

For those of you I do not know, my name is Nat Butler. I will be speaking about my experience as a gay man, during the time we were undergraduates until today.

During our undergraduate years, I was confused and conflicted about my sexual identity.

On one hand, I certainly felt myself attracted to men. On the other hand, I felt strongly the disapproval of my family, my friends and of society toward what we then called homosexuals – a word which, in itself, seems to emphasize pathology. So as a student I tried to deceive and to act like a straight guy. When my male classmates were arranging dates with someone of the opposite sex, I figured I needed to do the same. I hoped my behavior was convincing to others, but I was also hoping to convince myself that I was straight – partly because there seemed no acceptable way to realize the attraction I felt toward other men. I wanted to end the isolation and loneliness I felt in being different – and having no one I trusted to be honest with. The stigma of being gay was severe in those years.

During our sophomore year, I fell in love with one of our male classmates. Some of you will remember Ron Kram – as well you might. He was strikingly handsome, smart, athletic

and had an engaging personality. Ron and I never talked about our feelings for each other in those days, although we certainly spent a lot of time together. It wasn't until some years after we graduated from Harvard that we each told the other one about being gay. I have sometimes wondered whether Ron and I might have become a couple and gotten married if such a thing had been possible during those years.

During our senior year, with the Vietnam War hovering menacingly over our heads, most of our male classmates had to decide what to do about the draft – including whether or not to serve in the military. I applied to Navy Officer Candidate School, and during my physical exam, I lied. I filled out a form asking about various medical conditions, and in the box labeled “Homosexual tendencies”, I checked “no.” But still I was afraid that somehow I would be found out.

As it happened, I did enjoy my Navy experience. However, I had the difficulty of falling in love again, this time with a man in the division I was responsible for. I became so desperate to get away from him that I volunteered to be sent to Vietnam if I could be guaranteed a non-combat position. So I spent 16 months there in an air-conditioned office doing personnel

work. I was careful not to fall in love again, although, increasingly, I could not deny my attraction to other men.

As time went on, I became more relaxed and accepting of my sexual orientation. I had my first long-term relationship with another man in the early 1980s - also the time when the AIDS epidemic began. Ultimately, I lost several close friends to AIDS, including my first boyfriend, and our classmate Andy Kopecki who had been my best friend for about 20 years at the time of his death in 1995. During the early years of the AIDS epidemic, I was terrified along with most other gay men. The government was ignoring AIDS, there was no treatment – and when I found out about the death of someone I had had sex with, I became obsessed that I would get AIDS myself and die. When a diagnostic test became available, I took it. When I got the result that I did not have the AIDS virus, I only believed the result for a second – since I thought the test could not possibly be accurate, and I promptly got the test again.

I am extremely grateful that things have gotten better in more recent years. One of my proudest accomplishments is to have worked as an alumnus of Phillips Exeter Academy to help raise the consciousness about gay men and lesbians in the Exeter community. I began

this work on my own, only gradually receiving greater cooperation from the school. About five years ago, the school gave me one of its highest awards for these efforts.

In the wider society, the detestable “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” law, prohibiting gays from serving in the US armed forces, was repealed two years ago, in 2011.

And now gay marriage – which became legal in Massachusetts in 2004, and was further advanced by the Supreme Court’s recent decision to invalidate the Defense of Marriage Act. I met my husband Gene Meredith in April 2003. Early on in our relationship, he and I attended a rally for gay marriage at the Massachusetts State House where the Reverend Peter Gomes, magnificently dressed in his fullest crimson regalia, delivered a rousing stemwinder. In October 2009, Gene and I were married in Memorial Church, and then held our reception at the Harvard Faculty Club. After so many years of not even considering the possibility of legal marriage to another man in my lifetime as even remotely realistic, our wedding day had an element of make-believe as well as great happiness.