

Arthur and Marian Wirth, 1997 Ethical Society of St. Louis Humanists of the Year

Arthur and Marian Wirth Sunday, April 13, 1997:
Arthur and Marian Wirth entered gay rights history with a revelation from their son Scott in 1973. They do not dwell on their lives before that, but it is not as if they did not exist. They were a quiet, midwestern academic couple. Both were born in Columbus, Ohio, and were educated at Ohio State University, where they met. Arthur had served in World War II as a bombardier and later as a navigator. He had served on a B-24 and his unit had suffered many casualties. Arthur had earned the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal.



The Wirths modestly discuss their early religious upbringing. Both are from conservative backgrounds. Arthur had been sent to a religious college, and enrolled in Bible 101 and Geology 101 in order to compare the biblical and scientific accounts of the origins of man and the world. Later he passed by a Unitarian church and saw that the sermon was on the Four Noble Truths of Buddha and was impressed by the broad outlook of the Unitarians. Marian's thinking had developed similarly, and therefore when the Wirths later became affiliated with the Unitarian church, they enthusiastically participated in its activities and social action projects.

When Scott told his parents that he was gay, his intelligent and humane parents did not reject him. But this situation was outside their experience and it was difficult for them to cope. Their background had taught them that it was important to have the approval of neighbors, and society as a whole. In their new situation they were wary even of the attitude of their fellow Unitarians. They struggled with these feelings for three years, but then they decided to transform their thinking to reflect their humanist outlook. They were from a humanist-oriented church, but even humanists with undeniable credentials have difficulty understanding that homosexuality is a civil rights issue. What made them different from countless other parents struggling with the issues that homosexuality causes in our society? Arthur and Marian Wirth decided to be open and unapologetic. If homosexuality came up in conversation, they began to mention their son and his orientation. They became available for families going through their own crises, as they dealt more or less painfully with the fact that their children were gay. In 1977, with the encouragement of their son, they contacted the Metropolitan Community Church, which ministers to gays. The church, in turn, encouraged them to organize a pioneering self-help support group for parents of gay children and their families. The group flourished, and the Wirths took the group into the Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays as a charter chapter from St. Louis in 1980 when the national federation was formed. [The group is now known as the St. Louis Chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, or P-FLAG-St. Louis.]

The Wirths' story has a philosophical aspect that can be traced back to John Stuart Mill: People should have the right to do things that do not hurt others. In letters to newspapers, legislators, and Supreme Court Justices, the Wirths presented logical and rational reasons for us to be tolerant of all types of diversity. They point out to the uninformed and fearful that many great figures in history have been gay

and that gays do not typically prey on others. Rather, gays are often victims and need the protection of hate crime laws. They noted that laws on the books regulating sexual behavior are intrusions into the privacy of all of us. In challenging these irrational controls, the Wirths speak openly and freely against those groups who advocate regulation of our private lives.

Arthur and Marian Wirth are themselves authors. Arthur has written books in education, including one on John Dewey, and Marian has written books on physical activities for children. But the book for which they will most likely be remembered is *Beyond Acceptance: Parents of Lesbians and Gays Talk about Their Experiences*, co-authored with Carolyn Griffin. This book has become a standard reference for parents, relatives, and friends of gays, helping them to move beyond mere acceptance of their children to achieve a renewed closeness and appreciation of diversity that transcends the issue of gayness.