

HOW ONE MOTHER'S LOVE FOR HER GAY SON STARTED A REVOLUTION

In the sixties and seventies, fighting for the rights of queer people was considered radical activism. To Jeanne Manford, it was just part of being a parent.

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When Manford's son Morty came out, in 1968, homosexual acts were criminal in forty-nine states. She never tried to change him; she set out to change the world instead. Photo illustration by Tyler Comrie; Source photographs courtesy Suzanne Swan; Fred W. McDarrah / Getty

... **h**e crowd along Sixth Avenue was losing its mind. It was Sunday, June 25, 1972, and Dr. Benjamin Spock was walking uptown with the Christopher Street Liberation Day March, the scrappier, more revolutionary precursor to the New York City Pride Parade. Although he had risen to fame as a pediatrician, Spock was almost as well known for his support of left-wing causes—from legalizing abortion to ending the Vietnam War—as he was for “The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care,”

which had already sold more than ten million copies. Still, even by his standards, joining the Christopher Street crowd was a radical act. Two years earlier, when the march was held for the first time, its organizers had worried that no one would come. Those who did were so hopped up on adrenaline and fear that the fifty-block route, from the West Village to Central Park, took them half as long as anticipated; afterward, they jokingly called it the Christopher Street Liberation Day Run. Now here was Dr. Spock, one of the most influential figures in America, joining their ranks. As he passed by, the people lining the streets whistled and clapped and screamed themselves hoarse.

But all this hullabaloo was not, as it turned out, for the famous doctor; it was for a diminutive middle-aged woman marching just in front of him. She was not famous at all—not the author of any books, not the leader of any movement, not self-evidently a radical of any kind. With her jacket and brooch and plaid skirt and spectacles, she had the part-prim, part-warm demeanor of an old-fashioned elementary-school teacher, which she was. She was carrying a piece of orange poster board with a message hand-lettered in black marker: “PARENTS OF GAYS: UNITE IN SUPPORT FOR OUR CHILDREN.” She had no idea that the crowd was cheering for her until total strangers started running up to thank her. They asked if they could kiss her; they asked if she would talk to their parents; they told her that they couldn’t imagine their own mothers and fathers supporting them so publicly, or supporting them at all.

The woman’s name was Jeanne Manford, and she was marching alongside her twenty-one-year-old gay son, Morty. Moved by the outpouring of emotion, the two of them discussed it all along the route. By the time they reached Central Park, they had also reached a decision: if so many people wished that someone like Jeanne could talk to their parents, why not make that possible? The organization they dreamed up that day, which started as a single support group in Manhattan, was initially called Parents of Gays; later,

it was renamed Parents FLAG, for Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays; nowadays, it is known only as PFLAG. Just a handful of people attended its first meeting, held fifty years ago this spring. Today, it has four hundred chapters and well north of a quarter of a million members.

That growth reflects a cultural change of extraordinary speed and magnitude—a transformation, incomplete but nonetheless astonishing, in the legal, political, and social status of L.G.B.T.Q. people in America. Paradoxically, one consequence of that transformation is that the moral courage of Jeanne Manford, so evident to everyone lining Sixth Avenue that day, has become hard to fully appreciate. Parents in general, and mothers in particular, have long been a potent political force, from the mothers of the disappeared in Argentina to Mothers Against Drunk Driving and Moms Demand Action. In such cases, the power of parents derives from loving their children and trying to protect them, among the most fundamental and respected of human instincts. What made Jeanne Manford different—and what made her actions so consequential—is that, until she started insisting otherwise, the kind of child she had was widely regarded as the kind that not even a mother could love.

Jeanne Manford was born Jean Sobelson in Flushing, Queens, in 1920; her parents added the extra letters to her name when she started school, to distinguish her from another Jean in her class, a little boy. She was the middle of five daughters and, in a family of large personalities, the quiet one—two facts that might have contributed to her lifelong sense of being utterly average. Her father was a salesman; her mother, a nurse, was so overprotective that, well past the appropriate age, she would not let her girls cross the street without holding hands. When it came time to go to college, Manford, a New York Jew, chose the University of Alabama, a brief swerve in her life that was cut short by the sudden death of her father. Devastated by the loss—the first of many family tragedies that she would face—she dropped out and returned to Queens.

Back home, she met Jules Manford, a dentist, and after she married him they settled first into a small apartment and eventually into a modest house in Flushing, less than a mile from where she had grown up. In 1944, they had a son, Charles, followed three years later by a daughter, Suzanne. Morty, their third and final child, was born in 1950. By the time Jules turned forty, he had suffered multiple heart attacks; he survived, but his health never fully recovered. As a hedge against disaster, Jeanne went back to college and got a degree in teaching. For the next three decades, she worked as an elementary-school teacher at P.S. 32, down the block from her home.

By all accounts, Morty was the superstar of the Manford family. Kids liked him, adults adored him, and his teachers predicted that he would someday be a senator. Early on, he displayed an instinct for speaking out, part sincere, part prankish. At fourteen, he wrote a letter to the New York City Council about “co-ed socialization in the Junior and Senior High schools”; later, after a can of Progresso tomato paste exploded when he opened it, he sent the company a complaint, detailing the damage it caused and requesting reimbursement, then mailed carbon copies to, among others, the New York City Health Department, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Ralph Nader.

But, for all his outward accomplishments, Morty was inwardly wretched. By the time he was in high school, he was fighting what he later called “a personal civil war” over his sexual orientation, and eventually he asked his parents if he could see a psychiatrist. They were surprised—he had always seemed like a happy, well-adjusted kid—but they readily agreed, and when the first one didn’t work out they found him another. Meanwhile, the Manfords’ older son, by then in college, was struggling as well. Charles had always been bright but volatile, and in the fall semester of 1965 he slashed his arms in his dorm room and was rushed to the infirmary. Four months later, at the age of twenty-one, he took his own life.

The Manfords, undone, channelled their grief into love. When their

daughter, Suzanne, got pregnant, she moved back home so that her parents could help raise the child—a girl, Avril, born two years after Charles died. “This might sound strange,” Avril told me. “But I think that’s why I had such a blessed childhood. Some families would have fallen apart, but they took that awful experience and decided that life was precious. They were, like, ‘We are going to take care of who we have.’ ” This admirable commitment was put to the test soon enough. The same year Avril was born, Morty’s psychiatrist summoned Jeanne and Jules to his office and informed them that their beloved golden boy and sole surviving son was gay.

To the best of her knowledge, Jeanne Manford had never known anyone who was gay. Born and raised in one of the more conservative quarters of New York City (not by accident was Flushing the fictional home of Archie Bunker), she had lived almost all her adult life there as well, and spent most of the nineteen-fifties at home raising her children. She knew how to cook; she knew how to knit; she knew how to make a house guest feel at home. She was soft-spoken, with an accent that aspired upward, toward the patrician—half Queen’s English, half Queens. Her clothes were fashionable without being flashy; her hair was always done just so. “I considered myself such a traditional person,” she once said of her life before Morty was outed, “that I didn’t even cross the street against the light.”

There was no mystery about what that kind of traditional, law-abiding woman was supposed to think about gay people in 1968. At the time, homosexual acts were criminal in forty-nine states, with punishments ranging from fines to prison time, including life sentences. Same-sex attraction was classified as a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association and routinely mocked and condemned by everyone from elementary-school kids to elected officials. Those who lost their jobs, homes, or children owing to their sexual orientation had no legal recourse. Political organizing was virtually impossible—one early gay-rights group that attempted to officially incorporate in New York was told that its mere

existence would violate state sodomy laws—and positive cultural representation was all but nonexistent; there were no openly gay or lesbian politicians, pundits, religious leaders, actors, athletes, or musicians in the mainstream. Newspapers used the words “homosexual” and “pervert” interchangeably, and the handful of gay people who appeared on television to discuss their “life style” almost always had their faces hidden in shadows or otherwise obscured. In 1974, when “The Pat Collins Show” aired a segment on parents of gay children, the host introduced it by saying, “Even if he committed murder, I guess you’d say, ‘Well, he’s still my child, no matter what.’ But suppose your child came to you and said, ‘Mother, Dad, I am homosexual.’ What would you do then?”

You could fit most of the solar system into the chasm between how the average American of the era would have reacted in that hypothetical situation and how Jeanne Manford responded upon learning that Morty was gay. She was dismayed to discover that his sexual orientation had troubled him for so long, but she herself was not concerned about it. Not for a moment did she entertain the possibility that something was wrong with him. Not for a moment did she wonder, as the otherwise supportive Jules initially did, if his gayness reflected some failing of theirs as parents. And not for a moment did she worry about how other people would react; she told her sisters and friends right away, making plain that she was fine with the information and they had better be, too. “You don’t love him in spite of something,” she later declared on national television, her face free of shadow or blur. “You love him.”

At first, Morty could not accept his parents’ acceptance. In the early days, when he was still struggling with self-loathing, it seemed impossible to believe that everyone else wasn’t similarly disgusted by him. Later, after he went to college at Columbia and came to terms with being gay, the steady, unfussy love of his family seemed tepid compared with his own increasing radicalism. The first time he attended a gay-rights protest, he

wore sunglasses and turned away from the news cameras, but he soon became, his sister Suzanne (now Suzanne Manford Swan) told me, “unafraid and unstoppable.” An eighteen-year-old regular at the Stonewall Inn, Morty was there when a fight broke out between patrons and the police in the summer of 1969, an event that catalyzed the gay-rights movement. The following year, after joining the brand-new Gay Activists Alliance, he began organizing political demonstrations, then dropped out of college to do so full time. Not long after, he was arrested for refusing to move when police tried to shoo him off a stoop on Christopher Street, the heart of the Greenwich Village gay scene. (It was two in the morning before he was allowed to make a phone call. Reluctant to ring up his parents, he instead called a congressional candidate sympathetic to the G.A.A.: Bella Abzug, the firebrand feminist who would help introduce the first federal gay-rights bill.) Later, he and a friend “went out like Johnny Appleseeds” and, with the G.A.A. covering the gas money, travelled to cities and towns throughout the South to raise awareness about gay liberation.

Meanwhile, Jeanne was clipping and saving Morty’s every newspaper appearance, including many that few other parents would have cared to put in a scrapbook. (One of them, from the *Times*, featured him being ejected from a benefit for John Lindsay, the mayor of New York City, after shouting, “Justice for homosexuals!”) This pride in her son proved strategic, because it meant that she could never be baited or shamed. The next time Morty wound up in jail, Jeanne *was* woken up by an early-morning phone call—not from him but from the arresting officer, who, apparently expecting to ruin Morty’s life, made a show of asking Jeanne if she knew that her son was “a homosexual.” Morty was there to witness the officer’s confusion and deflation when she said, “Yes, I know. Why are you bothering him? Why don’t you go after criminals and stop harassing the gays?”

Still, for all her bravura, Jeanne worried constantly about her son. The possibility that he would be attacked for being gay “was always in the back of

my mind,” she said—until the day when it was suddenly at the forefront. In the spring of 1972, the New York *Daily News* ran an editorial, headlined “Any Old Jobs for Homos?,” that referred to “fairies, nances, swishes, fags, lezzes” and commended the Supreme Court for deciding that a public university could rescind a job offer to a man who applied for a marriage license with his male partner. (The same couple were the plaintiffs in *Baker v. Nelson*, a 1971 court case that found no constitutional obligation to recognize same-sex marriages, which remained legal precedent until the Supreme Court’s 2015 ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges*.) That editorial coincided with the annual Inner Circle dinner, a parody show hosted by New York City journalists, which that year was slated to include a mocking skit about a gay-rights bill. Fed up with the press’s treatment of L.G.B.T.Q. issues, the G.A.A. decided to protest the event.

Among those attending the protest and handing out leaflets was Morty Manford. Among those enraged by it was Michael Maye, the head of the New York City firefighters’ union and a former professional heavyweight boxer. With multiple police officers looking on, Maye allegedly attacked several of the demonstrators, including Morty, punching them, kicking them, stomping them in the groin, and throwing at least one of them down an escalator. This time, the phone call Jeanne Manford got about her son was from the hospital.

There were ultimately no real consequences for Maye, despite multiple witnesses, including high-ranking city officials, and a prolonged effort to bring him to justice in court. But there were enormous consequences for the country as a whole. “You would meet Jeanne Manford and you would never in a million years guess what she had in her,” Eric Marcus, the author of the 1992 book “Making Gay History” and now the host of a podcast by the same name, told me. “But as I came to know her I always felt that what was in her mind was ‘Don’t fuck with my Morty.’ ” Incensed by the attack, she sat down and wrote a letter to the editor condemning both the perpetrators and the police officers who stood by and let it happen. Then she went on to

express a sentiment never before aired in a mainstream publication: “I am proud of my son, Morty Manford, and the hard work he has been doing in urging homosexuals to accept their feelings.” She sent the letter to multiple newspapers, including the *Times*. Only the New York *Post*—in its last waning days as a liberal paper, before its purchase, a few years later, by Rupert Murdoch—agreed to publish it.

That letter made Morty realize, finally, that his mother was not just tolerating her gay son. And when throngs of friends and acquaintances called him up to say that Jeanne’s words had stunned them and given them hope for the future, it made him realize something else, too. As crucial as his own activism was, what his mother had done—what she *could* do, as a mother, that he could not—was just as important. The organizer in him took note. It was April of 1972, two months before the Christopher Street Liberation Day March. Morty asked her if she would join him there. Yes, she said, but the emerging organizer in *her* had one condition. There was no point in going if no one knew why she was there; she wanted to carry a sign.

The first meeting of Parents of Gays was held nearly a year later, on March 11, 1973. To reach parents directly, the Manfords placed an ad in the *Village Voice*; to reach them indirectly, through their children, Morty and the lesbian activist Barbara Love descended on New York City’s gay hangouts with fifteen hundred signs and leaflets, handmade and possessing something of the intimate, supplicant look of lost-pet posters. At the invitation of the Reverend Edward Egan, who was later forced into retirement because he was gay, the meeting was held at the Metropolitan-Duane United Methodist Church, in the West Village. In addition to Jeanne and Jules, Morty and Love were present to answer questions that the parents in attendance might not be comfortable asking their own daughters and sons.

At the time, most parents of gay or lesbian children were in a supremely

difficult position. Those who were conflicted enough to come to a meeting—rather than, say, refusing to talk about their kid or refusing to talk *to* their kid or organizing an exorcism—loved their children but also experienced them as sources of grief, shame, and confusion. They were full of questions, many of them ignorant but all of them sincere: about whether their gay son would get more effeminate every year; about how their “beautiful blonde daughter, just nineteen” could possibly be a lesbian. And they were often punished for seeking answers. “I had no one to talk to but the psychiatrists,” one mother of three gay children recalled. “And every one of them said I had sick children.”

For mothers and fathers like these, Parents of Gays was both a gift and a shock. Most people who came to a meeting expected, as Morty later said, to sit there weeping while someone patted their hand and said, “Now, now, dearie.” They did not expect to be told that the kids were all right and society was all wrong. “As parents of gay persons,” some of the organization’s earliest informational material read, “we have learned to recognize our children’s expression of love as honest and moral.” Even that was only the half of it, because Jeanne had always understood that acceptance wasn’t enough. “We will fight for the rights of our children,” she once said. “We will become political. We will have a national organization. I remember thinking that at the very beginning.” In essence, she founded a support group that was really a civil-rights organization—one that took the idea of traditional family values, so often wielded against queer people, and mobilized it on their behalf.

There was a cost to doing so, of course. The Manfords’ home number was listed in the phone book, and Jeanne’s full name had been printed in the *New York Post*. Someone threw a rock through the window of their house; someone made rude comments to Avril, then just twelve or thirteen, about her uncle and grandparents. People sent letters addressed to “the misguided Parents of Gays” and quoted Scripture to prove that these “degrading, repulsive feelings are wrong and against nature.” If any of this bothered

Jeanne, she never showed it. When the principal of the elementary school where she worked told her that people were starting to talk and asked her to be more discreet, Jeanne informed the woman that her professional life was one thing and her private life was another and that she would do as she pleased.

Mostly, though, the people who reached out to the Manfords and to Parents of Gays were looking for help or community or a balm for heartbreaking pain. A Lutheran pastor wrote to say that he had lost his parish after coming out—although at least by doing so he had enabled a congregant to finally reveal the reason for her son’s suicide. A young man wrote to say he was afraid that if he came out his parents would either be fired from the Baptist college where they worked or resign in shame. A grandmother in Norman, Oklahoma, wrote seeking advice on how to reconcile her intolerant daughter with her lesbian granddaughter, both of whom were full of “hate and hostility and can’t communicate and yet I think they love each other.” A man wrote to say, “May God bless you for all the good things you are doing. You make us gays very proud.” A mother of a gay son wrote anonymously to say, “A woman in the office where I work said she thought all homosexuals should be put in prison. Hardly a day goes by that I can’t hear someone make a nasty remark about queers.” She didn’t know how to stand up for her son, even though she already felt awful for all the ways she had failed him: “I only wish we had been more sympathetic when he was young. He was effeminate in many ways and we scolded him for it many times.” She concluded by thanking the Manfords “for saying the things that weak, timid people like me can’t say and can’t even sign their names.”

Jeanne herself had always identified as timid; all her life, she insisted that she was “very shy.” And yet, as word spread about Parents of Gays and the Manfords started to get invitations to appear on television and radio, she almost always said yes. That was not because she craved the attention —“There was nothing pretentious about her, nothing fortune-seeking, no

love of the spotlight,” her granddaughter Avril told me—but because she was one of the few people willing to speak out in public on behalf of their gay kids.

By this time, Jules was one of those people, too. In a kind of proof positive for the group’s model, which gave parents a chance to talk not only to one another but also to queer people other than their own children, it was Morty’s friends who had helped bring Jules fully into the fold. All around the country, kids were getting thrown out of their houses when they came out; meanwhile, Jeanne and Jules were welcoming Morty *and* his friends, and the Manford household had become something of a home for wayward gays. (“You know, ‘Who’s that sleeping under the coffee table?’ ” Daniel Dromm, a friend of Jeanne’s and a future New York City Council member, joked.) Jules loved talking with these young men, and they convinced him that nothing he had done as a parent had made Morty gay. His activism from that point on was limited only by his deteriorating health—he’d suffered additional heart attacks, as well as a series of strokes—and whenever he could he joined Jeanne in television and radio interviews across the U.S.

One day, a man named Bob Benov happened to catch one of those interviews on the radio. His sixteen-year-old son had just come out, and his wife, Elaine, could hardly imagine anything worse, so Bob told her about Parents of Gays and suggested that they attend a meeting. Soon enough, they became regulars and, along with Richard and Amy Ashworth, started a chapter in Westchester. (“I wasn’t sure Westchester was ready for it,” Amy Ashworth said. “But then I thought, Nobody’s ever ready for it.”) Another early member, Sarah Montgomery, was a generation older than Jeanne—she had been born in the nineteenth century—but had likewise never faltered in her love for her gay son. She was devastated when he and his partner, confronting the possibility of losing their jobs because of their sexual orientation, took their own lives together. At meetings, Montgomery told parents, “Your child faces a very hostile world. He needs you more than any

of your other children need you.”

In California, a couple named Adele and Larry Starr came home one day to a note from their son Philip that said, “I’ve left home because I am a homosexual.” After a frantic search that included placing a personal ad in the *Los Angeles Times*—“Philip, we love you. Call or come home”—they were reunited. They suggested that he see a therapist, but when he told them he wasn’t going to change they realized they would have to do so instead. They reached out to Jeanne and Jules, who came to visit and encouraged them to found a Parents of Gays group in L.A. Before long, people began to inquire about starting groups in other places as well: in Binghamton, New York, and Greensboro, North Carolina; in Youngstown, Ohio, and Omaha, Nebraska, and Pensacola, Florida. “I am 70 and hooked onto an oxygen tank most of the time,” a mother who was hoping to start a group in Calgary wrote, “but I still have much energy and can use a telephone.”

All political activism is a numbers game. Do you have enough supporters to pack a room, convince a legislator, sway a corporation, win an election? By definition, minority groups do not; to secure political victories, they must get others to join their cause. That’s the practical reason—though there are compelling philosophical and interpersonal ones as well—why too profound a suspicion of political allies is counterproductive. L.G.B.T.Q. people make up just a fraction of the over-all population, but they have parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. From the beginning, one of the goals of Parents of Gays was to persuade more and more of those people not just to make peace with their queer family members but to make common cause with them.

It worked. Many early members became evangelists for the organization, inspiring similar groups around the country, and in 1979, during the first National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, representatives from twenty-five of those groups met to talk about forming a national body. They were planning to call it Parents of Lesbians and Gays until one

participant raised an objection: if she attended a group by that name, she would effectively out her closeted daughter. As a solution, she suggested adding the word “Friends.”

Thus was PFLAG National born. When its First International Convention was held, in August of 1982, participants showed up from England and Holland and Canada and from throughout the United States: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Augusta, Maine; Memphis, Tennessee, and Little Rock, Arkansas; Rapid City, South Dakota, and Birmingham, Alabama, and Corpus Christi, Texas. It was a triumphant occasion for the nascent organization, but a bittersweet one for Jeanne. The conference was dedicated to her husband, Jules, who had died a month before it began, at the age of sixty-three.

Jeanne attended the convention anyway; she knew that he would have wanted her to do so. The program was packed with events, some of them celebratory—banquets, musical performances, awards—but most of them practical. There were workshops on managing a hotline, on working with the media, on legislation relevant to the L.G.B.T.Q. community, on what to do if someone in your family got arrested, on estate planning for gay and lesbian couples. The gestalt impression, borne out by the decade to come, was of a community simultaneously coming into its own and bracing for the worst.

By then, ten years had passed since Jeanne and Morty Manford had marched together up Sixth Avenue. The family home in Flushing was far emptier than it had been back then: Jules was dead; Charles was dead; Suzanne and Avril had moved to California; Morty and his friends were now grownups with homes of their own. And, in a sense, the streets outside were newly empty, too. The end of the Vietnam War had brought with it the end of antiwar activism, and the revolutionary energy of the left had begun to dissipate. The seventies had given way to the eighties, hippies to yuppies, radical action and the collective good to conservatism and greed. Within the queer community, respectability politics were ascendant, protests and

disruption on the wane.

Morty, observing these changes and ready for change himself, finally returned to his studies. In 1979, he completed the B.A. that he had begun in 1968, then went on to law school. But his interest in social justice never flagged; he spent four years as a public defender for Legal Aid, then became an assistant attorney general in New York. He seemed to be back on the trajectory that people had envisioned in his youth—on the inside now, a rising star, plausibly bound for elected office. And then, once again, tragedy found the Manford family.

In the spring and summer of 1981, gay men started showing up in intensive-care units in New York and San Francisco with a strange form of pneumonia and a rare type of cancer known as Kaposi's sarcoma. By the end of the year, many of those men were already dead, the earliest American victims of a disease that would eventually be named acquired-immunodeficiency syndrome. By 1985, more than twelve thousand people in the U.S. had died of AIDS, and the country was careering toward full-blown panic. A decade later, that figure had climbed above three hundred thousand, and AIDS was the leading cause of death for Americans between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four. More than half the dead were gay men; in that age bracket, one in ten of them died of AIDS, a literal decimation.

The timing of the epidemic was devastating. On the strength of a handful of hard-won legal and cultural victories, the gay community had just barely begun to believe that the future would be better; instead, it got suddenly, existentially worse. Before the development of effective antiretrovirals, AIDS was almost always fatal, and in urban areas with high concentrations of gay men the scale of death was overwhelming. "We watched all of our friends die," the Reverend Troy Perry, the founder of the Metropolitan Community Church and a good friend of Morty's, told me. Men in their thirties were going to funerals every two weeks.

To make matters worse—although they could hardly get worse—the epidemic unleashed another wave of anti-gay vitriol. It was the era of Phyllis Schlafly, the era of Jerry Falwell; there was no shortage of people willing to characterize AIDS as God’s retribution for the sin of being gay. Those who were not calling it a purifying agent for a sick society were too often simply ignoring it; Ronald Reagan famously refused to even say “AIDS” for his entire first term. Far too many people who had lived with unnecessary shame now died with it as well, and far too many families buried children they had not yet learned how to love. “I’ve been to AIDS funerals where they got up and condemned the body that was in the coffin,” Perry said.

For many parents, though, AIDS taught them a crucial lesson in the hardest possible way: the time to love your gay children, like all your children, is immediately and always. That had been the message of PFLAG from the beginning, but the organization could not protect its members from the catastrophe of AIDS. All it could do was try to keep them from losing more time than necessary with their children.

Morty Manford learned that he was H.I.V.-positive in the winter of 1989. For a brief period, the family home in Flushing filled back up again. Morty was once more living with his mother; his niece Avril, now twenty-two, moved home as well, to help take care of him. Three generations of Manfords did what they could for Morty, but that was barely more than what they had always done: love him. He died on May 14, 1992, at the age of forty-one.

Five months later, Jeanne stood in the pouring rain in the nation’s capital with a quarter of a million other people while the names of those who had died of AIDS were read aloud on the steps of the Washington Monument. Earlier that day, the AIDS Quilt—that beautiful homespun expression of grief and anger, each panel roughly the size of a grave—had been unfurled on the National Mall. One of its panels read “Golden Boy. Freedom Fighter. His star lights our way.” When Jeanne dedicated it, she said that her son had

“stood against the seemingly invincible forces of hate, greed, and bigotry and helped to turn them back.”

For the second time, Jeanne had buried one of her children. And, also for the second time, she responded by tending as best as she could to her remaining family. Moved by the experience of caring for Morty, Avril had applied to medical school and been accepted at the Mayo Clinic. She was married by then and newly pregnant, so Jeanne, well into her seventies, uprooted herself after a lifetime in Flushing and relocated to Minnesota to help take care of the baby. Two years later, she moved again, this time to live with Suzanne in Daly City, California. Jeanne Manford died there on January 8, 2013, at the age of ninety-two. The next month, Barack Obama posthumously awarded her the Presidential Citizens Medal for her work on behalf of L.G.B.T.Q. people and their families. In his remarks, he summarized, in the plainest possible terms, the reason she stood up against bigotry on behalf of her son: “She loved him and wouldn’t put up with this kind of nonsense.”

What made this worthy of a President’s praise was that, when Jeanne first began speaking out, almost everyone around her took that nonsense as gospel. It is difficult to say why some people perceive injustice right away while others require a social movement or a civil war to see it, if they ever do. Some of those who knew Jeanne Manford speculated that her support for Morty stemmed from Charles’s suicide—that, having lost one child, she could not bear the thought of losing another. Others suggested that it was because she grew up Jewish at a time of rampant antisemitism, deadly abroad and insidious at home. But Suzanne, who disputes both accounts, told me that her mother simply loved her children as many parents strive to but few achieve: unconditionally.

The organization that Jeanne Manford helped found on the strength of that love lives on, in many respects unchanged. At its regular grassroots

gatherings, there are family members in various stages of embracing their kids, L.G.B.T.Q. people on hand to listen and help, boxes of tissues that still get used at almost every meeting. All that differs, in some places, are the demographics. In New York City, where PFLAG started, the organization now hosts A.P.I. Rainbow Parents, which specifically supports Asian and Pacific Islander L.G.B.T.Q. people and their families; elsewhere, groups are full of Spanish speakers or members of the military. And all over the country more and more parents of trans kids are showing up at meetings.

A decade ago, one of those parents was Susan Thronson, who is now the president of the board of directors of PFLAG National. A support group “changed my life, and by extension my family’s life,” she told me, before describing a familiar trajectory: the meetings helped her become a more supportive parent, then an outspoken activist. PFLAG was one of the first national organizations in America to add transgender rights to its mission, back in 1998; under Thronson’s leadership, the group recently sued Governor Greg Abbott, of Texas, over his directive requiring child-abuse investigations into reported cases of minors receiving gender-affirming care.

On the phone with me, Thronson mused about what the Manfords would make of PFLAG’s work today. “No one twenty-five years ago would have anticipated gender expression and gender identity would have been the issue,” she said, and she herself can’t imagine what the issue will be twenty-five years hence. She does believe, though, that the organization will remain necessary, and that its core commitment will continue to be its best guide: “We love all of our children, and we’re not going to leave any of them behind.”

In case she ever needs a reminder of the courage that commitment takes, she keeps a photograph of Jeanne Manford on her desk. It is the iconic one, of Manford marching up Sixth Avenue with her son and her sign. Just behind her is an elderly man, tall and stooped, in a white shirt and dark tie. With the clarity of retrospect, it is possible to see not only the physical proximity

of the two figures but their metaphorical common ground. Like Dr. Spock, the Manfords, as Thronson put it, “are responsible for changing the way Americans raise their children.” ♦

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