

ADVOCACY FOR THE LGBTQ+ Community

By Glenn Edgerton, EdD, LAT, ATC

Whether an athlete or an athletic trainer, there is power and benefit to coming out publicly, according to **outsports.com**. It may free you of the feeling of secrecy you have been carrying for years; it may allow others around you to feel more comfortable coming out; it may allow someone on the other side of the country or world to feel more comfortable coming out; and it may even save lives.

My son, Andrew, came out to us and the world in 2012 (he was in eighth grade). He is currently a women's and gender studies major in college, and he believes that the more we, as a society, are familiar with homosexuality, the less of an issue it will be for people to come out. I would even suggest that knowing more about homosexuality in this country wouldn't require anyone to come out, just as heterosexuals don't feel the need to come out. Andrew is hopeful that this will happen in the future, but this is not where we stand in 2018, and the only way to understand homosexuality is to start talking about it, seeing it and sharing it publicly when one is ready to disclose such personal information. Make no mistake, there may be plenty of fear, especially in the unknown, for those contemplating coming out, and it is important that the person be ready for what follows after coming out. As athletic trainers, and people in general, we must provide a space and environment that supports those around us to be comfortable with whom they are and with whatever disclosure of privacy in their life.

Andrew was bullied during his fourth through sixth grade years. He was called "gay" on numerous occasions, and he really didn't feel accepted by most of his peers. He talked to both my wife and me about the bullying that was happening, and we made efforts with him and the school to try to remedy those episodes. We thought things were improving; however, we didn't know the full extent of his bullying until he shared some of those memories with us years later. Bullying, aggression, discrimination and

other negative tactics created an uncomfortable environment for Andrew, and this may have negatively impacted his overall health and wellness. This can also be true within the athletic/athlete population, and as athletic trainers, we should pay attention to the signs of bullying, aggression and discrimination among our patients.

We moved across the country in 2011, and Andrew got a fresh start in an extremely supportive town. He came out to his mom in eighth grade while they were driving in the car. My wife was the true definition of support, love and understanding. She gave Andrew the space he needed, and she ensured him that he was always welcome to talk about this with both of us. We were ready to navigate this new road with him.

I can't begin to express and explain all the blessings that have surfaced since Andrew came out in 2012. I have always considered myself an advocate for all people, regardless of race, gender identity, religious belief or socioeconomic status. However, Andrew revealing his true self of being gay forced me to truly become informed about the LGBTQ+ community, the struggles he would face, the challenges in front of him (and me) and the ways in which I could best support him.

The March 2018 issue of the *NATA News* has a great deal of information about the terminology used within the LGBTQ+ community, including the definition of LGBTQ+. Many may not know what the plus sign represents. According to the NATA LGBTQ+ Advisory Committee, the plus sign represents diverse sexualities, gender identities and gender expressions, which may not be explicitly included in the "LGBTQ" acronym.

I completed Safe Zone training, a course designed to provide allies and members of the LGBTQ+ community with information and resources, in 2015. The NATA LGBTQ+ Advisory Committee will provide training similar to Safe Zone (known as Safe Space training) at several athletic training conferences across the country in the near

future. We encourage allies and those in the community to attend these Safe Space/Zone training sessions.

I learned what it truly means to support and love someone who comes out, especially when many people don't understand that one's sexuality is not a choice and we are all supposed to live the lives of our true selves. I am thrilled that Andrew feels comfortable talking to both my wife and me about his struggles, triumphs, highs and lows. My youngest son, Gabe, observed the life of a gay teen first hand, and he learned how to be an advocate for his brother. Andrew's coming out, and our support of it, has opened a whole new world for Gabe and allowed him to see what it is like to be an advocate for the LGBTQ+ community.

Tips and Resources

While my son is neither an athletic trainer nor an athlete, I believe that there is something to learn from his/my experiences and, if anything, it brings to center the fact that many in this country are struggling or facing challenges with the idea of expressing their true sexual orientation. While my wife and I didn't have all the answers, we decided to advocate for our son through love, support, praise and reality. As athletic trainers, we should do the same for our patients and colleagues who are coming out.

Coming out is no easy task, but here are a few tips and resources for athletic trainers who want to provide a safe space for those coming out, and for the athlete/athletic trainer who is contemplating coming out. Another good reference is the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) website (www.hrc.org).

Tips for the Athletic Trainer

1. Create an environment that welcomes all athletes and athletic trainers. Be an "active" ally for the LGBTQ+ community. Do not allow any negative language toward any class of people. Hang stickers and flyers in your athletic training facility

that show you are an ally to the LGBTQ+ community. Use the appropriate terminology associated with the LGBTQ+ community (pronouns, gender neutral terms). Have open dialogue about the LGBTQ+ community in your AT facility. The more comfortable, informal and inclusive your environment is, the more likely athletes will feel safe in the AT facility.

2. If an athlete comes out to you, remember that person is showing trust and respect, and you should respond with the same genuine respect. Keep this information as confidential and private as the athlete desires. Show interest, curiosity and compassion, and ask them how best you can support them. Offer support, and have resources readily available, but don't assume a student needs help. Be a role model of acceptance. Listen and recognize the athlete's courage.
3. Talk to coaches and higher administration about the importance of supporting student athletes and athletic trainers within the LGBTQ+ community. The more support you have outside the AT facility, the better. Create and discuss anti-discrimination policies, including sexual orientation, within your department and with higher administration.
4. Talk to coaches about the terms they use when describing team success, such as "teamwork," "integrity," "community," "values" and "pride." Do the coaches truly believe in those terms and what those terms represent? How can those terms be used to support members of the team who are LGBTQ+?
5. Know the resources that are available to the student athletes and the athletic trainers within your organization.
6. Find ways within your everyday AT practice to disqualify the typical gender norms and gender stereotypes, and show how that can affect performance. For example, point out to the athletes the importance of balance and mindfulness for performance, and give examples of athletes who have a history of involvement in ballet, yoga and tai chi, regardless of gender.
7. According to Tim Drudge, president of the Indiana Athletic Trainers' Association and father of a teen who came out, look for signs of cutting and suicidal warning signs among your student athletes/co-workers. Many struggle with the idea of coming

out and have known their sexual orientation for several years prior to making their orientation public. During that period, it is possible for those individuals to feel significant self-doubt and find ways to harm themselves. Bullying and discrimination are prevalent in the LGBTQ+ community, and homelessness is a problem for youth.

8. Look for signs of common health disparities specific to the LGBTQ+ community, such as obesity, hormone use, substance abuse, etc., and provide support and appropriate referrals.

Tips for the Athlete/Athletic Trainer Deciding to Come Out

1. Understand that coming out is a lifelong process or continuum. This is not a one-time experience. You will most likely come out several times as you change jobs and cities and meet new friends. The good news is that each time is a bit easier than the last. Coming out, a.k.a., deciding to reveal one's sexual orientation, can have a profound effect as it allows a person to break down barriers and obstacles that could have stood in the way.
2. Attempt to get a sense of the environment in which you are coming out. Are there policies and protections (anti-discrimination policies) in place that create a safe place for you? Are there derogatory comments being made about the LGBTQ+ community? Who are the LGBTQ+ allies in your workplace? One must understand that there could be obstacles when expressing one's sexuality or gender identity, and one must be ready to face those obstacles. For example, the AT may work for a private, religious organization that is very clear about their stance on homosexuality. The AT has every right to be their true self, but that may have to occur within a different organization.
3. Confide in a close ally, and share your plan with them. Sharing your plan and talking to an ally prior to coming out may allow for you to be more prepared (with words, feelings and expectations) for what lies ahead.
4. Begin a process of preparing your work environment to accept the news of you coming out. Bring your partner or a date to a company function. Talk casually about the LGBTQ+ community. Hang an HRC, equality or Safe Space sticker in your office.

5. Understand and identify the resources available to you. Those resources may include an office or department within your organization that is committed to the LGBTQ+ community, or it may be the HRC website. It may be an LGBTQ+ support group within your community or workplace. Your main resource may also be the NATA LGBTQ+ Advisory Committee. Members of that committee are more than happy to discuss this process, your thinking, your concerns or anything else, so feel free to reach out to them (www.nata.org/lgbtq-advisory-committee). The more you surround yourself with support, the easier the task.
6. When you make the decision to come out, give those you tell time to process the information. The initial response is not necessarily indicative of the final response. There is a lot to process during this time, and the more space you can allow, the better. Ultimately, remember that you are doing this for you, so the response of the person you are telling is not the most important factor.

The bottom line is we are all in this endeavor together. Employers, administrators, coaches and athletes need to be cognizant of the environment that is/has been created, and continually look for ways to support everyone. Work closely with your organization to create safe spaces for your athletes and coworkers, and maybe even yourself, to feel comfortable living the life you so deserve to live. Whether straight, gay, brown, black, white, Catholic or Protestant, we have been placed on this Earth to love and advocate for one another. Andrew continues to show me how to do that every day, and I am so glad that I get to call him my son. I will continue to support and push acceptance and advocacy around this topic, and I sure hope that the athletic training profession, and ultimately the world, does the same.

More information can be found at www.hrc.org/coming-out, outsports.com, and by reaching out to your organization support staff, or the NATA LGBTQ+ Advisory Committee. Glenn Edgerton is an associate clinical professor at Northern Arizona University and can be reached at glenn.edgerton@nau.edu. †