

Mama's Boy, Preacher's Son

by Kevin Jennings

Not just another “growing up gay” tale, this is a well-crafted mix of individual history and a testament to what can be achieved by dedicated people.

The author grew up in a typical Southern Baptist environment in the 1960's and 1970's. He was harassed and persecuted for not conforming to cultural norms throughout his youth. He quickly realized that there was no support or protection available from his family, peers, school officials, or other authority figures. Conversely, his mother was dedicated to ensuring he got the education she never had.

Mama's Boy, Preacher's Son reviews Jennings's slow journey through awareness of his difference, recognizing he was gay, and overcoming the self-hate thrust on him by his peers, his father and brothers, and bigoted authority figures. While an undergraduate at Harvard, he found personal acceptance and began his public advocacy.

As a much-loved high school teacher and counselor, he publicly supported his gay and lesbian students. This led to founding a student group that included not only gays and lesbians, but straight allies as well. This was the first ever Gay Straight Alliance.

Word got out to other gay teachers and administrators, and Jennings was invited to speak to them about organizing GSA's in their schools to protect their gay and lesbian students. Shortly thereafter, he met another highly-supportive teacher who had started a gay-straight alliance in her school. Together they started working toward a more widespread support organization. Their goal was to help teachers and counselors everywhere teach awareness of the need for anti-harassment and anti discrimination protections at their schools. Subsequently, they banded together with several of their contacts to form the support network that became the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN).

Mama's Boy, Preacher's Son is a well-written, easy read. The book chronicles the stress of facing harassment and bigotry toward gays both as a student and as a teacher in a “diversity-affirming” private school. It shows the courage of those who stand up for right and equality. Most of all, this book demonstrates the life-long impact of a mother's dedication to her young son's success.

Reviewed by Dave Parker