



LGBT Math—Out of the Closet

Frank A. Farris

The world was very different in 1984. In my interviews at the JMM Employment Registry in Louisville, I no more would have told potential employers that I was gay than I would have confessed to embezzlement. And no one asked. I was presentable, with a good degree, and imagined that my unacceptable nature was detectable only to myself. After a long day in our interview clothes, my college friend Steve Kass and I propagated a little prank. We made a neat sign to set by the message board announcing

ASSOCIATION OF GAY MATHEMATICIANS

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and added the address of a local gay bar. This is the story of how an idea we found laughable—that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered mathematicians would one day be celebrated at the JMM—is now a fact that young people take for granted.

The first meeting

Steve Kass and I had planned to spend a little time at the bar that evening, wondering whether our sign would bring any other mathematicians to the site. After about half an hour, we saw two men with conference badges peeking out from their clothes. It was amusing to pretend that we had identified them as mathematicians only from their demeanor, though that was probably not out of the question. We passed a happy social evening, laughing together at the small joke that there could ever be such a thing as an Association of Gay Mathematicians. Looking back I see that our conversation offered us exactly what people now gain from the LGBT Math receptions that happen every year: the feeling of support, the

Photo above: Frank Farris and Bill Beeman at their wedding. Photo by Sam Kessler.

exchange of facts about how those like us are treated, and the comfort in knowing that we were not alone.

Since I cannot contact S and B to ask their willingness to be named in this article, I will stick to initials. S taught at a small liberal arts college in the Midwest, while B was a teaching specialist at a large southern university. Our common experience was of “passing,” meaning that we pretended to belong to the dominant culture of straight people.

We all were considered excellent teachers and all used language particularly well. I do not recall whose idea this was, but we agreed that part of our skill in teaching came from childhoods spent having to do that extra calculation of what others might think of our behavior and speech, modifying to make ourselves more acceptable. Just the little tricks involved in finding words to avoid identifying the gender of the person one is “seeing” are money in the bank when it comes to presenting complicated mathematical ideas to our students.

Perhaps the most important thing that came of our conversation was the question, “If there are four of us, could there be more?” What if we could enjoy the same kind of networking and information exchange at every national meeting?

The San Francisco Earthquake

That year, I was hired by Santa Clara University, a Jesuit university where I continue to teach today. Over the years, things changed slowly on my own campus: Students at SCU formed a support group for gay and lesbian students; when I came out to a student, she dismissed the news as an “open secret.”

With more openness came a backlash. In 1992, Colorado had passed its nasty Amendment 2 by popular vote. This law prevented any jurisdiction within Colorado from recognizing sexual identity as a class protected from discrimination. Looking ahead to the JMM scheduled for Denver in January, 1995, the leadership of both the MAA and AMS became uncomfortable with the idea of meeting in a state with such a law. Ken Ross, outgoing Associate Secretary of the MAA, tells an anecdote about the decision:

At the January 1993 meeting in San Antonio, the AMS and MAA agreed to move the meeting from Denver. This was a rare and electronically-interesting joint decision. My local computer guru insisted that I take his \$4000 black-and-white heavy laptop (I was afraid it would disappear) to the meeting. So the joint AMS-MAA resolution was crafted by the MAA Board on my computer, then I went down the hall to the AMS Council and read the resolution; they changed a few words, then I went back to the Board, etc., with fast convergence. Everyone was impressed with this use of modern technology.

Ken Ross tells me it cost the two associations \$10,000 to move the meetings to San Francisco, but the gain in good will, from my perspective, was immeasurable.

There in San Francisco, Jim Humphreys, Robert Bryant, and others organized a reception for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered mathematicians (LGBT Math, now called Spectra) at a bar safely distant from the conference site in the San Francisco Hilton. It changed my world to see the crowd: perhaps 60 people of all ages, including a past president of the MAA and an author I had long admired. It startled me to see these successful, happy people enjoying both a freedom to express their sexual identity and a sense of secret fellowship, fostered by the fact that many were not “out,” even to their professional colleagues.

The LGBT Math reception became an annual event, with a listserv organized by Ron Buckmire of Occidental College. The most popular topics of conversation involved the gay-friendly quality of one’s home institution. Pre-tenure faculty expressed fears that they had to pretend not to be different until tenure might make them safe. Even with tenure, some wondered whether a “moral turpitude” clause might terminate their employment if they were too open. It is important to remember that most states had no anti-discrimination laws to protect people with variant sexual identities. California’s Unruh Act did not explicitly identify sexual orientation as a protected class until 2005, although courts had held that it actually extended protection before that time.

Another popular comparison was the degree to which one’s school permitted or fostered associations of LGBT students. The more forward-looking places had these in place by the early ‘80s; at some schools there remain none.

The concept that one’s employer might offer any benefits to a same-sex partner would have been laughable in 1984. Perhaps without being explicitly told, we knew that our schools wanted us to say we were single, even if we were not. And yet,

Frank Farris and Bill Beeman at Huntington Lake in 1993.



school after school started to offer equal benefits to same-sex partners.

And now I'm married

It's hard to capture how much the world has changed since Steve and I put up that sign as a joke that there could ever be an organization for gay mathematicians. I can find some sympathy with people who have found it difficult to embrace the cultural shift, but it is truly marvelous to see so many LGBT mathematicians living happy and open lives. That said, struggles are not over. Despite clear scientific evidence that gender is not a matter of a single X or Y chromosome, we hear politicians blustering to put people into boxes based on testing a single gene and to remove trans soldiers from the military.

On my own campus, it's only been a few years since my university has started to signal that my sexual orientation is a positive contribution to the diversity of our community. One small token of the shift: At a reception to celebrate our Rainbow Resource Center, supporting LGBT students on campus, they had not just any old refreshments, but really good, catered refreshments. We had arrived. Though the picture is rosy now, I should not minimize the damage it did to my own career to have lived all those years in discomfort, hearing the official church doctrine that referred to homosexuality as "inherently disordered."

My partner, William Beeman, attended that first reception with me in 1991 and has now been back to many receptions since then. Having become a couple in 1984, during my last year teaching at Brown University, we lived apart as he retained his job in the Anthropology department at Brown until moving to the University of Minnesota in 2007. With many various sabbaticals and other leaves taken in each other's cities, we registered as domestic partners in California after a 1999 law made it possible. We married in 2014, but have never requested benefits from one another's university, though we may some day.

Our lives have been improved wonderfully by efforts to end discrimination. Even so, I feel sorrow for those in our profession who still suffer as I did from feelings of being fundamentally unacceptable, for whatever reason. And it's a double sorrow to think of those who left mathematics over feelings of exclusion. We have work to do. ■

Frank Farris, Professor of Mathematics and Computer Science at Santa Clara University, has served as editor of Mathematics Magazine and as the MAA Chair of the Council on Publications and Communications. His book, Creating Symmetry: The Artful Mathematics of Wallpaper Patterns, was published by Princeton University Press in 2015. His undergraduate degree is from Pomona College (1977) and his PhD from MIT (1981). Awards include the Distinguished Teaching Award from the Golden Section of the MAA and Best Photograph, Painting, or Print at the 2018 Mathematical Art Exhibition at the Joint Mathematics Meetings.

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