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Robyn Ochs

Bisexual activist Robyn Ochs recognizes that with her identity comes fear: fear of being misunderstood, fear of getting hurt, both emotionally and physically, and fear of rejection.

Ochs, 56, used her experiences with fear to fuel her activism and reach out to people in need of support. She helped found the Bisexuality Research Center, edited two bisexual anthologies, and has spoken on numerous television shows and at conferences about her sexuality.

“Robyn is a force of nature,” Sonny Ochs, her mother, said. “She’s an extremely dedicated and hardworking and opinionated young lady who’s out to change the world.”

Robyn said her experience with activism began with her mother.

“I also grew up in an activist family that was engaged in social justice work, and, therefore, the idea of being an activist came relatively easily,” Robyn said. “I grew up with the understanding that if something is wrong with the world you have an obligation to try to fix it.”

Sonny was deeply involved in anti-war and civil rights causes. She remembers Robyn attending marches with her, specifically one down Fifth Avenue in Manhattan.

“My brother’s walking with a young girl, and everyone thinks it’s his daughter, but it wasn’t,” she said. “It was my daughter, Robyn, and she’s obviously having a very good time.”

Robyn realized she identified as bisexual in college when she developed a major crush on a fellow student, and that’s when the fear began.

“This was terrifying to me because I didn’t know what it would mean for my life,” she said. “Growing up before Google, there was no easy access to resources.”

She said the only communities she knew of were lesbian and gay groups that weren’t welcoming to bisexual people. For five years, she remained closeted out of fear. When she finally came out, she said many of fears turned out to be unfounded and it was an overall positive experience.

“Most people responded better than I feared they would,” she said. “I had this feeling, certainly, that if I came out to people, they wouldn’t want to be my friend, they would reject me, and that didn’t happen.”

Some members of her family took a little bit longer to come around, but she said they’re all supportive of her now.

Sonny said she still remembers when her daughter came out to her while she was in college. Sonny had been working at the Clear Water Festival in New York.

“She showed up at the festival one time with a dyke on a bike, and I took one look, and I said to myself,

‘whoops,’” Sonny said. “That’s what I suspected, and I didn’t say anything.”

While they were in the car, Robyn came out.

“I said ‘Robyn, you have one life to live, and it’s important that you be happy, and if this makes you happy, fine,’” Sonny said.

Still, Sonny said she felt fear in that moment, not about her daughter’s identity, but about how it would be perceived.

“There’s so much crazy prejudice, and there are people getting maimed and killed just for their sexuality, and at that point, I felt fear,” Sonny said.

After coming out to her family and friends, Robyn, at the age of 23, began her involvement with bisexual advocacy with the East Coast Bisexual Network which became the Bisexual Resource Center.

“Basically the Bisexual Resource Center was founded in 1985, and it grew out of annual bi conferences that were organized in the Northeast,” Robyn said. “We needed a checking account. We needed some of the institutional history. We needed some sort of vehicle and structure, so the bisexual resource center grew out of that.”

Robyn said she struggled with dating for years because of biphobia from lesbian women and gay men. She said she remembers one woman who even developed paranoia because of her identity.

“I had one girlfriend who was so certain that I was about to leave her for a man that she left me first,” she said. “There was no man. She convinced herself that I was going to.”

Robyn met her wife, Peg Pedle, in 1997.

“We met socially at a theater performance,” Robyn said. “It was very clear that we liked each other a lot.”

The couple dated for two years before moving in together. Several years later, Robyn proposed, and on the first day marriage was legalized in Massachusetts, May 17, 2004, the couple said their vows.

“It was truly amazing, partly to be part of that moment of history,” she said. “We were among the very first same-sex couples legally married in the U.S. It was an amazing, momentous, exciting and joyful day.”

The couple even appeared on the first page of the Washington Post, however, the article ended up misidentifying Robyn as a lesbian.

“It certainly didn’t ruin our day,” Robyn said. “It’s annoying. Honestly, I think it wasn’t devastating or anything like that. It was like there we go again.”

She said it pointed to another problem in society.

“When people see a same gender couple, they assume that both people in the couple identify as lesbian, and sometimes that’s not the case,” she said.

Robyn said she advises people not to assume someone’s identity based off of their relationship.

“Just ask,” she said.

Aside from her relationship success, Robyn has also been successful as a speaker and the editor of the “*Bi Women Quarterly*” and the anthologies “*Getting Bi: Voices of Bisexuals around the world*” and “*RECOGNIZE: The Voices of Bisexual Men.*”

She said she’s excited to see the future of the bi movement.

“I’m getting great pleasure out of watching the bi plus movement grow and evolve over time,” she said. “There are a number of very exciting activists in the bi movement, and it gives me some hope.”

She said she’s seeing the movement get more organized and recognized, and that there is beginning to be research focused on bisexuality.

“Up until recently in almost all research done on LGBT people, bisexuals were lumped in with lesbian and gay people, and no one thought to look at the data on bisexual people separately,” she said. “What we’re finding is that while there is a great deal of overlap, there have been certain differences, and we’re encouraging researchers to look at those differences to get at the unique need of bisexual people.”

Robyn said she believes that there is no one experience of being a certain sexuality.

“I believe that our experience of our sexual orientation is framed by our geographic location, by our ethnicity, by our political and religious background, by our age and by so many things,” she said. “When somebody shares their label, you still don’t know who they are.”

She said her experience of her sexual orientation is shaped by her age, the time she came out and the fact that she grew up in New York in a politically progressive secular Jewish home.

For now, Robyn said she hopes to conquer what she calls “the wall of disinterest,” which is when people would rather not learn about something because it’s easier just to avoid it.

“Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people all stay resistant from the mainstream world in that most people would rather not think about us, they’d rather not talk about us, they’d rather we just shut up and go away,” she said. “On top of this, bisexual and transgender people often face this from within our community as well.”

She said in order to create more awareness, the queer community needs to fully represent and support the community.

“We need to engage more in dialogue. We need to read each other’s writings,” she said. “We need to recognize and value all of its members.”

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