

LDS parents and LGBTQ kids:

David Archuleta's mom joins those refusing to believe that a 'sad heaven' awaits their queer children

By TAMARRA KEMSLEY | The Salt Lake Tribune

David Archuleta had broken off three engagements with women by the time he opened up to his mother and told her that he was queer.

A devout Latter-day Saint convert at the time, Lupe Bartholomew was "devastated" — and not just because she had been smitten by all three potential daughters-in-law.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches that families can live together forever in God's presence. But to unlock this eternal blessing, each person must obey God's plan — a plan that does not include same-sex intimacy or marriage. All others, top leaders have taught, are relegated to second- and third-tier heavens.

Listening to her son explain that he was attracted to men, she said an image "immediately" formed in her mind of his soul "sinking" from the highest kingdom of heaven to the lowest and beyond her reach.

Her first response was to double down on her commitment to the faith, determined to be the example that would lead not just Archuleta but also his sisters, who had left the church for reasons of their own, back to the light.

"I was just thinking to myself, 'OK, I will show them,'" the South Jordan-based voice teacher said. "I'm going to remain faithful. I'm going to show them that this is the way to do it."

But the more she thought about it, the less convinced she became that her son was deserving of any kind of punishment.

"Here's my perfect child, who has done nothing wrong except to be queer," she said. "It just didn't make sense."

Then came the People magazine interview in which Archuleta described feeling so much self-hatred for himself as a gay Latter-day Saint that, for a time, he had wondered if he wasn't better off dead.

Bartholomew cried for days, balled up in her bed.

"I was hurting because I love the church so much," she said. "But at the same time, oh my gosh, my child is suffering. I had to make a decision."

She told her bishop, the lay leader of her Latter-day Saint congregation, that she, like her son, was stepping away from the church. Soon after, she formally withdrew her membership.

"I told David," she said, "we'll go to hell together."

DON'T ASK, DON'T TELL

Bartholomew's account is a high-profile example of a story that Ben Schillaty, a gay Latter-day Saint podcaster, author and therapist, has seen play out repeatedly through his work and advocacy.

Schillaty, who until recently worked

in the Honor Code Office at church-owned Brigham Young University, said he's watched as devout mothers and fathers, believing they will not live with their LGBTQ children in the next life, respond to learning their child is queer by creating distance — either between themselves and the child or themselves and the church.

He and Lisa Diamond, a University of Utah psychology professor and an expert on gender issues, both agreed: Today's Latter-day Saint parents are less likely to kick LGBTQ children out of their home or disown them than in times past.

Instead, what Schillaty sees is the development of "a don't-ask-don't-tell" policy in some families that harms the connection between parents and their child.

One phenomenon Diamond has observed is parents leaning into their religious practices and beliefs in an effort to cope with what can rise to the level of trauma for some Latter-day Saints.

"One of the things that terrifies a human brain the most is uncertainty," she explained. "And one way to cope is to cling to rules and doctrines that provide you with a sense of 'if you do this, you will be OK.'"

All in all, Diamond said, this search for solace represents a "pretty human tendency in a time of crisis," while stressing that's not necessarily where

Godwise from above left • Lupe Bartholomew holds a framed photo of David Archuleta in her hands at her home in South Jordan; Ben Schillaty, a gay Latter-day Saint podcaster and therapist, says today's parents are less likely to kick LGBTQ children out of the home; Lift + Love founder Allison Dayton says Latter-day Saint parents are rejecting the idea that their LGBTQ children will spend eternity separated from them; Darice Austin, mother of four, says her generation doesn't buy into the "sad heaven" idea; Lisa Diamond, a U. of U. psychology professor, sees parents leaning on religious beliefs to cope with families in crisis.

the parents will remain.

"It's a journey that a lot of these families are on," she said. "The kid is growing and the parent is changing. These are not single events and trajectories."

PUSHING BACK AGAINST ETERNAL SEPARATION

But Schillaty said even this softer form of distancing is becoming less common.

More and more, he said, he has observed Latter-day Saint parents who reject the idea that their child's LGBTQ identity equates to an empty seat at the family table in the afterlife.

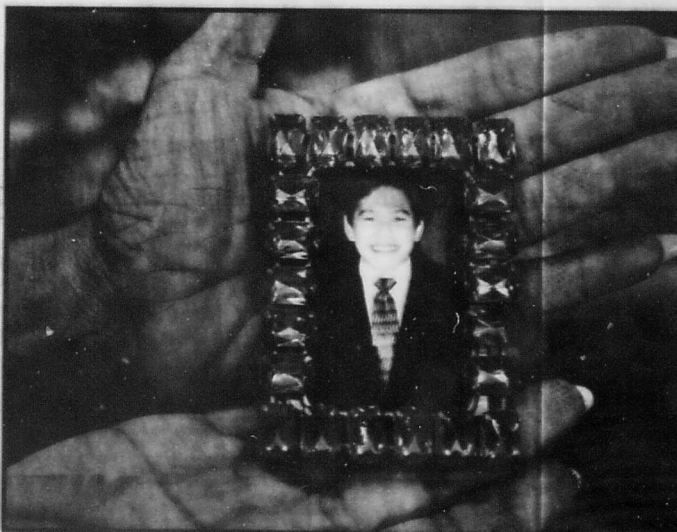
Allison Dayton — the mother of a

gay son and founder of Lift + Love, an organization that offers support for Latter-day Saint LGBTQ+ individuals and families — said she's also seen this trend, which she chalks up primarily to a generational shift.

Schillaty agreed that but not the only one. Church leaders, at best, increasingly hide God's love and grace, he said. At the same



Lupe Bartholomew, the mother of pop singer David Archuleta, is seen in the reflection.



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