

Nana Fotsch & Grandchildren Extended Interview

OwningOurFaith

Background

Nana Fotsch: My name is Nana Fotsch and I am blessed to be here with four of my thirty grandchildren. And these four grandchildren just happen to be gay, makes no difference. They're four of my grandchildren, four of my thirty grandchildren period.

Chris Lawton: So my name is Chris Lawton. I am 30 years old. I'm from originally Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and now I live in New York City.

Andy Lawton: My name is Andy Lawton. I am 30 years old. I grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and now live in Portland, Oregon.

Maria Fotsch: My name is Maria Fotsch. I'm 22 years old. I grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and now live in New York City.

Andy Fotsch: My name is Andy Fotsch. I grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I'm 24 year old and I now live in San Diego, California.

Coming Out Stories

Andy Lawton: I came out when I was in my first year of medical school and my church experience at that point, I was going to a Catholic Church and I was close friends with the pastor of the church and I had many great conversations with him. Initially, he was a spiritual director, and then just got to be a great friend. And I knew I had his support and that he was supportive of someone living a full life, dating and expressing themselves as a gay person, obviously is one facet of themselves. But it wasn't something I talked about with other people of the church. It was in a fairly conservative suburb of Milwaukee, and it wasn't something that I really brought up except with the pastor because we were good friends. I was a cantor at the church, I knew a lot of the parishioners, I would talk to the ushers as I walked in the door but it's not... I was always cautious about that. And I think when I go back home that's also the word I would use when I am at home in Wisconsin, I feel welcome, I do, but I feel like I am always a little bit cautious. And I reconnect with people from home and hug them, and see people that were part of the great school community that I had and I would say both, I feel welcome but I'm also very aware and cautious of what I saying and who I am being more so when I am at home. Now I live in Portland, Oregon, I actually struggled to find a Catholic church where I really feel comfortable. Maybe not comfortable, maybe not comfortable is... is not the right word, but I feel most at home. And I actually right now go to an Episcopal church, which as most people know, if you were at a service, you would be hard pressed to figure out what are the differences from a Catholic service. But the pastor is gay, has a partner, it's on occasion, part of the preaching the... being gay, being divorced, many issues that probably many faith communities are processing. But it's just a place I feel at home, right now. But when I'm home and with my family, I always look forward to going to Catholic Church. When I am visiting my brother, I certainly look forward to going to his church where there is a vibrant LGBT community.

Chris Lawton: When we came out to Nana, we came out to Nana together. We came out a few years after speaking to our parents about it and we, we wrote a letter to Nana and we explained in the letter a bit about what we had experienced growing up Catholic, growing up gay and how we really wanted her to know that this is who we were and that this was something that was really important for her to know about us and that it was her getting to know more of us. And not so much that we'd been trying to keep anything but really that we wanted her to better understand who we were and that we still wanted to be obviously a part of this family and a part of the church. And so we wrote all of this in a letter to her and what I remember very clearly was that we had spoken with a number of family members about what do you think Nana will say when we come out to her and I think that there was not a good sense because we've always been a pretty traditionally Catholic family. It wasn't exactly clear what her response would be, even though we also know that she is a very, very loving person. We weren't sure how she would decide and would reconcile those things. So we wrote her this letter and then shortly after that we were home for holiday. Andy and I were home together and we got together with Nana and we had dinner together and we got to the restaurant where we were having dinner and parked the car and got out of the car and all the while of meeting up and going to dinner we had not talked about the letter per se and she grabbed us both by the arm and she took one arm in each of her hands, one on Andy and myself on the other side and she said I got your letter and I just want you to know I love you both, nothing changes and let's go and have a great time. And that was how I remember coming out to her and obviously meant a great deal.

Andy Fotsch: When I came out to Nana, I had already heard that Chris and Andy had already come out to her and had a fairly positive experience so, by that point I had my partner, my boyfriend, and I just knew that it was time to come out and need to say something to Nana. I just go to Nana, I say, "hey Nana, there's something I need to tell you, I'm gay" And she just responds and goes, "well, ah, I have grey hair." And then I go, well, so I have a boyfriend and she goes, "Yes, and his name is Riley, I know all about him!" You know, it didn't phase anything, and she, I guess, she already knew, but it was totally okay and acceptable and then we were right onto the next thing.

Maria Fotsch: So when I came out to Nana it was this past summer. I had just graduated from college and so I was at home before moving out and starting work and so, we got to go to lunch a lot that summer. We always talk about you know, what is going on in our cousins' lives and things like that... And their relationships and I kind of wanted to be able to share that and so I told her that I had a girlfriend and she promptly asked, you know, what's her name? And started asking questions and so we covered it was another lunch topic on another day and it was wonderful. And it was interesting for me because I just had a little bit of a different environment because Chris and Andy, and my brother, Andy, had already kind of broken the ice for me and so, I didn't have as much of the nerves and the uncertainty but, it was tough but Nana makes it so easy and I knew that it was you know, just another lunch conversation.

Attending Catholic School

Chris Lawton: We went to a Catholic high school in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and being gay and Catholic wasn't something that was talked about with any frequency or really at all. I took an AP Psychology course my senior year of high school, and in that course, on the day that we were on the chapter in our book about sexuality and homosexuality, our teacher said to us that she believed from the bottom of her heart that gay people, LGBT people, are born that way and that heavily affected the nature of the conversation about sexual identity and also about faith but that for reasons she wasn't going to go into, she wouldn't be talking about that topic any further but that she really felt that people were born that way. And that there were no questions asked and we moved on.

Andy Lawton: I had friends, not a ton, but a few, who were completely out and were very comfortable. I had a close professor friend/mentor who in a way I think he really believed in his heart, told me that if I prayed and thought about it the right way, that the confusion I had about same sex attractions would go away and that I would prefer women more. When I heard the message from the Professor, I respected him and loved him as a mentor so much that I really just wanted to think and pray about it. But I remember deep down, thinking... Gosh! Really? Was that... Can that... Could that really happen? And I... at the time wanted to think that it could but... I had to learn for myself that that was just, that was wrong. I realized that even though that was a ...it was a loving ... it came from a place of love, I do believe, it was somewhat misguided and it didn't end up affecting my faith very much. I think I had met enough other people that also were of deep faith but had a different opinion.

Andy Fotsch: There was a brief period that that I was identifying as bisexual before I went said that I was gay. And during that time, I was talking to a priest and one of the things that I said is I'm bisexual. And his immediate response was, "okay, good, there is still hope for you to go to heaven." And the point that he followed up was that you can still love and marry a girl. And that was very clear. And that actually, ironically was one of the things that pushed me to, I walked away from that thinking about that and I go wait, I actually don't want to be with a girl. And really pushed me into saying, no, you know what? I am gay! And it was the negative reaction I had that actually affirmed my sexuality. I actually dated someone and we would go to mass together so the community was very welcoming, even if the priest maybe wasn't the most welcoming but certainly never made anyone feel uncomfortable. I definitely had the full experience of all reactions. I had a very positive experience as well. I sang in a choir which was a very warm, welcoming, wonderful community. I had one experience during actually a reunion that the choir had and many of the alumni of the choir came back to the campus and we were having a rehearsal and then a mass. And I was standing at the mass, where we were singing, up in the choir loft, I was standing next to a guy, who had come with his partner. They were recently married. They wore rings. I was sort of enamored by that. I thought that was so wonderful. I was questioning myself at the time, if I if I was gay. And during the homily, he and I sat down at the choir stalls, in theory listening to the homily, and he showed me. I couldn't help but lean over to him and he had a wooden... he and his husband had wooden rings. I said your ring is so beautiful and he took it off and showed it to me and told me about their wedding... while in theory we should have been listening

to the homily. But I remember thinking, what a palpable experience that was in the Basilica, at my college, with someone who was in a wonderful relationship, was you know, reconnecting with his Catholic faith, and the music ministry that he was still a part of and was a married gay man. That was incredible.

Maria Fotsch: That's the perfect transition to my story. I came out when I was in college at a Catholic University but my friends didn't miss a beat and it was just, I mean, we were all very similar and I didn't really have a big discussion in college about faith and sexuality, it was just another dimension of who I am.

Nana Reconciling Grandchildren's Sexuality

I grew up in Glenview Illinois which is a western suburb of Chicago, I now live in Malgrove Wisconsin which is western suburb of Milwaukee. Yes, I really did raise my family Catholic. There were not only our immediate family was Catholic, but our expanded family was Catholic. Catholic influences all over the place. To raise a family Catholic, the first thing that you have to do is let the children know that their faith is everything.

My Catholic faith is very strong. Do I think that we need some changes as a Church - you better believe it! But, I am, perhaps this is wrong, but I separate my faith from my Church. My faith is something between me and the good man upstairs. My Church tells me how I should do it, and sometimes, especially as you get older you get kind of agitated when things aren't the way you think it should be. So I question my Church periodically and maybe I'm going to get in trouble with that, but that's just the way I am.

When my grandchildren came out to me, as I say, it was just a non event. Were they any different the day before they told me and the day after? No! They are still grandchildren that I love. Having gay grandchildren, all of whom I am very proud of, have they changed my views, you better believe it. Because I never really thought about it before because there was something that was not my experience and I wasn't really sure how I would react to the experience and then I thought, you dope, why are they any different than your straight grandchildren. And they aren't. I chew them out just like I do my straight grandchildren. There is no difference.

What do I think the Church is saying it should change in regards to sexuality? They have to recognize the fact that gay people are no different than straight people. They love their faith, but quite frankly, and they love their church, but their church has let them down by not recognizing them as a wonderful participant in the Church. I also, strongly feel, that gay people should be married in the Church. And this has evolved for me because at first I had a conversation with my daughter after Andy and Chris, my grandsons came out and she said, mom, how do you feel about gay marriage in the Church? And I thought, oh, I don't know about that so I had to do some pondering. It didn't take me too long. I am a slow learner, but this was something I strongly believe because I think that a loving couple married in the Church should have children. And I feel that same way about my straight grandchildren. A loving couple, children. It's just normal. And that's what the Church has to in my opinion, has to change what is normal.

For someone who is old thinking and in primarily that is older people, we don't like change. We want everything to stay just as it is. It's easy. It's easy. It's hard to change. It's very hard to change, but we have to do it. If we don't change old thinking, we are going to lose the most precious part of our church and that is our young people because young people do not think old.

I think about family whether it's gay or straight as a biggest blessing any person can have. And is there any difference, no. I would never think that my gay grandchildren having a family would be a threat to our family.

My friends and fellow parishioners, of course know that I have gay grandchildren and they're all very supportive. If they aren't, they will soon not be my friends. If I had a friend who had a child who is coming out and she was having difficulty, I would say to her, do you love him or her and she would naturally say yes. I would say then you better be accepting or you are going to lose him.

If you were my grandchild and you were afraid to come out to me, I would say why are you afraid? Do you think I don't love you? I would go to my grandmother and say just exactly how you feel and say I haven't changed from yesterday to today. I am still your grandson and I love you. And if that doesn't melt her heart, I get choked up thinking about it. How can you possibly turn away someone who you've loved all your life?

We sing a hymn in our Church. It's called All Are Welcome In This Place. Ok, are all welcome in this place, or are those a lot of pretty words. It's time we put our money where our mouth is and say yes, all are welcome in this place.

I had proclaimed myself matriarch of the family. I am not sure that they all agree to that. But that responsibility I take very seriously and I want to express my opinion as matriarch, not only to my family, but to my generation.