

# Gay, Proud...and Gingrich

*Most Americans Accept My Right to Equality. Why Can't My Brother?*

By Candace Gingrich

**W**HEN MY brother assumed the office of speaker of the House, I became a news story overnight. To all of America, I was a symbol of irony, if not contradiction. The distinguished congressman from Georgia became the ultimate insider, which left me—the lesbian in Newt's family—the insurgent outsider.

His elevation was made possible by a tide of tenaciously conservative sentiment, some of it rabidly reactionary in its opposition to gay and lesbian equality. Fortunately, my relationship to him is rooted not in politics but in the love a sister has for a brother. And blood, I'm happy to say, is thicker than the cold waters of bigotry.

My life was forever changed the moment a reporter from the Associated Press, to be followed later by Connie Chung and a slew of others, delighted in the sardonic news that the nation's new and brashly outspoken speaker has a sister who is a lesbian.

I have discovered since that coming before the media's eye is not always pleasant; I'm often a bit rattled by what I read about myself, or my brother, in the papers. But I also brought on much of the attention that has come my way—the day I took a call from Elizabeth Birch, the head of the country's largest gay and lesbian political organization, and

*Candace Gingrich's tour with the Human Rights Campaign Fund ends Oct. 11, National Coming Out Day.*

agreed to make myself into somewhat of a poster child for the cause.

Within a few weeks I had left my life in Harrisburg, Pa., where I worked as a computer consultant by day and a UPS truck-loader by night, and began a 51-city tour for Birch's group, the Human Rights Campaign Fund. I have spent the past six months granting interviews, giving speeches and generally showing the world the face of a lesbian.

**D**uring my travels and in conversations with thousands of people, I have been treated with a surprising amount of decency, warmth and openness. In airports and supermarket aisles, even on rugby fields, more people than you might imagine pass on words of encouragement. I remember particularly a receptionist in Seattle who came up to me and described herself as an evangelical Christian by way of introduction.

"I know who you are," she said in hushed tones as she approached. "I've seen you in the papers and they're always referring to you as a lesbian." Right so far, I thought.

"But you're not just a category. You're a human being. I think that's wrong for them to label you that way, and it's good you're out showing people who you are."

If being out of the closet is reaching women like this receptionist, then I'm making progress. Since I've been on tour, my message has been simple and direct: There is authentic discrimination and there are painful consequences when it is practiced. And as things stand now, there are no federal laws to protect gays

and lesbians: In 41 states, it is legal to fire someone, or deny a person a mortgage, or refuse hospital visitation rights, simply because someone is gay. My brother is among those who tacitly endorse such discrimination.

I tell people that it is the responsibility of all of us—gay, bisexual and straight—to be aware of discrimination and to educate others. It has been said before, but fear and ignorance are the real breeding ground of hate. So I remind those I meet that there are a million things we have in common—only one that's different.

My conviction that face-to-face conversations make a difference is bolstered by these facts:

According to pollster Celinda Lake, 65 percent of Americans who say they do not know a gay person nevertheless support equal rights in the workplace for gays. This jumps to 87 percent among people who say they know someone who is gay. So coming out of the closet makes a pronounced difference not only for lesbian and gay people, but for most of the people who know us.

In fact, most Americans are well ahead of my brother and other representatives in Congress on the matter of equal rights for gays and lesbians. Lake's polls also show that the majority of voters don't know that job discrimination against gay people is legally permissible in much of the country, but when they are told the truth, 77 percent agree that such discrimination is wrong.

None of this is meant to deny the existence of vocal and radical religious groups at work

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today. The point is that they are wielding influence far beyond their true numbers and exerting great pressure on our elected officials. For evidence, look no further than Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole's recent decision to return a campaign donation from a group of gay Republicans in an effort to appease the extreme right. This, mind you, was money from a group, the Log Cabin Club, that supports Dole on almost every issue and from whom Dole's representatives actively sought support. Sadly, the influence of the new majority party's far right wing is undermining the principles of fairness and equal opportunity that characterize our Constitution and should be driving our public policy debates.

If nothing else, I hope that we can at least start speaking the truth as we debate the "family values" and social issues heating up on Capitol Hill. The truth, that is, about who we are as individuals, and the truth about what agendas we're trying to put forward.

I began speaking the truth about myself some 10 years ago—at first haltingly and with great fear of repudiation and rejection. While I never chose to be a lesbian, I eventually chose to accept myself and tell the truth about who I am. My family, Newt included, has known I'm a lesbian for seven years.

I followed no road map in my journey toward truth-telling. There is no single right or wrong way to do it. My coming out was in stages. At first, I came out to my college friends in rural Pennsylvania. I came out to my family when my mother found a lesbian newsletter on my bookshelf, brought it to me and asked whether I was trying to tell her something. ("Yeah, Mom. Quit snooping around my room!")

Soon after, all my other family members, including Newt, got the news that I was gay. And while there was no open hostility towards me, we never discussed it much either. Every-

one seemed to respect and love me for who I was. In fact, when Newt found out, I remember him saying, "It is your life and you should live it the way you want to." We kind of left it at that.

Finally, when my brother ascended to the pinnacle of political power, I came out to the nation. Soon after I did, I got a taste of what politics can really bring out in a person. Asked by a reporter whether workers should have recourse if they are fired for answering "Yes" when their employers ask whether they are homosexual, my brother responded:

"I don't think that's grounds for federal legal involvement. I don't think you have a right of filing a federal lawsuit or of getting the federal government to protect you based on your sexual behavior." He went on to say that schools should take care to protect against homosexuals who may be "recruiting" students to be gay.

Since remarks like these, many people have asked me why I waited so long to speak up—why did I not raise my voice before to counter the hurtful and inaccurate things that my brother and some of his colleagues have been saying?

There are many factors that contributed to my reluctance to speak up before I did. Besides, I can't change what I've done, I can only accept what is and do whatever I can to make a difference from here on out.

And so my story is just that: It is my story, not offered as exemplary or prescriptive for anyone else. But as my tour comes to an end, I can say this: I have never regretted my decision to be honest about who I am. And to America, I offer this observation, rooted in a truism: Honesty is the best policy by which to order our individual lives, and honesty is the best policy for public and political discourse as well—whether you're the speaker of the House or just a member of the family.

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