

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

A Tale of Two Uncles

Posted: 05 Mar 2009 07:17 AM PST

"Tell me how you became an ally?" I asked in advance of helping a straight woman effectively speak on our behalf in the workplace. She eloquently wrote a powerful tale of her two gay uncles and the very different reactions they got from her family.

* * *

My "uncle" Bill was not really an uncle, but rather a close friend of the family. Bill and my parents went to college together and, as such, I'd known him my whole life. As a kid, he was the funniest person I knew. He was "over the top" funny. He'd get down on the ground with you and roll around; he'd do impersonations; sing and dance; and make you laugh until you cried. Growing up, Bill was always a presence in my life. There was never a point where I wondered if he were gay or straight - I just always knew. He was "out" in every sense of the word.

I remember meeting his different partners over the years, walking around the city with them on the weekends, and eventually sharing holidays with he and his current partner. Growing up, my mom would often share stories with me about Bill. She'd tell me hilarious stories about the two of them in college – about when they were in plays together, the first time Bill met my grandparents, or legendary stories about Bill at parties. She also shared stories about how when they were in college he struggled to find his identity, that as a child in Catholic school he was never able to be himself, and that as an adult he had struggled through the loss of friends to HIV/AIDS.

My mom talked to me about Bill in the same way she talked to me about any of her other friends. As a child, I never saw Bill's life as being different than mine or any of the other straight people I knew. Growing up with "Uncle Bill" has had a lasting impact. Once an adult, there was never a question how I felt about gay people, where I stood on issues related to gay rights, whether or not I was an "ally." Because of Bill, my first experience with a gay person was not about knowing a "gay person," but rather it was about knowing a great, funny, loving, caring uncle. My stance on matters related to equal rights in many ways was formed at a young age by being given the opportunity to share in his life in this way.

But that isn't where my story as an ally ends. In fact, I think it only begins with Bill. My life as an ally was also greatly impacted by my uncle Robert.

Robert always lived away from us in New York City. He never missed a holiday or birthday. He was always there. As a kid, I thought he gave the best presents -- always from fabulous stores where my mom wouldn't shop. I loved his gifts! As I was growing up, my family and I would go visit him about once a year and stay with him in New York. My uncle Robert was the fashionable, hip, cool relative – the total opposite from my parents. The fact that he was always alone seemed completely normal to me. As I got older, I guess I may have wondered why he never dated or brought anyone with him, but it would be a fleeting thought. He was my uncle and this is the way it was.

At some point, once I was an adult, my mom shared a story with me, a story my grandmother shared with her years prior...

When Robert was first living in New York, my grandmother surprised him with a visit – she was staying for a week. It wasn't long after she arrived, that my uncle sat her down and explained that friends of his were going to be stopping by, and as a preemptive strike, (figuring that it would become obvious after she met his friends) he told her that he was gay. Now, this act of coming out itself may not be earth shattering; however, placed in the context of how the rest of my family reacted, it explains a lot. My grandmother responded with a comment akin to, "That's nice dear," stayed the rest of her trip making no mention of it, and came home and didn't speak of the event for years.

Years later, my grandmother told my mom the story. My mom immediately reacted with sadness. Her heart broke for him. Imagine coming out to your own mother and getting almost no reaction. Keep in mind, my grandmother told my mom this story *years* after her trip. My mom, so stricken with this news, came home and immediately told my dad about what his mother just shared. My dad's reaction was, "My brother's not gay – won't believe it till he tells me himself." And so, years after coming out to his mother, and being outed to his brother by my mom, the fact that my uncle is gay remains an unspoken truth in our family.

To this day, my uncle remains in the closet with our family. We still visit him and he still comes home for holidays – but he is always alone. My mom has never confronted him with the knowledge she has, but instead always extends an open invitation to him to invite anyone he wishes to our home. He never has. My dad continues to deny his brother's lifestyle, and my brother and I don't pry for fear of embarrassing him.

I think about my uncle and his story and feel sad. I'm sure, from the stories he shares, that he has a very full life; however, he doesn't share that with his family. What must this be like? How transformational must that moment have been when he came out to my grandmother and she swept it under the rug, such that he never broached the subject with a family member again. What keeps him from sharing his "whole self" with his own family now, despite the fact that his parents have passed away? And, what I think about most with his story as it relates to what we hope to do with this training – what does it mean for me that I am a "straight ally?" If any of us had truly been allies, would we approach my uncle and make sure he felt comfortable to share his whole self with us? Or, do we respect his decision to keep his life separate?

After some reflection, I think the common thread in both these stories is the presence of allies (or lack thereof). In my "uncle" Bill's case, my parents were his allies. In turn, they raised me in such a way that I could become an ally myself – seeing him first for the wonderful person he is, and then as a gay man.

When I think of my uncle Robert, I think if only he had had an ally within the family, someone he trusted enough to lean on during his decision to come out. When my grandmother proved not to be an ally – and then when my father also chose to ignore the truth - would the presence of someone else have been enough to help him bring his "whole self" to our family? I have to think, no matter how close our family is or how many holidays we spend together; he does not see us as his allies. I don't blame him. I just wish it were different.

When I look at my parent's role in both these stories I wonder why then, they couldn't have been the same kind of ally they were for Bill for my uncle Robert. I guess that, in the end, being an ally – defining yourself as such – is not just about supporting gay rights or equal opportunity, but it's about supporting people. It's about taking the time to understand what the gay people in your life need from you and what being an ally means to them.

* * *

Another lesson to be learned, I think, is that we gay people help create the responses we get from others.