Sara’s comments on final draft:

I’m really liking this story. Good revisions. Yes, it’s long, but if we trim just a little, I think we’ll be OK.

I like the sidebar idea on how religions view gay marriage. Would still like you to talk to an expert source on that very issue. Contact me on Friday about possible sources.

**Reporter byline**: Natalie Maggiore

**Reporter contact info**: [namg2d@mail.missouri.edu](mailto:namg2d@mail.missouri.edu) (708) 927-2788

**Assigned word count: 500-600 vs. ACW**: 1006 (Yeah that’s really long, I just don’t know what to cut because I love it all so much!)

**Single word that sums up this story (use a noun):** Acceptance

**Print Hed & Dek (give at least 3):**

Heds:

A Beautiful Storm

Weathering the Storm

A Perfect Storm (Would Imperfect be better? I guess it could work both ways)

Deks:

Elisabeth Sobczak discusses the trials and successes of finding peace with herself and her faith.

Elisabeth Sobczak harrows the rough seas of public and self judgement after helping with Hurricane Katrina

Elisabeth Sobczak shares her tale of struggles and triumphs with self acceptance and faith

**Web Hed & Dek (give 1)**:

Elisabeth Sobczak describes coming to terms with her sexual orientation and her faith in a judgemental world.

Elisabeth Sobczak relies on the openness of the Missouri United Methodist Church for support in being herself

**Story Links:** (at least 3 that could be embedded into story on website)

http://www.moumc.org/

Need more here.

**Suggested Tweet**:

Elisabeth Sobczak tells her story of self acceptance and faith with the #UMC

**Suggested Facebook post**:

Interested in LGBTQ community issues? Hear Elisabeth Sobczak tell her story of inner discovery and the search for an accepting faith here.

**Suggested Web Excerpt**: (25-35 words)

The subject of gay marriage has been controversial for some time, especially in correlation with religion. Hear Elisabeth Sobczak tell her side of the story through her journey of self discovery and acceptance and the search for a faith that would give her the chance to be herself.

**Best version of lede**:

Elisabeth Sobczak had dated men her whole life. She had even been seeing someone when she first traveled to Mississippi in 2005 to volunteer with Red Cross after Hurricane Katrina. On one of her trips, however, things changed. One night when she had fallen asleep in her car after a long day in the kitchen. A woman came up and knocked on her window to see if she was okay. This woman was Betsy Reeves. She was in charge of the health of all evacuees and workers for the chapter.

Sobczak was soon in charge of cooking Reeves special meals in accordance with her multiple allergies, forming a friendship. They clicked instantly. “We talked on the phone for hours. We kind of both knew something was going on,” Sobczak said.

It was then that Sobczak realized that she had found her soulmate.

**Body of the story**:

Sobczak struggled with the thought of being part of the LGBTQ community, because the Catholic faith in which she was raised neither accepts nor supports gay marriage.

She was 38 when she realized she had fallen in love with Betsy. Her internal battle reached a turning point after a plane ride from Mississippi following another trip of helping with Hurricane Katrina relief. As she passed through the small aisle looking for a place to sit, she noticed a middle seat open next to an African-American woman. When she inquired about its vacancy, the woman simply replied, “this seat was meant for you.” Elisabeth would find after the trip that this couldn’t have been truer.

The woman introduced herself as Mrs. Taylor, kept up a conversation throughout the entire ride, discussing self acceptance and equality for all races and orientations. Though this stranger did not know it, she was changing someone’s life with her words.

After that day on the plane, Sobczak knew she could no longer bear the weight of keeping her true identity hidden. “I think God was using her as a vehicle to say ‘It’s okay. You are who you are. I love you regardless,’” says Sobczak.

Sobczak decided to permanently relocate to Mississippi in 2006 to fully devote her time to the relief effort. She kept in contact with Reeves. Together, they figured out their feelings. They were married in Mystic, CT on August 29, 2009 - the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina.

However, Sobczak~~’s struggles weren’t completely diminished and she~~ still felt uncomfortable embracing her true identity in public. “People are ‘tolerant.’ I don’t like that word. It’s like they’re just putting up with you,” she says.

She felt she had to keep her personal life with Reeves to herself, especially at Shelter Insurance, her place of employment, though her co-workers could easily discuss their husbands and wives. “I can’t begin to describe the energy that gets sucked out of you when you have to live two different lives,” she says.

After a family tragedy in 2011, the couple realized that putting on the facade everyday was no longer worth it. “After what happened, life and death, sometimes you don’t know one minute from the next if somethings going to happen,” Reeves says. “Hiding wasn’t important anymore. Loving people and letting them know that was important.”

Though they continued to take these steps, they still needed to deal with their orientation in accordance with their faith. Reeves was also raised under the Catholic faith.

“It wasn’t my faith in God that was rocky, it was my faith in the church that was,” she says. “I never understood why LGBTQ people felt the way they did until I joined the community.”

Sobczak and Reeves began their search for an accepting church. They relocated to Columbia in for work purposes. After visiting a few churches? that didn’t feel right, they decided to visit the Missouri United Methodist Church on Ninth Street. They saw pamphlets about the church’s acceptance policy and went to a service. “Right as we walked in, the pastor, Jim Bryan, was saying that this church was open and reconciling to all: black, white, gay, straight. We were blown away,” Sobczak says.

Pastor Trista Soendker Nicholson believes that UMC’s policy of inclusivity is just in their nature. “We are all fearfully and wonderfully made as God’s children and I think Open Door policy helps to reaffirm that to a group of people who have felt excluded from that message,” Nicholson says.

While the Missouri UMC is supportive, the worldwide religion as a whole is not, according to their Book of Discipline. At their last conference they voted 60-40 against changing the rule. Sobczak attributes this to other countries who may not be as accepting as the United States yet. According to Pew, only 44% of Americans are opposed to gay marriage. That’s a 13% decrease since 2001.

Sobczak and Reeves decided to get involved with the church and learn more. They began going to Open Door Ministry, a group for LGBTQ community members and allies, which they now lead every third Thursday of the month.

They were still hesitant at first, but the openness of the others helped them to slowly gain confidence. “We didn’t hold hands in church until a few months ago,” Sobczak says. “A couple across from us was talking about being openly gay, and we were like ‘Is this real?’ Well, hell. If they can say it, I can say it too.”

She says that now that time is passed and they have started visiting the church regularly, they have found friendship and family in the other members. “There has never been one person that has made us feel unwelcome or unloved,” Sobczak says. “They accept us for who we are: just Elisabeth and Betsy.”

Sobczak is thankful for that special day on the plane that began the process of lifting the burden of a double life from her shoulders. “I’m constantly feeling euphoric. No more energy gets sucked out of me,” she says. “I guess Hurricane Katrina was a bigger storm than I knew. But it was a beautiful storm.”

**Sidebar or Info Box if needed**:

[**http://www.pewforum.org/Gay-Marriage-and-Homosexuality/Religious-Groups-Official-Positions-on-Same-Sex-Marriage.aspx**](http://www.pewforum.org/Gay-Marriage-and-Homosexuality/Religious-Groups-Official-Positions-on-Same-Sex-Marriage.aspx)

From Pew: How religions feel about Gay Marriage Great idea, but we will probably want to work on the wording here and make extra sure to verify this info.

Catholic: Do not support - Marriage is to be between a man and a woman

Buddhism - Has no stance

Evangelical Lutheran - Voted in 2009 to allow congregations to pick if they do or do not support it

Hinduism - No stance, though the Kama Sutra does imply supporting it while other materials do not

Judaism - Supports and passed a movement in 2012 that allows a ceremony for same-sex couples to marry

**Sources**:

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Betsy Reeves, Wife

573–823-8999

reevesbl@me.com

[reevesbl@health.missouri.edu](mailto:reevesbl@health.missouri.edu)

Trista Soendker Nicholson, Pastor at UMC

(573) 443-3111

Still looking for an expert source - someone who can address the larger issues of gay marriage and religious tolerance of gays.

**I am still waiting to hear from Amanda, Elisabeth’s daughter (I know that’s a little late, but I’d really like her perspective)**

**Documents as Sources**:

[**http://www.pewforum.org/Gay-Marriage-and-Homosexuality/Religious-Groups-Official-Positions-on-Same-Sex-Marriage.aspx**](http://www.pewforum.org/Gay-Marriage-and-Homosexuality/Religious-Groups-Official-Positions-on-Same-Sex-Marriage.aspx)

[**http://features.pewforum.org/same-sex-marriage-attitudes/**](http://features.pewforum.org/same-sex-marriage-attitudes/)

[**http://www.pewforum.org/Gay-Marriage-and-Homosexuality/Overview-of-Same-Sex-Marriage-in-the-United-States.aspx**](http://www.pewforum.org/Gay-Marriage-and-Homosexuality/Overview-of-Same-Sex-Marriage-in-the-United-States.aspx)

<http://www.umc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content2.aspx?c=lwL4KnN1LtH&b=8102353&ct=11740419>

<http://www.umc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=lwL4KnN1LtH&b=2789393&ct=6941643>

**Media Support**:

<http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jul/17/local/me-methodist17>

<http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-05-07/national/35458535_1_gay-clergy-gay-advocates-gay-rights>

<http://www.unitedmethodistreporter.com/2012/08/conferences-react-to-umc-stance-on-gay-issues/>

<http://www.suntimes.com/lifestyles/lavin/18058674-452/debating-the-religious-issues-with-gay-marriage.html>

<http://www.gallup.com/poll/159089/religion-major-factor-americans-opposed-sex-marriage.aspx>