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On Coming Out: Courage vs. Cowardice

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Oct. 11, 1987, when half a million people marched on Washington for lesbian and gay rights, has become synonymous with the struggle for gay rights in the United States. After the success of that march, gay activists Jean O'Leary and Rob Eichberg got together with members of several gay civil rights groups in Manassas, Va., to encourage gay people to "come out of the closet." National Coming Out Day, founded in 1988, is now celebrated all over the nation and in other countries.

I spent part of National Coming Out Day this year by attending a lecture at the Rainbow Center at the University of Connecticut in Storrs. The speaker was Puerto Rican native Pedro Julio Serrano, communications coordinator of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in New York. Serrano movingly spoke of being 19 and telling his parents that he was gay.

He was ordered to leave their house immediately. It took his parents' reversal of fortune a year later, and Serrano's willingness to give them the support they had denied him, for them to reunite. His parents are now spokesmen and very involved with the gay rights movement in Puerto Rico.

Serrano was the first openly gay political candidate to run for a seat in the House of Representatives in Puerto Rico in 1998. Despite a campaign against him of lies and threats that made him fear for his life, Serrano did not drop out of the race. His experience as a political candidate motivated him to create the pro-gay organization "Puerto Rico Para Todos."

Serrano's courage, his willingness to risk his life and his commitment to civil rights for gays, contrasts greatly with the hypocrisy and secretive double life led by U.S. Rep. Mark Foley to stay in power.

Foley resigned Sept. 29 after the ABC news disclosure of sexually charged e-mails he sent to congressional male pages. His attorney, David Roth, made outrageous excuses to explain his behavior: that he had "been molested by a clergyman" as a teenager and that he was an alcoholic.

Foley publicly acknowledged that he is gay the day after his resignation. That gave this year's National Coming Out Day an added dimension for many of us in the gay community.

I am sorry that it took a scandal for Mr. Foley to finally admit what had been known in political circles for more than 10 years. According to an article in Newsweek magazine, when asked in a 1994 radio interview if he was gay, Foley replied that he had a girlfriend.

Coming out can be one of the most difficult events in a gay person's life. Most of us remember the exact moment when we took the step that would change our lives forever and the anxiety as we waited for a positive or negative response from our parents, siblings and friends.

Mr. Foley is one of those people most gays would be ashamed of being associated with, even after attorney Roth declared emphatically that any suggestion that Mark Foley was a pedophile was categorically false.

When asked on Oct. 11 about House Speaker Dennis Hastert's knowledge of Foley's behavior and belated investigation of the matter, President Bush replied, "I appreciated Speaker Hastert's strong declaration of his desire to get to the bottom of it. You know, we want to make sure that we understand what Republicans knew and what Democrats knew in order to find the facts."

In another statement President Bush said, in a tone reminiscent of his praise for the Federal Emergency Management Agency -- "Heck of a Job Brownie" -- that "Denny's very credible as far as I'm concerned. And he's done a fine job as speaker, when he stands up and says: I want to know the truth. And I believe yesterday he said that if somebody on his staff, you know, didn't tell him the truth, they're gone."

It is ironic that President Bush held this press conference on National Coming Out Day. It is even more ironic for a man who has spent so much energy and so many taxpayers' dollars trying to get a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage, to be so flip as to say that "this Foley issue bothers a lot of people, including me."

"Bothers" is such a weak term that it doesn't even begin to express how most of us, gay and straight, feel about Mr. Foley's conduct and the unmasking of the hypocritical actions of those involved with an administration that has demonized gays in order to obtain votes.

Those who knew about Mr. Foley and didn't act in a decisive and timely manner to prevent his immoral and unethical behavior toward minors should not be allowed to continue pretending that they have a monopoly on family values.