

**Coming Out: A difficult but key step to happiness**  
**By Lisa Marr, with files from Jeff Mahoney**  
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Lyla's slow and painful awakening to her gayness had little of the hype and hoopla surrounding Ellen's coming out on tonight's TV show.

"For starters, I was raised a Jehovah's Witness. It is very sexually oppressive, even for a heterosexual. You weren't suppose to think about sex at all, let alone feel attracted to naked women," the 22 year old said.

Lyla doesn't want her last name used out of concern for her parents.

"I was weird enough as it was – I was a tomboy most of my life and a loner all through school – I just couldn't deal with this."

Although she suspected she was gay since puberty, it wasn't until last year that she gathered the courage to come out as bisexual to her friends, her three younger brothers and her parents. Her brothers weren't surprised, but she said her parents are "still in denial about it".

As difficult as it was, coming out felt "like a weight dropped from my shoulders".

Nikki Gately, 29, said tonight's show featuring Ellen DeGeneres – admitting through her character, Ellen Morgan, that she is a lesbian – is definitely a milestone.

"It's a huge deal. If we all stayed in the closet, it de-empowers us. If everybody who was gay was painted blue for a day, (people) would find there are loads and loads of us."

Ali Grant, 32, of Hamilton, got a kit from US based Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation in the Media to host a party tonight for about 10 gay women friends to celebrate the Ellen show.

While Grant has no illusions that the TV sitcom is going to change the world, she says it at least increases the visibility of lesbians.

"We realize it's popular culture and don't want to overstate the impact but I think relatively it's an historic event", she said. "Historically, media representation of lesbians is they're invisible or lesbians had to be unhappy, commit suicide or go back to a man."

I am happy they are treating the issue with levity. There are mixed opinions among our small group. We all recognize it's about rating sweeps, but (Ellen DeGeneres) is also a business woman, so that's fair enough".

Gately, who recently gave a talk about coming out to Hamilton's Lesbian Support Group, said it can be a traumatic experience, particularly for parents.

Eight years ago, Gately came out to her family as soon as she realized she was gay. "The first big thing was coming out to my mother. She had a pretty tough time about it at first."

But Gately said her father and sister had a hard time coping.

Her father didn't want her to publicly display affection to her lover. She told him she couldn't promise that. Now, they just don't discuss it.

"I think he's proud of me for standing up for what I believe in."

Gately said lesbians are often loath to come out to employers because of tensions that can arise in the workplace. For women who have children, coming out is not an option if custody is at stake.

Lyla, who is vice-president of Mohawk College's gay club for students, said while most students support them, homophobic attitudes persist.

"Last year, a teacher at the college wrote a full page in the student newspaper about homosexuality and tried to get rid of us (the club)."

Last month, hate messages were left on the answering machine and under the door of McMaster University's Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Association office.

Lyla and Gately says, as difficult as coming out can be, it's an important step.