



TEXT (Danielle Levsky)
PHOTOS (Danielle Levsky)

When I got in contact with Beth Matway, she told me she was surprised that I had asked to do a profile on her. She claimed that she wasn't a pioneer in Gender Studies, that I should profile one of the longtime professors in the field. She didn't want to take credit for their work. These claims did not deter me because I knew she had a story to tell. **We all have a story to tell.**

Her story surrounded her twin, lesbian daughters, Claire and Lora.

Beth was a young girl during the second wave of feminism, so she had identified herself as a feminist long before she pursued women's issues and women's studies in her professional work. She graduated from college with an education degree and taught elementary school children, or "short legged people", as she referred to them fondly, for five years. She eventually decided to get her masters, then PhD, in the field of American Literature and Cultural Studies, with 19th

DREAMS WITHOUT & GENDER

Beth Matway reaccounts how raising her daughters taught her about gender studies

|| Beth Matway is a Senior Lecturer in the English department at the University of Pittsburgh and is the coordinator of Writing in the Disciplines at Pitt. Her course instruction includes: Seminar in Composition: Gender Studies, The Wild West, History and Politics of the English Language, Writing in the Disciplines Faculty Seminar, and other W-courses in Literature.

► Right: Beth decorates her bookshelf with photos of her family, showcasing pictures of family vacations and her daughters' growth over the years.



century American Literature as her specialty. She finished her PhD in 1999, and in the midst of studying and writing her dissertation, she had Claire and Lora.

Beth met her husband, Roy, singing in the Pittsburgh Oratorio Society in 2001.

"He's a rare person, really smart and thoughtful," Beth said, "By the time we were in the process of raising our kids, we already were LGBT allies, although I think much less directly and explicitly than we are now. **We both already had a position that affirmed the variety of sexualities on the human spectrum.**"

Roy is a chemical metallurgist. His perspective on gender studies comes from his background and his scientific perspective on gender. Roy grew up in a suburban, blue-collar family. His parents never set any expectations on what he wanted to do with his life, and encouraged his interests and talents. Although they didn't see why he found the masses of planets so interesting, they took him to the library every week, signed him up for science classes outside of grade school, and paid his way through college. He wanted to give his children the same kind of freedom with their life. His studies and scientific data reasoned that LGBTQ individuals were variations on the diverse human type.

"We did find, though, that we had lingering stereotypes, or things we didn't know counted as prejudices. I think you find this out by putting yourself in real encounters

was my way of giving them more freedom and power over what traditional expectations would give them."

By the time they were four years old, Lora was already identifying herself with things that are typically coded masculine, and distancing herself from things coded feminine. **It was a whole new way to think about what women's studies, gender studies and gender meant.**

"It was the beginning of an education taking place right in my own life."

At Christmas, when Lora and Claire were four years old, the girls received elf doll houses with little wooden figures. They loved playing with them, those miniature elves.

female, born in female bodies. It was really starting then that my husband and I started to say that we should not make assumptions."

Beth noticed that four years old was an interesting moment of consciousness, an awareness of how and where your identity might be. That summer, they were picking up swimsuits from the Land's End catalogue. Lora came up to Beth and she had picked out a swimsuit: a pair of swim trunks.

"It was a great looking pair of swim trunks! I hadn't told them that they had to pick out a swimsuit from the girls' pages. Claire picked out a suit from the girls' section... so they both made their decision. I said to Lora, 'is that what you want? Okay, well, you have to wear one of these girls' swimsuits under it.' That's a hard discussion to have: explaining to a four-year-old why she has to cover up her top when boys her age don't have to."

Although Beth and Roy were encouraging the girls to make their own choices and how they would express themselves gender-wise, they didn't realize that their daughters could be hearing it from other little kids. When Lora wore her swimming trunks for the first day of summer camp, she was very proud of them. As Beth was getting ready to head back to the car, she heard some kind of commotion. Walking back, she saw Lora backed up against a fence with a group of girls around her, interrogating her as to why she was wearing a boys' swimsuit. Before the situation escalated, Beth went back to her summer school teacher, who talked to the girls and told them that lots of girls like to wear shorts over their swimsuits.

"That also was a wake up call... Little kids who force gender expectations upon each other, even at that age. It was just another thing I didn't realize about how much authority people have over gender."

For their fifth birthday, Roy and Beth

"I didn't mind that people looked at me like I was weird, because that was my way of giving them more freedom and power over what traditional expectations would give them."

with any difference from your own world. But, we weren't coming to the experience with disapproval that had to be overcome."

When the twins were young, Beth was conscious of what information the twins absorbed about who they should be and how they should act. When she took the girls for walks around the neighborhood, strangers would approach the stroller and say how pretty and how cute the twins were.

"And I would say 'Strong too!' very loudly, making a total fool of myself. 'Also smart!' I wanted that to be going into their minds, because it was always 'aren't they pretty, aren't they cute.' I didn't mind that people looked at me like I was weird, because that

However, later during Christmas afternoon, Lora climbed up on Beth's lap.

"She tucked her head down, like she did when she wanted to say something that she was feeling deeply, and she said, 'Mom, it was really nice of Santa to bring me the doll house, but why didn't he really know I wanted a tool set?' And being Santa, I was thinking, 'Santa has not been paying attention.'"

Lora saw Santa as a God-like figure who would know what she wanted. Beth felt she was projecting what she wanted onto her daughter. She didn't think to ask if Lora wanted a tool set.

"As much as I thought I was trying to be forward thinking and feminist in my approach, I realized I was still making all kinds of assumptions about what they would want, because Lora and Claire were still gendered

“But they never really came out of the closet to us, because, as we like to say, they never had to go in.”

decided they were going to get Lora and Claire bicycles. They approached the bicycle aisle in Toys R Us and were astonished.

“You have to know that when we were little kids, the differentiation between girls’ bikes and boys’ bikes was only the height of the bar... if it was low, it was for girls, so they could wear a skirt riding their bike; if it was high, it was for boys. I had a red bike. Red, blue, those were the colors of bikes.”

The bicycles in this store, however, were divided into two, clear groups. On one side of the aisle, all the bicycles had white wheels, white pedals, and streamers; they were pink, lavender, flowered. On the other side were gray, red, silver, and black bikes, with black wheels and black pedals.

“It was a complete revelation to us. It was divided so strictly, so rigidly by gender. So by now, we already had a few wake up calls. We looked at these bicycles and knew that we couldn’t do this, we had to bring them here and let them choose!”

When they brought Lora and Claire to the bicycles, they didn’t say, “here are the girls’ bikes, here are the boys’ bikes.” They simply said, “you get to pick your bike.” Claire picked a white, flowered bicycle that had streamers and a basket, so she could carry her baby doll. Lora paid no attention to that side of the aisle and went over to the other, picking a dark blue, sparkly bike. Of course, no streamers.

This time, when she picked up the bike, Beth and Roy wanted her to be ready for any outside criticism. They told her that some

“That was the beginning of what has been an adventure not only as a parent, but as an intellectual and a teacher.”

When Lora and Claire were 12 years old, they revealed that they were lesbians to their grandparents, and eventually their friends and family, as well.

“But they never really came out of the closet to us, because, as we like to say, they never had to go in.”

Beth believes the reason that people have to come out is because the entire world, including parents and close relatives, assume they’re straight. Gendered and assumptive questions like, “Are there any boys you like? Do you have a boyfriend?” make coming out of the closet an act of integrity to adjust people’s assumptions and expectations about sexuality. If no one is assuming that people are heterosexual or homosexual, then perhaps “coming out” wouldn’t be such a necessity. It wouldn’t take so much courage for an individual to reveal their sexuality.

Around this time, the entire family had discovered an organization called Dreams of Hope, a performing arts troupe for LGBTQ youth. One Sunday at church, this youth group performed a skit on the issues LGBTQ individuals face every day. The performance was told through drama, humor and song, engaging and enticing the audience. Beth went up to the group after the service and approached Susan Haugh, who she later found out was the founding artistic director of Dreams of Hope.

Claire and Lora

assumed of everyone from a young age. In media, heterosexual couples are displayed as the norm, and often same-sex attractions are not seen or affirmed. Then, there’s the idea of Homophobia, which also creates Internalized Homophobia. Phrases like “That’s so gay” or “You’re such a fag” only make LGBTQ individuals feel threatened and rejected by society. They often take others’ hate and become consumed in self-doubt, and even self-hatred; it takes courage to overcome this inbred fear and accept yourself for who you are. Finally, there is Gender Identity, which is confusing for many youth when our world is constantly being gendered “female” or “male.” Often, transgendered youth receive negative feedback from both sexes who cannot accept them or help them understand who they are.

In one skit the Dreams of Hope performers showed on their promotional video, “Homo High,” they reversed a familiar situation and portrayed a high school that mostly consisted of LGBTQ high schoolers. At Homo High, heterosexuals were the anomaly. When a new student came to join the lunch table, gossip spread that the new boy was straight. They bombard him with questions, like “Is it true?,” “What did your parents say when you told them?,” “Are your parents heterosexual?,” “What’s it like being straight?,” “Is it contagious?” Finally, one of the other students at the table screams and admits that she, too, is heterosexual. After much shock and disbelief, Claire ends the skit by saying, “See, they do recruit!”

The video makes it quite clear how absurd and ridiculous this situation is, but it’s not too far from the truth. These questions are often asked of LGBTQ youth. Backed up by their Dreams of Hope community, Lora and Claire did their part in middle school to address the Triple Threat, getting their entire

Want to learn more about Dreams of Hope? Check out their website www.dreamsofhope.org/ for their mission statement, upcoming calendar events, youth programs, ways to get involved, and resources for LGBTQ youth.



people might say her bike was a boy’s bike and asked what she thought she would say to them if it happened. She said, “Well, I picked it out myself, and I’m a girl, so it’s a girl’s bike! And blue is my favorite color.” Beth knew Lora was ready to face any opposition with such a clear and confident answer.

By the time the twins were preteens, Beth and Roy had learned so many things about gender from them. **Every day was a lesson in how gender might be more flexible or multitudinous than they originally believed it to be.**

got involved with the organization in the fall of their eighth-grade year. As performers, they were able to write their own skits, poems that local musicians would turn into songs, and original percussion pieces. **The group advocated different ideas through their performances, reaching out to not only closeted youth, but misunderstanding individuals.**

In their promotional video, “That’s So Gay!”, they spoke about the Triple Threat of being a LBTQ youth. First, the idea of heterosexism, which in our culture, was

class to stop saying “That’s so gay.” Roy also appeared in the educational video, explaining how he supported his daughters 100 percent and couldn’t see why he wouldn’t.

Based on her experiences raising Lora and Claire and becoming involved in Dreams of Hope, Beth’s involvement in the field of Gender Studies took an interesting and unique perspective. Through her daughters, she was able to get an out-of-school curriculum she couldn’t find anywhere else. ■