

Same-sex parents get OUTspoken

Training session planned tomorrow

By Jane Clifford
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They change diapers, go to PTA meetings and worry about peer pressure, just like any other parents. And they say they want to be viewed just like any other parents.

“Parents are parents, and families are families,” said Marci Bair, executive director of Family Matters, a local group representing same-sex parents.

“We have over 900 families here in our membership, which is about 1,600-1,700 parents and thousands of kids,” Bair said. “I am not sure of how many other gay families there are in San Diego, but we have new families joining us each month.”

Tomorrow some of them will learn how to speak out on behalf of all of them by attending OUTSpoken Training, co-sponsored by Family Matters and organized by California Family Unity Network and other same-sex parent groups.

Last weekend the training was held in San Francisco, and on Sunday it moves to Los Angeles. The California workshops follow ones held in Massachusetts, the only state to recognize same-sex marriage, and Florida, the only state to ban adoption by same-sex parents.

“We want to teach them how to tell their story,” Bair said of local same-sex parents. “Once you get to know someone and their story, all of a sudden people don’t see their sexual identity; they see them as parents.”

The training prepares people to become members of the OUTSpoken Families Speakers Bureau, created by Family Pride, a Washington, D.C.-based national nonprofit organization committed to gaining equality for all families.

Jennifer Chrisler, Family Pride’s executive director, said the purpose of the training is “to arm parents and those who love them, care about them and want to support them, with really good information and the skills to be able to advocate for themselves in their communities.”

That can mean anything from joining the PTA to advocating for a piece of legislation at the state level, Chrisler said.

“We have over 700 parents and allies across the country sharing the reality of our families’ lives,” she said.

The most visible so far, she said, are two gay dads who appeared with their six adopted children on Oprah Winfrey’s show this week. Others are more quietly active, she added, giving a personal example.

“Our twins are in (pre-kindergarten), and we knew we were the only same-sex parents in the class. We asked for a gathering of all the parents in the classroom. We sat down, told them we wanted to introduce ourselves,

tell them about our family and answer any questions.”

Chrisler and her partner also asked that books and other materials in the classroom illustrate the many types of families that exist – from children being raised by grandparents or single parents to those who have same-sex parents.

“The conversations we need to have are personal – why our lives are the same,” Chrisler said. “There are things about us as parents that really unite us with heterosexual families.

“The majority of my time is spent with straight parents of my children's friends and classmates. We all worry about the quality of our school, the safety of our neighborhoods, the environment. I think if we can find those common links as parents, we can help people understand what's unique about us yet what we all have in common.”

Tomorrow's training is open to anyone who is interested.

“About 50 percent who participated in previous trainings were heterosexual,” Chrisler said. “There were social workers, teachers, extended-family members. The point is that it's for anyone who cares about all families being treated equally.”

And it's a way to be involved “without being political activists showing up at rallies, but showing up in our daily lives to change people's hearts and minds,” Chrisler said.

Bair expects a good turnout for the San Diego workshop.

“We have pastors coming, and early-childhood educators, counselors and concerned community members, in addition to parents,” she said.

Bair said the goal “is giving the members who are there the tools to discuss the myths surrounding gay families. We take our kids to soccer practice and dance class, we put Band-Aids on boo-boos and help with homework and cook dinner, just like any family.”

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