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Local News

Community Profiles:

Rob and Kathryn Steffensen

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Rob and Kathryn Steffensen are exactly what they appear: an older Mormon couple whose focus rests on family and their LDS community. Why, then, were these fifth-generation Latter-day Saints at the Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgendered Community Center of Utah? The Steffensen's youngest son, Erik, is gay.

This news, delivered by Erik through tears when he was 22, rocked the Steffensens to their devout core. "He came out and we went in," said Kathryn in the KUED documentary Friends & Neighbors: A Community Divided. "We went into a period of grief." The documentary, produced by Colleen Casto, was shown at the Center on March 31, the first in a monthly series of documentary viewings and discussions.

The Steffensens continued to appear out of context at The Center for the first few moments of the film, until Rob, who was seated next to a rack of gay magazines, said, "He's the one in the front. There he is again." Rob was identifying Erik in the family photos shown on screen. The second featured a small boy in high heels. Rob's voice was that of any father's, colored with love and pride.

The Steffensen's participation in a film that displays the struggle of Mormons who are either gay or whose family members are gay illustrates the fact that the Steffensens didn't stay "in" for long. Indeed, these Mormon grandparents are co-founders, along with Gary and Millie Watts, of Family Fellowship, an organization that works to educate and preserve LDS families with homosexual members.

During a discussion that followed the film the Steffensens erased any remaining misconceptions about their being Mormon grandparents. "Homosex," said Rob, leaning forward on the edge of his seat. "That's all they see." This couple is not ruled by the fear and ignorance that some in the queer community feel plagues the LDS church.

The Steffensen's standing as church members opens ears that would otherwise be resistant to the teachings of tolerance. They were once asked to speak to the bishopric, but the latest bishop is, according to Rob, "kind of a homophobe ... We have our job cut out for us all over again."

Kathryn spoke also of the backlash facing the nation at this point, and shares the depression of many that resulted from the last election. However, she called these setbacks "the last death throes," and quoted Gary Watts: "We will win because we are right."

From the national to the personal, the Steffensens have it covered. When asked by an audience member how to deal with a resistant parent, they stressed, above all else, the importance of being happy, and sharing this happiness and self-acceptance with an unaccepting parent or family member.

They advocate a gentle resistance. "Be kind to him," Rob said to the audience member, "and love him, and don't shut him out of your life." The Steffensen's message of acceptance is one that may be equally applied to and implemented by those who are struggling to come to terms with a gay family member as well as those who are gay themselves.

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