

INTERVIEW WITH CLAUDIA STALLMAN,
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Claudia E. Stallman is the founding director of the Lesbian and Gay Family Building Project, which started April 1, 2000, with a \$43,000 grant from the Ferre Institute. The project relocated last fall to Binghamton University, after receiving a \$617,000 five-year grant from the state Department of Health. The family building project provides support, information and access to health care and services for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people in upstate New York.

Question: What would you like the people in this community to know about your project and what you do?

Answer: From our offices at Binghamton University, we try to bring together gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer people and their families. Our mission is to help folks achieve their goals of building and sustaining healthy families, however they define them. We want to make sure gay folks who want to become parents know what their options are. ... People do need this information, and they do need access to health and human services providers who are going to welcome them into their practices.

When you're at a point in your life, and you're a gay person and you've decided you want to become a parent, there's a yearning you're acting on, and far too many LGBT people knock on doors and have those doors slammed in their faces. That happened to me. Even if it doesn't, many folks have a fear that it will. We want to make sure there are more providers who understand and welcome LGBT families.

Q: There are a lot of services listed on your website. What is your signature program?

A: Our signature program is our network of Pride and Joy Families. That is something we've established over the years. Right now, there are about 660 LGBT-led families on our mailing list (throughout upstate New York). We have been able, over the years, to help LGBT families to find one another and gain a sense of community, which I know from personal and professional experience can make all the difference to a kid with gay parents or adults who are raising children in a same-sex parented household.

Q: Your office recently moved to Binghamton University. How will that help with your programs and services?

A: Now that we've moved to Binghamton University, there is a tremendous feeling of being welcomed at all levels. There are several student groups specifically focused on LGBT issues. Our office is housed in the Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies program, where there are faculty who are studying gender and sexuality, who are now turning their attention to studying LGBT families.

There's been a lot of interest on the campus in our relocation. When I was an undergraduate and graduate student at Binghamton University many years ago, this sort of welcoming and this sort of inclusive environment was really not present.

Q: What are the obstacles your project faces as you work for inclusion in the general community?

A: In terms of the large upstate New York community, we've got to find LGBT publications and community centers who will be interested in our message. There are some gay community centers. There's one in Albany, one in Rochester, one in Buffalo. Syracuse does not have a gay community center. A lot of our work happens as a collaborate effort. We co-sponsor events with other LGBT serving organizations around the state.

Q: What success stories can you tell about how your project has helped people?

A: There was a family that was moving to Binghamton because of a job opportunity. The family was moving from Texas; it was a gay male couple. They wondered about the LGBT climate in upstate New York, so they looked on the Internet. They found our website and they found we actually had an LGBT program, the only program in the state other than in New York City.

This one partner just could not believe Binghamton, New York, was a place where they might find community. We emailed and they ended up establishing a relationship, so when they came to look at Binghamton as a destination for their family — they had an infant — they already felt welcome and already had a built-in community. It made all the difference in their lives, in their feeling welcome. At one of our conferences, one of the comments on our evaluation form where we ask "what did you learn" was: "I learned that it's OK to be a lesbian and a parent, too." So apparently, that woman didn't walk in the door feeling so very sure about whether she was OK and whether her family was OK, but she walked out the door feeling affirmed. I hope it was a lasting outcome.

Q: What is your long-term goal for the project?

A: I find it utterly remarkable how the climate has changed in just the last few years for LGBT families and individuals. Really, I could not have imagined this, and others in our community could not have imagined the way public opinion has changed, how public policy has changed in New York state, in the Northeast, in the country. We're making progress in terms of acceptability in the public's eyes.

I like being in an LGBT community. I think LGBT families are participating in other communities and doing so openly. We're much more recognizable as same-sex families than we used to be. I don't know that I can imagine a day when there won't be any difference, but I can tell you now that there are places where it feels that way, where families like mine are really just the same as others.

Q: What has been the impact in the LBGT community of the legalization of same-sex marriage in New York?

A: I've looked at research on Massachusetts couples, which had legal marriages for many years. I looked at a study that was done five years out. Everything in that study said that LGBT people, whether they got married or not, enjoyed a tremendous sense of social inclusion in their families and in their communities as result of the passage of same-sex marriage.

I know that in the state of New York that has been true for families, like mine. I feel like my family, and others in New York, are much more visible, much more recognizable, much more welcome and accepted and legitimized. Feeling socially excluded is exhausting. Looking around for where are you going to be

welcomed or invited is an absolutely exhausting place to be, emotionally, and it can take a physical toll, too, on stigmatized minorities like LGBT.

It's been very important to that sense of being included in that sense of community.