Sara’s comments on first draft:

WRITING

I like the story. I’m amazed at the great details about Hurricane Katrina. Maybe it’s because I used to live and work in N.O., but that part strikes me as really powerful, and I think you should play it up more. Lead with her volunteer work and falling asleep in the car and meeting Betsy. Then go back to her indecision and the incident on the plane.

Please give me two different versions of the lede.

The length of the story isn’t too bad, but as you add, you’ll need to cut. I think you can condense some of the lower part of the story about them at church.

I want you to go to one of their meetings or a church service and show them in action.

REPORTING & DATA

I think you know we need lots more sources - Betsy, friends and coworkers current and past, family members who have overseen this transformation, her pastor and other members of the church...

We need DATA - information about how UMC relates to gays, national perspective on gay marriage. Gay marriage is one of the hottest things in the news right now, so use that! Find out how Elisabeth feels about that issue. Don’t just list data sources - use them in your story! Look to the Pew data and others.

**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**: 786

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

Heds: A Beautiful Storm, Weathering the Storm,

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

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

Elisabeth Sobczak describes coming to terms with 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:**

http://www.moumc.org/

**Suggested Tweet**:

Elisabeth Sobczak tells her story of acceptance of self 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**:

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.

**Two versions of a lede**:

Give me two different versions of a lede, please.

Elisabeth Sobczak walks through the jet bridge and steps onto the plane’s more stable floor. She is headed to back from Mississippi after another trip of helping with Hurricane Katrina relief. She passes the through the small aisle looking for a place to sit and notices a middle seat open next to an African-American woman. When she inquires about its vacancy, the woman simply replies, “this seat was meant for you.” Elisabeth would find after the trip that this couldn’t have been truer.

Who is this Mrs. Taylor? Why only her first name? Did Elisabeth keep in touch with her? Can she be interviewed? Is there any other way to verify this? We can’t build a lede out of this if all we have is Elisabeth’s recollection of the incident. Besides, it would be better to get to know Elisabeth better before describing it.

Need more basic facts on Elisabeth in the story - age, what she does for a living, when they moved to Columbia.

Mrs. Taylor, the woman occupying the seat next to her kept 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. Sobczak had been grappling with the inner struggle that though it was not always accepted, especially by the Catholic religion she was raised in, she was a part of the LGBTQ community.

Though Mrs. Taylor does not know it, the minute Sobczak stepped off that plane was the turning point in her battle for self approval. Mrs. Taylor had spoken all the words that Sobczak has up until this point been afraid to say herself.

**Body of the story**:

Sobczak had dated men her whole life. She had even been seeing someone when she first traveled to Mississippi to volunteer with Red Cross after the storm. 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, the woman in charge of the health of all evacuees and workers for the chapter Sobczak had been helping at. Which chapter was this? How does this relate to the conversation on the plane?

Sobczak became 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.

Sobczak struggled with the thought of being part of the LGBTQ community because of the Catholic faith she was raised in that does not accept or support gay marriage. “I never understood how the Catholic church would allow me to have a child out of wedlock, but not be myself,” Sobczak says.

After that fateful day on the plane with Mrs. Taylor, Sobczak knew she could no longer bare 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 a few years later. Why? What was happening with Betsy at that point? She and Reeves figured out together that they were soulmates. They were married in Mystic, Ct on August 29, 2009 - the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. That’s really powerful. I would play up the Katrina element of this story.

However, Sobczak says her epiphany was only personal and that she still struggled to feel comfortable in public. “People are quote on quote 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 at work 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,” Sobczak says. Where does she work? Is she openly gay at work now?

Sobczak and her partner, though together and happy, still felt uncomfortable acknowledging their relationship in public, especially in accordance with their 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 felt the way they did until I joined the community.”

They began their search for an accepting church and after visiting a few that just didn’t feel right, they decided to visit the Missouri United Methodist Church on Ninth St. The first thing they saw was open door ministry pamphlets displayed. What’s that? Still in disbelief that this church might be the real deal, they 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. Why not speak to this pastor?

**Insert info on UMC & Pastor Amy’s comments. Including why it goes against the doctrine**

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. They were still hesitant at first, but the openness of the others helped them to slowly garner confidence. “A couple across from us was talking about being openly gay and we were like ‘Is this real?’,” she says. “Well, hell. If they can say it, I can say it too.”

This easiness spread between both mass and groups. “We didn’t hold hands in church until a few months ago,” Sobczak says.

She says that now that time is passed and they have started visiting the church regularly, they are beginning to feel the love from 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.” I like this ending.

**Sidebar or Info Box if needed**:

Perhaps how each faith views gay marriage. I have a great article that describes each.

**Sources**:

Elisabeth Sobczak, 45, (573)-823-8997

Interviewed by phone multiple times and in person at Panera on Ninth St.

[ESobczak@shelterinsurance.com](mailto:ESobczak@shelterinsurance.com)

Betsy Reeves, Elisabeth’s wife

Hopefully talking to her Thursday

Amy Gearhart, Senior Pastor at UMC

[Amy.Gearhart@moumc.org](mailto:Amy.Gearhart@moumc.org)

Waiting for an email reply still

Do not just email - call and stop by also. If you don’t hear from her, move on to another pastor.

Other sources will include members of Elisabeth’s church group. I was also thinking about talking to a catholic priest to get the differing opinion on LGBTQ to highlight Elisabeth’s transition between churches. I’d also like to talk to someone from LGBTQ Center on campus to get some statistics on correlation with religion.

**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>

Use the documentation you find in your story!

What happened to the link I sent you? I would like to see that information included.

**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>