

As co-founder of a group for parents of gays and lesbians, Colette Roberts has become a support group and activist rolled into one



Colette Roberts, who is shown at her home in Columbia, says, "I've always been a person that believes we can make changes in this society."

DAVID HOBBY [SUN PHOTOGRAPHER]

Making tolerant parents proud

BY SANDY ALEXANDER
[SUN REPORTER]

Colette Roberts likes to tell people that having four teenagers in the house at one time gave her plenty of reasons to get upset, but her daughter being a lesbian was not one of them.

It is a story — and a pragmatic attitude — that comes in handy as Roberts tries to offer comfort and perspective to parents and family members who seek help from the Howard County chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, which she co-founded.

For 10 years, Roberts has been the one at

the other end of the phone when people call PFLAG: parents who are conflicted over a child coming out, family members who want to support a loved one, adults and youth who need guidance on how to tell people that they are homosexual.

"I wanted to just be there for people, be an example," Roberts said. "It is OK to love and cherish and be proud and support your gay child."

Roberts and her chapter were honored last month by Equality Maryland, a statewide civil rights organization for the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community.

"When she started [the chapter], it was what a lot of chapters are, which is a sup-

port vehicle for parents," said Dan Furmansky, executive director of Equality Maryland. "But she's really transformed it. It's become a model for chapters across the country."

In addition to meetings during which individuals can hear each other's stories, the chapter has speakers, programs and social events. The leaders have started a separate group for parents who are more comfortable in a smaller setting. And recently, the chapter's youth group and advocacy arm have grown.

A trim, outgoing grandmother of seven, Roberts, 66, and her husband, Jim, moved several places for Jim's job as a shopping center manager for the Rouse Co. The fam-

ily spent time in Columbia when the children were young, and then Colette and Jim returned after he retired.

Now, in addition to her work with PFLAG, the Lake Elkhorn Waterfowl Committee and several other community groups, Colette produces artwork for the family Elliott City calligraphy shop, Oh My Word.

Roberts said she was not concerned when her daughter revealed she was lesbian more than a decade ago, because she had already suspected, and because she knew other lesbian women.

After a few meetings at another PFLAG chapter, Roberts said she did not feel as though she needed the support. But lead-
[Please see ROBERTS, 20G]

FROM THE COVER

Mom supports parents, youth of gay community

ROBERTS [From Page 1G]

ers — including the president of the national PFLAG organization — told her that other parents needed her.

Roberts and a neighbor, Linda Linton, founded the Howard County chapter of PFLAG in 1995.

The main meetings are a chance for parents, friends and family members to get together and share their experiences, a process that Roberts said is very important.

“Parents can lose their fears about ‘what will happen to my child,’” she said. They can see gay couples who have lasting relationships, full lives and children.

The group for gay and lesbian teens began about five years ago. Led by two facilitators, the group hosts meetings, social events and trips.

A lot more young people are coming out now than they did 10 years ago, Roberts said. The youth group is intended to be a safe place for them to make friends and have fun while being open about their homosexuality.

Dan McCarthy, a PFLAG board member and father of a gay son, said the youth group “was a god-send for us.” When his son Stephen — now a college student — was still finding his way among his peers, “it really enabled him to be who he is and to be himself,” McCarthy said.

The advocacy arm of the How-



Colette Roberts, co-founder of the Howard County chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, was recently honored for her work with the group.

DAVID HOBBY [SUN PHOTOGRAPHER]

ard County PFLAG has also grown.

Roberts “has really put together a very powerful group,” McCarthy said. “She has made PFLAG much more than just a parents group. ... For me, it’s gone from accepting to celebrating to advocating. Now I’m out there fighting for my

son’s rights.”

PFLAG members have been developing relationships with elected officials and speaking out on civil rights issues for homosexuals. The chapter took about 90 people to a rally in Annapolis in February to speak out in favor of marriage for gays and lesbians.

**COLETTE
ROBERTS**
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As a self-described woman of color in an interracial marriage, she said she faced discrimination directly. In 1958, when she and Jim wed, “We could not have lived in Maryland,” she said.

Now, she said, the same arguments used against her are being used to deny her daughter the right to be married.

“She is singled out to be a second-class citizen,” Roberts said. “I don’t see why people are so threatened. ... I don’t understand why people want to deny them benefits.”

Roberts, who was moved to join the anti-Vietnam War movement and worked for abortion-rights causes and the Equal Rights Amendment, said, “I’ve always been a person that believes we can make changes in this society.”

Now, her group is telling other parents how they can get their message out.

“We can show the public this is who we are ... we’re families who

love our kids, who love our siblings, who love our co-workers who are lesbian and gay.”

Over the past decade, Roberts said she has seen a change in the culture.

She used to get many phone calls from parents traumatized by their child coming out, she said. “Now it’s like a whole total other world.”

With more gays in the media, more people are accepting and familiar with the issue, she said. More calls now are from people calmly seeking information or a way to get involved.

And, she said, she wants to encourage families to go even further.

“I want parents to go beyond acceptance to being proud,” she said.

McCarthy recalled seeing one woman rush up to Roberts at a gay pride parade, hug her and tell her, “You saved my life.”

Such a reaction “is like an everyday occurrence,” he said. “Who knows how many lives she’s helped.”

Said Furmansky: “I think she’s kind of gone from being the mother of a lesbian daughter to really being a mother for an entire community of people.”

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