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It started with a phone call late on a Friday night in February 1997. The call was from my ex-husband, informing me that our twenty-nine-year-old daughter, Anna, had committed suicide. She had been found late that afternoon after hanging from the bar in her closet for fifteen hours.

As we drove the 550 miles to the town where Anna had lived and died to plan and attend her funeral, I said to my husband, Bob, that I did not want Anna's death to be in vain. I had no idea what I could do, however, because there was one major complicating factor: Anna was a Christian and a lesbian. And I was a fundamentalist Christian who had been taught all my life that homosexuality was a sin.

I learned of Anna's homosexuality in a "coming-out" letter she wrote to us from college in December 1988. Here is an excerpt from the letter I sent her a few weeks later in response:

Undoubtedly, the most difficult part of your letter was the gay thing. I will never accept that in you. I feel it's a terrible waste, besides being spiritually and morally wrong. For

a reason I don't quite fathom, I have a harder time dealing with that issue than almost anything in the world. I do and will continue to love you, but I will always hate that, and will pray every day that you will change your mind and attitude.

The years after our letter exchange were stormy at best. I didn't want her to be a lesbian, and I continued to firmly believe it was a choice she'd made.

What made Anna's death even more difficult was that in August 1996—eight years after she had first come out to us and just six months before she died—I received an angry letter from her, cutting off all contact with me. She told me that I was her mother only in a biological way, that I had done

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colossal damage to her soul with my shaming words, and that she did not want to, and did not have to, forgive me. I was at a loss. I sought counsel from family and friends, and they all told me to respect Anna's wishes and give her the space she was asking for. So I did.

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What do I wish I'd done? What would I do now? Grab my toothbrush, credit card, and car keys, jump in the car, drive to where she lives, and tell her I love her no matter what. I did not do that, and now I never can.

I had so much to learn. We really don't learn unless we're ready, especially when it comes to this particular subject. We must want to search and understand. If we don't, no amount of information thrust upon us will penetrate our hearts. I would give anything to go back in time with an open heart. But while Anna was alive, I was unteachable.

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After Anna took her life, I needed some answers. I began to read everything I could get my hands on. I read books about grief, grace, suicide, and even homosexuality. Somehow, I had to try to understand what had happened

to Anna that caused her so much emotional pain that suicide was her only answer.

One book I read was Mel White's autobiography, *Stranger at the Gate: To Be Gay and Christian in America*. As I read, I began to wonder: What if Anna hadn't chosen to be a lesbian? What if I had condemned her in my heart, and sometimes to her face, without reason?

I decided to e-mail Mel to tell him Anna's story and let him know his book had made me take a hard look at the topic of homosexuality. He e-mailed me back with words full of compassion for the grief I was now experiencing and the pain Anna had suffered as a gay Christian rejected by her church and her family.

A few months later, in October 1999, Mel convinced us to come to Lynchburg, Virginia, to meet with his newly formed organization, Soulforce, and tell my story to two hundred lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. I had only five minutes to share it. As I spoke of Anna's tragic death, I watched people in the audience weeping openly, and I struggled to keep my own tears under control. Bob and I were astounded at the number of people who approached us afterward and said, "You just told my story, only I haven't gotten as far as the suicide part—yet."

I began to wonder if what I'd been taught all my life in church was true. Soon after we got home from Lynchburg, I e-mailed Mel to thank him for paying our way to this life-changing weekend. He e-mailed back just three words: Do your homework! And so we did.

In about a year's time—after reading everything we could get our hands on, talking to people on both sides of the issue, studying the "clobber passages" (a handful of Bible verses that seem to condemn homosexuality), and praying to be shown God's truth—our beliefs were revolutionized. We began to understand that we must never take Bible verses out of the context and the culture of the day in which they were written. We came to understand that several passages in the Bible speak of same-gender sex. But

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in every instance, the Bible is talking about heterosexuals who, filled with lust, became sexual perverts. The Bible says nothing about innate homosexuality as we know it today, or about people of the same gender living in loving, committed, monogamous relationships. We discovered that homosexuality

is not a choice and, therefore, cannot be a sin.

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In 2002, my husband and I formed TEACH Ministries. (TEACH is an acronym for To Educate About the Consequences of Homophobia.)

We began traveling around the country to tell our story to anyone who would listen. We felt that if telling it could save just one life, it would be worth it.

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Ten years after Anna’s death, *People* magazine featured our story in its November 19, 2007, issue. We never dreamed we’d get hundreds of e-mails in response—or that some would be nasty and downright hateful. After all, almost all the groups to which I’d spoken in the past had been friendly. Not so with all *People* magazine readers. While most were positive, the negative e-mails really rocked me back on my heels. This was something new for us.

One person wrote, “Christians should love the person but not their sin. It appears *People* magazine hunted down the most left-wing nuts to agree with you in your drive to make homosexual behavior become accepted. Perhaps your daughter’s death is an indictment of the homosexual lifestyle? Never thought of that? You just assumed it was because people weren’t tolerant enough, right? Shame on you.” We were finding out what it was like to be the object of the church’s hatred for gay people. Having once been much less accepting, it was very unsettling.

Being one of five families featured in the award-winning documentary *For the Bible Tells Me So* has also had a tremendous impact on us, as it has had on many others. About homosexuality and Christianity, it has appeared in theaters across the country and is now being shown in educational institutions, churches, and community centers worldwide. It has really made a difference in the lives of many Christian families with gay children.

Are you wondering how to prevent what happened to my family from happening to others? The answer is simple. Get to know gay men and lesbians. Do your homework, as we did. If you don't, vital and valuable members of our world will continue to be at risk—of religious bigotry, hate crimes, and suicide.

For more on Mary Lou and Bob Wallner's TEACH Ministries, visit its website at www.teach-ministries.org, as well as that of For the Bible Tells Me So, www.forthebibletellmeso.org.