

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

February 7, 2013 at 8:59am

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## One woman's prayer for acceptance for LGBT persons

by Kate Childs Graham

Young Voices

I have to admit it. I didn't even really notice the quiet yet exuberant presence of Danielle before she spoke. It was Saturday afternoon of Creating Change, a conference of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, and we were having a conversation among people of faith. It had been a long day of workshops and connecting, and my concentration was waning. Until Danielle spoke.

Danielle, a sophomore at San Antonio College, has lived in San Antonio since birth and plans to stay there all her life. Her father migrated from Mexico 35 years ago, and her mom's parents did, too.

She belongs to St. Philip of Jesus Catholic Church. She was baptized there. She went to school there. She was confirmed there. And after her confirmation, she became a peer educator to future groups of young people readying themselves to be confirmed.

Danielle came out of the closet at 15. The director of religious education at St. Philip's was one of the first people to accept her.

"She told me, 'That's cool,' " Danielle recalled. "Just don't be too gay."

So she continued to educate and walk with "her kids" -- as she calls them -- in the confirmation class. But then, the parish got a new priest and a new director of religious education.

"He said that being gay is bad," Danielle said. "I never heard any priest I knew talk like that."

When she heard of the new priest's views toward lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, she was conflicted. She wanted to be true to herself, but she also wanted to keep teaching. So she "hid back in the closet."

It wasn't until she heard that some of the young LGBT people were being asked to leave the class that she decided to stop teaching. She didn't necessarily stop out of protest, though; she stopped out of fear -- fear of being asked to leave her ministry.

"It would just kill me if they rejected me," she said.

Her grandparents started a mariachi choir in 1969. When they died, her mom took over. When she died nine years ago, her aunt took over. When her aunt is gone, Danielle will carry on the tradition.

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On Sundays, she plays at four Masses with four separate church music ministries, including her parish's. She describes music as a "bonus" to her Catholic faith.

"The Catholic faith makes me feel whole. Music makes it fun," she said.

For Danielle, being rejected from her church could also mean the end of a family legacy.

"So," she asked the group, "what should I do?"

We offered our support and some ideas -- but none seemed like a real solution.

For now, Danielle plans to keep attending Mass on Saturdays -- a fifth Mass in her weekends of Catholicism -- with the students who will be confirmed in May. She has known many of them since they were 3 or 4 years old.

Danielle knows the church she loves has a long way to go, but her prayer is pretty simple: "I just want my parish to be a bit more accepting."

[Kate Childs Graham is an activist in the progressive Catholic movement. A graduate of The Catholic University of America and the U.N.-mandated University for Peace in Costa Rica, she currently serves as speechwriter for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME).]

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