

WHAT WOULD You Do IF I WAS GAY?

Gina Trapani, 17

I *All the names in this story have been changed.* remember sitting on the couch next to my Dad watching the news on television when I was about ten years old. There was a report on about the gay and lesbian parade going on in Manhattan. I did not know what it meant to be gay I asked my father and he told me, "That's when two men or two women love each other like a boy and girl do."

"Why would someone want to do that?" I asked.

Without ever looking at me, he answered, "Well, they can't help it. Gay people are just born like that, like having brown eyes."

"Oh," I said, thinking that it sounded really weird. But then I became worried. What if I turned out be gay? So I said to my Dad, "What would you do if I was gay, Daddy?" He jumped up and looked at me and said, "Why?"

"I was just wondering," I answered, sorry that I had asked at all.

"Well, you would still be my daughter," he said, sitting down again. But for some reason his answer didn't make me feel any better.

A few years later, during my freshman year in high school, I met Jennifer. We became very close, but I knew that the way I felt about her was very different from the way I felt about my other close friends. I was very possessive of Jennifer and didn't want to share her with anyone else. At times I even felt jealous of the guys she liked.

Soon I began to realize that I liked her as more than just a friend. It was very scary for me to think about it, because I'd heard how the girls in school would talk about "lezzies" and the disgusting things

they did. It was hard to figure out whether or not I was just confused, or if I really was a l-e-s...Yuck, I couldn't even say the word.

That summer, because of how out of control I felt, because I couldn't handle the feelings I was having, I ended my friendship with Jennifer. I never told her why.

But I still felt that I had to tell someone what was going on. I decided on my friend Linda, because I looked up to her like an older sister. Sitting in her room one day, I sort of hinted around the subject, trying to find out what she thought. I was so afraid that she was going to squeal the minute I brought it up. But she didn't. She looked at me very carefully and intently and waited for me to finish.

Finally I just spit it out: "Linda, what would you think if I, uh, said that I, um, well if I liked, like, another girl?" There was a moment's pause. I was dying of embarrassment, very ashamed of what I had told her, and very afraid of her reaction.

But she said, "No, no, that's not gross at all."

"Really?" I said, hoping that she meant it.

"Yes," she told me. "Do you want to talk?" That day, Linda made me feel much better. She told me that I wasn't bad or disgusting, and that it was okay to feel that way. For me, that talk was the first time I ever outwardly admitted to myself and another person how I felt. (About a year later, I was not so surprised to find out that Linda was a lesbian herself.)

Even though speaking to Linda made me feel better, there were many times when I felt really down and isolated. I didn't know of anyone else in the world who was gay or had even questioned herself. I was afraid to tell anyone in school. I felt very left out because I didn't have a boyfriend, and my friends would always be talking about guys—who they liked, who they were taking to the prom. I didn't belong with them because I wasn't a part of that world and didn't want to be.

Marilyn and Elaine were my two best friends. We had been in school together since first grade. They were always there for me and

always understood me when I had a problem. I was sure that after they got used to the idea they would open up to me and everything would be the same as it had always been between us. So I just said straight out, "I think that I am a lesbian."

They were shocked. They asked me a couple of questions. But after that one time, they never mentioned it again. Soon we started to talk less and less about anything at all. I don't know if who I am caused that to happen. But I do know that it made me feel really bad. I learned the hard way that they were not my real friends, and I also learned that I had to be very careful about who I told and who I absolutely could not tell.

It was and still is very frustrating for me to have to live a lie out of fear of other people's reactions. As a result, I began to really appreciate the few people I could tell—all of whom were straight. But I felt like they couldn't really understand, because they hadn't experienced it. Finally I decided that it was time I went out and found people who I could talk to, who would understand how I felt: other gays and lesbians my age.

I remember standing outside the door of a drop-in center for gay teens in Greenwich Village, afraid to go inside. I had no idea what to *expect*, and I was petrified that I wouldn't fit in there, either.

Finally, I just walked in. A funny-looking girl with a baseball cap on came up to me and said, "Hi, I'm Marie." Marie became one of my best friends—a real best friend, because I know that she loves me for who I am, completely.

A couple of months ago, Marie told me about a group that was forming for lesbian and bisexual women who are under twenty-one. The next week I went to one of their meetings and the women there made me feel right at home. It felt great to be able to goof around with them, joking about ourselves and the people around us. If I talked like that with my straight friends, they wouldn't understand. Ever since that first meeting, I've gone back every week. I've finally found a place where I can be myself and belong.