

# Social Justice Watch 1028

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[I graduated high school in 1966. Abortion was outlawed then, of course.](#)

[The Atlantic | The Rise of the 3-Parent Family](#)

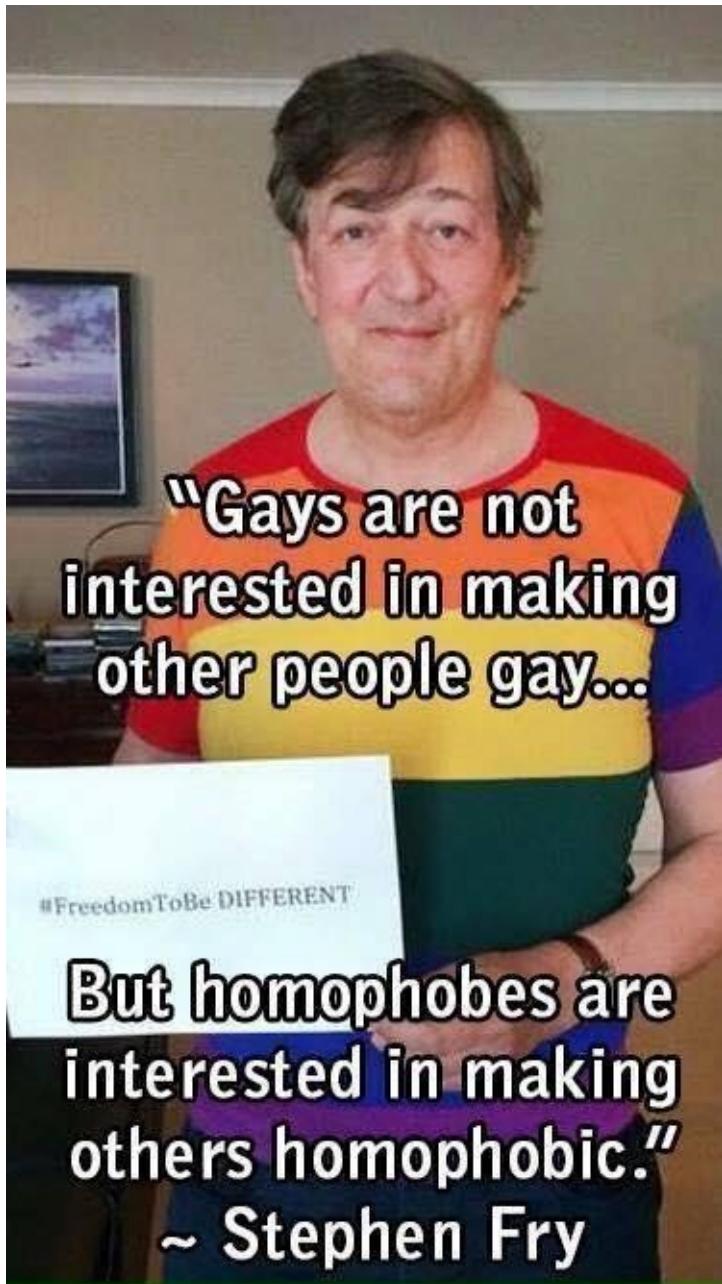
[The Atlantic | What If Friendship, Not Marriage, Was at the Center of Life](#)

来源：[Social Justice Watch](#)

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fbid=10158600260145629&set=gm.819119391988045](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10158600260145629&set=gm.819119391988045)

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**Minovsky**  
@MinovskyArticle



Dad ranted about how LGBTQIA+ identities were getting too confusing to keep up with, my 88 year old grandma shut him down. "The way things are now is better than when people had to hide away or killed themselves because nobody understood who they were. Respect costs you nothing."

<https://www.facebook.com/Theunofficialcaptain/posts/1821351338003634>

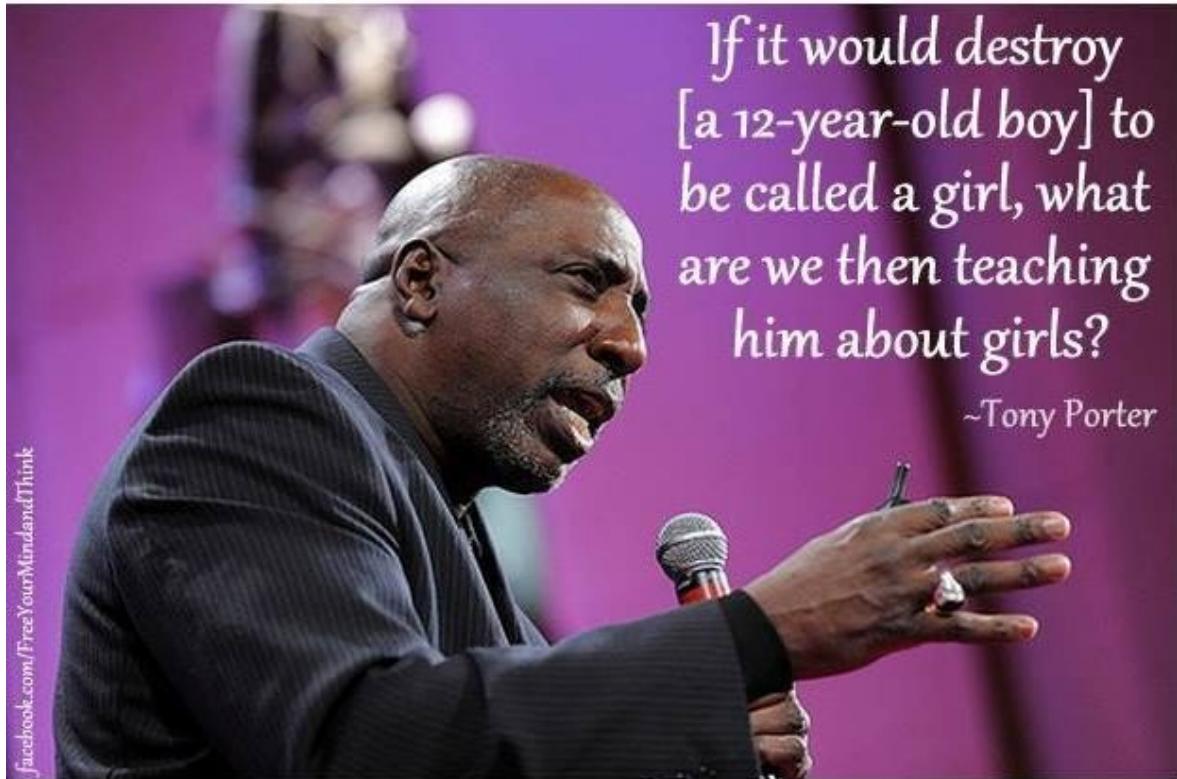
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**On October 24, 1975, the women of Iceland went on strike for equal rights. 90% of women walked off their jobs and out of their homes, shutting down the entire country. The men could barely cope. The next year, Parliament passed a law guaranteeing equal pay. Five years later, Iceland elected the world's first woman President. Now Iceland has the highest gender equality in the world.**

On this day in 1975, in a remarkable display of solidarity and determination, Iceland's women went on strike for equal rights. They refused to go to their jobs, do housework, or perform childcare, all to show the importance of women in their society. Incredibly, 90% of women in Iceland participated in the strike. Of those, 25,000 women -- almost 12% of Iceland's population at the time -- took to the streets of Reykjavik in a demonstration while other protests were held in towns across the country. The historic strike was called Women's Day Off and it's gone down in Icelandic history as the beginning of a dramatic change in the status of women -- and the first step toward Iceland becoming "the world's most feminist country." [source](#)

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facebook.com/FreeYourMindandThink

*If it would destroy  
[a 12-year-old boy] to  
be called a girl, what  
are we then teaching  
him about girls?*

~Tony Porter

"I can remember speaking to a 12-year-old boy, a football player, and I asked him, 'How would you feel if, in front of all the players, the coach told you, you were playing like a girl?' Now I expected him to say that I'd be sad or I'd be mad or I'd be angry or something. No, the boy said to me, 'It would destroy me.' And, I said to myself.... if it would destroy him to be called a girl, what are we then teaching him about girls." -- Tony Porter [source](#)

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Groundbreaking! Taiwanese armed forces' official group wedding has 2 same-sex couples for the first time in history. (Same-sex marriage legalized last year)

[source](#)



**Tyler Evans**  
@tylerevansokay

🇨🇦: insulin manufactured for around  
\$6

🇺🇸: insulin manufactured for around  
\$6

🇨🇦: insulin costs \$32

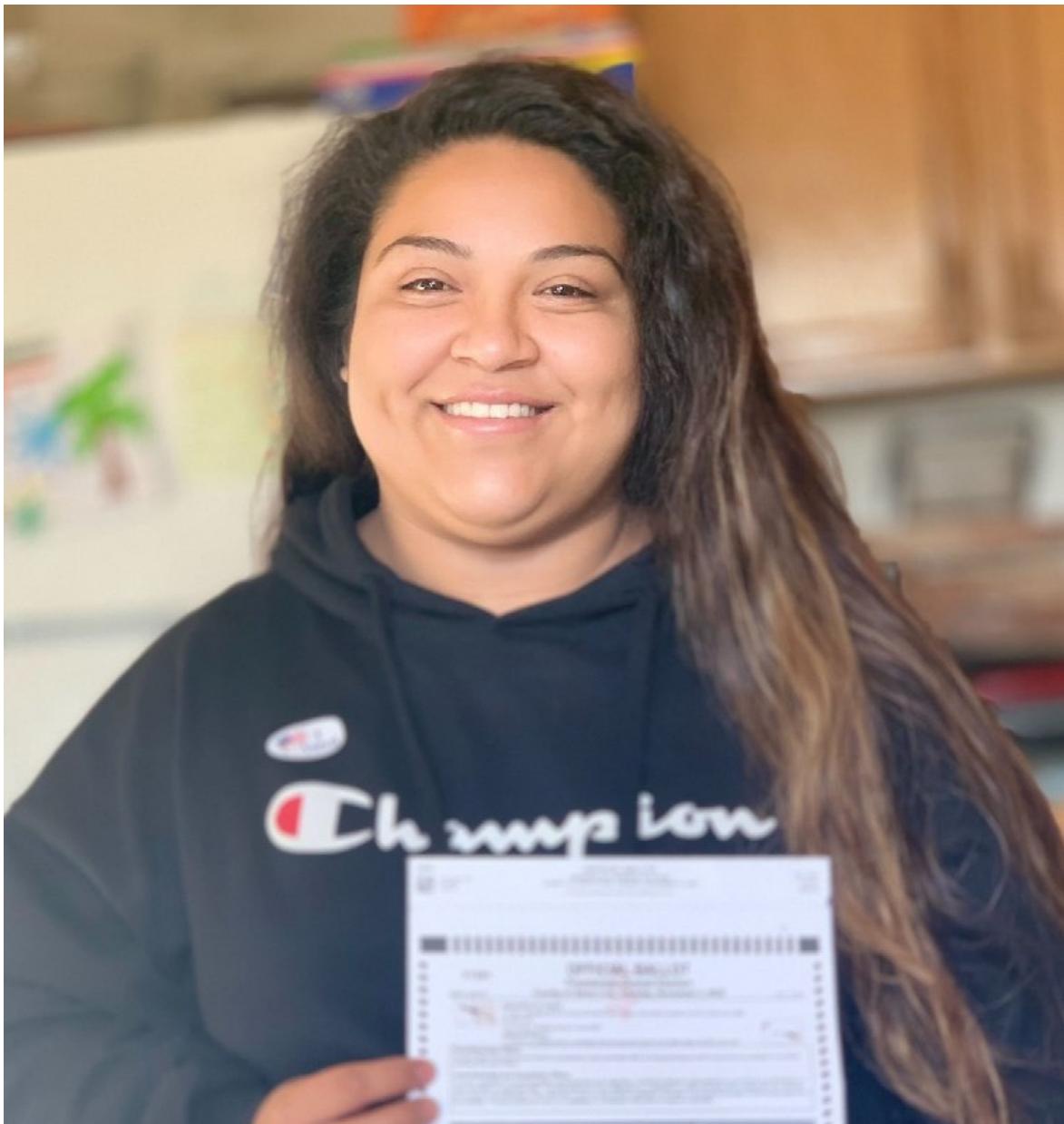
🇺🇸: insulin costs \$300

Americans are dying because of the enormous greed of the pharmaceutical industry. We have got to end their greed.

<https://www.facebook.com/progressivesecularhumanist/posts/405600332776058>

data: [manufacture cost](#) | [retail cost](#)

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Victoria just voted in California. Being from a mixed status family, she knows how important her vote is for immigrant rights this election.

Haven't voted yet? Make your plan to vote here: [link source](#)

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# HOW TO NOT AMPLIFY DISINFO



## Don't Feed the Algorithm

*When you see something that makes you mad:*

1. **DON'T** repost on social media
2. **DON'T** comment trying to outsmart them, this attracts more attention to the post
3. **ONLY IF** the post is already popular, **DO** comment with vetted debunking info
4. **DO** take a screenshot if you must share and share only through email, messenger etc.
5. **DO** Educate your community to exercise the same discipline

REFRAME

# HOW TO NOT AMPLIFY DISINFO

## DON'T Share Disinfo to Debunk Disinfo

Don't repost disinformation on social media,  
even if it's outrageous and  
you want to call out how wrong it is.  
This ends up amplifying the disinformation.

THIS IS NOT TRUE.  
HERE'S WHY...



## INOCULATE, DON'T SPREAD DISINFO!

Hold a strategy session with your team to decide  
if and how to publicly respond

Intervene directly - over text, DM or phone - when  
you see friends unintentionally amplifying  
disinformation. Share facts that debunk the  
disinfo and ask them to take down the post

Share "side-step" messages that inoculate  
against the disinfo without repeating it eg:  
"Viruses don't discriminate and neither should we"

REFRAME

# HOW TO NOT AMPLIFY DISINFO

## Research What You Read

Before sharing,  
do these quick research checks:

1. If you don't know the source, do a **Google search** to see if the same information is being shared by a source you do know and trust.  
If not, don't share it.
2. Do a **reverse image search** to see if photos are being taken out of context  
>**right-click on the image**  
>**choose Search Google for Image**
3. Check **Politifact** and **Snopes** to see if the information has already been debunked.



# HOW TO NOT AMPLIFY DISINFO

## Intervene

When you do intervene, use the **Fact-Fallacy-Fact sandwich** by leading with the facts, then debunking the fallacy, and close with the facts. Call out the political agenda served by the disinformation as part of naming the facts.

LIES



REFRAME

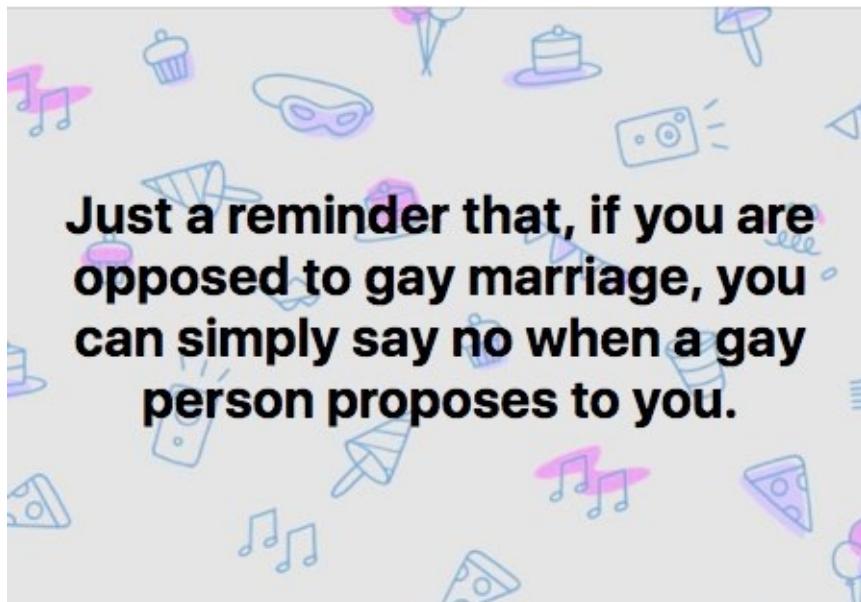
With the election just 7 days away, there is going to be a lot of disinformation put out there by Trump and other republicans. Don't fall for it and don't spread it. Check out these tips to help ensure you're not amplifying bad info. [source](#)

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<https://www.facebook.com/Theunofficialcaptain/photos/a.1187713014700806/18>

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<https://www.facebook.com/feministnews.us/posts/1351947401819141>

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# 消息精选

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<https://telegra.ph/What-If-Friendship-Not-Marriage-Was-at-the-Center-of-Life-10-26>

Telegraph

The Atlantic | What If Friendship, Not Marriage, Was at the Center of Life?

“Our boyfriends, our significant others, and our husbands are supposed to be No. 1. Our worlds are backward.”

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<https://telegra.ph/The-Rise-of-the-3-Parent-Family-10-26>

Telegraph

The Atlantic | The Rise of the 3-Parent Family

The typical path to parenthood didn’t work for David Jay, a founder of the asexual movement. So he designed his own household—and is trying to show others what is possible. David Jay is the oldest of 12 cousins on one side of his family and the third-oldest...

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<https://telegra.ph/I-graduated-high-school-in-1966-Abortion-was-outlawed-then-of-course-10-27>

Telegraph

I graduated high school in 1966. Abortion was outlawed then, of course.

I graduated high school in 1966. Abortion was outlawed then, of course. But even though birth control pills were starting to become available, only married women could get them, and only with written permission from their husbands. Many doctors refused to...

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Philadelphia police shot Walter Wallace ten times in front of his mother after she

tried to deescalate the situation. He was 27 years old. Having a mental health crisis should not be a death sentence [link source](#)

<https://www.inquirer.com>

Fatal police shooting of Walter Wallace Jr. prompts heated overnight protests in West Philly

The 27-year-old man had a knife during a confrontation with police Monday afternoon. In the hours that followed, clashes erupted between police and protesters.

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Beautiful scenes from [#NowyDwórGdański](#) on Sunday, a town of 10,000 inhabitants, local farmers joined the protests by driving their tractors slowly at the head of the march to protest against a court ruling that amounts to a near-total ban on abortion in [#Poland](#).

[#AborcjaBezGranic source](#)

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[#breaking](#) from [@ewaltersTX](#): Texas reverses course, will no longer allow social workers to discriminate against LGBTQ Texans + people with disabilities [link](#) [#txlege source](#)

The Texas Tribune

Texas social workers will no longer be allowed to discriminate agains...

The Texas Behavioral Health Executive Council voted unanimously to restore protections for social workers' LGBTQ and disabled clients after backlash from advocates and lawmakers.

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# **I graduated high school in 1966. Abortion was outlawed then, of course.**

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I graduated high school in 1966. Abortion was outlawed then, of course. But even though birth control pills were starting to become available, only married women could get them, and only with written permission from their husbands. Many doctors refused to prescribe them. Taking them was a moral offense that would get you excommunicated from most religions. Many pharmacists would not fill the prescription. And when they did, whispers went around the drug store, and the pharmacist and the clerks would treat you with contempt. It was a big freaking intimidating deal.

If a girl or woman got groped or raped, she usually kept it to herself. She would be blamed, always, for wearing the wrong thing, being in the wrong place, and acting the wrong way. Always.

Even if she was a minor, and the offender was an older relative. Men were praised for being sexual. Women were shamed. Even married women could expect leers and slurs about her condition if she was pregnant. That's why maternity wear was so concealing and prudish then. It was considered disgusting for a very pregnant woman to be out in public. In most jobs women quit immediately when they found out they were pregnant. Or they would be fired. And there would be no unemployment benefits.

Women had to take the oath in the marriage service that she would "love, honor, and Obey". It was even in secular marriages by Justices of the Peace. It was taken for granted. Women had the relationship to her husband that a child had to his mother. Subordinate. Obedient. There were laws, but "slapping around" or spanking a wife who "got out of line", "forgot her place", and "tried to wear the pants in the family", was actually regarded as appropriate by most people. And even when a wife was beaten to the point of needing hospitalization, usually, her husband was merely warned by police to "take it easy on her", and it was the

wife who faced interrogation by her clergy, the police, and the hospital about what SHE did to "set him off", and was counseled to change her attitude. She was NEVER to deny a husband his conjugal rights to her body.

Because women could not control pregnancy, even by choosing to abstain, she had no control of her life. The fact that her employment depended on it, meant that no financial institution could take a chance on her being to repay loans. She could not get credit, buy a house or a car, or take out a student loan, unless her husband or her father, somebody legally "responsible" for her, co-signed the loan.

Because she could not control pregnancy, she was denied most jobs in management or training. Companies did not want to invest in temporary employees. They did not want to have to rebuild organizations when key people left.

Colleges denied most applications from female high school graduates. The attitude was that girls were only there to find a husband, and that they would drop out when they married and had babies. (And girls and women who became pregnant out of wedlock were expelled from high school and college immediately). Colleges felt that every time they accepted a female, she was taking the place of a future male breadwinner. It was considered almost immoral in their eyes.

Besides, "everyone knew" that women were not as smart as men, anyway. The silly things had no common sense. They needed to be guided and protected. They were the weaker sex, both physically and mentally. Television and movies made constant fun of them, especially of women who were clever and tried to rise to the level of men, and do their jobs. Those who succeeded were called horrible names, and came to bad ends. Unless, of course, a man came along to put her back in her place and she smiled and went happily back to it. Ah, true love!

Because of all that, her temporary availability, her subordinate status. it was simply unthinkable to see women in positions of authority. Women in the police and the military wore skirts and heels and did not carry weapons, and mostly did secretarial work, or support work as drivers, communication messengers, crossing guards, etc. Women did not appear on media as experts, or host the nightly news. In business, women did not appear in the board room, except as

secretaries, serving coffee, passing out papers, and getting touched inappropriately. "Working girls" were fair game.

Look at old video and you do not see any women in orchestras, except as the singer, or on any film crews except as the script girl, or on any newscasts except as the weather girl, in a perky revealing outfit to reflect the weather of the day.

This was the world I grew up in. Where little girls were admonished to pretend to be weak and clumsy and stupid so the boys would feel big and strong. So they would LIKE us. So that someday, one of them would choose us, and marry us.

Our only goal in life was to be a housewife and mother, after a temporary stint as a nurse, teacher, telephone operator, store clerk, waitress or secretary. We were discouraged from "racy" choices like airline stewardess, model, actress or musician, because people would get the "wrong idea" about us. (A girl who became a cocktail waitress or nightclub singer might as well just put a scarlet A on her chest.)

So when Ruth Bader Ginsburg graduated high school in 1951 and was accepted at Cornell University, that was a big deal. When she got accepted at Harvard University after marrying and becoming a mother, that was a HUGE deal. When she graduated TOP of her class at Columbia Law School, that was nothing less than astounding. And THEN, she became a PROFESSOR at Rutgers Law School in 1963 (where she was told she would be paid less because her husband had a good paying job). She was one of only 20 female law professors in the entire country.

She was also a volunteer attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union. In 1972, Ginsburg co-founded the Women's Rights Project at the ACLU, and participated in more than 300 gender discrimination cases, and argued six gender discrimination cases before the Supreme Court between 1973 and 1976, winning five of them. She joined the ACLU board of directors and in 1980, President Jimmy Carter appointed her to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, where she served until her appointment to the Supreme Court by President Bill Clinton in 1993.

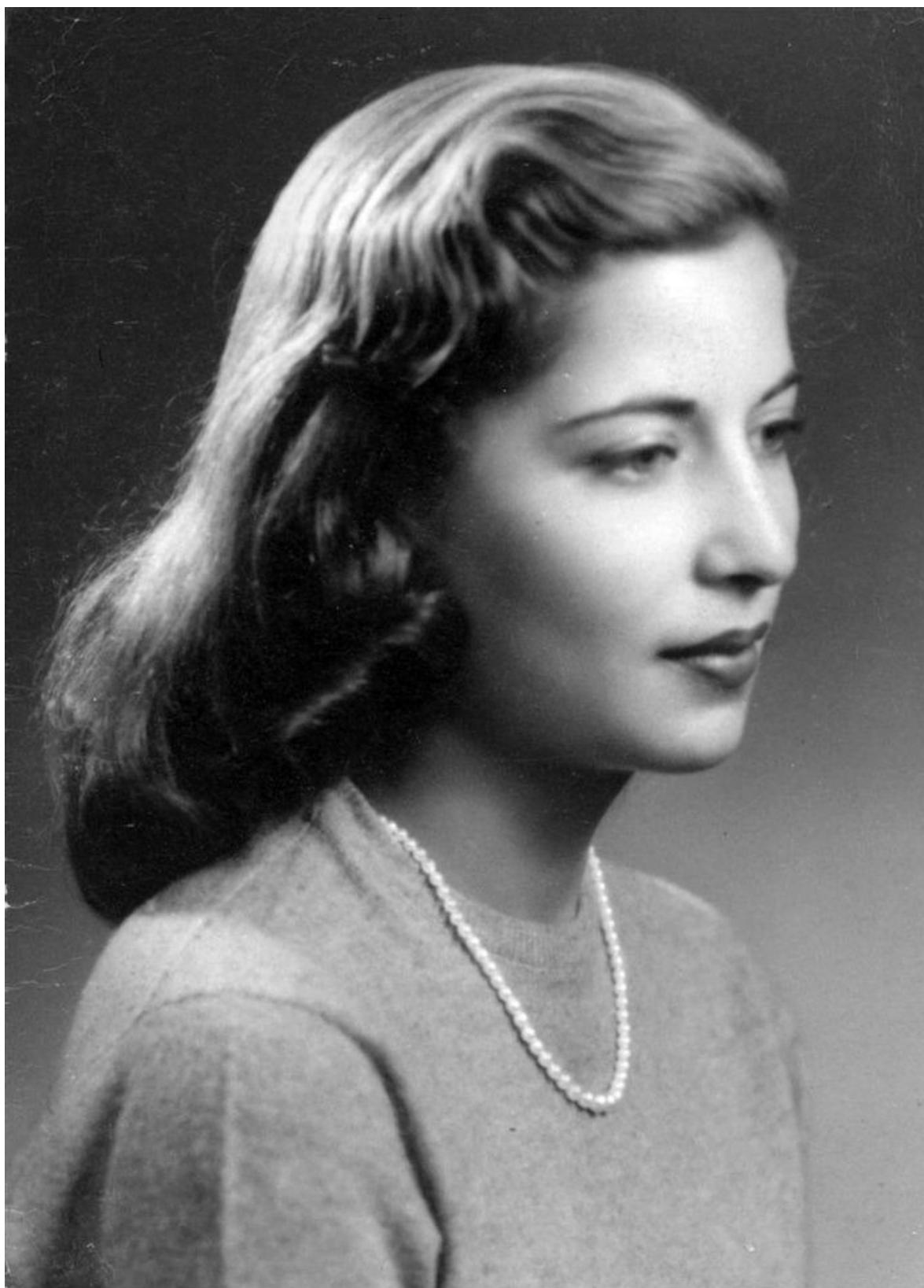
In the 54 years since I graduated high school, the social role, the opportunities, and the rights of women changed, thanks to Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and other pioneers like her, from basically that of a child to that of an adult human being.

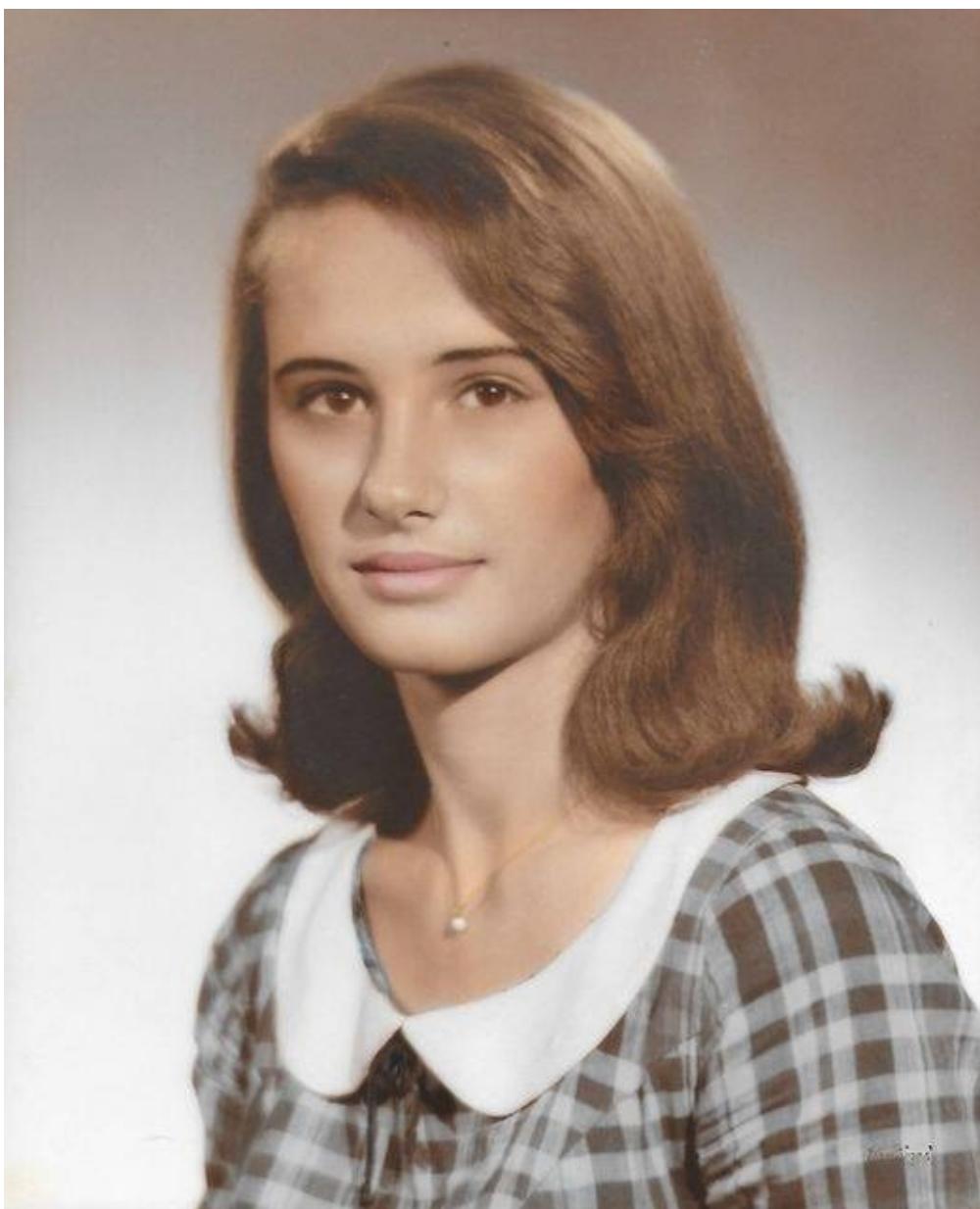
We have almost gained equality to men in business and so many other fields. We still have a ways to go to be equal in pay. (And of course, women of color still are kept back at a much lower level than white women). We have only a tenuous hold on control of our own bodies. The same men who claim a mask is a violation of their civil rights to govern their own bodies, have no problem claiming the right to decide every aspect of ours.

The primary goal of McConnell and Trump, and the religious organizations that back them, is to overturn Roe v Wade, and LGBTQ rights, and then every advancement we have made in Civil Rights, Women's Rights, and Voting Rights in the Courts. They want to roll back the clock and re-establish white supremacy and religious authority to where they were in my day. In Ruth Bader Ginsburg's day.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg showed us that anything is possible if we are willing to put the will, the time, the effort, and the work into it. This tiny woman overcame every obstacle and achieved something for ALL of us living in this country today. We ALL need to step up now, and carry her torch forward. We stood on giant's shoulders. We must not fail her. We will not fall, but climb higher, to the place she led us to, the place she wanted us to go.

VOTE. Get everyone you know to vote. Everything we ever fought for and won, is on the line.





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# The Atlantic | The Rise of the 3-Parent Family

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The typical path to parenthood didn't work for David Jay, a founder of the asexual movement. So he designed his own household—and is trying to show others what is possible.



David Jay is the oldest of 12 cousins on one side of his family and the third-oldest of 24 cousins on the other. As a kid, family to Jay meant having a lot of people around, a feeling of community, and crucially, a sense of permanence, that these people would always be in his life. Later, as an adult living in collective housing, he could access the *feeling* of family with those around him, but the permanence was gone. His roommates started finding romantic partners, having children, and dispersing. Jay had always wanted his own family with kids—and had known, for almost as long, that he wouldn't be able to build one the usual way.

Jay is the founder of the Asexual Visibility and Education Network and one of the most prominent people in the asexual movement. (Asexual people, or aces, don't experience sexual attraction, though many do have sex and form romantic relationships.) After starting AVEN as a freshman at Wesleyan University in 2001, Jay spent years explaining asexuality to the public, speaking at events and talking to the press. As he grew older, the questions on his mind moved beyond identity and attraction to issues of parenting and family life.

The problem for Jay was never how babies are made, and fostering and adoption were options. The problem was that he wanted kids and also wanted a co-parent to help him raise kids, but wasn't interested in romantic partnership. Before exploring single parenthood, he was curious whether there might be another way to form the family he wanted.

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Jay had already been forced to be creative in finding connection without romance. He remembers the first time he met someone with whom he had “really intense energy,” and how they took the time to explicitly discuss what their ideal relationship would look like. They didn’t want dating and sex. They wanted to go dancing together all the time and cook and meditate together. He’s now a godfather to her son.

Maybe, Jay thought, he could apply that creativity to the project of building a family—a permanent one—on his terms. Today, Jay is part of a three-parent family in northern California. He lives with a married couple, Avary Kent and Zeke Hausfather, and is not part of their marriage, but is a father to their biological daughter, Octavia, or Tavi, whose full name includes all three of their last names.

Jay is Tavi’s parent just as fully and permanently as Kent and Hausfather—and just as legally too, since three-parent adoption has been recognized by the state of California. (Three-parent adoption has also been recognized by state statute in Maine, Washington State, Rhode Island, and Vermont, according to Colleen Quinn, the director of the Adoption and Surrogacy Law Center at Locke & Quinn.) Family, in his own way.

Three-parent families are not a new phenomenon, and Jay doesn’t consider himself a trailblazer. Many parents, particularly those who are single or have low incomes, have long cobbled together child care by bringing relatives and friends in as informal co-parents, according to Philip N. Cohen, a sociologist of family at the University of Maryland. The idea that the default family unit consists of two straight parents and their children is outdated and doesn’t reflect the U.S. today. One 2014 Pew Research report, for example, found that fewer than half of American kids lived in a so-called traditional family environment, with two married parents on their first marriage.\* Divorce and remarriage are more common than they once were, as are blended families and stepfamilies—many of which feature a third parental figure. The queer and polyamorous communities, too, have plenty of examples of three-parent families.

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But formalizing these families through law, as Jay has done, is a relatively new possibility. Diana Adams, the founder of Chosen Family Law Center, says that interest in this option has been growing over the past 15 years, spurred by the increasing acceptance of queer families and the popularity of assisted-

reproduction technologies. (Chosen Family Law Center works with New York and New Jersey residents and does national legislative advocacy.) In Adams's experience, applications for three-parent adoption succeed most commonly when the triad consists of a same-sex couple—usually female—and the male sperm provider who plans to be a platonic co-parent.

Just as marriage provides benefits that cohabitation doesn't, legal tri-parenting creates stability and rights that less formal arrangements lack. According to Adams, in tri-parenting arrangements that aren't legally recognized, a break between the two legal parents might mean that the third parent can be denied access or custody to the child, even if they've always been an important and beloved part of the child's life. The nonlegal parent's status is also vulnerable in the case of a tragedy—for example, if the two legal parents were to pass away without wills, and without formalizing the role of the third parent, a disapproving relative could take the child away and the third parent would have little legal recourse.

For Adams, tri-parenting is a way of reclaiming the “diversity and beauty of the queer community.” When it comes to queer rights, the big fight of past decades has been to legalize gay marriage, which has been significant, but has also played into the narrative that the two-parent family is and should be the default structure. “That has taken away some of the power of being able to live radically queer lives without needing to fit into a capitalist, patriarchal structure of a nuclear family,” Adams told me.

Jay's family is one step removed from what a “traditional” three-parent structure looks like. It doesn't have roots in assisted reproduction or even polyamory, but rather in ideas about relationships that Jay has been considering for most of his life, informed by his asexual identity.

More than a decade ago, Jay wrote his senior thesis on the question of what differentiates sexual relationships from nonsexual ones—besides, obviously, the sex—and why we treat them so differently. His conclusion, then and now, centers around permanence, or at least the expectation of it. “When a relationship becomes sexual and it becomes romantic, it's not only that those things generate emotion, which they do,” he told me. “It's that suddenly this relationship could be defining your entire future in a way that a friendship doesn't have the same implied potential to be defining your future.”

So when he decided that he wanted a family, he began looking at his nonromantic relationships and treating them as capable of defining the rest of his life. The strategy was to invest in his relationships with couples, who, unlike singles, were less likely to distance themselves once they found a new romantic partner. Jay told all his friends that he wanted a family and began talking to various couples about the role they might play in one another's lives, and how children might fit into that picture.

That process progressed the furthest with Avary Kent, whom he had met in 2010 at a nonprofit conference, and her then-boyfriend, Zeke Hausfather. The three felt a strong connection from the beginning and, a year into their friendship, talked about how that bond had become an important part of their lives. When Jay moved to New York from San Francisco, he flew back several times a year to visit Kent and Hausfather. Shortly after the two were married, Kent and Hausfather sat down with Jay and said that they had started thinking about having a family, and wanted him to be involved.

There's a spectrum of "being involved," Jay said to them during this conversation, drawing a line in the air. Maybe when the baby cries, he gives her back to the other two to deal with, or maybe he's changing diapers at 3 a.m. right alongside them. That was the beginning of a conversation that ended with them deciding that they wanted Jay to be on the 3 a.m. diaper-changing end of the spectrum and as close to an equivalent third parent as possible.

The trio met one another's families of origin. They worked through hard questions—What if someone finds a job elsewhere and wants to move? What if someone becomes seriously ill?—and wrote their answers down. They met with a mediator who told them about the option of third-parent adoption, and without hesitation, Kent and Hausfather said, "Yes, that's what we want."

On New Year's Day in 2017, Kent found out she was pregnant. During her second trimester, Jay moved back to San Francisco. He attended birthing classes and was in the delivery room when Tavi was born that August.

Since then, Jay has been part of an alternative-parenting community in the Bay Area, where he sometimes introduces new acquaintances and friends to the idea of three-parent families.

One such friend is Kaitie. For as long as she can remember, the idea of being

part of a two-parent family has seemed claustrophobic. The idea of a three-parent family had long interested her, but Jay was the first person whom she heard talk about it as a reality. (Kaitie asked to be identified by only her first name to protect her privacy.)

Kaitie just gave birth to a son. She became pregnant with someone who, initially, had been happy to be a romantic partner and a sperm provider but not a co-parent. Kaitie had planned to find two others to co-parent with, but then her partner decided that he wanted to raise the child after all, so the two are looking for a third co-parent to join them (though that's been on hold because of the pandemic). That co-parent does not have to be romantically or sexually involved with either of them. "The idea of having to match romantically and sexually [while] co-parenting and cohabiting, it's so much, you know?" Kaitie told me. "I don't feel like I need to check *all* those boxes to find the perfect co-parent."

Jay suspects that his being a platonic co-parent has led people to be much more accepting of his family structure than they would be if he were romantically or sexually involved with Kent and Hausfather. While their arrangement goes against the norm of a two-parent family, it doesn't challenge the norm of two-person romantic relationships. "We sidestep all of the shaming and social scripts that would be [involved] in a poly three-parent family," he told me. "There's this whole universe of navigating implications about our sexual relationships that we just avoid entirely, and so that allows people to focus on the parenting and the benefit of the parenting."

Similarly, Jay knows that his and his co-parents' ability to champion this new form of family is tied to class and race. He, Kent, and Hausfather paid \$5,000 total for the adoption process. All three are white, as is Kaitie, and as are most of Diana Adams's tri-parenting clients.

Yet finding the right partners can be difficult no matter what. Katherine, who also knows Jay through the alternative-parenting community, wants to have a child and spent a few years looking for two fellow co-parents. (Katherine, who uses gender-neutral pronouns, also asked to be identified by their first name for privacy reasons.) Ideally, these would be people with whom Katherine had only a platonic relationship. "Sexual attraction can be very fickle; it's not necessarily something that you want to base this lifelong familial commitment of raising children together on," Katherine told me. Plus, Katherine is polyamorous, so their romantic and sexual needs were being met elsewhere, and their other

partners weren't interested in raising children.

But after many discussions and even a trial move-in with one couple, the perfect fit never materialized. Finding a lifelong connection with one person can be hard enough, let alone two (who need to connect with each other also). Katherine would still love to have a three-parent family, but has decided to shoot for only one other parent instead. And now Katherine has decided that the other partner *can* be someone with whom they have a romantic or sexual bond. "I've largely made that decision because I feel like that is what most people are looking for and very, very few people were looking for the other thing," Katherine said. "And so I'm mostly just trying to give myself better chances."

It's unclear how common third-parent adoption—in any of its incarnations—could become. Still, the increasing visibility and legalization of three-parent arrangements "is one of the signs that our definition of family is opening up," Cohen, from the University of Maryland, told me.

For Jay, the arrangement has been smoother than expected. Having a third pair of hands (and a third income) to raise a child is easier. The division of parenting work in his family—carefully discussed and allotted during weekly logistics meetings—feels more fair than arrangements for many straight parents who are couples, who can easily fall into gendered assumptions of whose job it is to take care of the baby and who is only "helping out." In Jay's family, each of the three parents is less exhausted from taking care of Tavi, and that's good for Tavi too, who gets to read and snuggle with Kent and play with blocks with Hausfather and take long walks in nature with Jay.

"All of our research points to the fact that it's the quality of the relationships that matters, and the handling of communication and conflict, and the number of people in the household is not really the key," says Pamela Braboy Jackson, an Indiana University sociologist and a co-author of *How Families Matter: Simply Complicated Intersections of Race, Gender, and Work*. "Just because family structure is different doesn't mean that family operates any differently." All families have rituals and stories about what makes their family theirs.

Tavi calls Hausfather "Daddy" and Jay "Dada." She's just getting to the age when she tries to play them against each other ("But Daddy said I could!"), though the adults have set up a text channel to make sure she can't game them. She's also surrounded by kids who don't come from traditional two-parent

families. The kid next door has two moms and a dad, for instance, so Tavi has realized that there are lots of kinds of families and her own is just one of many possible shapes.

Logistical benefits aside, Jay wants everyone to know that more options exist than people may believe. “If you’re someone like me, who really wants kids in my life and doesn’t want a primary romantic and sexual partner, then there are ways to do that,” he said. “If you are someone who wants a kid in your life but you really want a kid in your life once a week, not every day, for many hours a day, you can find a way to do that.” The important thing is that people look beyond the obvious next steps and believe in the ability to “choose your own family and choose your own path.”

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# The Atlantic | What If Friendship, Not Marriage, Was at the Center of Life?

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“Our boyfriends, our significant others, and our husbands are supposed to be No. 1. Our worlds are backward.”



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Kami West had been dating her current boyfriend for a few weeks when she told him that he was outranked by her best friend. West knew her boyfriend had caught snatches of her daily calls with Kate Tillotson, which she often placed on speaker mode. But she figured that he, like the men she'd dated before, didn't quite grasp the nature of their friendship. West explained to him, "I need you to know that she's not going anywhere. She is my No. 1." Tillotson was there before him, and, West told him, "she will be there after you. And if you think at any point that this isn't going to be my No. 1, you're wrong."

If West's comments sound blunt, it's because she was determined not to repeat a distressing experience from her mid-20s. Her boyfriend at that time had sensed that he wasn't her top priority. In what West saw as an attempt to keep her away from her friend, he disparaged Tillotson, calling her a slut and a bad influence. After the relationship ended, West, 31, vowed to never let another man strain her friendship. She decided that any future romantic partners would have to adapt to her friendship with Tillotson, rather than the other way around.

West and Tillotson know what convention dictates. "Our boyfriends, our significant others, and our husbands are supposed to be No. 1," West told me. "Our worlds are backward."

In the past few decades, Americans have broadened their image of what constitutes a legitimate romantic relationship: Courthouses now issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples, Americans are getting married later in life than

ever before, and more and more young adults are opting to share a home rather than a marriage license with a partner. Despite these transformations, what hasn't shifted much is the expectation that a monogamous romantic relationship is the planet around which all other relationships should orbit.

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By placing a friendship at the center of their lives, people such as West and Tillotson unsettle this norm. Friends of their kind sweep into territory typically reserved for romantic partners: They live in houses they purchased together, raise each other's children, use joint credit cards, and hold medical and legal powers of attorney for each other. These friendships have many of the trappings of romantic relationships, minus the sex.

Despite these friendships' intense devotion, there's no clear category for them. The seemingly obvious one, "best friend," strikes many of these committed pairs as a diminishment. Adrift in this conceptual gulf, people reach for analogies. Some liken themselves to siblings, others to romantic partners, "in the soul-inspiring way that someone being thoughtful about loving you and showing up for you is romantic," as the Rutgers University professor Brittney Cooper describes some of her friendships in her book *Eloquent Rage*.

Some alternate between the two comparisons. From the night Joe Rivera and John Carroll met at a gay bar in Austin, Texas—Rivera was the emcee for a strip competition, and Carroll won the \$250 cash prize—they felt like brothers. "Brothers that really want to hang out and be around each other," Carroll clarified. Yet when Carroll considered their shared domestic life, he told me that "we have a little married-couple thing going on even though we're not married." These mixed analogies suggest that neither wedlock nor siblinghood adequately captures what these friendships feel like.

Many of those who place a friendship at the center of their life find that their most significant relationship is incomprehensible to others.

Intimate friendships don't come with shared social scripts that lay out what they should look like or how they should progress. These partnerships are custom-designed by their members. Mia Pulido, a 20-year-old student at Drew University, says that she and her "soul mate," Sylvia Sochacki, 20, have cobbled together role models in what has felt like a "Frankenstein" process: Through

reading about intimate female friendships from centuries ago, the pair discovered a framework for a relationship that doesn't neatly fit the contemporary labels of romantic or platonic. They found their complementary personalities reflected in the characters Sherlock and Watson, and they embraced the casual affection (and the terms of endearment "Bubble" and "Spoo") that they came across in a note between a wife and husband; it was tucked into a used book they found at a garage sale. Pulido has found it freeing to build a relationship around the needs and desires of Sochacki and herself, rather than "having to work through this mire of what society has told you this relationship consists of."

Many of those who place a friendship at the center of their life find that their most significant relationship is incomprehensible to others. But these friendships can be models for how we as a society might expand our conceptions of intimacy and care.

When Tillotson and West met as 18-year-olds, they didn't set out to transgress relationship norms. They were on a mission to conform, *aye ma'am-ing* their way through Marine Corps boot camp in South Carolina, and referring to each other by their last name preceded by the title "Recruit." Most evenings, Recruit Tillotson and Recruit West spent their hour of free time chatting in front of their shared bunk bed.

During these conversations, they discovered that West's mom had just moved to a city that was a 20-minute ride away from Tillotson's hometown of Tulsa, Oklahoma. West and Tillotson spent boot camp's month-long break together, winding through the Tulsa suburbs in West's mother's black sedan, late-aughts rap pulsing through the rolled-down windows. For most of the next four years, they were stationed thousands of miles apart, including when Tillotson eventually deployed to Iraq. From afar, they coached each other through injuries, work woes, and relationship problems. Their friendship really blossomed once they both ended up in the Tulsa area for college, and they started to spend nearly every day together. By then, Tillotson was waiting for her divorce paperwork to be notarized, and West was a single mother caring for her 3-year-old, Kody.

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When West got a job at a bar, Tillotson watched Kody during the day so her friend could sleep. Tillotson frequently joined West at preschool pickup. When

the two women would walk down the hallway, past the miniature lockers, West said, “it was like the seas parted.” Tillotson could feel the parents’ eyes on her. Periodically, a teacher would sidle up to the two women, direct her gaze toward Tillotson, and ask, “Who is this?” “People would always ask us how we know each other, or, ‘Are you sisters?’ A lot of times people think we’re dating,” Tillotson, 31, said. It would take too long for West and Tillotson to explain the complexity and depth of their friendship to every curious questioner.

With no lexicon to default to, people with friendships like West and Tillotson’s have assembled a collage of relationship language. They use terms such as *best soul friend*, platonic life partner, my person, *ride or die*, queerplatonic partner, Big Friendship. For some, these names serve a similar purpose as matching friendship necklaces—they’re tokens mainly meant for the two people within the friendship. Others, such as West and Tillotson, search for language that can make their relationship lucid to outsiders. West and Tillotson realized that people understand boot camp to be an intense setting, the kind of environment that could breed an equally intense friendship. When the friends began to refer to each other as “boot-camp besties,” people’s confusion finally faded.

For more than a decade, Nicole Sonderman didn’t mind if the only people who understood her friendship with Rachel Hebner were the two women who were part of it. Sonderman sums up their relationship as “having a life partner, and you just don’t want to kiss them.”

In the years when they both lived in Fairbanks, Alaska, the friends were fluent in the language of each other’s moods and physical changes. Before Hebner suspected that she might be pregnant, Sonderman made her buy a pregnancy test, steered her into the bathroom, and sat in the adjacent stall as Hebner took it. Four years later, the roles reversed: Hebner had the same accurate premonition about Sonderman. “We paid more attention to each other than we did to ourselves,” Sonderman, 37, told me.

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They occasionally navigated around other people’s confusion about or combativeness toward their friendship. Their preferred term of endearment for each other, *wife*, wasn’t a problem for Sonderman’s then-husband. But once Hebner divorced her husband and started dating, her romantic partners got jealous, especially the women she dated. Sonderman grudgingly placated them

by calling Hebner “wiffles” instead of wife.

After those years in Alaska, the pair spent a few years several time zones apart, as Sonderman and her then-husband moved around for his work. Eventually Sonderman moved back to Alaska, but Hebner had relocated to Indiana. Phone calls and occasional visits became their friendship’s support beams. Sonderman said that Hebner reached out less and less as she grappled with a cascade of difficulties: She was in an abusive romantic relationship and she lost her job because she had no one else to take care of her daughter while she worked. She was depressed. In October 2018, Hebner died by suicide.

For Sonderman, Hebner’s death was devastating. The women had envisioned one day living near each other in Alaska, where the two of them had met, and where Hebner longed to return. Now Sonderman had none of that to look forward to. For six months after Hebner’s death, she kept earphones in when she went to the grocery store. She couldn’t bear small talk.

Sonderman found it hard to translate her grief to others. “Most people don’t understand. They’ll just be like, ‘Oh yeah, I had a friend from high school who died’ or something and try to relate. But it doesn’t really resonate with me.” In other cases, people would impose a salacious and inaccurate story line onto their relationship to try to make sense of it. Because Hebner was bisexual, Sonderman said, some people believed that they were secretly lovers, and that Sonderman was closeted.

To Elizabeth Brake, a philosophy professor at Rice University whose research focuses on marriage, love, and sex, Sonderman’s experience is not just tragic but unjust. Because friendship is outside the realm of legal protection, the law perpetuates the norm that friendships are less valuable than romantic relationships. This norm, in turn, undermines any argument that committed friendships deserve legal recognition. But if, for example, the law extended bereavement or family leave to friends, Brake believes we’d have different social expectations around mourning. People might have understood that, for Sonderman, losing Hebner was tantamount to losing a spouse.

With no legal benefits or social norms working in her favor, Sonderman has felt most understood by other people who’ve had an intimate friendship. Sonderman described one such friend who was an especially attentive listener. For two hours, he and Sonderman sat in a car, engine off, in a grocery-store parking lot.

She talked with him about Hebner, cried about Hebner. Her friend said, “It sounds like she broke your heart.” Sonderman told me, “That was the first time that anybody really got it.”

Intimate friendships have not always generated confusion and judgment. The period spanning the 18th to early 20th centuries was the heyday of passionate, devoted same-sex friendships, called “romantic friendships.” Without self-consciousness, American and European women addressed effusive letters to “my love” or “my queen.” Women circulated friendship albums and filled their pages with affectionate verse. In Amy Matilda Cassey’s friendship album, the abolitionist Margaretta Forten inscribed an excerpt of a poem that concludes with the lines “Fair friendship binds the whole celestial frame / For love in Heaven and Friendship are the same.” Authors devised literary plot lines around the adventures and trials of romantic friends. In the 1897 novel *Diana Victrix*, the character Enid rejects a man’s proposal because her female friend already occupies the space in her life that her suitor covets. In words prefiguring Kami West’s, Enid tells the man that if they married, “you would have to come first. And you could not, for she is first.”

Two well-known women who put each other, rather than a husband, first were the social reformer Jane Addams and the philanthropist Mary Rozet Smith. In Addams’s bedroom, now an exhibit at the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum, in Chicago, an enormous portrait of Smith hangs above the mantle. After meeting in 1890 at the pioneering settlement house that Addams co-founded, the women spent the next 40 years entwined, trudging through moments they spent apart. During one separation, Addams wrote to Smith, “You must know, dear, how I long for you all the time, and especially during the last three weeks. There is reason in the habit of married folks keeping together.” When Addams traveled without Smith, she would sometimes haul the painting with her. When the two women journeyed together, Addams wired ahead to request a double bed. No scandal erupted in the newspaper. These women weren’t pressed, directly or implicitly, about their sex lives, nor did they feel compelled to invent a label to make sense of their relationship to onlookers, as West and Tillotson would about a century later. Same-sex intimacy like theirs was condoned.

These friendships weren’t the exclusive province of women. Daniel Webster, who would go on to become secretary of state in the mid-1800s, described his closest friend as “the friend of my heart, the partner of my joys, griefs, and affections, the only participator of my most secret thoughts.” When the two men

left Dartmouth College to practice law in different towns, Webster had trouble adjusting to the distance. He wrote that he felt like “the dove that has lost its mate.” Frederick Douglass, the eminent abolitionist and intellectual, details his deep love for his friends in his autobiography. Douglass writes that when he contemplated his escape from slavery, “the thought of leaving my friends was decidedly the most painful thought with which I had to contend. The love of them was my tender point, and shook my decision more than all things else.”

One question these friendships raise for people today is: Did they have sex? Writings from this time, even those about romantic relationships, typically lack descriptions of sexual encounters. Perhaps some people used romantic friendship as a cover for an erotic bond. Some scholars in fact suspect that certain pairs had sex, but in most cases, historians—whose research on the topic is largely confined to white, middle-class friends—can’t make definitive claims about what transpired in these friends’ bedrooms. Though we will never know the exact nature of every relationship, it’s clear that this period’s considerably different norms around intimacy allowed for possibilities in friendship that are unusual today.

A blend of social and economic conditions made these committed same-sex friendships acceptable. Men and women of the 19th century operated in distinct social spheres, so it’s hardly shocking that people would form deep attachments to friends of their own gender. In fact, women contemplating marriage often fretted about forging a life with a member of what many deemed the “grosser sex.”

“You would have to come first. And you could not, for she is first.”

Beliefs about sexual behavior also played a role. The historian Richard Godbeer notes that Americans at the time did not assume—as they do now—that “people who are in love with one another must want to have sex.” Many scholars argue that the now-familiar categories of heterosexuality and homosexuality, which consider sexual attraction to be part of a person’s identity, didn’t exist before the turn of the 20th century. While sexual acts between people of the same gender were condemned, passion and affection between people of the same gender were not. The author E. Anthony Rotundo argues that, in some ways, attitudes about love and sex, left men “freer to express their feelings than they would have been in the 20th century.” Men’s liberty to be physically demonstrative surfaces in photos of friends and in their writings. Describing one apparently ordinary night

with his dear friend, the young engineer James Blake wrote, “We retired early and in each others arms,” and fell “peacefully to sleep.”

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Physical intimacy among women also didn’t tend to be read as erotic. Even men wrote approvingly of women’s affectionate relationships, in part because they believed that these friendships served as training grounds for wifehood. In his 1849 novel, *Kavanagh*, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow casts a friendship between two female characters as “a rehearsal in girlhood of the great drama of a woman’s life”—the great drama, naturally, being marriage to a man.

Men could feel unthreatened by these friendships because few women were in the financial position to eschew the economic support of a husband in favor of a female companion. By the late 1800s, exceptions to this rule started to sprout. Colleges and professions were opening up to middle-class (and, almost exclusively, white) women, enabling these graduates to support themselves, no husband required. At this point, the historian Lillian Faderman told me, women’s intimate friendships “no longer had to be a rehearsal in girlhood.” Educated women could instead live together in what were called Boston marriages. These committed relationships allowed women to pursue careers and evade heterosexual marriage.

From the late 1800s to the 1920s, each one of these components—gender-segregated society, women’s economic dependency, the distinction between sexual behavior and identity—was pulled like a Jenga brick from the tower of romantic friendship. Men and women’s divergent social spheres began to look more like a Venn diagram, enabling emotional intimacy between the genders. With far more women in the workforce and potentially independent, men weren’t so enchanted by women’s intimate relationships. Sexologists declared same-sex desire—not merely same-sex sexual acts—perverse. Americans came to fear that kissing or sharing a bed with a friend of the same gender was a mark of “sexual inversion.” Romantic friendships had lost their innocence.

A few decades after the erosion of romantic friendship began, Americans’ conception of marriage shifted. The Northwestern University psychologist Eli Finkel identifies three distinct eras in American marriages. The first, running from the colonial period until about 1850, had a pragmatic focus on fulfilling spouses’ economic and survival needs; the second, lasting until about 1965, emphasized love. Finkel makes the case that starting around 1965, the “self-

“expressive marriage” became the ideal; spouses expected their partnership to be the site of self-discovery and personal growth. (Excluded from these structures for most of the nation’s existence were the tremendous number of Americans who were denied access to legal marriage, namely enslaved Black Americans, interracial couples, and same-sex couples.) Throughout this evolution, Americans started relying more and more on their spouses for social and emotional support, with friendships consigned to a secondary role.

John Carroll, who met his platonic partner, Joe Rivera, at a gay bar, describes this type of romantic relationship as “one-stop shopping.” People expect to pile emotional support, sexual satisfaction, shared hobbies, intellectual stimulation, and harmonious co-parenting all into the same cart. Carroll, 52, thinks this is an impossible ask; experts share his concern. “When we channel all our intimate needs into one person,” the psychotherapist Esther Perel writes, “we actually stand to make the relationship more vulnerable.” Such totalizing expectations for romantic relationships leave us with no shock absorber if a partner falls short in even one area. These expectations also stifle our imagination for how other people might fill essential roles such as cohabitant, caregiver, or confidant.

Carroll and Rivera, 59, escaped this confined thinking. They built their lives around their friendship—at times deliberately, at times improvising in the face of unanticipated events. In 2007, Carroll discovered that the house next door to his was up for sale. He called Rivera with an entreaty: “Bitch, buy that house, and you can just walk home from dinner!” Rivera would no longer have to drive across Austin several times a week to have dinner at Carroll’s house. Carroll, who’s a real-estate agent, had already filled out the contract for the house for his friend. Rivera just needed to sign.

After buying the house, Rivera did in fact log fewer miles in traffic, but that was a trivial benefit compared with the life-altering ones that came later. When Rivera became concerned that Carroll’s drug and alcohol use had gotten out of hand, he took photos of partiers entering and leaving Carroll’s house at 3 or 4 a.m. Rivera staged an intervention with Carroll’s other friends, and Carroll agreed to get help before Rivera could even begin reading aloud the two-page letter he’d written. The next day, Rivera drove Carroll to a recovery center, and cried as he filled out the paperwork. Rivera asked the man who ran the center, “What if [Carroll] goes through recovery and when he comes out, he hates me for doing this to him?”

Their friendship did change after Carroll finished the program, but not as Rivera had feared. While Carroll was in recovery, he and his friends came up with a plan to turn his house into a sober home for gay men—a solution to Carroll’s shaky finances that also served a meaningful purpose. Once Carroll finished his own stint in a sober home, Rivera suggested that Carroll move in with him. By the time Carroll unloaded his bags, Rivera was already months into his own sobriety, a commitment he made even though he never had an alcohol problem. Rivera said, “I didn’t want to be drinking a glass of wine in front of John when he couldn’t have one.” “Who *does* that?” Carroll asked, his voice blending incredulity and gratitude. They’ve both been sober for a decade.

Companionate romantic relationships and committed friendships appear to be varieties of the same crop, rather than altogether different species.

A friendship like theirs, which has spanned nearly their entire adulthood and functioned as the nucleus of their support system, raises a fundamental question about how we recognize relationships: On what basis do we decide that a partnership is “real”? It’s a question the journalist Rebecca Traister poses in her book *All the Single Ladies*, when she examines the central role that friends often play in single women’s lives. “Do two people have to have regular sexual contact and be driven by physical desire in order to rate as a couple? Must they bring each other regular mutual sexual satisfaction? Are they faithful to each other?” she writes. “By those measures, many heterosexual marriages wouldn’t qualify.” At the same time, people who have intimate friendships are eager to declare their devotion. The social theorist bell hooks writes that women who have such close friendships “want these bonds to be honored cherished commitments, to bind us as deeply as marriage vows.” Companionate romantic relationships and committed friendships appear to be varieties of the same crop, rather than altogether different species.

Brake, the philosopher, takes issue not just with cultural norms that elevate romantic relationships above platonic ones, but also with the special status that governments confer on romantic relationships. Whereas access to marriage currently hinges on (assumed) sexual activity, Brake argues that caregiving, which she says is “absolutely crucial to our survival,” is a more sensible basis for legal recognition. She proposes that states limit the rights of marriage to only the benefits that support caregiving, such as special immigration eligibility and hospital visitation rights. Because sexual attraction is irrelevant to Brake’s marriage model, friends would be eligible.

In LGBTQ circles, placing a high value on friendship has long been common. Carroll, Rivera, and several other people I interviewed for this story, absorbed the idea of “chosen family”—that those besides blood can decide to become kin—from this community. Though he and Rivera never considered dating, Carroll had already learned to be at ease with nonsexual intimate relationships with men. In other words, he had come to appreciate something that was once widely understood—as Godbeer, the historian, puts it, that “we can love without lusting.”

In many ways, Americans are already redefining what loving and living can look like. Just in the past several months, experts and public intellectuals from disparate ideological persuasions have encouraged heterosexual couples to look to the queer and immigrant communities for healthy models of marriage and family. The coronavirus pandemic, by underscoring human vulnerability and interdependence, has inspired people to imagine networks of care beyond the nuclear family. Polyamory and asexuality, both of which push back against the notion that a monogamous sexual relationship is the key to a fulfilling adult life, are rapidly gaining visibility. Expanding the possible roles that friends can play in one another’s lives could be the next frontier.

Other changes in American households may be opening up space for alternative forms of committed relationships. Fewer and fewer Americans can count on having a spouse as a lifelong co-star. By the time they’ve gotten married—if they’ve done so at all—most Americans have spent a considerable part of their adulthood single. The tally of Americans’ unpartnered years grows once you tabulate the marriages that end because of divorce or a spouse’s death (about one-third of older women are widowed). According to a 2017 Pew Research Center report, 42 percent of American adults don’t live with a spouse or partner.

We’re also in the midst of what former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy has called a growing public-health crisis in the United States: loneliness. In a 2018 survey, one-fifth of Americans reported always or often feeling lonely. Being alone does not portend loneliness—nor does being partnered necessarily prevent loneliness—but these data suggest that plenty of people would appreciate a confidant and a regular dose of physical affection, needs only amplified by the pandemic. Americans, who’ve long been encouraged to put all their eggs in the marriage basket, may come to rely upon a wider array of social relationships out of necessity.

A platonic partnership may not feel right for everyone, and as is true with dating, even those who want a mate might not be able to find a suitable one. But these relationships have spillover benefits for those in close proximity to them. Tillotson told me that she thinks all her relationships have been brightened by her closeness with West. Their romantic partners appreciate that the friendship lessens their emotional load; their mutual friends treat Tillotson and West as a reliable unit to turn to when they're in need; their veteran community has been strengthened by the volunteering they've done together. Their platonic partnership fits Godbeer's description of how Americans viewed friendship centuries ago, that it "not only conferred personal happiness but also nurtured qualities that would radiate outward and transform society as a whole." Though Tillotson and West's relationship serves these broader purposes, they choose to be bound to each other primarily for the joy and support they personally receive. Tillotson thinks of her romantic partner as "the cherry on the cake." She and West, she explained, "we're the cake."

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