

OPENING UP



Rebecca Hirsh

Female, 41

Lesbian

Philadelphia, PA

I'm Rebecca Hirsh. I'm 41. I was born in Philadelphia, and I grew up here.

When did you know?

Probably my freshman year of college. I started questioning my freshman year and I figured it out pretty quickly. I started dating somebody the summer after and I was pretty sure.

What was it like when you were dating her? Was she your first girlfriend?

Well she, uh...it was my first relationship ever. I had dated guys before, but it wasn't ever successful. It was a little tumultuous and drama-filled, but I knew it was right. Not that I was dating the right person, but that I should be dating woman, not boys at that point.

Did you ever think about men after that?

From time to time. Whenever I was going through a break up, I was just like I should just date men. I never acted on it.

One of the things we always talk about is how sexuality is very fluid. Everyone, in a way, is a little bit bisexual in the sense that we think about it. Where with me, I think about it, but then I turn around and say maybe not. But then, there are people that can switch months or years or maybe just once in their lives. Do you ever think about that with yourself?

Well, I never really had a successful romantic relationship with a guy. I can be attracted to guys, but I just don't think I can be in a romantic relationship with a guy.

When did you decide that this was serious enough to come out to your friends and family?

In my sophomore year of college, I was in a relationship with a girl who lived in Philly while I was in Providence. I was driving back and forth, really not trying to tell anyone. It just became hectic and ridiculous, so I told my brother first that fall of my sophomore year. Then I told my parents. I don't remember when I told my friends because it wasn't such a big deal.

How did your parents react?

I told them over the phone and I don't think they were surprised. This woman I was dating was around and they knew. They struggled, but they were supportive. They didn't freak out. They didn't quite believe it and it took them some time to work through the process that I had already been working through for a year and a half.

How are they with it now?

My parents are great, and they love Ronda! They're really supportive and they want me to be happy. I don't think it's that big a deal to them. Recently, I had dinner at my parents house and my dad was telling our family friend about Ronda— how great she was and it was just weird.

Why?

Because it was someone who they were friends with and not someone who really knew me. They were outing me to this random person, which totally didn't bother me, but I hadn't actually heard him talk about it in front of other people before.

That's interesting that you say that you were outed. If you're open, why do you see it as an outing?

We're always coming out. People always still assume that you're straight. I don't necessarily mean it in a traumatic or bad way, but people always assume you're straight and anytime someone, either me or someone else, tells them that I'm not, then it's like

"Being gay kind of came last. My relationships are important to me and are a huge part of my life but whether that relationship was with a man or a woman or somebody who is trans, that's not the defining piece of who I am."



“My parents and everyone I knew would just assume their kids are straight... [Now] there’s a lot more of a thought process between parents and their kids.”

environment? Yourself? When I talked to your girlfriend, Rona, about this, she said your generation was not as accepting. Your generation was the one to start the change, but not necessarily the change.

I think people much older than me started the change. If you look back in the ‘60s and ‘70s, it was the adults at the forefront of the gay community who started that change. For me, it wasn’t a huge deal. I heard stories among my friends and there was more of an urban legend about people who’s parents stop paying for college or kicked them out. For my socioeconomic standing, it wasn’t a big deal. My parents and everyone I grew up with all would just assume that their kids are straight. Now when I talk to parents, there’s many more people saying *Oh my son is into this, my daughter’s into that. I wonder what that means.* I think there’s more of a thought process now between parents and their kids. My being out is a non-issue, both because of myself and also because I live in 2015 in Philadelphia. I think the world has changed a lot in the last 10, 20, 30 years for sure.

What’s it like for you as a gay parent? What are some things that you you have to look at differently?

When I first had Jacob, I met this woman in New York who was 15-20 years older than I was. She had a son who was 16, so he’s probably in his 20’s now. Jacob, at the time, was just a baby. We were talking about being out. She said to me that being a gay parent was never an issue for her. The issue was always being a single parent. And I thought that was kind of weird or that it couldn’t be true. Maybe it was just because she lived in the West Village in New York. For me, the gay piece of the puzzle, I’m curious, is if it’s an issue for Jacob. I don’t think he has a particularly well developed sense of it being an issue, but it’s not really an issue. Most of his friends parents, who I spend any amount of time with, know and aren’t really phased as far as I’m aware. There are a few parents here and there when he was at Jewish day school that it didn’t occur to them that I was gay.

How do you approach the conversation with Jacob and his peers’ parents? I’m sure someone has asked.

I think the question that parents always want to ask me, or that kids ask him, is *Where’s your dad?* If he had another mom, he would say *Oh, I have two moms.* And they would just say okay. His response is always just I don’t have a dad. Although he doesn’t say that anymore, that’s what he usually used to say. Then, the next question they ask is *why.* If they ask him, he’ll either just say that his mom dates girls, so she didn’t have a dad for him. That’s how I explained it to him. I think he’s tired of talking about it at this point so he’ll just say something random now.

they’re outing me. Maybe it’s just an expression. When he (Jacob) tells his teachers, it’s fine with me. It’s just private information that’s out there. People assume I’m straight, so when they hear otherwise it’s like oh, ok.

When people find out, do you see their thoughts registering?

Honestly? Lately, no. A lot of people also see that I’m a single mom and they wonder how that happened. So, then it begins to make sense for them.

How is it telling people you’re gay now versus back to when you first came out?

It’s a lot different. A lot of it is sort of my own evolution. The people I was telling were more high stakes—my family and people I grew up with. I never really had any negative reactions, but I think there was a lot more fear on my part about coming out. Now I don’t really think about it that much. It’s also a lot easier to come out when you’re dating someone because then you can just say *Oh my girlfriend and I did whatever.* Again, there’s not a coming out process, but there probably is that split second where I ask myself if I should tell them or not. Or, if I should just say she’s my friend. More and more now, it’s such a non-issue.

Is it a non-issue because times have changed? Or, is it your



I could only imagine what he comes up with...

He'll say he has a dad that he's never met, which I think is more confusing to people than helpful. For me, coming out to other parents is just a non-issue. From that perspective, being a single parent is the challenge. That's where the struggle is, particularly now as he's getting older, there are a lot more divorced parents in his group. They think that they can relate, but it's not exactly the same.

Do you ever think about what his teenage years will be like or will it be so natural because he was raised this way?

I don't know. We were at Ronda's over Christmas and he was playing with this little girl. Her mom was telling us this story that she had explained to her daughter about someone having two moms, and the little girl was like *Ew! That's gross*. The mom addressed it and was sort of embarrassed. I'm not really sure if Jacob has experienced those reactions before, but since he talks about it with his peers, I'm sure someone has told him that two girls can't date or be married. I'm not really sure how much he even knows it's an issue. For him, not having a dad is a bigger issue than who I'm dating.

Where do you think kids who have a negative reaction learn it from? That little girl you just spoke about obviously didn't learn that from her parents because you said her mom addressed it. Where are kids getting that societal oppression from?

I don't know. When he was five, he was on the bus going to school and he liked to wear nail polish. Very quickly it was made clear to him that boys don't wear nail polish. This was in 2013. It was the other kids on the bus; they didn't necessarily make fun of him, but they told him it wasn't something boys do. From that perspective, gender roles are very engrained and very clear to kids. It was upsetting because he used to like wearing nail polish and he liked watching princess movies and my little pony. Now he won't. If he has a girlfriend over, then he'll watch it with her, for her, but he won't just watch it on his own. It's sort of sad...and ridiculous.

At such a young age, he's learning that he can't enjoy the things he likes because it doesn't fit a mold.

Right. It was very much when he started grade school. It wasn't so much the kids in his class, but the older kids or the kids who had older siblings. When I talked about it to some of those kids parents, they were sort of horrified and embarrassed. They couldn't explain where they got it from or say they don't teach that at home. I know they don't, but it's everywhere. I don't think homophobia is everywhere as much, but heteronormativity is still the standard. There's a five minute clip of a gay couple on a Disney show, but for the most part, everyone's happily married on TV. The message that it's not okay or that two girls dating is gross isn't as prevalent, but the idea that a boy and a girl should date is definitely the norm. Anything that strays from the norm is going to be seen by a six year old as gross or icky or whatever.

Well our media, just as much as it's white-washed is straight-washed. It's the sad truth unfortunately.

I don't think you see overt homophobia on TV or kids books anymore, but it's still out there. Maybe some of these kids are getting it from home in subtle ways and the parents may not even be aware of it.

Speaking of heteronormative behavior, how is it within the lesbian community when you were younger? And at full adulthood with being a parent? In the gay-male community, there's a lot of internalized homophobia and it manifests itself in the discrimination of feminine men. Feminine men tend to get hit with the most hate both from within and without the community.

When I came out in the '90s, the whole butch/femme dichotomy was very intense. I never really got it. I don't identify as one way or the other and I'm not gonna change how I dress and how I look and how I act to fit into this little box on one side or the other. I always felt that way. I think at different

points in my life, I felt or identified as being more butch or more femme, but I never really identified as being either because it just doesn't fit me. I think as humans, we have to put things into little boxes and that makes it easier to conceptualize the world. None of us actually fit into any of those boxes.

"An identity based on oppression has very limited utility."

es. Again, I don't know if it's because times have changed or because I'm not in college anymore, thus my community has changed. I don't see it as being as much of an issue. Certainly when I was dating, I would meet people who would say they don't date butch women or femme women. To some extent I think that's just about attraction. Some people are attracted to blondes and some people are attracted to shorter or taller people. In terms of having a son, it's not an issue. I know a lot of single lesbian moms—more than I thought I would. I think we have the same challenges that single moms have anywhere else in terms of dating. I don't think lesbians are anymore or less interested in dating somebody with kids than heterosexual men would be if they're looking for a partner. I've been out with a couple of women who would say they couldn't ever imagine having a kid in their lives and that's not how their lifestyles are. That's fine. Then there are women who want kids in their lives even if they're not their own biological kids. From my perspective, those issues are fairly consistent whether your straight or gay. It's just about being a single parent. There are lots of gay families and I think the community as a whole isn't just more accepting, but also accommodating. The whole community doesn't revolve around the bar in the same way that it did 20 years ago. Maybe that's just because I'm not 22 and I can't imagine hanging out at a bar with a bunch of 22 year olds. I know people that do, but one of the challenges is trying to go to events. A lot of the dating events are at 7 o'clock on a week day. It's not really the best time for me, but again, I don't think that's particular to any community.

You were saying that in different parts of you life, you identified more as butch or femme. That goes into what we were saying about sexuality being fluid. Do you think that would be true for most people, where you go through different phases of gender expressions?

I think sexual orientation and gender expression are fluid and change. I think we set up the world in terms of straight and gay and male and female, but they are completely arbitrary categories. Humans are a bit more complicated. Those are just little boxes that we fit people into. Sexual and gender expressions are fluid and for some people they may not be. I have friends that are super butch and always have been butch. That's who they are and good for them. For me, it's been a bit more fluid, not significantly more fluid, but I wear more make up now. Not that I wear a lot, but I wear it more often now than I ever did. For me, that's just about getting old and needing to cover more things up. I think these categories are very arbitrary and a modern invention or construction. They don't really work for most people. For the most part, people are too afraid to step out of them. Maybe that's a little bit less true for gay people than for straight people, but I think the gay community in general is very much afraid to question it further as well. Once you've gone through the coming out process and declare that you like people of the same sex, to then question that even further is just as scary for them as questioning sexuality is for a straight person. Nothing is set in stone or fixed about gender expression or of any other form of identity.

Do you consider yourself a part of the gay community?

Yes, I consider myself part of the gay community. I'm not even exactly sure what that means. It's always been a struggle for me to understand this concept of a gay community. I grew up in a Jewish community. I went to Jewish day school. My family members were part of a synagogue. Most of the people I hung out with were in that community, which was a fairly specific Jewish community. I was in that community for 18 years before I went away for college and I came out. Then there was this gay community which was based around the idea that because we are all attracted to members of the same sex that we somehow have something in common. Admittedly, that's being simplistic. I have friends who are obviously gay. I have many more friends who are not gay. My community for me is about a value system. My gay friends, I think (or hope), share my value system. The people that I surround myself with share my value system. I don't know the fact that I am attracted to women means I have anything else in common with other people who are attracted to women or men who who are attracted to men. Clearly there is a gay community in Philadelphia, and gay communities in all parts of this country, but for me, it has to be based on something more than that. It has to be based on something more than being oppressed. An identity based on oppression has very limited utility. I don't think it's particularly healthy. I have never really been sure what it means to be part of a gay community, other than that I support our right to exist and our right to not be harassed and our right to enjoy the same freedoms that everybody else enjoys. I support those rights for people of color, people who are from rural and urban areas. There are all sorts of ways that people are oppressed; being gay is just one of them. Being part of a community has to be more than that for me.

In general, do you feel like there's internalized homophobia within the gay community and what forms of it have you witnessed?

Sure. I think all forms of oppression are internalized. I see it manifest in sort of an obsession with physical appearance among certain segments of the population. I see it internalized in how a lot of gay life is centered around the bars. I don't know if that's more about internalized homophobia as it is just the way historically communities formed. Giovanni's Room, a gay and feminist bookstore here, is struggling, and the bars are thriving. I think that says something.

If you were to describe yourself, where would being gay rank for you?

It's pretty low to me in terms of how I identify. I identify as being Jewish—that's a huge part of who I am and how I was raised. My immediate circle of people are most meaningful to me. I identify through my work in some ways - being in the healthcare community I would say. That work is meaningful and important to me. Obviously I identify as being a mom and a part of my family. And then, I identify as being gay. I don't necessarily rank these things everyday, but being gay kind of came last.



“From that perspective, gender roles are very ingrained and very clear to kids. It was upsetting because he **used** to like wearing nail polish, and he liked watching princess movies and my little pony, and now he **won't.**”

A portrait of a man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a black t-shirt, standing against a wall with a diagonal shadow. The background is split into light blue and light beige sections.

Danilo Vento

Male, 24

Bisexual

Milan, Italy



Hi, I am Danilo Vento. I am 24 years old and I'm from Milan, Italy.

What's the gay community like in Milan?

I'm not really sure because I'm not really into the gay community. I usually go out, hang with gay friends, and it's normal. I would say there are no differences between straight people and gay people.

What would you define as the gay community? Obviously there's some sort of definition since you're not including yourself in there. How would you describe that gay community even though you're not a part of it?

I don't think there's a real gay community in Italy. Well, I think there is, but I live in Milan. I see that there's not a lot for gay people. The only thing I see are night clubs for gay people, so the gay community that I see is composed of that. I can't say much else because I don't know.

So there are only night clubs. Besides that there aren't gay centered events?

I read about a gay spa once or a sauna, but I think gay people just go to normal clubs or normal bars. We probably have more gay clubs, but gay bars and gyms and things of that genre— it's normal for gay and straight people. It's the same.

Do you think the gay community in America is different than in Milan?

Yeah, it's a lot different! Here, gay people feel this gay thing more than us, I think. You have gay bars and gay people go to the same places to hang out together. I don't think we have this kind of thing in Milan, or in Italy anyway.

Do you wish you had this there?

I really like that America has this. Not because I want all the gay people to be in the same place or to just hang out with gay people, but because you feel more understood.

"I'm speaking for myself and my friends; we just don't want to be in a category."

Its safe zone.

Yeah.

Would you consider yourself part of the gay community in America?

Yeah.

Do you think the reason you don't have these types of gay communities in Italy is because people are more close minded? Or because they feel there isn't a need?

It's because of our culture. It's completely different. Gay culture developed in a different way in Italy than here. America is more understanding about gays than Italians and are more used to it. In the 1980s, the gay thing was already here in America and no one knew about it in Italy, or they weren't acknowledging it. Here, it was becoming normal because it was in New York. It wasn't the same in Milan and it wasn't the same in the 1980s.

What do you think the perspective is of the gay community from the outside— both in Italy and in America? What are some of the thoughts about gay people in Italy?

Here, straight people are more open minded. It depends where in Italy you are.

It depends where in America as well.

In a city such as Milan, people are used to it and don't actually care for the most part. You do actually find some people that think it's a good thing and are pro gay rights. In America it seems people are more okay with it, but I think there are still homophobic people everywhere. I want to go back to the thing about gay communities. We do have gay communities and associations in Italy, so we do have a gay community. I just don't feel a part of it because I don't know about it nor think about it much.

What do you consider yourself as—gay, bi, queer...?

I consider myself bisexual and maybe that's why I don't feel part of the gay community. I can say my friends are gay, but they think the same as me. They don't feel a part of a gay community.

Does part of you not want to be associated with a gay community because of some fear you have of being associated?

I don't think so. I'm speaking for myself and my friends; we just don't want to be in a category. It doesn't matter if I'm gay, or bisexual, or lesbian, or etc. It's just something about me. It doesn't have to be my description. We think about this a lot and we don't like to be labeled.

Do you notice homophobia within the gay community and how would you define it?

Yeah, there's a lot of homophobia from people that are actually gay, but don't want to admit it. They are angry with themselves. So in that moment, they are homophobic to other gay people just because they don't accept themselves. That's the kind of homophobia I saw. I live in Milan, but I'm actually from the island Sardinia in Italy. Being from a small town, I knew a lot of people who were gay, but they didn't want to say that they were gay. I only know it because they know I am and they've tried to do something with me. I would usually turn them down and it was then that they would deny everything they told me. They told me I misunderstood. But I know they're gay and I know they're angry with people because I have seen them yelling at gay people or fighting with them.

When we're younger and there's bullying, people say Oh that person's bullying you because they're

insecure. That seems to be your perspective of homophobia within the gay community—it's this sense of insecurity. Have you seen discrimination between different types of gay men?

Yeah there's discrimination, but I wouldn't call it homophobia. If a gay person tells another person they're more feminine, I see it as a distinction between gay people. It's just as there is a distinction between straight people, such as being really tall or being really short.

Who have you seen discriminated within the gay community?

A lot of discrimination toward feminine people.

Has anyone ever discriminated against you? Have they called you feminine and said anything against it?

When I was 12 and I was doing gymnastics. As I said before I come from a small city and I was doing what was considered a female sport. So, they would call me a faggot.

What would be the masculine extracurricular in Italy? What would be some of the masculine traits that you have to portray to fit the gender mold?

You should play soccer. But, it doesn't matter because I was actually playing soccer and it was my 9th year doing it. When they saw I was doing gymnastics, soccer wasn't there anymore. It was like I never played soccer in my life.

Are there any other feminine interest you have which you felt you ever needed to hide? Anything that you felt you couldn't fully do? For example, when you were 12, with gymnastics, was there a part of you that ever said I can't do gymnastics?

Fortunately I never had this problem in my life. When I wanted to do something, I didn't care about others.