

When wives come out

THINK OF IT as a Gov. Jim McGreevey-style situation in reverse.

In "Gayle's" case, it was the woman who became involved in a homosexual affair and had to fess up to her spouse that she was gay.

Lately, news headlines about homosexuals leading closeted lives have focused on men such as McGreevey and former U.S. Rep. Mark Foley, who is single. But plenty of women have found themselves in similar circumstances. Last week, an "Oprah" show on the topic featured gay women married to men.

"I wish I could give concrete statistics but [I can't] because it's such a hidden experience," said Joanne Fleisher, a Mount Airy-based therapist and author of "Married to a Man & In Love with a Woman" (Alyson Books, \$15.95).

You'd assume that with so many openly lesbian celebrities such as Ellen DeGeneres and actress Portia de Rossi, and the popularity of such shows such as the "L Word," it wouldn't be so difficult for lesbians to be who they are sexually.

"There's almost a false appearance, like it's so acceptable," said Fleisher, who operates the online counseling resource www.lavendervisions.com.

"The reality is that there is still a lot of oppression that exists. You cannot walk down the street and hold hands even in parts of Philly where you won't get frightening comments made . . . [And] there are some places where women can have their children taken away from them."

Yesterday, which was National Coming Out Day, I interviewed a local divorced woman who's now living her life as an openly gay woman. Still, she asked that I not use the name she goes by for fear of upsetting her ex-husband with whom she shares custody of their three children. She agreed to share her story in hope of helping other married lesbians.

"I thought that possibly everybody had those fleeting thoughts, 'Gee, what would it be like to be gay?'" Gayle told me. "I was very much in love with my husband and my life was perfect."

Things began to get tough, though, following the birth of her first child. It was a challenging pregnancy that had her on bed rest, followed by a difficult birth. Then she learned her son was autistic.



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She sought help from a friend of her sister's, who was a special-education teacher who was gay. Gayle's husband was often off working long hours. Over the years, the two women became exceptionally close.

"We had such a bond that I knew that if I needed someone, she was there for me," Gayle re-

called.

But their relationship was strictly platonic, until Gayle heard that "Ann" might be moving to California. She decided it was time to act.

"I needed to tell her how I felt. She started crying. She said, 'I have the same feelings but I wouldn't let myself have them,'" Gayle recalled. Two months later, in January 2005, Gayle blurted out what was going on to her husband of 10 years.

"He was, like, 'You're kidding me.' He started saying, 'Well, let's work on it . . . He said, 'We can go to counseling,'" Gayle recalled. But her heart wasn't in it. Her husband filed for divorce two months later.

"Coming out to me wasn't at all the issue," she said. "I am who I am. I told my parents. There was no worry about that."

"Anybody I needed to tell, I told. What I said was, 'I fell in love with [Ann] and we're together and we plan on spending the rest of our lives together.' I never have had a physical connection with any man the way I have with her."

Restructuring her family has been more of a challenge. She moved out of the marital home and now lives in a town house with her partner.

"My kids want me, daddy and Ann together. They don't understand," Gayle said. "They have a deep love for her and she has a deep love for them."

Gayle continues to regret the pain she caused her husband and hopes he'll one day forgive her and accept her lifestyle.

To other gay women unhappily married to men, Gayle suggested, "I hate to quote Jim McGreevey . . . but his words about being true to yourself and being authentic, give you so much freedom. I don't think you realize how much freedom you have lost by not being true to yourself." ★



Portia de Rossi

Have you peeped a hot trend that hasn't been reported? E-mail heyjen@phillynews.com and let me know what you know.