

Daughter Spurs Shift in Gephardt's View on Gays

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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Though many of the Democratic hopefuls, including Mr. Gephardt, oppose gay marriage, nearly all support measures that would bar discrimination against gays in the workplace, increase financing for AIDS treatment and legalize civil unions, allowing gays and their partners to enjoy the legal rights accorded to married people. Experts say that is a seismic shift from the 80's and early 90's, when gay rights rarely figured so prominently on the political agenda.

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FULL TEXT

The first hint of the unexpected was in the annual Christmas card from Congress. There, in the photo of Representative Richard A. Gephardt of Missouri and his smiling family, stood his daughter Chrissy with her arm around another woman.

Mr. Gephardt sent out more than 2,000 of the Christmas cards last year, letting his constituents and colleagues know for the first time that his 30-year-old daughter was proudly and openly gay. Since then, she has become one of the public faces of his presidential campaign and something of a celebrity.

Her transformation from a married social worker into an outspoken advocate for gay rights has been widely chronicled. But what is less commonly known is that her journey would have been far more difficult without her father's.

Mr. Gephardt's decision to turn the spotlight on his daughter underscores his own evolution in 27 years in Congress. In the early 1980's, he opposed abortion, school busing and federally financed legal services for gay men and lesbians.

Over the years, he has changed those positions and today is hailed by gay and lesbian rights groups for sponsoring legislation against hate crimes and discrimination and for being the first presidential hopeful to give a gay relative such a prominent and public platform.

"My dad is ever evolving," Ms. Gephardt likes to tell her audiences. "I'm working on him."

One of those areas is gay marriage, which she avidly supports and he does not.

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The shift reflects what analysts and pollsters describe as a widening acceptance of gay men and lesbians in American political and cultural life over the past decade. Mr. Gephardt, 62, says his views have shifted as he met people directly affected by his votes in Congress and considered what it would be like to walk in their shoes.

It cannot have been easy. The son of a milk-truck driver, Mr. Gephardt grew up in a religious family in segregated St. Louis in the 40's and 50's. His mother hoped that he would become a minister, and he was a youth leader in the Third Baptist Church.

When he was growing up, he said, he never knew anyone who was openly gay, and people often made fun of homosexuality.

"It was seen as abnormal behavior," he said. "It was a very different time, but that's the way it was."

"You learn as you go through life. You meet people, and if you listen to people -- and I do try to listen to people -- you can really learn. And I've learned."

Mr. Gephardt acknowledges that his metamorphosis has sometimes been awkward and uncomfortable. He has been accused of opportunism, particularly when he first reversed his positions on busing and abortion rights before running for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1988.

He says some colleagues questioned his judgment when he hired Steve Elmendorf, an openly gay man, as his chief of staff in 1992, long before he learned that his daughter is a lesbian.

His decision to include his daughter in his campaign and her partner, Amy Loder, in the family photograph and in brochures has touched off angry letters and telephone calls from conservative-minded supporters.

But perhaps toughest of all has been confronting his own position on gay marriage when he looks in the green eyes of his daughter, who said two years ago that she is a lesbian.

The issue is no longer an abstract argument in the halls of Congress, but an intensely and wrenchingly personal debate across the family dinner table.

"He knows I disagree with him," said Ms. Gephardt, who describes her experiences over the last two years as "an emotional roller coaster."

She is warm and vivacious, with short spiky blond hair and seemingly irrepressible confidence. As a child, she knocked on doors and passed out pamphlets for her father's campaigns. But she anguished for more than a year before she could bring herself to tell him the truth.

The truth was that after four years of marriage she had fallen in love with Ms. Loder, a classmate in graduate school. Telling the truth, she thought, would mean being divorced and destroying her father's career.

"I just assumed it was a liability," Ms. Gephardt said in an interview. "I thought for sure it would be this family secret, and that we would keep it to ourselves."

When she finally broke down in tears and disclosed her secret in April 2001 over dinner in an Italian restaurant in St. Louis, her parents embraced her and promised to support her. They had suspected that she was involved with Ms. Loder because she had been spending so much time with her.

"We were naturally worried and concerned," said Mr. Gephardt, who added that he worried about the trauma of a divorce and the discrimination that his daughter might encounter.

"But we told her," he recalled, " 'We will always be behind you.' "

Mr. Gephardt and his wife, Jane, invited their daughter and Ms. Loder to live with them for several months after the couple had completed graduate school in St. Louis and were looking for jobs in Washington.

Last November, they asked Ms. Loder to appear in the family portrait for the Christmas card. In March, Mr. Gephardt invited his daughter to join his campaign full time and to tell her story across the country.

Early next year, Mr. Gephardt and his wife and daughter will appear together in photos that will appear on billboards and in magazines in Washington and New York to help a gay advocacy group that the Gephardts joined this year.

The photographs – part of an educational campaign organized by Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays – are expected to carry a slogan like "we love our gay daughter."

Other prominent Americans with gay relatives will also be featured.

"I'm sure," Mr. Gephardt said, "there are people who don't like the decision that she's made and think that it's wrong, immoral, whatever and will look badly on me. But I don't care. My family always comes first."

By the time he learned that his daughter is gay, he was already considered a reliable advocate for gay rights. In 1995, he was a co-sponsor of a bill to bar discrimination against gay federal employees. In 1999, he was co-sponsor of one to extend federal protection from hate crimes to people attacked because of their sexual orientation.

"Congressman Gephardt has for a long time been a friend of the gay and lesbian community," said Winnie Stachelberg, director of the Human Rights Campaign, the largest gay advocacy organization.

"But having a family member who talks to you about these issues makes it more personal, makes it more real," Ms. Stachelberg said. "It makes a difference."

Ms. Gephardt is inevitably compared to Mary Cheney, Vice President Dick Cheney's gay daughter, who was active in the 2000 presidential campaign. But Ms. Cheney and her parents never discussed her sexual orientation publicly.

Ms. Gephardt acknowledges that taking such a public stance is not easy. On the campaign trail, some of her father's supporters have quietly taken her aside and told her not to talk so much about being gay.

The discrimination she says she has encountered, both at her old job as a social worker and elsewhere, has made her reluctant at times to introduce Ms. Loder as her live-in partner. Sometimes she describes Ms. Loder as a cousin.

But Ms. Gephardt said she forged ahead because she believed that she was making a difference. This year, she found that her father was not sponsoring a bill that would require the federal government to recognize gay couples who move to the United States after marrying legally abroad. She brought the issue to his attention, and he agreed to sponsor the measure.

She is pressing him to do more, particularly on gay marriage. At a meeting with gay and lesbian students at American University, Ms. Gephardt promised this month to be "a live-in lobbyist" if her father was elected president.

"I want my dad to understand why this is so important to me," she said. "Why should I not be able to marry if my brother and sister can? I'm working on him with this issue. And I can assure you he's listening."

Photograph

The Gephardts' Christmas card photo last year. From left, Amy Loder, Chrissy, Kate, Richard, Jane and Matt Gephardt, with Tricia, his wife. (pg. A1); Chrissy Gephardt speaking at American University, where she promised to be "a live-in lobbyist" if her father was elected president. (Photo by Oscar Matatquin for The New York Times)(pg. A11)

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