slightly gullible... you're not gonna go necessarily.. go and actively seek the help you think you need because you wouldn't even know where to look, and then you would be afraid to be sitting in an office to be judged... “Oh, I know why you're in there”... or you're afraid to be seen walking with someone to go somewhere for help... “Oh, I know why you went there”... it's just all about protecting yourself, but at the same time hurting yourself knowing you need some type of outlet.

**Fear of lack of support.** One participant described fear due to not feeling supported enough and it was not the “right” time. Kevin recalled being 12-years-old and wanting to disclose, but he did not feel he had enough support at the time,

You know how they, there's so much support now, was never there then, so it was never a thought for me to come out until I was probably, like, I reached 12, but I, it was just like, I was always the child to want to have a thought, but I was so afraid to say that my heart would pound so fast that I wouldn't say it. I was, like forget it. And I would just, and I would beat myself out of it. It caused like a little anxiety, but I would never say it, so, um, I think before I was, I had a, it was 12; I wanted to come out, but it was just not the right timing, and like I said before, wasn't it, I didn't feel like I had enough support.

***Fear of losing financial support.*** One participant remembered not disclosing to his grandparents due to fear of losing financial support while attending college. Vinny elaborated how he needed to “become someone else” when he was around his grandparents,

I am out to everybody in my family except for my grandparents. And it is solely a financial reason because they're the cosigners on my loans for school. And even though I know they'll probably be okay, I am terrified that they are going to not cosign my loans for my senior year and I am going to be a year shy of graduating, which is entirely selfish. But that's where it is in my life. Um, but ... So when I'm around them, while the rest of my family knows, when I'm around them I feel like I am not being myself at all. I feel like I am saying things that I normally wouldn't say. I am carrying myself in a manner that I don't see myself as, like I'm a completely different person that I don't even recognize.

***Fear of rejection from others.*** The majority of participants indicated having a fear of being rejected from others (e.g., family and friends/peers). Vinny expressed how he felt when disclosing to others,

Oh my God, it was terrifying. I...I actually think I cried a little bit. I'm 95% sure I probably started crying because it's scary. You don't know ... like while she's my best friend, the biggest fear in the back of your mind is always they're not gonna accept me. They're gonna hate me. I'm gonna be made fun of. You hear all these terrible horror stories. Matthew Shepard, like down the line of things happening to gay teens or gay people because they ... because of their sexual orientation and you never want to be ... you don't want to be one of the bad stereotypes let alone a stereotype at all.

Russell commented on how he felt,

Nervous. I was scared of judgment, I was like, I don't know, it was my sophomore year; we're all like innocent and vulnerable so I was scared of being like, I don't know, unaccepted by everyone else.

Kevin added,

So that's probably like the biggest challenge because my city's small. So I did a lot for the community, and with my name being out there as a community, like, supporter, and then having sexuality attached to that, it's like, uh; then you have like a big, um, religion population in our city too. So it's my, my only challenge

is having to confront them and them knowing, and then being, like, uneasy about certain things; not that I've gotten that, but that's always in my forefront of my mind. What if they're not comfortable, so they won't ask me to show up at this event, help out with, because they don't want me there because of my sexuality.

*Fear of rejection on an intimate level.* A participant stated feeling fear when trying to court a same-sex partner. Kevin stated his fear of rejection from someone he may be interested in romantically,

Just being out... it's so weird how people... cuz I'm shy when it comes... I'm a social person, but I'm when it comes in terms to messing with someone... on an intimate level in terms of same-sex world because I don't know if you are really are gay. If you're even interested...like... I don't even want to... I don't want rejection; I don't want embarrassment, and things like that... so I won't even touch that subject unless someone is approaching me... and nine times out ten every time that person has approached me.

*Fear of family rejection.* Several participants conveyed their fears about hearing stories of how families kick individuals out or disown the individual for disclosing a homosexual orientation. Xavier recalled how he felt before "coming out" to his brother,

Before coming out to my brother I didn't really know what to say or how to say it. I was nervous but on some level I figure he'd be okay with it.

Xavier further elaborated on his fears before disclosing to his brother,

That he wouldn't be okay with it and would tell my parents and uh, the horror stories that you hear about, kids getting kicked out and parents disowning them and things like that. That was always in the back of my mind.

Kevin explained his friend's fears and the reasons why they did not disclose to their family,

Yeah, it's not always how it is....I am going to talk about myself, but I have friends who are out to the community, but not their family. And so then such networks it has to be certain things that's reworded a certain way so things can be placed put up, and they are all in fear of just rejection and then rejection comes with... um not.... not associating with the family, kicked out of the house, etc.

While Evan recalled his fear of getting thrown out of the house,

My mom didn't understand neither, so I felt like I wasn't alone cuz I felt I was alone my first two years of high school like... nobody understand what... I'm like... I can't come talk to you to let you know my mom is trying to kick me out because I'm gay... I can't come talk to you and let you know that my mom is reading me a bible to me and not just any scriptures, but pinpointing scriptures like "laying with another man is an abomination."

Furthermore, one of the participants shared the experience of being rejected. Roberto

disclosed being rejected by his grandfather for having red hair,

Allright. Uh, with my hair still being red, my grandfather, which I respect dearly ... Like, yeah. He kind of said I wouldn't be able to enter his house without dying my hair back black, and yeah ... I mean, imagine that. Uh, my parents kind of felt like ... What's the term? Not disgusted, but they didn't really want to be seen with me outside.

***Fear of rejection from peers/friends.*** A couple of participants commented on their fear of losing friends after "coming out." Evan shared his experience,

I had to meet new friends... so I didn't want to lose those friends that I had... cuz I was becoming a popular kid for once... from the little geeky kid over there or that's Evan or you're gay I can tell... you know what I'm saying... so... that's why I started joining football... started joining sports so... the straight guys could attract to me, so I could cover that up so they wouldn't be like... cuz when I'm by myself you can definitely tell like, "Oh you're gay" by the way I walk like or you're gay... when I'm around a bunch of straight guys you really can't pick out a straight... a gay guy if he's acting straight around a bunch of straight guys.

Kevin shared his thoughts and fears of losing his best friend,

Um. And it was to my best friend. And the thoughts before was, is, because he asked me, it was because I said, let me just; I'm old enough. Worst case scenario is we'll lose our friendship and I'll be upset, but I'll get over it, and if that's the case, that's going to be a lesson I'm going to learn in life because once you're out, you're going to continue; all this has to come out. Especially if you don't have social networks today because then no one knows that you're like, you're established that way, and then, you have to see a new family member, a new family. Oh, by the way, this is my situation.

Additionally, several participants stated losing friendships after self-disclosing.

One participant communicated his experience of losing friends due to a perceived homosexual orientation by peers. Roberto elaborated,

Oh, so this is like more down the line ... I would say 11th grade to senior year. Uh, I was an idiot, and you know the color crimson? I wanted to dye my hair that color. It didn't work out, and it was like a bloody ... not a bloody red, um, a very like your lights. That type of a red on my hair, so you know, automatically people were like, "Oh gay, gay, gay." So, some people that I would talk to, but they didn't know; they, you know, evaded me, and I was fine with it because I always had the mentality if you weren't cool with it, then go somewhere. No one really came up to me.

Another participant recalled his experience of losing friends after "coming out,"

But then I've also realized throughout my entire coming out process, people that don't want to be friends with me or don't want to associate with me because of my sexual orientation are not people that I want to be around anyways. So if even after having long debates with people or things like that, like longtime friends, if they don't want to associate with me because I identify as gay then that is ... that's their prerogative and that's not something that I need to worry myself about. Because I try and surround myself with good energy and good people that will continuously help me be happy where I am, so.....I have friends flat out say I cannot support you if you are gay. I cannot be friends with you because you're gay.

**Fear of negative reactions.** Many of the participants reflected on their fear of disclosing to others and expecting a negative reaction. Ron reported his fear of a negative reaction from his best friend,

Yes... my friend is Brittney who's a girl... um... I was just nervous to say it... because it... there was always a sense of... not knowing how someone can react. You can't guarantee someone's reaction whatsoever... I was completely confident that she would... it wouldn't be a problem with her. And I had predicted that she would run around the house like screaming happily... and that was true, but I still did experience, like the anxiety.... the discomfort because there was just a fear... of it becoming a little more real.

Kevin further noted his fear of negative reactions,

Then you have to wait for the reaction, whether it's, like, immediately or a processed reaction, but the thought before was, like, is, is it gonna either be very

well put together and the support is going to come how I want it, or I'm gonna lose friends, family, or I'm going to catch attitudes; I'm going to be frowned down upon.

Evan disclosed being bisexual at first in order to see others' reactions,

It's like winter break; I came back and was like "Okay I'm bi"... and then my friends is like "You're not bi; you're gay"... and I'm like "No, I'm bi"... So that was just like, uh, it was just like a joke because at first I wasn't ready to come out and just to my friends like, "Yeah, I'm gay.. I don't know how you're gonna accept this"... so... the tester....I told them I was bi... just to see... their reaction.

Several participants indicated that they faced verbal harassment and homophobic remarks before self-disclosing a homosexual orientation. Evan commented on his experience,

...especially being a football player and being gay, I was always getting called names. Their favorite word was the F-bomb; that's the only one, that's only word people really know, I think. I feel like that's the only word people really think that hurts gay people when they call us the F-bomb, and I'm saying the F-bomb because I'm not gonna say it, F-word that rhymes with maggot (laughs), but um ... they'll say it my face. I hang around a bunch of girls; they like you're being an F-bomb; I'm like okay. Like they, people, it's not the fact that they said it; it's just the simple fact that, like, I could be anywhere. I could walk down the hall and somebody feel like they want to say it today, they gonna say it; somebody see my face they gonna say it. It was random times. I never knew when I was gonna hear the F-word from somebody in my school, but then as time got, kept going sophomore year, junior year, and they seeing how cool I am, how all the girls wanna be around me, it's just like, "Oh, okay, let's make him my friend." I'm like yeah, you could benefit, but you not gonna be my close friend, but I've got some girlfriends that, a lot of girlfriends.

Vinny elaborated how individuals use the word "gay" synonymously with "stupid,"

Um, at least in ... at least for me growing up. And it's still a thing, people using say gay as a synonym for stupid is very common. So no matter what, people I would do something they're like, "That's so gay." That's so blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Or ... I mean, I'm a dancer so everything I did was gay, apparently.

***Fear of violence.*** One participant indicated the fear of a negative reaction which may lead to violence. Vinny added,

So, um, it was ... it was really scary, but having a good friend to come out to that I knew ... I think I knew deep down that she was going to be okay with it, but it's still scary. Having her say, "It's fine; it's okay, like, I'm here for you. I'm not going anywhere, like, I'm going to help you, like, um, whatever you want to do; whether you want to tell people or not tell people I'm going to be here for you," was probably the best thing to have when I came out. Because it ... it put me at ease a lot, while still telling people is still scary, like, meeting new people and telling ... like when they find out that I'm gay, you have no idea how they're going to react because some people can get extremely upset and violent.

***Fear of change.*** One participant stated fearing things would change after self-disclosing a homosexual orientation. Vinny elaborated,

So that ... And that's what it felt like when I was around people before I came out. It... it felt like I was ... somebody that I didn't want to be, or I didn't want to perceive myself in that way. And I didn't want to present myself in that way, but I had to ... to make sure that things didn't change. And I think that's probably the big ... that's probably the biggest fear of coming out in general, that things are going to change no matter what... whether people will accept it or not some ... Because you come out things are automatically going to change. And it could change for the better. It could change for the worse. Things could change but still slightly be the same. And if I ... if I present myself as straight or if I present myself as not gay just a little bit more effeminate, then things are going to stay the same. Or they're going to stay how I think they should stay in a way. If that make sense?

***Family/Parents' fears.*** A couple of participants reflected on family and parental fears due to the parent's lack of understanding and knowledge of the "coming out" process. Ron disclosed how his mother knew he was gay, but she had misconceptions of gender identity versus sexual orientation,

My mom had been like, "Oh please, we knew this for years now." ...um so she just was like, you know, "We love you; nothing is really changed"... she was... I gave her the distinction that I wasn't dealing with any... gender issues I had, but I... but I was completely aware of my sexual orientation as gay and, like, that it annoyed me at the time because she was so happy that I wasn't gonna start dressing like a girl... That was a concern of hers and I remember just kinda



feeling like that was shitty of her, but I mean it wasn't an issue on my part; that's why I just took it as a win and you know.

The fear also stems from how homosexuality was viewed in the '70s and '80s when AIDS was identified, as well as the hysteria surrounding it. Kevin reported his grandmother's fears about AIDS and instilling that fear into Kevin,

Um. It's crazy 'cause this memory just sticks like glue. ...glue. Um. The reasons for the beating is because I don't even know if it's like how she was raised or her traditional beliefs, or whatever you may call it. I don't know what it is, but I think her fear is she grew up in the '70s and '80s; when she just grew up in a period where being gay wasn't acceptable at all through society... AIDS hit. And then gay had these bad norms and stereotypes, and then you had bath houses, and then you had swinger states, and everything that it was just so much going on that it just ... To sum it all up in one, homosexuality was just frowned upon for so many reasons that I think the beatings were to instill in me, like, this is not good. You cannot be gay. And I was just thinking basically her being afraid, and then fear for me let her turn to instill that in me to be afraid myself so that I would never have to be open and inexperienced with people's experience during her time when she was growing up and seeing what was going on for that.

Additionally, one participant described parental fears of saying something that may offend the individual who self-disclosed. Russell shared the awkwardness between himself and his parents after "coming out,"

Scared because there was that awkward point in time where I don't know between my dad more than my mom, but like my dad didn't want to say anything because he didn't want to offend me, and my mom just didn't know what to say 'cause she didn't know what I wanted to hear. But slowly and surely we started talking more and now it's just as normal as ever.

***Fear of losing a son.*** One participant indicated feeling terrified leading up to "coming out." Russell reflected thinking his mother may feel like she lost a son after self-disclosing,

I was terrified. I thought that they were going to feel like they lost a son. So I tried to hold that off as long as I could, but my mom and I are really close so I felt like I definitely had to tell her sooner rather than later.

Fear is an important part of the “coming out” process. Individuals fear a myriad of issues that they may face when contemplating whether to self-disclose or not. One may decide to self-disclose to others if he has overcome his fears. Disclosure is the next step in the “coming out” process.

### **Disclosure**

The theme of Disclosure emerged as a result of participants’ responses. The majority of the participants discussed the issue of disclosure as part of the “coming out” process, and self-disclosing to others (e.g., friends, siblings, teachers, parents, etc.). The participants also shared the reasons behind their disclosure and also the consequences once they disclosed.

**Need to control information.** There is a need to control who finds out and how they find out when an individual is considering to self-disclose a homosexual orientation. Ron explained his need to be in control of “coming out” to people,

I would’ve been less likely to come out to more people; I probably would have held onto the idea of trying to control the.... Information, really cuz I even in during that time of freshmen year before it was public, like, I knew where it was, and, and I was concerned to who it was... I can imagine holding onto that feeling and then eventually when it was getting bigger, I remember getting like afraid that it was like almost like a bubble was going to pop um and that was that was....there was anxiety associated with that, so... if I had been receiving more negative reactions from people I can imagine me still wanting to hold onto that control for a lot longer and that would have been really hard and painful and traumatic.

Ron further elaborated how he felt about others finding out,

What I felt, like maybe I had told someone who was gonna to tell people, and I wasn’t ready for it to be public, I would go right to that person and I would remind them that this is private or, you know, I... that’s kinda of how I would handle it.. I would really do, like work to make sure everything was, I had control over the situation and... but then at some point I was just like, I don’t need to do this anymore.

**Ignorance.** One participant reported waiting to disclose because of parent's ignorance. Ron commented how his father's derogatory comments prevented Ron from self-disclosing,

I just felt like he was ignorant. I never took it much as a personal insult. I didn't believe him when he said these things, the derogatory things about the gay community. It was just more uh, that I felt bad for him. I wanted to be able to help him, but at the same time, it did keep me a little bit in the closet more than I wanted it to. Just because I felt like he had to have some learning to do; he had some warming up to do to the idea. Uhm, in general, I would say that the way that he was, did keep me in the closet longer and that it would just frustrate me at the time, but it didn't go anyway in the name of making me doubt myself or making me believe what he was saying. I always knew that he was wrong.

**Hiding and secrets.** Several participants stated they needed to hide their sexual orientation from others before "coming out" because they were not ready or comfortable for everyone to know. Kevin shared trying to hide his sexual orientation even though his cousins had a suspicion,

So, then when they, when they're, they're brothers so they know what, like, they're close, so they know, I guess it's like, I don't have any brothers. I only have sisters. So, I didn't really get it. But they picked up on it. But I would still deny it. No, I'm not gay, no. I would never tell them no. Even though they were my cousins, I probably could have shared it, but it wasn't like a sibling connection. So I didn't feel comfortable enough sharing it with them. So, that was up until about a year or so. Maybe like, like after I turned 13. A little bit after I turned 13, so, um, I moved out 'cause I couldn't take it anymore. It was either I reveal myself, and then still go crazy, or I try to hide myself and go crazier.

Evan commented on how he dealt with hiding his sexual orientation from his family,

I remember when I was coming out... the depression I was under because I was trying to hide it... trying... uuuhh.... Deny it, not even deny it, but trying to hide it from my family... not have them see me with people... dress a certain way...talk a certain way.... That's why I was into football so they wouldn't like....

Ron added how he did not feel comfortable allowing everyone to know his “secret,”

I didn't come out to any... I only came out to a few people...um... in middle school so... It was like my best friend and a handful of people, but by the time I did enter freshmen year of high school, a lot of people did know, but tech-...it wasn't...but I wasn't comfortable them telling other people at that point, so they had to keep it their secret.

**Family rejection.** One participant described being rejected and ignored by family members. Evan communicated what occurred with the relationship between him and his family after self-disclosing,

I got ignored for like three years, like freshmen year through junior year I got ignored by my mom.... My brother ignored me. He told me recently he hated me because of that; he felt like I took all the attention away from him because I came out to be gay... You get what I'm saying? That's just like my intention wasn't to take attention from nobody... I was just trying to let people know like this is who I am... I'm not gonna bring a girl around... I'm getting married to a guy; if you're not coming to my wedding let me know now.

Evan elaborated further on the atmosphere in the house,

When I first started realizing she started ignoring me I, I, I ghosted myself. We could walk past each other without touching each other. We could be in the kitchen together. ... We could walk past each other and not touch each other. You know you can be in the kitchen and, you know, you bump into somebody. We got so got at it. It was like a maze game, like we would not get into the way, bump into each other. If she was by something that I needed I would wait. If we had to go somewhere in the same place, I would go with somebody else before I would get in the car with her because, I'm like, you're going ignore me; I don't have to be in your presence.

Evan felt,

Home's supposed to feel welcoming. When I walk in my house I feel so cold; it's not warm; it's annoying, but I did those activities so I could keep my mind off suicidal thoughts or depression or trying to find places where I'm not supposed to find myself and places where I'm not supposed to be at, or ... and I found myself at many of those places where I'm not supposed to be at because I didn't have nothing to do, because I didn't want to go home. I'd be out of school at 3:00 and just walk around Jersey City til like 6:00, telling my mother I got practice or something.

**Desire to disclose.** All the participants reported having a desire to self-disclose a homosexual orientation for a variety of reasons. For example, some participants disclosed because it is an inevitable step in the “coming out” process, but others disclosed because they no longer wanted to live a double life and wanted to start enjoying their life.

*Disclosing as a step of “coming out.”* Several participants stated self-disclosing because they were ready to let others know, and because one’s sexual orientation is inseparable to one’s identity. Kevin felt it was time for him to tell others,

and then Monday before it even coming out to my best friend... I was starting to reach a point where I was just ready because I was almost an adult. What could you tell me at that point? I didn’t have to deal with, “You can’t live in my house”, or “you can’t do this, that and the third around me.” What could you tell me? So I was ready to come out that point and then I came out to best friend... then it was easier.... It was like... a lot was taken off my plate... after coming out to him and then.... After that seeing how he reacted... and how welcoming he was and how nothing didn’t change between us... it just... made me ... I just took it the wrong way, but I... assume that the whole world would act like that... and so far most of it has been like that. Will I encounter something negative? Probably... maybe the world will change at the point where I’ll just... it’ll skip right over, but... I decided to come out because it was time.

Xavier added,

Huh. I feel like it was something I knew subconsciously but I wasn't, I wasn't consciously aware of it until I kinda like, not like, I don't know just until I came out pretty much. It was just kinda there, something I was feeling, trying to understand and once I got it, it was like a light bulb, I was like, “Oh!” And I felt my life was gonna change when I came out, which, in a, in a sense I was happier and freer and things like that, but it was just kinda like a little light bulb went off and I was like oh, okay. And then like I said before, after coming out the first time, it was more a come out so that other people had someone that they could talk to or someone who understood and, like a visible, a visible network of LGBT people who um, I could be resource for, even though I didn't know what's going on myself. I just knew if I had someone, like my ex, I'd no idea about LGBT stuff but he was someone I could talk to, who got me and I wanted to be that um, type of person for other people.

While Ron recalled his reasons for disclosing to his parents,

I was ready to tell them because I knew that it was like inseparable from my identity and that it was something that was eventually going to have to come out anyway, and I was ready because I knew I didn't fear their reaction as much as I ... versus what I wanted to tell them. In fact I wanted to tell them.

*Disclosing to “enjoy life.”* Several participants indicated not wanting to live a lie or in secret any longer. The participants explained wanting to start enjoying their lives and feeling free. Vinny explained his reasons for self-disclosing,

Because I was tired of ... I was ... I was just tired. Overall I was tired of psychoanalyzing. I was tired of not feeling comfortable around people because I wasn't being myself. I was tired of ...I was just also tired of people not knowing it. It feels like your harboring this huge, like gigantic secret and nobody knows. And it eats you inside because you just want to tell someone. You just want somebody to be on your side and support you and ... and reaffirm you. And so when nobody's reaffirming you, it causes you to overthink and it causes you to beat yourself and break yourself down. But once you start telling people it's very uplifting.

Russell replied,

Uh, I didn't want to hide a part of my life anymore. I felt like if anyone can say how their feeling, speak their mind, tweet, or Facebook whatever their feeling, like, I should also be given the opportunity to express myself completely, feel like I have a place in my school with who I am, not hiding a part of me.

Evan described the difficulties of living a double life and no longer wanting to live a lie,

Cuz living in this secret... is way harder than being gay... cuz you gotta constantly... after you lie you gotta lie again, and once you lie about that one, you gotta find another lie to cover that lie... so I rather just tell the truth and give it to you blatantly and if you don't like it, it's too bad.. cuz at the end of the day I'm not gonna keep constantly lying cuz that makes you go crazy... being in the closet is like living a double life.... I can't live a double life cuz it's hard enough living one life...Cuz I wanted to enjoy life. I wanted to enjoy life and enjoying life wasn't being in the closet. I wasn't enjoying life. I was really... that's what I mean, I was depressed because I was just like, I would be smilin' in other people's face and they don't know who I am... and then go somewhere else and be the person that I wanted to be. You get what I'm saying... like I would be one way with other people, den another way with another one, which is miserable because you... you get confused because den I'll probably be straight with this

one and when I'm supposed to be straight with this one, but then I end up being gay. You get what I'm saying? So it's just like... (laughs).

Disclosure is an integral step in the "coming out" process. There are consequences after self-disclosing a homosexual orientation (e.g., family rejection), but individuals have a desire to disclose because they no longer want to hide their sexual orientations and want to begin enjoying their lives. Psycho-social issues are also essential in the "coming out" process.

### **Psycho-Social Issues**

Last, the theme of Psycho-Social also emerged as a result of participants' responses. The majority of the participants described dealing with a variety of issues, which included self-confidence and pride, feelings of empowerment, hurt, anger, feeling misunderstood, self-acceptance, and depression and suicide.

**Self-confidence.** Many participants indicated gaining self-confidence and being proud after self-disclosing. Vinny shared his experience after "coming out,"

I don't know... I feel very ... see I've been ... I've been out for such a long time. I haven't really thought about how I felt before then because I didn't like where I was before then. I like where I am now. I like ... I like not having to be on guard. I like just talking to people and having a conversation and whether they know I'm gay or not, like that doesn't matter to me. If they will ask me, I will gladly tell them, but it is none of their business; it's all my business. Um, I ... I can do and say whatever I want without of fear of, "Oh, they're going to find out", because if they find out, I don't care. I've been living this ... I've been out for so long that it doesn't matter to me anymore whether people like it or not because I have enough ... I know that I have enough friends and I have enough good people in my life that love me and support me for who I am truly that if you don't want to be around me, "Bye, I don't need you."

Evan reflected on life after "coming out" in school,

I was fierce!... I was gay!... Yes!!!... (laughs)...like I didn't care... like... I didn't care... I thought being gay was like dressing in skinny jeans... and wearin' tight clothes... then after I came out I was just, like... Fuck it, I don't have to wear anymore skinny jeans; I can start wear boy clothes....I can be myself... I dyed my

hair... for Halloween I dressed up like a girl.... I wore tutus for dress- up day... I was very like out and gay pride like... Oh, so you're gay it's ok... don't worry about nobody else. Someone would come up to me like "Oh you're gay!"... I was just like "Oh I know... so tell me something that I don't know already!"..... You get what I'm saying? So... it was more... I felt like a confident boost... I had confidence... yeah, I used to walk with a strut... that's what they say walk with a strut cuz that's when you walk with your head held high and you got confidence and nobody can tell you anything...(laughs).... And that's when nobody told me anything... (laughs).

Ron explained feeling proud even when some students would make verbally harassing comments,

Uhm, I don't- it was; I was; it would always roll off my shoulder just because I didn't think that I, I wasn't hurt by the fact that they were insulting my sexual orientation or my personality or my, hell, even gender expression. Like, just because at that time I already understood that these things were pretty inseparable from my identity, and I was already proud of them. So dealing with it wasn't difficult. For the most part I would call people out if they said anything to my face, or if they said anything under their breath. I would usually ask them what they said and I would - and I've always just been that way. Just because I was always under the impression that they were the...people doing something wrong. I didn't have anything to be ashamed of. So if I was, if people that did say things about me or even other people, especially in regards to sexual orientation, then if I was the one to, like, expose the haters, then they would usually be the ones to get backlash and not me.

***Feelings of empowerment.*** One participant described feeling empowered after “coming out” because he no longer felt the need to hide his sexual orientation. Russell felt,

It was kind of empowering. Like I felt like I wasn't hiding any part of myself anymore. Mm, still nervous but like it gradually and like progressively got better.

**Depression.** Several participants reported feelings of depression and sadness due to lack of support and the need to lie to peers. Xavier disclosed seeing a therapist due to depression,

Initially I was seeing a therapist because me and my parents would always be at each other about stupid little things. Um, which I think was a result of me not



being out and being ... or questioning about so many things. Then I switched therapists. Um, a little after I came out for unrelated reasons, and I kind of, I came out to him, um, but at the time I was feeling s-like a sense of depression because I wasn't completely sure where my life was going, and I didn't have the support of my parents. Um, and I was kind of; like grasping for some, some sense of support. Uh, because not having the parental support was definitely, um, was taxing.

Kevin elaborated feeling depressed because he could not be himself around peers,

Um. I literally sat in the house and was, like, semi-depressed, like, oh I can't hang out with my friends today 'cause I have to lie and pretend that I have something important to do, knowing I'm not doing worth anything, so. It's literally just lying and, like, beating myself up....because I wasn't ready to come out, so. That's pretty much just like a cycle of lying and then a semi-depression, and then recycling itself again.

Evan described dealing with his depression,

I am depressed sometimes, yes, but it's just like I can't get upset. I used to when I was, like freshman and sophomore year, you're immature and people's words, I used to, I remember I cried once. Like yes, I cried, plenty of times. I felt like I was alone. Like almost got kicked out of high school a bunch of times, but we can't be upset because this is the choice I made and people gonna have they opinion.

Evan further elaborated on his depression,

I still fight with depression now because I still have the, sometimes still have the same, like I said, still have the same issues that I had with my parents and my family about me being gay. So, what I did when I was in high school, I started dancing and cuz sometimes I didn't know how to express myself with my words, sometimes I didn't know how to tell people how I felt. So at that time for me, to make me feel better about myself, I just went into a space of dancing, and it cleared my mind so I wouldn't just be downing myself and always saying this is, it's your fault that they're talking bad about you; it's your fault that your parents are saying that, Oh you're not supposed to be gay, like even though I am gay. I can't keep constantly keep saying it's my fault because they don't believe in what I believe in.

***Suicide.*** A couple of participants discussed their thoughts about suicide. Kevin shared the risks that sexual minority youth face in the “coming out” process,

Jim and Jane... Jim and Jane get to walk down the street holding hands, but I can't because I'm going to be criticized or talked about or something like that... I'm not solely that I'm worried about being talked about cuz it's gonna happen

whether I do something good or bad regardless, but it was so much more. Who's to say I can take it for week 1, but week 2, I might just go crazy.... And then I always read about people jumping off bridges, hanging themselves, cutting themselves, and... it's a shame; it's really sad so that puts me more into a shell like "Oh I'm not ready to come out."

Evan disclosed attempting to commit suicide on several occasions,

Just a lot of stuff that's been happening with me and my family and me in general, so I took 5 oxycontin. I woke up in a panic and started throwing up. I took them; I started to daze out; I was, like okay it's working, and I just went into a very deep sleep, then out of nowhere.... I started just throwing up. I'm really over killing myself already, like I'm really over, trying to do it myself. If it's not meant to be; it would've happened already after the 5 oxycontin, which were very strong; it would've happened. After that time I tried to cut myself I would've killed myself, died; nothing happened. It didn't go deep enough and that wasn't the type of pain I wanted to let, uh, feel when I was killing myself. I just wanted to sleep. Because I didn't want to feel pain because I already felt it. I just wanted to sleep for the rest of ... that's it. Find me blue.

**Hurt.** A couple of participants reported a feeling of being hurt for various reasons. Some participants felt hurt because of their family members' reactions after self-disclosing, and another participant was hurt due to experiencing verbal harassment.

***Hurt due to family members' reactions.*** A couple of participants described how they felt hurt because their family members reacted in a negative manner once the participant self-disclosed a homosexual orientation. Ron explained his cousin's initial reaction,

There was only one person. Everyone was just like "whoop hoo"... everybody celebrated it... cuz.. I mean it was so obvious... um... the only person that I had like a bad reaction with and it wasn't even that bad in my opinion... it was my cousin Elizabeth... and her and I had been close when we were younger, but just family issues had kind of separated us, but we still were friends and when I just casually mentioned it cuz at that point that's how I was just doing it... um... she just said "Well no you're not because I don't believe that's true. I don't believe that people can be gay."... And I was hurt momentarily and then... not even much long after that, her tuned changed and... she was completely fine.

Evan remembered feeling hurt because his mother's denial,

Um, cuz it hurts because you know she says tell the truth, tell the, like I said, they say tell the truth; we still love you, and then when you tell the truth and they say you're lying or they saying, "Oh I don't believe you", it's just like, then what the hell you tell me to tell the truth for; I might as well just keep lying and say that I'm straight because I'm sitting here trying to tell you I'm gay. I'm trying to tell you the truth about who I am, and the things that I've been doing behind your back, and the people that I talk to. You're not going to see me with a girl so I want to let you know. And to see that you keep saying, "I don't believe you", that's not what you want, no, after you gotta, I keep ... You know how embarrassing it is to keep coming out 4 times and somebody keep saying they don't believe you. It's embarrassing because you're, like how you don't believe me when I'm telling you; like how you don't believe I'm not what I say I am; like you're not me. It still, it hurts, I'm still hurting now, but I just have to; it's days when I just get upset because I'm just like I have barely nobody to talk to. I can't go to my mom and talk about stuff, so, it hurts.

Evan shared how he felt when his mother stated she was hurt when he initially came out,

I started crying because that wasn't my intention. It's still not my intention to hurt her; it was just my, the fact that women do not, are not something that I want to be with. They are fine to be friends with, but I don't want them laying my bed (laughs), but it's like I don't wanna, I didn't wanna hurt her, and to say that I'm hurting you because I'm following my heart, it's just like you're hurting me because you left my dad, but you followed your heart.

***Hurt due to verbal harassment.*** One participant reported feelings of hurt after being called the f-word. Evan indicated that words matter and are worse than being physically harassed or assaulted,

Because I used to let people's words... I said words affecting more than people's... uh... putting their hands on them... cuz words strike this core... like what you say mean a lot like... it gives off pain, like when you hear someone call you the f-word, or you hear somebody across the street or driving the car saying the F-word or just throwing them out, and it's just like... words back then hurt me... like it used to tear me apart... and he's just like, "You can't let that affect you cuz you're going to constantly hear that"... and I still hear it now and I use to... I tell people like... "Come up with something different" because I used to hear that when I was younger; like I know I'm the f-word; I know I'm gay, but it's a difference of being a proud f-word than being somebody that hides it.

Evan further elaborated,

Uh, words hurt harder than somebody hitting me, to me, so I just like, it hurts, yes it does hurt, I'm not gonna lie. When people say something to me it hurts me, but I can't wallow or is that the word? Yeah, I don't even know if that's the word, but I can't sit there and be upset. I could be upset, yes, if I'm playing in my mind that somebody called me that a bunch of times. Yes.

**Comfortable versus uncomfortable.** A couple of participants conveyed the notion of feeling uncomfortable because they were hiding their sexual orientation, but participants indicated feeling comfortable after self-disclosing. Ron recalled how he felt in middle school,

I was not picked on um... I was just uncomfortable a lot of the time in middle school, and... I wasn't picked on when I came out at all... if anything I may have been targeted when I wasn't out just because everyone knew... I wasn't hiding it very well and I wasn't admitting it.

Ron further noted,

I felt uncomfortable in middle school because I knew that I wasn't being completely myself. It's not - I didn't really fear what other people ... I didn't fear any sort of like physical harassment or discrimination. I wasn't afraid of others. But I knew that I wasn't living up to everything I was and who I was, and I wasn't completely happy with my life. And then when I realized that it was probably due to the fact that I wasn't disclosing my sexual orientation and I wasn't living as openly as I wanted to, that as soon as I did come out, that that feeling would start to go away. And it was true.

Kevin offered how he felt after disclosing to his best friend,

So, it was just my thoughts before, but after coming out, after I had told my best friend, it was like, his reaction. I think it was his reaction that just made me so much more comfortable. Like, assuming that his view was the rest of the world's view, I just went on a rampage, like, "Oh my God, I can do this now." It's like, el, but, that's the reasons I consider us brothers, that s-support I wanted, I needed, and because of that, it was comforting, and it allowed me to go on and say, "Okay, I'm old enough to say it to everyone else I see now."

**Issue of trust.** One participant explained having issues with trusting other individuals during the “coming out” process. Kevin felt he had no one to trust so he decided to keep a diary journal,

Because I thought I didn't have anyone to trust, and when you think about diary journal, you think, “Oh that's such bullshit”, but it's actually really helpful. So it was like, maybe, like, a five-subject notebook and I just ripped off the dividers cuz I needed a really big book. And I just started writing my thoughts down, and one day I felt like I didn't need the book anymore, but me being young, don't, I don't burn it, don't rip it up; I just throw it in the trash can. And who digs in the trash can? I have no idea. But she did it. And that day was when I said she is an official bitch 'cause she got that title and it stuck til now.

**Issue of acceptance.** Several participants indicated there is a need for acceptance from others (i.e., peers and family members), as well as self-acceptance. Xavier felt accepted after self-disclosing to his friend,

The first time I came out in school was to a few friends; uh, the first person was my friend, Samantha. She was pretty accepting and then from there she kind of knew a few other people who would be okay with it, who I was friends with; I came out to them. I was never out to everyone. I think they assumed. I did a project on Matthew Shepard for history class, so I think people knew, um, but there are only a few people that I was completely out to.

Kevin shared his experience,

That's why his situation was so much more crazy 'cause he wanted him to come out as well and he refused to, so it just drama, drama, drama; but at the end of the day, people still accepted it, who he was, and he ran track and I also ran track, and so track is a big sport at my high school. And, like, football is. So, with us being the now, then and there superstars for the team, it was just, like, okay, you're doing this good, so we're going to accept you anyway because you're doing this good for the team, and you're doing good for the school, and that's pretty much it. And it sucks to say that you're like, eye candy for a sport or for academics, so we should accept you, but if you were in the corner reading a book by itself,... we're not going to accept you.

**“Not fitting in.”** Several participants expressed the difficulty of trying to fit in with their peers. Vinny felt he did not fit in with the other boys,

What I went ... what I went through in my understanding. I remember throughout my entire life; I never really fit in with the boys, which I feel is so like, contrived and so overly stated like, “Oh, I’m gay”, because I don’t like hanging out with boys, or I don’t do boy things. It’s like I just never felt like the things that most boys were doing, I never identified with. I could play sports, I like some ... I like some sports. I love baseball. I like some typical masculine things, but that was never where I like....I never wanted to talk about this one... hang out with girls or be around or um ... think of girls in that way. Uh, so that ... But my friends would notice that also.

Evan disclosed trying to fit in,

But it was still like, trying to find out where I fit in at... what group of people would accept me for me... but then that’s when I found out dancing... because that’s... that’s what I’m saying, dancing took up a big part of that coming out process in high school, too, because it allowed me to express myself... to people not thinking of me as “Oh that’s gay Evan...”, as “Oh that’s the boy that can dance amazing.”...um, finding that... finding out how, where to fit in at... still being able to be true to myself without trying to like hide it constantly.

Kevin replied,

So that was another thing... trying to be a part of the crowd, but I had to distant myself from that crowd because I’m not them; I don’t participate in that. uh... This goes back to probably like... fourteen, fifteen, sixteen... and it relates to this question to... um... trying to fit...like I... I wasn’t a follower, but to try and fit in to feel accepted knowing I had something to hide... that was probably the number one thing I would try and do anything for... to try and squeeze in... and it made me feel like, “Oh I’m like a loner number one... um... so what do I do?”... um... sex with girls I’m not interested so I can’t force myself.... Give me a molly... I guess, I don’t know... (laughs)... Um... I really don’t, but other than that it just made me feel like I can never be myself... and be and have friends like real friends. Because I thought that by me not coming out and not being real that was the only way I would keep friends.

**Family acceptance and support.** A couple of participants indicated that being accepted by family members is an essential and integral part of the “coming out” process.

Russell commented on the role his parents played,

My parents eventually played a role in my coming out process, and actually my sister. Um, like about a half year later when they did find out it was a shock, and you can tell there was like a slight discomfort just 'cause it was something new to them, but from day one, like completely accepting. They did everything they could to make me feel like I was still their son 'cause that was the biggest fear of mine, like I was changing who I was so they didn't have a son anymore, but, from day one they made me feel like I was still the person they had raised and nothing was going to change about that.

Russell further noted his parent's support,

My immediate family; I came up to my mom; I actually dropped a lot of hints, um, I like left a picture of a guy up or I would just like hint at, like different things to try to get her like to say the words 'cause I didn't want to, but I would confirm it, but eventually I just, um, one day she asked me if I had a girlfriend and I, like did that like awkward pause where it was like a "yes", but it can't be a yes 'cause it's not a girl, and so I told her that way. And the whole, "I love you no matter what thing,"; she cried, and it was good to tell her and then I had told my dad a week later. Uh, he came up to my room about like twelve at night on a school night and he was just very curious as to why I was on the phone, and why I was acting differently. And so I had to, like tell him that way 'cause there was clearly something going on, and so I told him that way and completely supportive. I think the only, well I know, the only words that came out of his mouth that day, "I'm only mad at myself because I wasn't a good enough father for you to come up to me sooner."

*Sibling acceptance and support.* A couple of participants expressed how they felt having sibling support. Evan felt accepted by his sisters,

(crying) Because I'm smiling now, because me and my sister, both my sisters, just had this conversation because I was on Netflix, and I was watching a gay movie, and they were like, "You know I love you right, and I was just like yo, you know when you guys were younger I felt like you and my sisters, you 2 were gonna follow mommy, and making me feel like y'all didn't want to be around me, but it's ...it's just big relief because I love my sisters and my brother and even though my mom and I have a rough and rocky relationship, it's just like those 3 people are always there to make sure that, like I know that I'm loved by them and it's just, it's really, I'm just happy about it because I thought it would've been a whole other situation, because you know if your mom is upset, you upset; if your mom don't like it you don't like it. And to see that my sisters aren't following their footsteps and it's like they accept it, and the only thing they say is, "Don't kiss in front of me." I'm like, "Well you can't come to my wedding"... then (laughs). They're like I wasn't coming anyway. I was like you're coming, and we joke. And it's just a

relief because I'm just, like I know I have. . . ., I know I have people that really do care even if one person doesn't.

Russell added,

Then mom, then my dad, and we haven't ... actually I told my sister like sort of recently; she's eleven. So, when I came out I think she was probably like eight or whatever. Something around that age. Um, uh, she actually ... we like actually ... we like were slowly introducing the idea of lesbian/gay just so she wasn't overwhelmed because she's younger; we don't want to overwhelm her. But um, I had told my parents to back off just 'cause she's my sister; she's around me all the time, and like if she's with me enough she's going to know... she's going to know but not know that I'm gay. Like, there's just subtle hints that are dropped or if she sees a boy come around and it's, it's just different and when she, when we did actually, like ask her about it she did say like, "I thought he was, but I didn't want to say anything". But like it's cool that someone as young and undeveloped like mind as her can still put together something as me being gay. But she's completely accepting of it; she loves me; I'm her role model; like, nothing has changed; she is still as close to me as ever.

***Self-acceptance.*** Several participants reported having to accept themselves and be comfortable in one's own skin. Evan described gay men as real men,

Because, all right I've always said a real men, (laughs) like gay men are real men because they can accept who they, like, you know. Some straight people always wanna, like, I feel like straight people follow the norm. It's always the same thing, but I feel like for a gay man to confess who he is and be okay and stay true to himself, that's the strongest man of all, to just confess and just stay true. And I feel like all the stuff that we always go through and we still go through, like I could walk down the street and get called a name; it just we are strong people and we stand next to each other. We like the Great Wall of China. You can't get through us (laughs).

Vinny further noted having to accept oneself in order to be able to help others going through the "coming out" process,

And so through the use of the internet and talking to the people and just kind of learning to be comfortable in my own skin, I learned to accept the fact that I was gay, which is fine. There are so many gay people that live out like, outrageously wonderfully lives and I can be one of these people. So eventually after I was able to come to terms with it myself, I'm able to help other people. I'm able to talk with other people who might be going through the same thing and help them come to terms with them, as well as be open and honest with everybody that I meet about who I am and where I am in my life.



**Keeping sane.** One of the participants communicated the need to keep one's sanity. Kevin reflected on his own experience moving to his sister's house in order to keep his sanity,

Um, it was, I literally just, like, packed three big, black trash cans. I'm like, I mean, garbage bags, in like 13 trash bags, on buses and trains. I think I did it in a consecutive of a week. My stuff just started disappearing from the house and it ended up at my sister's house in New Jersey, like, "What's going on? Where are you going?" I said, "Oh, I'm just takin' a vacation," and like, "You're 13; where the fuck could you go?" I said, "I gotta get the fuck out of here because I'm going to go crazy", so I ended up moving all of my stuff myself over to my sister's house in New Jersey via public transportation. I was determined to just...; it was just my, um, defense mechanism. I was just going off of that. And, so, I need to keep sanity. I need to be sane, and I just, I wasn't ready to reveal myself, and, I... felt like I had no support to back me up had I done that.

**Feeling misunderstood.** Several participants commented feeling like others did not understand them. Kevin explained feeling vulnerable and misunderstood by his sister after she found his diary journal,

And I talked about my past experiences and my passing sexual encounters with other people, and she pretty much just read it, and, first of all, it just... that's why I don't have such a network 'cause they're just messy; they're just messy, but I don't want people reading my thoughts. Like I just, it drives me up a wall; it's a pet peeve. It's a pet peeve, so, at that young age, I just started spazzing and crying 'cause I'm emotional and vulnerable, and she says, "What's wrong that you just told me?" And I was just like, "You're just a bitch; like, you don't understand." And that's pretty much how it went.

Evan remembered misbehaving because others did not understand what he was experiencing,

I misbehaved because I felt like I wasn't being understood as a gay person... they're like "Why are you upset?"... like, "Tell me why you're mad".... I'm just like "Cuz no one really understands"....Like really this is how I said it; I'm like "Nobody really understands what I'm going through... I come to school and I feel like I'm accepted then I go home and I'm just getting bashed or... not being spoken to or ignored."

And Vinny recalled growing up in a hetero-normative world,

Yeah, like growing up in a hetero-normative world. Like everything is straight. You, if you were anything off the radar or anything slightly off of the normal heterosexual spectrum, you have to figure things out for yourself. You there, I couldn't go talk to my mom and say, "Hey, I think I'm gay", because she's straight. She has no idea of what I'm thinking or what I could possibly be going through. And while it is different for everyone, at least being able to reach out and get some understanding from people who might have gone through what I've gone through helps me formulate my own ideas and navigate itself.

**Sense of confusion.** Several participants communicated being confused and having feelings of uncertainty about their sexual orientation. Kevin elaborated what he remembered around the age of seven after receiving a beating,

From what I can remember, after the beating, I know it was like hysterically crying. I know that. I do know that. Um. I just know I was confused because that's the first time I've ever learned what gay was. That's the first time I ever learned the term. I never really got a definition of it, but I could pretty much sum up with guy and a guy as a big "no" at the time, so that's where I really much got from it. But I just know I was confused. I was hurt physically and emotionally. And that was pretty much it that I can remember after the beating. And it was just something that, as a child, you, first time experiencing it, you don't want to experience it again, especially when you're hurting physically and emotionally, and so you – that's when your defense mechanisms start building as a child. You, especially from bad experiences, and that's why. That's pretty much what I thought after.

Ron disclosed his thoughts prior to "coming out,"

and even though I was... I was thirteen and when I think back on it, I don't... I know I didn't have like all my thoughts in order so at the time even I'll admit that... I wasn't completely... sure and where my whole sexual orientation so... I was reluctant to tell too many people just because I knew that since I wasn't ready to tell everyone, I didn't have it all together at the time.

Xavier further noted,

I was definitely nervous and I was just kind of unsure of what I was. The night before I came out, I wrote in my journal that I thought I was slightly bi curious was exactly what I wrote. So I knew there was something going on, but I wasn't completely sure what it was, and then once he came out to me, it was, there's someone I could associate with and it would, uh, face to label and things like that and something that I felt.

**Self-concept.** Several participants described a sense of self and being honest to themselves. Vinny remarked,

I don't have to ... I don't have to fake anything. I don't have to tread lightly. I don't have to think about what I'm going to say. Is this going to make me sound gay? Is this going to make me sound straight? Will she question me if I say this because now she knows? So no matter what I say, it doesn't matter because it's my honest words coming out, as opposed to me psychoanalyzing everything and trying to get the perfect right, straight answer.

Ron noted life after "coming out" in school for the first time,

It was better... I was just.... Now I was into it... now I was like... it wasn't living the lifestyle until I came out and now that I was living it... like it just felt a lot more like myself... I felt like I was being more honest... I was happier... like I'm looking at guys, like doing my thing... just even as something as simple as like being able to talk to your friends about, like the people you find attractive and oh this and that. Like those are just small things, but... that's, like, really like a part of life... you know what I mean? Being able to be open and just like. I think that I wasn't being myself, but I didn't even know I wasn't being myself... I don't think I was going through this... dark time of not being myself and feeling like I was living a lie because I was very young and I'll admit... I mean twelve; thirteen really, was when I realized that I was... (pause).. bisexual, gay, that I liked men, but it was just something about it was always so like incomplete... that I knew that I was still just figuring it out so I... and I was willing to take the time to just like wait and figure it out and let things, like let the process go so... when I know now that when I did come out like life did improve, but beforehand I didn't know that it was bad. Does that make sense?

Kevin added how life was for him after "coming out" in school for the first time,

I felt like I would jump off the Empire State Building and survive... honestly; it was a great feeling coming out to my best friend. It was... the fact that I came out to him first... whether it was optional or not... it was kinda... I was kinda of in a position where I thought it was the right moment to answer.... Being truthful without... having to say, "no", then have to resurface that question again... and it felt really amazing and like now it's not... when we talk about relationships it's not "What do you think about her?" It's "What do you think about him?" Or "Who are you talking to now?" And it's like a regular conversation between two guys if they were hetero... it's just a hetero and a homosexual now. It's a regular thing we... and we've gotten so much closer because of it and he shows so much more respect for the gay community.

**Sense of relief.** Several participants communicated a sense of relief after they “came out” for the first time and how they described their life in school. Evan elaborated,

I felt free....like I felt like a whole... (pause)... whole...like how they say?...um... a whole weight just fell off... like after I finally said, “Mom I’m gay... I’m serious”... like I had to really be like, “Mom no” like... so she’s like basically I told them I’m gay... “So you like boys?”... “Yes”... “So...you’re gonna be datin’ boys?”... that’s all the questions, nothing else... “So you’re datin’ boys?”... “Yes”... “You’re serious about this?”... “Yes”... “You know that’s a sin, right?”... I’m like “Yeah, I do”..... “You know.... This is not going to look kindly in God’s eyes”... I’m like “Okay”... “You know you gotta tell your uncles and your cousins and ‘em”... so that’s how it went... “Are you gay?.. Are you serious?... now you gotta tell your family because you told me... now you got to tell your family.”

Vinny further noted his sense of relief after self-disclosing to his friend,

It was relieving. At least when she reacted positively, I think when she hadn’t said anything like the in-between time, which was in reality probably like 5 seconds, but in my head like 5 minutes. Uh, it felt like unnerving and it’s like ... what’s a good analogy? Like if you’re standing on like, a surf board on water and you’re like rocking back and forth and you’re kind of not even ground, and you don’t know whether you’re going to fall or you’re going to stay balanced. But then, having her say, “It’s fine”; it was just like, “Okay. I can breathe again” like I don’t have to hold my breath.

Vinny continued reflecting on his life in school after he “came out,”

I felt different. I felt like ... like you know when you walk outside and you are wearing sunglasses and gets kind of dark and take them off and you realize that the world is a lot brighter than you think it is. That’s kind of what it felt like. You see ... I felt like I saw things a little bit differently. And I could interact differently. So ... how did I view life? It was a lot better, especially at school because I didn’t ...like I am at school now. I don’t have to worry about what I’m saying. Like the second you don’t have to ... you don’t have to think anymore and you don’t have to start psychoanalyzing everything you do, it’s like a huge like relief like you can breathe a lot easier because you don’t have to worry anymore.

Psycho-social issues arise during the “coming out” process. Some of the issues are positive (e.g., proud, self-concept, self-acceptance), but other issues are negative (e.g.,

sense of hurt and pain, depression and suicide). “Coming out” and self-disclosing a homosexual orientation is a complex system, which individuals must navigate.

### **Overall Perspective of the “Coming Out” Process and Comparison to Existing Literature**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the unique experiences of the “coming out” process. Coming out is defined as becoming aware of one’s sexual orientation or gender identity and one’s self-disclosure to others. There are various models of coming out and the formation of a homosexual identity. Cass (1984) proposed a six-stage model of homosexual identity formation, which includes identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis. An individual moves through a linear process, which leads ultimately to a homosexual identity; however, an individual may choose not to continue to the next stage in the development of a homosexual identity, which Cass refers to as identity foreclosure.

**Proposed “coming out” process.** As a result of participants’ responses, the current study suggests the coming out process is a linear process which includes the following stages or steps: Self-Awareness, in which the individual becomes aware of his attraction to the same-sex and may cause inner dilemma; next, Self-Reflection, in which the individual tries to gain an understanding of one’s homosexual identity by seeking information about homosexuality through research (e.g., internet or books) or meeting other homosexual individuals and listening to their experiences; then Self-Acceptance, in which the individual comes to terms with a homosexual orientation; Self-Confidence, in which the individual is comfortable within one’s own skin, and finally Self-Disclosure, in which individuals feel as though they no longer need to lead a false life (i.e., desire to

disclose) or maintain two separate images (private versus public) and they start telling others of their sexual orientation. The self-disclosure is mediated by fear of how others will react. Individuals come out initially as bisexual in order to see the reaction of others (acceptance or rejection) before eventually identifying as gay. Additionally, the self-disclosure (i.e., coming out) is an on-going and cyclical process, in which individuals constantly come out to others when put into a new environment or when meeting new people.

**Connection to literature review.** In respect to influences on the “coming out” process, as revealed through the content from the qualitative interviews, many of the existing findings in the literature were supported. Disclosing one’s sexual orientation depends on “who” and “how” the individual decides to come out. Sexual minority youth usually disclose their sexual orientation to a friend rather than to a parent (Savin-Williams, 1998). In accordance with previous studies, the present study reveals that participants disclosed their sexual orientations for the first time to friends. Kevin reflected on his own experience coming out for the first time to his best friend,

I wanna say it was my best friend; uh... He was in Maryland and it was Black Friday, Thanksgiving break... and he texted me and he’s like, “I have something to ask you;”... it’s four in the morning and I knew what it was and I was, “Oh shit”... excuse me... (laughs)... and I, for some reason, just from the message... I have something to ask you... that’s random... I was like “Oh, okay, go ahead”... he’s like “Are you gay?”... And I was like, “Yeah,” ... He’s like “Whoa”... and then he went off on me... like he had an attitude with me because we’ve been friends since freshmen year of high school and he’s like, “You could’ve told me... it’s not like I care”.. blah blah blah and all this other stuff... “I don’t know why it took this long to tell you... I should have asked you when we first met cuz I already knew it.”... and his reaction was bad at the time, but it was comforting because it wasn’t like “Oh... now what am I going to do, I gotta find a new friend”... It wasn’t anything bad... so it was my junior year of high school I first came out.

Vinny also shares his experience “coming out” to his best friend for the first time,

Um, my experience coming out for the very first time... I came out to my first person when I was 15. It was at a party with some friends. Uh, we were just hanging out, dancing, eating chips no drinking or anything like that. But I just felt like I had to tell someone, or I had to say something. So I pulled my best friend, Kathy outside and I said, “I have something to tell you” and I could never say it. Every time I came out to somebody, I could ... I could never actually say it and they always said it for me, which helps so much because if I actually had to say it out I don't know if I actually could have done it. Um, she, like pretty much everybody that came out to afterwards, kinda already suspected or kinda knew or could have kind of guessed that I wasn't happy with the role that I was pretending to lead and was trying to see myself and present myself in a different light. And so, yeah, I came out to her. She was extremely supportive. She helped me come out to everyone else, which was great. She's still my best friend. Um, after I came out to her, I came out to some friends first. I hadn't told anybody in my family yet. I came out to my friend, Michael who was also gay.

In accordance with existing literature, individuals come out to siblings before parents (Strommen, 1989). Vinny reported disclosing his homosexual orientation to his twin brother before telling his mother,

So having them [friends] as a support system helped me come to terms with myself better and be proud of where I was and who I am. And so then I told my brother. My brother helped me tell my mom and then my mom helped me tell the rest of my family.

Sexual minority youth tend to disclose their sexual orientation first to their mothers then to their fathers. Fathers are sometimes told of their son's sexual orientation by their wives (Savin-Williams, 1998). In Ron's own words he shared how he came out to his mother and his mother told his father,

I kinda cheated the system when I came... coming out to my parents because my mom initiated it, and then she asked if I wanted to sit down and tell my dad and I said “Oh no, you do it”.... because and so my dad, if I had to sit down and tell him, it would've been a lot harder like I feel like all that stuff... the panicky, discomfort, and frog in the throat probably would have just been a lot harder only because he had shown signs of not always being like the most supportive not of me, but of the like the gay community... he had made derogatory comments in the past and of course I cataloged them and I remembered, and... but knowing my dad who... knowing that he loved me and everything like that, I didn't think it

would be an issue, but I knew he would take more time and I felt that a conversation with him would be really, really uncomfortable on his part so I... maybe it was me justifying to myself, but by not like... I remember feeling ok with not having a conversation with him because... I was almost doing him a favor.

In light of the age of technology, a couple of participants disclosed their sexual orientation through the use of social media (e.g., Facebook). Using social media alleviates the pressure of disclosing face-to-face and somewhat removes the human interaction, as well because one does not have to deal with the other individual's immediate reaction (negative or positive). Russell explained how he came out for the first time,

Uh, it was my sophomore year of high school, I believe. Uh, I had recently started seeing someone and I felt the need to ... I guess he gave me the push to, like come out. He wanted me to be open about it. I don't know; it's hard dating someone in the closet and I felt bad, so I kinda did it for him, but in the long run it benefited me so. Uh, I came out via Facebook; it's kind of weird, but, I came out that way and then confirmed it when people like asked me in person. So, yeah

Roberto further stated how he used social media to disclose his sexual orientation for the first time,

(laughs). It was, I think 8th grade and it was to one of my close friends at the time. Except I didn't really say I was gay; I said I was bi. Things change, and- Uh, it was through Facebook because I was a little punk, and, uh, she was cool with it. We didn't really talk about it in person.

**Benefits of “coming out.”** In reference to benefits of “coming out,” participants' responses in the current study are in accordance with existing literature. Disclosing one's homosexual orientation provided positive benefits and positive psychological adjustment. Sexual minority youth who disclosed to a sibling may strengthen and deepen the relationship between siblings (Savin-Williams, 1998). Several participants shared feeling supported by siblings after they “came out.” According to Coleman (1982), “coming



out” to significant individuals in one’s life fostered a positive self-concept and self-acceptance. Many participants in the current study reported feeling proud, self-confident and self-accepting, and a sense of relief. Ron shared feeling proud after “coming out” to his brother,

It was great... we had this like... we had hours of conversation just about it... about me, what it means to be a member of the community..... my brother is very intellectual, very loving...um..It was just... It was the same thing you know... He... he didn’t parade around like a lot of my friends did or anything, but his level of interest in it, happiness for me, pride...um... cuz he was very proud of me at the time ...like was very similar to that same.... Very, extremely positive reaction that like triggered me to be very, very happy about coming out.

Evan elaborated on self-acceptance,

That’s why I mean I’m not in the closet anymore because he finally pulled me out... like you have to accept it... You have to accept it if you want someone else to accept it.... You have to love yourself.... You want someone else to see that you don’t care what they’re saying.

Xavier commented feeling a sense of relief after coming out,

After I came out for the first time it was definitely, it was liberating. Uh, in a sense, I felt freer, I felt like there was also of a burden, but I also felt like it was a secret between my friend and myself, and it kinda, it stayed there. So I was beginning a new chapter of my life, but just with that person who knew.

**Challenges.** In regards to challenges sexual minority youth face, the interviews of the present study are in accordance with existing literature. Sexual minority youth face a myriad of challenges when these individuals self-disclose their sexual orientation to others.

***Running away, survival sex and prostitution.*** Sexual minority youth are at-risk for homelessness and running away from home (Human Rights Watch, 2001), and are likely to engage in prostitution as a means of support after running away (Kurks, 1991).

Evan disclosed engaging in prostitution with random guys,

(laughs)... Like... um... I'm going to be honest... um... when I was younger my mom used to... when I told my mom I was gay she stopped giving money.... Younger or older guys used to come up to me, be like "Hey you're cute"... I used to get paid to have sex... if I would've known its ok... that it's not ok to do dat... It's to... go on... go find... like... If I had somebody tell me or lead me in a way to say "You don't have to do that... not every guy that tells you you're cute or... uh... they love you means anything".... (laughs)... I can't believe I just said that but... yes!!.... Oh my God that just that was a weight off my shoulders; I just confessed that to somebody... (laughs).

Evan continued to explain his experience of running away which led him to prostitution,

I ran away a couple times. Whoever was gonna take me in they house for a couple of days.... Friends and complete strangers. And that's where the, um, (laughs), I'm not gonna say it again, but you know what I'm talking about. I don't wanna say that again. I don't wanna even put that out there no more, but that's when that started to come apart.

**Bullying.** In accordance with Kosciw et al. (2012), sexual minority youth are at-risk for bullying (e.g., verbal harassment, cyber-bullying, physical harassment, etc.). A couple of participants stated that they had been bullied in school. Vinny remembered his bullying experience at an early age,

And so I remember from a very early age, people would tease me. They're like, "Oh, you're gay", blah, blah, blah. And you always automatically say, "No. No I'm not. I can't be." Nobody ... nobody choses that. Nobody picks that blah, blah, blah.

Evan also remembered his experience in grammar school,

That's what I mean when I was in grammar school... like I was a little bit too flamboyant for some of the guys so I used to get bullied...in grammar school... so when I went to high school... I wasn't that flamboyant cuz I had that experience to grow to become like a young little...little boy.

**School Supports Available.** A major focus of the current study was to uncover opportunities for schools to support students who decide to come out, as well as the possibility of uncovering additional resources. The majority of participants discussed their experiences having a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) in high school. Evan remarked,

Cuz I was around people who were just like me... who accepted me like... I didn't know any gay people freshmen year because I was a freshmen...didn't know anybody... any clubs... and only thing I knew about was football, track, school... and that's it; go straight home... den I met Mr. Lopez, he introduced me to Mr. Clark... who introduced me to the gay-straight alliance...I felt important... finally I felt important because... even though it was a small group... my school didn't ignore it... you get what I'm saying?

Vinny communicated his experience being a member of his high school GSA,

But also my high school had a gay-straight alliance ... I kind of help revive it my sophomore year. I had a teacher who, her daughter was a lesbian ... is a lesbian. And so me, her and her daughter kind of helped restart it and revamp it. And it was just like weekly meetings, before school started, just talking about issues that were going on in gay culture legislation things, what to do. We talked about bullying a lot because obviously kids are ruthless. Kids are vicious. I know this because I'm a music educator. Kids are terrible. They're great but they're terrible. Uh, and they don't realize they're terrible. So it's like how do you deal with bullying. How do you ... What are the systems in place for if you are being bullied? Who do you talk to? Do you talk to them? What do you do? And so having ... also having the gay-straight alliance as a support system helped a lot.

A couple of participants indicated that their school did have counselors who were available to speak to students on a variety of topics, which may have included sexuality and sexual orientation, but the counselors were not specifically trained in addressing issues affecting sexual minority youth. Ron recalled the counselor in his school,

There was um... there's, there's always been... a... I knew in high school her title was student assistance counselor, basically. The school did, my middle school as well as my high school did have like an onsite counselor that worked there... did their thing and you could go to at any time... um throughout the day... so they were available to me.

Kevin remembered the counselor available to him in school, but the counseling was something he needed to seek out,

It's not direct support... it's more so support you have to seek... and that's basically in a nutshell, counseling....Because... when you're in... it's like a social worker or a guidance counselor at my high school... um... it's the same thing... and you go to talk to them about anything, but when you have friends and you don't have any relevant problems that they know about... then it's like, Why were you in there? You didn't talk to me about that or why did you go? We

could've talked it out and stuff like that... so then they assume the worse when its already a questionable thing about someone's sexuality.

Several participants identified supportive teachers and administrators when they disclosed in school for the first time. Evan remembered two teachers in high school teaching him about the importance of safe sex,

He told me about safe sex.... He taught me about... um... if I'm going to be active being tested every six months... talked about, don't be... the process of getting HIV... if you're gonna get it, this is what's going to happen... this is just not the gay disease... stuff like that.

Evan further remembered the support he received from two of his high school teachers,

And I'm forgetting one of the biggest people that got me... and he's not even gay.. Mr. Clark. He's a teacher who... (pause)... I love... ok, Mr. Lopez and Mr. Clark are the two teachers who took me under their wing cuz I was a rebel kid... and... (pause)... I misbehaved because I felt like I wasn't being understood as a gay person... so being at tech you can be kicked out... I almost got kicked out three times in high school cuz of the application process to get into that high school... I got kicked... almost got kicked out three times... anger management... They're like "Why are you upset?"... "Like tell me why you're mad".... I'm just like, "Cuz no one really understands"... Like really this is how I said it: I'm like, "Nobody really understands what I'm going through... I come to school and I feel like I'm accepted then I go home and I'm just getting bashed or... not being spoken to or ignored"... and Mr. Lopez, who is the music teacher and Mr. Clark, who was the advisor of GSA just took me under... like told me stuff... took me to my first musical.... brought me my first ballet slippers... like they were people who were there.. who just supported me and understood like... "We understand what you're going through... this is what I went through and shared their stories of "Oh yeah my parents kicked me out."

And Vinny recalled his school administrator and teachers showing support even when parents were not in agreement,

The principal is in charge. So having him on our side meant no matter what you say he's going to let us stay. So having his support ... I think it also made it a little bit more okay for other teachers to show their support, and lots of students have affinities towards certain teachers. And so when teachers are starting to say like ... When teachers would hear snide comments about like, "Oh, you can't go to that club. It's full of queers and stuff like that," teachers would squash it. Or say, "That's not okay. You're not allowed to say that. Why are you saying that?" And

challenge students and get them to express like, “Well, why do you think like this? Do you think it’s okay to think like this?” And cause them to reevaluate and rethink things. And so by having the principal’s support and having more teachers’ support, it kind of help create this overall arching and welcoming atmosphere on campus.

A couple of participants explained that being involved with the performing arts program at school helped with the “coming out” process. In Evan’s own words,

He was... (laughs)... Mr. Lopez was the music teacher... and... he picked me out of the group and this is why.... Cuz I came to him; I was a computer science major... and... he was going... He was doing Hairspray for the school play... and the dance auditions came up... and I danced... no dance training, no nothing... he was like “It’s just something... like it’s a glow about you that I’m loving.” He’s like come to me early in during the...uh... come to school earlier, we’ll talk... I’m going to transfer you from... computer science to dance.

Vinny further noted,

I am a performance arts kid so, um, I don't know why, but apparently all gay people are performing arts kids or at some point, or that’s what we were associated with, but at least for me being in choir and being in theater helped a lot because people in there are accepting of anything. You could come in and only walk in your hands and they’ll be like, “You’re the coolest person ever.” So, uh, having ...I always call them my choir family. Having my choir family just stand by me no matter what, like I could ... I could shave my head and they’ll say, “Whatever we like you still.”

Results of participants’ responses also revealed that participants found support systems outside of the school environment. The majority of participants found social support through their friends and peers. Russell stated his friends were his biggest supporters when he decided to come out for the first time in school,

My friends were my biggest supporters because I told them, like about a half year earlier with my parents, so they were the only people I really relied on; they were the people I told everything to, biggest fans in a sense, like they stuck it, stuck it with me, throughout everything, when I went through my bi-sexual stage to gay, fully. Um, and I could say that I guess in a sense that, my uh classmates were supportive ‘cause they never said anything to knock me down, so I felt like I was allowed to be who I was.

Evan further recalled his experience getting support from his friends the first time he came out in school,

My friends Gary and Roger....we..... (laughs).... Uh Gary is Goldie... uh Roger is Tolula Tonsoffun and I'm Red Rider... We made up drag personas... We used to become drag queens in the dance room and those.... And that's when I mean I didn't know any gay people because I was in the computer science room... and then transferring to the acting and performing side of things opened my eyes up to "Oh there go Gary, there go Roger... Wait, you guys are gay".... Throw on some wigs and there you go become drag queens... and Rupaul.

One of the participants identified that having family support was beneficial when coming out in schools. Vinny described how his brother defended him,

And I think also having my brother on my team after people started finding out helped a lot because he, he would say ...he would tell me all the time like, "The football players were talking about you and they were saying all these really, like untrue homophobic things, and I told them to knock it off." And so it helped create a nice atmosphere to where I didn't have to worry about really being bullied or anything like that because he had my back, and I had friends that had my back. I'm just a no shit kind of person like, "You're not going to talk to me that way or else you can get out."

One of the participants used other social supports by listening to other individual's experiences navigating the "coming out" process. Kevin reported,

I found out a lot of things that I should be finding out through a textbook, but it was through live experiences, whether it was messing with it... a guy or... learning about someone's else experience or hearing how someone else is going through pain... I've learned a lot.. and I just kinda molded that into where I didn't want to be and where I think I should be and how I didn't want to feel.

Another participant shared his experience of going to a private therapist and using an online peer counselor. Xavier disclosed going to a private therapist,

I was seeing a therapist at the time, but I didn't feel, for like family things, but I didn't feel comfortable coming out to him, so that didn't really happen. He was kind of old, in all honesty. He was just kinda, like, he's like old and just kinda scary. He wasn't someone who I really felt comfortable talking to, so that was kinda, we just didn't match on that level. The second, the second therapist who I went to was a lot more, just friendly and opening or open.

Xavier continued,

...there was, there is an online chat network, I'm trying to remember the name of it ... It was, it was for LGBT youth. Umm ... I can try to find the name of it. GLBT National Hotline, Peer Support Chat, <http://www.glnh.org/>; I went on there a few times cuz you talk to like uh, like a peer counselor, about things. It was more about like, I feel probably like being depressed at that point.

One of the participants used the library to read books and conduct research about the “coming out” process. Vinny indicated how he went to the library and conducted research,

At least I'm lucky that I grew up in a town that I did, where there was a lot of ... where I can use the internet and research and reach out to people and talk, and read books, and things like that, and go to my library and they have a young adult, gay teen section that I can read about stories, where they'd be fiction or not, about people like me coming to terms with things.

### **Impact of the Findings**

The results of the current study suggest schools are providing limited to no support systems for sexual minority youth. For example, several participants disclosed coming out for the first time during middle school, but all participants reported no Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) available in their middle school. However, the majority of the participants did attend a high school that had a GSA available. In other words, sexual minority youth needed to wait until they were in high school to have some type of social support/group, even though they were dealing with and questioning their sexuality at an earlier age. These findings have significant implications for school supports in general, for peers, counselors, teachers, building administrators, and district administrators.

**Desire for supportive schools.** Based on results of participants' responses, there is need and desire for supportive schools. One participant described feeling irrelevant due to the lack of specific resources available for students who decided to self-disclose.

Also, several participants indicated there is a need to feel supported in school and have support systems available to students. Kevin indicated feeling irrelevant at school,

I feel like it wasn't a relevant issue for them. We have a nurse. We have health problems in the school that's relevant to them. We have an administrator. The students who are bad, that's relevant to them. But we don't have an educator or a counselor, or a consoler for coming out students because I feel like it's not relevant to them. Maybe an example, maybe something bad would happen by bullying, to the extent where it's a coming out student that they're bullied so much that they go to the board, and they go to the police, where then there has to be a cause for it to be in effect for something to happen, but I feel like it's not relevant to them, and I feel like it, that's in many cases in many places, if there's no support for that whatsoever, I feel like it's not relevant. Or they don't believe in it. Or they could care a less about it. That's how I feel.

Ron stated the importance of school support systems,

GSAs are incredibly important because they capture the whole spectrum of people as they begin to develop and disclose their sexual orientation because you have plenty of people that definitely need help on the spot. They need a safe space; they need somewhere to go; they need support so that they can begin to move on in their journey. So it's good for people that actually need help. They need attention. But I think that it goes... just as well, it allows ... it creates a different atmosphere; it just develops a culture in a school that allows people to come out if they don't need help because I think that sometimes it can be a perception that the GSA is only for the people there that like have to hide their sexuality or uhm, maybe like don't have a lot of friends and can only find friends within, like this commonality of sexual orientation. But really, I think that what it does so much more is allow people that - to just choose their own path without the fear of being discriminated upon because there is somewhere, there is a support system somewhere; there is a safety net.

Xavier expressed his desire and need to feel supported in school,

I think it would be awesome because it's a visible network and that's how I see coming out and just equality and stuff, in general, as a visible network of people, and I think that's what the safe space type of thing does. That's, that's one reason why I'm out and try to express who I am freely is I didn't have any, like role models or visible network of people um, or anything I could associate myself with or anyone um, to be like that they understand me; like it's okay to be out and things like that and that's kind of why when I came to college I was out; like rainbows and glitter and whatever else I could find like. I also wanted to, to be like a, um, beacon; I don't know if that's the right word, but just being myself so that other people could be themselves equally.



**Psycho-Social Supports.** Social supports such as GSA is needed for students who decide to “come out” in schools. Ron expressed his thoughts on having a GSA in the primary grades,

I can only imagine then that if I was a sixth grader moving from my elementary school into my middle school, I probably would have known that there was a GSA.... And there is a whole really good chance that I would have been a member and it would've addressed these issues and come out even earlier if there was such a GSA.

Russell reported how he felt being supported by his school through his GSA,

Um, I definitely like the club aspect of it. It was, I don't know, it was very personal for our, for my particular school; like we had the in school session meetings but, uh, we also had after hours where we would come in and like just dedicate a room and no one was there so we could sit in a circle and just like express anything that came to mind, and that definitely made me feel like more accepted. So I feel like that was a good support system.

**Peers and friends.** The implications for peers are that there is a need for diversity training to increase sensitivity and diversity (Fisher & Kennedy, 2012). Some of the participants indicated how important peers are in the “coming out” process. Vinny elaborated the impact of support from peers and friends,

Like, because your friends ... Like I said, your friends will support you if you want to change your hairstyle. And so hopefully they'll support you with your lifestyle choices ... well, not choices but your lifestyle. And most of them will but when you start having random strangers be okay or people that you don't necessarily consider close. But when they started becoming okay and saying this is fine. Like no matter what like you're ... you're a human being and what you choose to do with your life is your choice, or however you want to live your life is how you want to live it, and I'm going to consider that okay. Like once you ... once everybody starts ... once you ... let me reflect. Once people start reaffirming you, it makes it better.

Russell further noted,

I mean your friends, definitely. I mean coming out made me realize who my true friends were. I didn't lose any of them which was the best thing about that, but I know people do lose friends due to coming out and it sucks, but you realize who

your true friends are and your true friends are going to help you and support you and make you feel like accepted.

***School mental health counselors.*** Mental health professionals and school counselors should offer non-judgmental and confidential counseling. School counselors should discuss confidentiality and the counselor-student relationship. Counselors should listen and affirm the sexual minority youth, show them understanding and empathy, normalize the experience, and provide support and information (Fisher & Kennedy, 2012). There should be several counselors who are specifically trained in addressing LGBTQ issues and are comfortable with using terms related to sexual minority youth (e.g., gay, lesbian, homosexual, bisexual, etc). Ron conveyed his thoughts about counseling in schools,

I think that one- counselors probably not like enough for any school... outside not even just like for LGBTQ issues, but um... I would say that it needs to be widely known that the counselor is there for issues regarding sexual orientation and gender identity... thinking back like there was never...I never really knew that I could go to my counselor for that reason in middle school. Like... I just... and I maybe I didn't think about it hard enough, but there was never any like visibility on their on the school's end that, like they would receive um... someone struggling with LGBT...like sexual orientation, gender identity issues... like that wasn't an advertised or well known... there's... I feel knowing my school now in retrospection that like, if I did go... for those reasons they would have received me, but they weren't reaching out to the student body in that regard.

Russell commented that there is a need for school counselors to receive specific training to address GLBTQQ issues,

I don't know if this is pushing it, but maybe a dedicated counselor in like, whose like a specialized in gay, straight, like transgender like, that's their study ... maybe like a special counselor for that 'cause I mean those are a bigger population nowadays, so it's not exactly a waste if two students ... a good majority of the school is probably bi-curious at the most to gay or lesbians ... so I feel like maybe they should like, dedicate a counselor to just...so t they are, like specialized and they know maybe the exact words to say instead of, like sugar coating it.

Vinny added the importance of confidentiality when working with GLBTQQ students,

Counseling support services are a great thing, too, because they keep everything confidential. So just knowing that there are people that you can talk to whether you are planning on coming out or just questioning or have questions, knowing that there's somebody that you can talk to and that they will keep your information confidential and talk to you as a non-partisan, I think is really important.

*Teacher mentors.* Teachers could help support sexual minority youth by identifying as an ally by putting a rainbow flag or Safe Space sticker on their doors.

Teachers should be provided with specific training about GLBTQQ issues. Ron described teachers becoming allies for sexual minority youth,

Anybody that undergoes training gets a sticker that says... its rainbow and it says "ally program member"... And I can only imagine that if they implemented such a system in middle school and high school, if you had this sticker on teacher's doors saying like... just admitting that they were an ally to the LGBT community... that would go a really long way.

Vinny offered the need for sexual minority youth to feel safe in school,

I really like the, um, the safe ... the safe place, um, campaign. I don't know if it's a campaign. My mom talks about it all the time and I kind of wish it was more prominent in my school, uh, because I was able to talk to some teacher about it, but being able to talk to adults... At that age, having known that I could have gone to any random teacher even if I didn't have them and just talk and have them not be ... not judge me or just like talk to me as a person, would be really nice. Especially I like the idea of it being not teachers that you normally associate with so ... I'm not a history kid, but I would have loved to be able to go to talk to some random teacher because they don't know anything about me. But... and tell them my story and have them be a non-partisan party in my coming out process would be really great.

Xavier added,

I mean a school counselor would probably... one or just like how we do safe space training; some, for some people it's optional, um; for some people it's mandatory like the police department does it. But then some professors can go; it's like a two-hour workshop about like LGBT community; how to support them, things like that and they get, like a card, with like a little rainbow flag and stuff like that. And professors put it on, like their office door and things like that and it kind of identifies people who are LGBT friendly. So if teachers had something

like that, just kind of identify. I think it sends a statement, in general, um; I think it sends a statement um, just across the board that these people are openly supportive of LGBT community. I think that's a statement in itself, not just to gay and straight people, um, but then also to LGBT people. It identifies the person they can go to, like this person will understand; this person won't like freak out or anything.

**Academic Supports.** Although the current study revealed that there is more of a need to support sexual minority youth through psych-social support systems, there is also a need for academic supports (e.g., guest speakers and inclusive curriculum).

**Building administrators.** School administrators should have a strong performing arts program available for sexual minority youth and invite guest speakers to discuss issues related to the GLBTQQ community. Ron shared his experience being a part of the performing arts program in his high school,

It's probably hard to kind of like, classify or qualify whatever, but there in my high school there was like, a musical and there were so many more art programs where I felt like that's where... the community tended to flourish and like get.... be open, so and there were none of those in my middle school... actually there.... In even in choir class like... I don't know.

Evan shared his idea of bringing in speakers to address GLBTQQ issues,

Having people come in like... doing seminars... just making more... about the knowledge and being able to talk to people instead of just... putting down one stereotype.... Cuz it's... about talking that... that's what I mean; for me, it was about the talking and the people telling me their stories about them coming out and them dealing with the stuff that made it easier for me to be the person I am now.... Because I know now I'm not the only one who's struggled because when you're younger you feel like you're by yourself, just in that box like... I'm gay; I don't know nobody else who's gay... I don't know where else to look...turn to.

And Roberto added,

I mean if they had, like assemblies at schools talking about like sexuality, even though it's a very taboo topic ... kind of would help.

**District administrators.** There is a need for district administrators to promote an inclusive curriculum. An inclusive curriculum can promote respect for all and improve

school experiences for GLBTQQ students. Xavier stated his thoughts about how to include GLBTQQ topics into the curriculum,

I feel like working it into the curriculum at some point, like not avoiding LGBT topics and working it into, like into history and I guess that's about it. I don't think you can have gay math or anything, but um, however it fits in the curriculum, just not being a topic or subject to talk about, I think would have helped people who aren't out yet see who... people who may understand them. Umm ... Yeah, I guess just not avoiding the topic.

Xavier further explained,

I think those resources would be helpful then and might have touched on this a little bit before, but having uh, inclusive, an inclusive curriculum across the board, as I mentioned, history, but um, even like sex ed. and stuff like that. Umm ... Just not assuming um, that everything is just a guy and a girl, um, putting all the options out there, um, and I think that would be helpful. I mean a lot of it is rooted in whatever, just in binaries and stuff like that, but I think consciously try to make an effort to. I mean that's even more down the road, getting rid of, like micro aggressions and some things like that, but uh, I think at least for now, starting, having safe space or things like that or clubs... some kind of support systems in high school would be totally beneficial.

### **Limitations**

The primary limitation of the present study is that participants were a sample of convenience. In this regard, the interviewed individuals represent people who were willing to speak at length about their understanding of the “coming out” process and their experiences disclosing a homosexual orientation to others for the first time, a unique characteristic, given the sensitivity of the topic of study. Additionally, the participants were also individuals who are attending a community college or a university. In fact, the recruitment flyer was sent specifically to local colleges’ and universities’ on-campus GLBTQQ organizations to disseminate to their group members. Therefore, given the nature in which participants were recruited, there may have been bias in discussing their experiences that may not be representative of all sexual minority youth. Furthermore,

there were only 7 participants in the sample from which the data analysis was drawn. Consequently, the results found in the present study may be unique to the participants interviewed and may not be generalizable beyond this group of participants. The question then is how do researchers access those who are unlikely to be members of or attend their on-campus GLBTQQ organization? Are there dramatic differences in one's understanding of the coming out process between individuals who are members of the GLBTQQ organization, compared with those who are not? Are there differences between individuals who do not attend post-secondary institutions, compared with those who do? Future studies may try to recruit individuals who participate in a GLBTQQ community agency.

Another potential limitation to the present study was the difficulty in recruiting participants. Although research suggests that there are more students coming out now, compared with previous generations, not many individuals wanted to participate in the current study. This observation may be due to the fact that individuals may not have felt comfortable discussing such a sensitive topic with an unfamiliar person. Results of the current study suggest that "coming out" is a difficult and continuous process, which is mediated by fear (e.g., fear of rejection from peers, fear of rejection from family, fear of losing financial support). There may have been a fear of others (e.g., family or friends) finding out, leading, potentially, to negative consequences.

The current study required participants to meet face-to-face for the interview, which excluded two interested participants because they could not meet in person. Given cameras (web cameras on phones, computers, and tablets) and the nature of the internet,

future studies may utilize programs such as Skype, potentially to recruit additional individuals who may not be able to meet in person.

A potentially confounding factor is that participants had to have disclosed their sexual orientation to others in middle school or high school and were between the ages of 18-21. The question then is how different is one's understanding of the "coming out" process for individuals who disclose during college or later in life? The results cannot be generalizable because one's understanding of the "coming out" process and the "coming out" experience may differ drastically, depending on life experiences and the time when the individual self-disclosed. Future studies could address this by including individuals who disclosed anytime throughout their lives.

Another potentially confounding factor is the gender of the participants. All the participants included in the current study identified as gay males and may not be representative of all sexual minority youth in regard to the understanding of the "coming out" process and the "coming out" experience. The question then becomes how different is the "coming out" process and how different are experiences for individuals who identify as lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning?

Another limitation to the present study was that the group of participants was homogeneous in regard to geographical region, city/town, political climate in the school, and socio-economic status (6 of the participants resided in the Northeastern section of the US and 1 participant resided in the Southwestern section of the US; 4 participants attended school in a suburban setting; 2 participants attended school in an urban setting, and 1 participant attended school in a rural setting; 5 participants described the political climate at school as Liberal; 1 participant described the political climate at school as

Conservative, and 1 participant described the political climate at school as Other; All 7 participants came from a middle socio-economic status). This group may not be representative of the population as a whole, considering that individuals in the Northeastern section of the US are regarded as more Liberal and progressive. Future studies could address these issues by researching individuals who reside in other parts of the US such as the South who are considered to be more Conservative.

### **Future Directions**

In light of the overall goal of understanding the “coming out” process and the “coming out” experiences by interviewing gay males, future studies may want to compare similarities and differences in the “coming out” process in other sexual minority groups (i.e., lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning). What are the specific challenges that each group faces when self-disclosing to others? How does society view each group?

Another goal of the current study was to uncover opportunities for schools to support gay students who self-disclose a homosexual identity. Based on participants’ responses, schools are providing limited resources or indirect support. Participants provided some ideas for support systems such as counseling, gay-straight alliances, safe spaces and allies, inclusive curriculums, and guest speakers. Additionally, schools are making support systems (e.g., gay-straight alliance) available when students are in high school, but research suggests students are “coming out” at younger ages (i.e., late middle school) than in previous generations. Future research may focus on measuring the effectiveness and impact that these supports systems have within the schools, especially when the supports are implemented in younger grades.



As revealed through participants' responses, race, gender, and religion are important aspects of the "coming out" process and one's identity. An area for future direction could specifically look at multicultural issues. For example, do individuals have to prioritize their identities and figure out where sexual orientation fits in with their other identities/minority statuses?

Cass (1984) proposed a six-stage model of homosexual identity formation which includes identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis. As a result of participants' responses, the current study suggests the following stages: Self-Awareness, Self-Reflection, Self-Acceptance, and Self-Disclosure. There has been much progress recently in regard to gay rights, compared with 1984. Future research may focus on comparing how relevant Cass' (1984) model is at the current time and possibly propose a new model.

There is much research on the challenges and risks that sexual minority youth face when they decide to "come out." As revealed through a couple of participants' responses, the "coming out" process affects not only the individual who decides to self-disclose, but also affects others (e.g., friends and family members). An area for future research may examine the impact on the family and friends after someone has decided to self-disclose a homosexual orientation.

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**Appendix A**

## Letter of Introduction

**PHILADELPHIA COLLEGE OF OSTEOPATHIC MEDICINE**

Yuma I. Tomes, PhD, ABA  
Associate Professor  
Director, Psy.D. Program in School Psychology  
Department of Psychology  
215-871-6946 Office  
215-871-6458 Fax  
[yumato@pcom.edu](mailto:yumato@pcom.edu) Email

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Michael Appelgren and I am a doctoral student at the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine in the Psy.D. School Psychology Program. I am currently working on my dissertation which will focus on the “coming out” process and secondary school support systems for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender middle school and high school students. If possible, I would like the opportunity to speak with members of your **(insert specific name of organization or association)** organization to possibly recruit participants for my research, more specifically identify gay men who may benefit from this research, as well as assist younger students in the “coming out” process.

The study is a qualitative research dissertation that will involve me interviewing gay men up to 2 hours on a mutually agreed upon date and time at a public location. The purpose of the study is to examine participants’ understanding of the “coming out” process and support systems received while in middle school or high school. Each participant will be interviewed on an individual basis. Confidentiality will be strictly adhered to during this process.

If you require additional information or have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me via email [michaelapp@pcom.edu](mailto:michaelapp@pcom.edu) or at 862-216-5010. I hope to hear from you soon. If you have any concerns about this study contact Dr. Yuma Tomes at 215-871-6946.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Michael Appelgren, M.A., Ed.S.  
Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine  
Psy.D. Doctoral Candidate

**Appendix B****Research Flyer****Descriptions of Psycho-Social and Academic Support Systems in  
Schools for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and  
Questioning Middle School and High School Students.****The following participants are needed:**

- Are you a gay male college student between the ages 18-21?
- Did you disclose your sexual orientation to others during middle school or high school (e.g., friend, family, teacher, pastor, etc.)?
- Would you be willing to participate in a research interview?
- The interview will focus on the understanding of the “coming out” process and support systems.



**If you are interested in participating in this study or need more  
information, please contact:**

**Michael Appelgren  
michaelapp@pcom.edu  
or  
862-216-5010**

## Appendix C

### Eligibility Screen Protocol

#### Introduction:

Thank you for your interest in participating in a qualitative research on the “coming out” process and support systems in middle school and high school. In order to be included in the current study, I will ask you several questions in which a “yes” or “no” response is required. At the end, I will inform you whether or not you are an eligible participant in the study. Do you have any questions?

1. Do you identify your sexual orientation as Gay?  
 Yes       No
2. Are you a male?  
 Yes       No
3. Have you disclosed your sexual orientation to others in middle school or high school (e.g., family, friends, teachers, pastor, etc.)?  
 Yes       No
4. Are you between the ages of 18-21?  
 Yes       No
5. Are you a college or university student?  
 Yes       No

Note: If the individual responded “No” to any of the questions, then the individual is not eligible for the current study. At this time, inform the individual that he does not meet the criteria to participate in the study.

If the individual responded “Yes” to ALL questions, then the individual is eligible for the current study. Proceed with following the procedures for giving background information about the study and discuss a mutually agreed upon time and date to meet in a public location for the in-person interview.

## Appendix D

### Demographic Questionnaire

**1. Age**

18     19     20     21

**2. Ethnicity**

Caucasian/White     African American/Black     Asian  
 Latino/Hispanic     Other

**3. Identify your religious affiliation (i.e., Presbyterian)**

\_\_\_\_\_

**4. How would you describe the geographical region of your school when you first “came out?”**

Northeastern     Southeastern     Northwestern     Southwestern  
 Midwest

**5. How would you describe the city/town/place your school was located when you first “came out?”**

Rural     Suburban     Urban

**6. How would you describe the political climate of your school when you first “came out?”**

Liberal     Conservative     Other

**7. How would you describe the socioeconomic status (SES) of the students in your school when you first “came out?”**

Low SES (<\$30,000)     Middle- Low SES (\$31,000-\$45,000)  
 Middle-Middle SES (\$46,000-\$85,000)     Middle- High SES (\$86,000-\$100,000)  
 High SES (>\$101,000)     Wealthy (>\$250,000)

**8. Did your middle school have a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA)?**

Yes     No

**9. Did your high school have a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA)?**

Yes     No

**Appendix E**  
**“The ‘Coming Out’ Process and School Support Systems”- Interview Protocol**

Interview Script

I would like to take this time to sincerely thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to be part of this research project. This interview will be audiotaped. After the interview, I will type your responses in order to get a better understanding of your responses. After this first meeting, a follow up (in person or via email) will be held once I transcribe this interview so you can review your responses to check for accuracy.

I am going to be asking you some questions about your thoughts on the “coming out” process and school support systems. At times, the questions maybe personal in nature, so when possible, tell me as much information as you can so I can clearly understand your opinions. Each question will be asked to gain a clear understanding of your thoughts, beliefs, and experiences.

You may also decline to answer any questions that you do not want to answer or feel uncomfortable answering. You may stop at any time if you do not wish to continue with the interview. The information you give me today will be held as strictly confidential. In addition, any reports of the findings will not contain your name or any other identifying information.

At the end of the interview, please feel free to add any other information that you may feel could be helpful within this area of research or contribute to the study. Throughout the interview please feel free to ask questions, pose concerns, or add additional information not asked by me.

At this time, is there anything you would like to ask me regarding what we are going to be doing today? Ok, let’s start.

Interview Protocol

1. Tell me your understanding of the “coming out” process.

For the scope of this interview we will be defining “coming out” as becoming aware of one’s sexual orientation or gender identity, and one’s self-disclosure to others (e.g., teachers, friends, family, pastor, etc.)

2. Tell me about when you came out for the first time.
  - a. How did you come out/disclose your sexual orientation to others for the first time?
3. Can you talk to me about your first time “coming out” in school?
  - a. What was your experience like “coming out” for the first time in school?
  - b. What were some challenges you faced “coming out” for the first time in school?
  - c. What were some of the supports available to you when you “came out” for the first time in school?

- d. Do you have some thoughts about how to support students who decide to “come out” for the first time in school?
4. After you came out the first time in school, how was life for you?
5. Why did you decide to come out?
6. What else has been important to you during the “coming out” process that we have not discussed?

Do you have any questions or concerns at this time?

Debriefing

Are you feeling any discomfort or distress as a result of the interview?

Thank you so much for your time and participation.