**M4 – Gay son**

**Interviewer:** When did you first find out that your son was gay?

**M4:** He was not even 1 year old when I realised this… when we go to the shops, he immediately goes to the girls’ section. He was not even 1 year old when I realized this… when we go to the shops, he immediately goes to the girls' section. At that stage… he wanted to do all the things that girls wanted to do and he enjoyed most playing… with my high heels… and teddy bears. Those were his favourite toys. He did sometimes play with play cars, but then he color-coded them. All of his playcars were in his toy box and he put all the green ones and all the yellow ones together. He didn’t race them on a track. These were the first thoughts that came to my mind, the wearing of my high heels, when he told me.

**Interviewer:** What was your initial reaction?

**M4:** When he told me?

**Interviewer:** yes

**M4:** Well, from an early age I told my kids, both of them, that they can tell me everything. They can come to me with anything. They can tell me anything. Because I made a promise to them, also with the personal things that happened in my life. But I made a promise, I might be angry, I might be sad, or don’t like what they are telling me, or maybe even disappointed. My first reaction wasn’t shocking as I said when he finally told me I realised that I was supposed to know. The second thing was sadness. I wasn’t sad about the fact that he was gay, I was sad because he had to go through this lonely road all by himself. That is why I felt sorry for him. And that now I knew about it, he would experience rejection and there was nothing I was able to do about it.

**Interviewer:** Do you think he experienced this rejection while he was in school?

**M4:** Yes I think so but he never spoke about it. Like I said, he was never open about it. In school, he was the type of guy that had many girlfriends. I thought he was this jock amongst the girls (chuckles). Because he had a girlfriend with which he would social. And then he had other girlfriends who were more serious about things. So yes, he had many girlfriends and with valetines balls, he had the most stunning girls at his side. So yes, I think he had to pretend while he was in school.

**Interviewer:** Do you think he was bullied in school?

**M4:** He was bullied in school.

**Interviewer:** Why do you suspect it?

**M4:** Because he was never the sporty, jock type of guy. He was more of a cultural type of guy. He was the type of guy that did choir and drama. Those were his interests. Where his brothers, they differ like day and night. Totally different. The teachers didn’t even want to believe they were brothers. They don’t even look like each other even though they have the same father. Two totally different personalities. Where the younger brother was more into sports, he even wanted to go to school earlier just to play ball. Whereas my son was more of a normal child. Hehe had to… go sit and study to pass his exams. He stressed very easily. He was much more emotional. He was the type that if we went for a walk he would pick a flower and give it to me. Where his brother would comment and say when we are going to finish the walk. But Bennie was a much more emotional child. So I did expect it. But also remember this was 10 or 12 years ago when he finished school. It was different from what it is now.

**Interviewer:** You said that he was possibly bullied. Why do you say so?

**M4:** Because he easily showed his emotions, he easily cried, because he was so sensitive. Because like, he would feel sorry and show care towards a small insect, whereas other boys would just step on it and kill it. He would pick them up and try to help them. That is why I suspected it because the guys would not show that they were sensitive… Bennie never spoke about it, about all the things that happened at school. I think both of us just want to keep silent on that topic. To a certain extent. But it is not that we have a bad relationship. In fact, he calls me every day and we talk every day. While with his brother, you would call and he wouldn’t answer. He would send a WhatsApp and say that he would let me know I can give him a call (giggles). So you understand, they are like opposites.

**Interviewer:** what type of bullying?

**M4:** Later on he told me about the bullying. They called him names such as moffie, shemale, Isitabane, amongst other things...

**Interviewer:** Do you think the school or some of the kids knew that he was gay?

**M4:** No. Even his best girlfriend almost fell backward when he told her that he was gay. He always tells the funny story of … they sat outside of my room and chilled with a bottle of potency or something, and then he said listen Marina, I just want to tell you that I'm gay. So she almost downed the whole bottle. She didn’t know at all. And I mean they spent the weekend together. So no, she didn’t even know.

**Interviewer**: So you think it was a lonely road?

**M4:** That is why I am saying that when he told me, I thought by myself how alone and scared and insecure he must have been for so many years. And that feeling of doubt of whether I am or not… gay. I can’t tell anyone. Too scared of rejection.

**Interviewer:** What effect do you think this had on his time in school? I understand that it is difficult to understand because you weren’t aware of it at that time, but what do you think?

**M4:** Look, about his schoolwork itself, I don’t know. He had to study for his exams. I just know that his circle of friends was very small. He only had girlfriends. That’s why I thought he was the jock amongst the girls ( giggle). He never really had boyfriends.

**Interviewer:** Do you think if the school was aware of his non-heterosexual orientation, they would have notified you?

**M4:** Most probably. Because remember the schools in those years were very conservative. The school had Christian principals, which was good for me. But the way they did things was very conservative.

**Interviewer**: Can you think of an example?

**M4:** Uhmm… it was that thing of, things aren’t supposed to be done like that. A person is not like that. I almost want to say that we as Afrikaners (white-speaking Afrikaans) have these boxes. I almost want to say that if you have a normal life, then you fit into that box. You go to school, you go to university, you get engaged, get a good job, and get a child blah blah blah. Then you fit into the box. But as soon as you are homosexual or you fall pregnant before you are married, or change of work every year, then you are outside of the box. So it is not done that way. But I can’t think of a specific example right now.

**Interviewer:** Let’s say you were aware of your child’s non-heterosexual orientation in school, do you think you would have acted differently i.t.o his schooling?

**M4:** I think I would have been more protective due to the fact that I know how sensitive he is and was. Because I knew how easily he got upset and anxious and things like that and would have liked to limit those things to protect him. To teach him, and myself, to not be bothered by others. Be who you are and love yourself the way you are. I accept you for who you are and everyone, including your family and your immediate circle of friends will not reject you for it. So just be yourself. Don’t be bothered by others. I know the words of kids and people can be hurtful… but if you know who you are and are comfortable with who you are… I mean if I knew before I could have helped more.

**Interviewer:** So would you have liked to know earlier, if it was your choice?

**M4:** I really don’t know. I was a single mother from when he was only three, so at that stage, it was first just to survive. Financially it didn’t go well. Secondly, it was a thing of me being a single mother, and the critique of your child is gay so you are probably a bad mother. Your child does not want to play sports, so what was wrong with me? At that stage it was like to show people that I can look after my children, I can take care of them. To show them that my children are normal and balanced and that they are getting a good education in a good school. I am doing my utmost best. So it was more about the image, from the family’s side, because I was the black sheep. Look, the father was nowhere to be found. He didn’t even pay custody support. I think the last time we saw him was when the youngest was only in Sub A and then when Bennie was in grade 4. And after that no contact. They did however make contact two years ago. That happened through me.

**Interviewer:** Was the father aware of his sexuality?

**M4:** I recall something about when he was in high school, I’m not sure though their other grandmother, they live in another province. I recall they sent Bennie letters at that stage. They sent him some money when he did well. It was in his matric year when his father made contact with him. He then mentioned it to his father. In 2016 his father came and apologised for everything… and that he wanted their numbers and such. The younger brother immediately said but my son first said he wanted to think about it. He only said after a day or two that I could give his number to his father. And then I also told his father that he was gay and that if he is going to reject him based on his sexuality then he will have to deal with me. Because really, the whole family accepted him. His brother was the last to know and he was very chilled about it. He actually was upset as to why he was the last one to know (chuckles). I think my dad at first struggled with it because he comes from the older generation, but besides him, everyone accepted him.

**Interviewer:** Why do you think he didn’t tell you earlier?

**M4:** I think he was scared. He was insecure about himself and struggled with himself. Is it like that or not (him being gay)? Is it a sin or is it not? Is the Lord also going to reject him? Will my mom and family reject me? I think it was all about rejection. Because he had a really good relationship with all of his cousins and myself. We are very close. The fear of now I need to carry this burden by myself.

**Interviewer:** Do you think if the school knew about his sexuality and accepted it it would have made a difference in his school life?

**M4:**  I think if the school knew about it and made it easier for the children, they would have come out of the closet earlier. And then people can address the issue of bullying. Then people can be more open about it. Then I also think they wouldn’t have the fear of going to school like today I have to see that one and what he is doing to me or those types of things. They would have been more relaxed and more spontaneous. I am the type of person that, if I knew, I would have gone to the school, and told the principal that my child is gay and that if I ever hear the school or any of the teachers attempt any type of discrimination …

**Interviewer:** How would you have preferred the school should have notified you if the school knew about your child’s sexuality and there was a problem with that at school?

**M4:** I think they would have called me for an appointment with the principal, called me, and said that they wanted to talk to me. I would have immediately thought to myself, oh what did they break, and how I'm going to pay for it (laughing). I really think they would have done it. They would have called me in privately and told me about it. I don’t even think they would have used the word gay. They would probably have said did you know that your son is that way… I actually don’t even know whether they would have used the term homosexual. They would probably have said your son is (skeef) curved. Or they would have said your child is a (moffie) faggot. Whether they would have been sensitive about it, I don’t know.

**Interviewer:** And if they knew he was bullied, would they have done anything about it?

**M4:** No, no. Even today schools don’t even do it.

**Interviewer:** What would have made it easier for your child when he was in school? Like for example a teacher he could have talked to or a policy that was in place.

**M4:** I there were counselors at the school with whom he could have spoken to in private, it does not even have to be a psychologist, even though it would have been the best. Someone that is trained and educated about such things. If there were counselors whose passion is kids, and not only notice and give attention to kids whose parents are abusing them, or who are really poor, not that I'm saying that it is not important, but all of those are the ones first attended to. If there were counselors who were objective and acted as outsiders, which would have made it easier for the children, to be a safe haven. I think it is a big thing. Because not all gay children will be comfortable just telling anyone. To say here I can talk, here I can listen, here I can cry and here I can swear, they need a space where they can release their frustrations and shout.

**Interviewer**: Do you think that was the case with your child?

**M4:** Yes he was frustrated but I just saw it as teenager moods. So yes, he was frustrated and circumstances at home were also like, he didn’t have his private space. It was really a tough time (financially). Like he and his brother had to share a room until he was in matric. So he didn’t have his own space. He went to a girlfriend of his many times, so he went there on Fridays and came back on Sundays. But I didn’t think of it at that stage that it might be an escape for him.

**Interviewer:** If there was a counselor at school and your son did confided in him/her, would you have wanted to know the content of the discussions?

**M4:** No, not the content. Like I said it needs to come from his point of view and I think, he doesn’t want his mother to know everything. I mean there are still things, even though we are close, there is a line, even though we go out (clubs) together. Uhmmm, I was very young, I'm only 17 years older than him, so we socialise together, go to clubs and such things but there is a line. So yes, there are still things, because it has nothing to do with me, it is his life. So with the counselor, what they said I don’t want to know. What she said, and what I was supposed to know, then that would have been good.

**Interviewer:** Do you think his school was homophobic?

**M4:** Yes I think so. It was very traditional, Afrikaner and it had a good reputation. So I think it was still… so yes, I always say that I think the English schools were more relaxed about such things.

**Interviewer:** If your child was bullied, how do you think he was bullied?

**M4:** I think it was verbally. I could never see something physical on his body like scars or something. If there were such under his clothes… I think it was verbal and emotional.

**Interviewer:** Has he ever told you anything about him being gay in school?

**M4:** No. You know, there was this one time, there were a few drinks involved, and he just said something about one time in the school bathrooms, but further, I don’t know anything.

**Interviewer:** What do you think he meant by that?

**M4:** You know, there are many things going through your head, like if they cornered him, or they could have … I don’t even want to think about it, but they could have raped him, that they said that you want to be gay … you want to be different, so let us show you what is different. So many things went through my mind. What exactly what was said and done, I don’t know. We never spoke about it. Look, we speak now, but like if he had a one-night stand, I don’t have to know about that. It's his life. But since he told me I became involved, and read books and spoke to him about it. He even gave me a book and asked me to read it. At times I was shocked, but then I was also like ok, now I know better. I mean it was after school.

**Interviewer:** So even though he didn’t say anything, you knew he had a tough time in school?

**M4**: Yes I think so. It couldn’t have been otherwise.

**Interviewer**: If he told you two years before when he actually told you that something is wrong, what would you have done if you knew that your child was treated differently to his heterosexual peers?

**M4:** I would have gone and spoken about it. I have always been a hands-on mom since they were very small. I have been to every concert, at every parent evening. If I knew anything about it, I would definitely go and speak about it.

**Interviewer:** And if the school knew?

**M4:** if the school knew and didn’t tell me anything, I would have been very disappointed. I wouldn’t been able to change the things that happened but I could prevent it from happening again. And if they didn’t do anything about it, I would have taken my child out of school.

**Interviewer:** Let’s say the school was positive about it and told you that they were aware of it and you didn’t know about it, what could you have done together to make it easier for your child?

**M4:** I really don’t know. I hope that if it happened, that they have told me and that other children and their parents would come out with it and that it wasn’t only me. I believe other parents would have come forward as well. Schools, today still give preference to top achievers and top sports, it is just the way it is. If there was a programme in schools that said let's get other parents in, let's talk about this, maybe them struggling to accept it, and let's give counseling to both the parents and the children. Even now, and my child is out of school, I would like to get involved in such a programme. What I think is important is that you know it is your child. I know many parents don’t see it that way but (hel) hell, you can't push your child away based on his sexuality. I see it with so many of my son’s friends. I tell them to come here. I want to meet them. I want to learn from them...

**Interviewer:** How big a role did your religion play when you found out that your child was gay?

**M4:** You know, I think it depends on the personal relationship you have with your child. Yes, when they were very young I was the type to hit them on the forehead with the Bible. Because remember, I needed to be a good mother. I even did Sunday school lessons. But I do think it laid a good foundation for them. For me, I wasn’t troubled with that.