Gay Community and Family in Post War America

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Although the AIDS epidemic and the debate over legalization of same-sex marriage have both brought national attention to the gay community in America, the formation of the gay community began much earlier. I researched the development of the gay community for Dr. Elizabeth Clement, who is writing the history of gays and lesbians in America in the post-war era and their relationships to family. Dr. Clement's book will document the evolution of the gay community, the relationships they had with their birth families, their efforts to create their own families, and the heterosexual reaction towards gay family members.

Most of my research for Dr. Clement has focused on the gay community in the 1980s and 1990s and its reaction to the AIDS epidemic. After mainstream America turned its back on gays they turned to their own community for support in dealing with this crisis. They found coping mechanisms and care giving they extended their definition of family to include friends and lovers. This led to a trend which we are still seeing today. Gay Americans are trying to define their non-natal families and assert their right to be recognized as families and gain the benefits given to traditional families. For my research so far, I have been reading various collections of coming out stories and have found leads on possible journals for further research, such as Partners Magazine for Gay and Lesbian Couples, Partners Newsletter for Gay and Lesbian Couples, Between Our Selves Women of Color Newspaper, Black Out Magazine and Gay Community News. I have also read books like Hospital Time and In the Shadow of an Epidemic, both of which offered a more personal understanding of the impact of HIV and AIDS on the gay community.

Even before the AIDS epidemic, the gay community was struggling to find its place in society. Much of my research time has been spent reading primary source documents describing many individual coming out stories and the reactions of family members, which ranged from violence to acceptance. Even within one family each member reacts in different and sometimes surprising ways.

Over the last several decades the gay community has become more and more visible. Gays and Lesbians have faced a long history of discrimination. Hopefully this project and Dr. Clement's book will help bring to light the difficulties faced by these individuals and raise the consciousness of mainstream America.