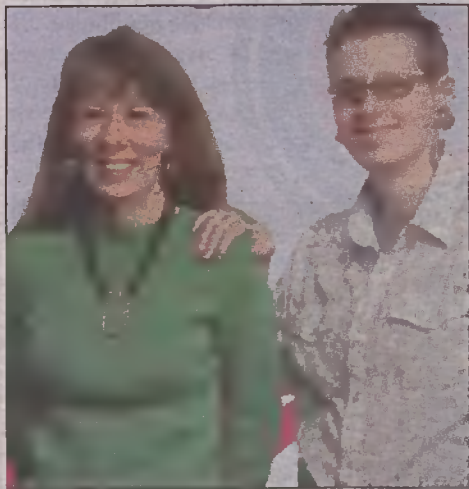


Mother, trans son embark on Soulforce journey

Family to visit Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church

by Matt Comer · Q-Notes staff

BUNN, N.C. — Mary Helen Phelps, 43, calls herself a “reformed redneck.” Her journey toward accepting her female-to-male trans-



Mary Helen Phelps and her trans son Angel Collie will travel to Joel Osteen's Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, on Mother's Day.

gender son has taken her from valleys of worry and despair to mountain tops of joy and reconciliation.

Phelps and her son will soon join Soulforce's American Family Outing, a national event wherein families with LGBT parents or children will visit six American mega-churches with anti-gay positions or doctrines. Joel Osteen's more than 40,000 member Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, will be one of Soulforce's stops. Phelps and Collie plan on attending worship there on Mother's Day, May 11.

Phelps, who grew up in this traditionally conservative Baptist town just outside Raleigh, said she didn't hesitate when invited to participate in the American Family Outing by her son.

“I didn't have to think about it,” she told *Q-Notes*. “As soon as I was invited I was ready to go. I feel like I've been there and I know where these parents are at.”

She said she wants to let parents of gay and transgender children know that they can accept their sons and daughters for who they are.

“I remember sleeping outside Angel's door at night, afraid to death Angel would commit suicide,” she said. “I want to tell these parents, ‘You're trying to change something your children were born with and what you're doing is putting bullets in a gun.’”

Phelps said her own journey to acceptance was filled with obstacles. To this day, she still faces challenges, especially when it comes to using the correct pronouns for her transgender son.

“Angel wanted boys clothes everytime I put clothes on him,” she said. “I was not supportive [after Angel first came out] because of my Baptist religion. I told Angel he was going to Hell and we even tried counseling.”

The family finally came to a turning point when all the landmark institutions if their lives began turning against Angel.

“Angel's school turned against him. Angel's church turned against him — even telling him he couldn't pray on the altar,” Phelps relat-

ed. “Any mother in the world is going to stand up for their child. All the negativity around Angel is what really turned me around.”

Phelps said she eventually came to the point where she'd “rather have a happy boy than an unhappy girl.” With the help of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) and the Metropolitan Community Church, she learned new ways of coping with her own struggle toward reconciliation.

Collie, who spent years with his own struggle reconciling faith, sexuality and gender, first learned of Soulforce while attending an MCC General Conference in Calgary, Canada.

“Someone tapped me on the shoulder and said they wanted me to know about the Equality Ride,” he said. “That person ended up being [Soulforce founder] Mel White.”

The Equality Ride, first held in 2006 and again in 2007, took LGBT students to Christian colleges and universities that hold anti-LGBT policies.

Collie applied for the Equality Ride in 2006 and 2007. He was accepted to both, joining this writer as two queer, Baptist, North Carolina youth on a bus headed to some of the most conservative Christian colleges in the country.

Soulforce Executive Director Jeff Lutes told *Q-Notes* the organization has attempted to contact all of the churches they'll be visiting. Lakewood Church was originally contacted with the five others in 2007.

“We're holding out hope to the last minute that Lakewood will offer us hospital-

ity,” Lutes said, “but if they don't we'll figure out a way to offer Lakewood hospitality instead and offer space for us to meet with Lakewood families.”

In April, Jay Bakker, the LGBT-affirming son of evangelists Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, released an open letter to Osteen.

In interviews, Osteen has said LGBT people are not living as “God's best.” Also, openly gay Lakewood members are not allowed to serve in church leadership positions.

The American Family Outing is jointly sponsored by Soulforce, Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE), the National

Black Justice Coalition and MCC.

Unlike other Soulforce actions, civil disobedience and the risk of arrest have not been discussed at length. Collie told *Q-Notes* he seeks only to be able to worship with his Christian siblings when he and his mother visit on May 11. His mother is also looking forward to the visit.

“I think he is a wonderful man,” Phelps said of Osteen. “I really want to go to his church and hear him speak, but how can I go to a church and feel comfortable if my child isn't accepted?”

info: www.soulforce.org

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