



My Roller Coaster Journey

Sallie Ferguson

Sallie Ferguson grew up in Mansfield, Texas with two wonderful parents, two brothers, and four sisters. She attended the University of North Texas on a cross country and track scholarship and graduated in 2011 with a degree in Kinesiology. In 2010, she married her husband, Garrett Ferguson, and moved to Lubbock, Texas—a place she never thought she would call home. She taught elementary physical education for two years before having her daughter in 2013. Her recently acquired job as a stay-at-home-mom keeps her busy, but she tries to find time to run, catch up on her favorite Hulu shows, and spend time with friends. This is the story of how she came to marry a man with same-sex-attraction (SSA).

It begins at an amusement park.

Many of my childhood memories were made at Six Flags, but nothing really compares to the day my family showed up to Six Flags with my super conservative grandparents, on Gay Pride Day. I don't think I really understood what that day meant—I was 11 or 12 at the time and all I could see was a bunch of men, with short shorts and painted toenails, holding hands with each other in line at the Texas Giant. My grandparents walked around shell shocked most of the day! The funny thing was, we showed up on the exact same day the next year. For several years, that was my only reference to any type of “gay culture” and it was as loud and extreme as anyone could make it.

When I was in high school there was a kid in my class who said he was gay. Since any reference to “gay” sent me back to Gay Pride Day at Six Flags, I thought he was just being dramatic and wanting some extra attention. I felt bad for him and was curious about the validity of the identity he claimed, but I avoided talking about it because I knew very little about homosexuality at the time.

Before I went to college, I was really good at avoiding the subject of homosexuality. I didn't think it was my place to judge or have an opinion about the matter because it wasn't close to me, but I was always curious. I knew that those who were gay were still God's children and I knew that God loved all his children and, therefore, I knew God loved gay people. How He loved them and why they were gay was beyond me, so I let everyone else worry about that.

My opinions on the subject changed really quickly when I decided to go to one of the most liberal colleges in Texas, University of North Texas (UNT). At Freshman Orientation, when I learned that UNT was one of the top 100 schools for gays, lesbians and transgender individuals, I laughed to myself thinking, “Seriously! Who keeps track of that? How can they even tell?” That became very obvious to me as I walked around campus over the next few

MY ROLLER COASTER JOURNEY

years. It was a colorful campus full of just about every kind of person you can imagine, and I loved it. I quickly made friends with many different kinds of people from all walks of life and my previous thought about God loving all His children was continually confirmed. Amidst this diverse group of people, I learned to judge less and love more. Something I could not have learned better anywhere else. Even my Latter-day Saint student ward was made up of an incredibly diverse group of students all doing the same thing—living the gospel the best way they knew how to live it. Among that group was my now-husband, but I wouldn't learn about his “diversity” for a couple of years after we met.

Meant to Be

I first met Garrett when I was a freshman and he was a freshly returned missionary. He was the talk of the ward when he came home from his mission; everyone loved Garrett. I could see why quickly—he knew how to have a good time! He was in charge of our ward's Family Home Evening, at the time. Every Monday night was guaranteed to be silly, unexpected and really fun! It's a little silly to say this now, but I always felt drawn to him for some reason. His personality was infectious, and I thought that maybe someday it would be nice to be better friends with him.

One day, he decided to ask me on a date. After admiring him from afar for several months it didn't take any thought to reply. I quickly accepted his invitation and we exchanged numbers. He must have really caught me off guard because, in the heat of the moment, I actually forgot that I had a boyfriend. He was a little hurt when I called him to explain what happened, but mostly flattered that his charm made me forget about my current relationship.

We stayed friendly acquaintances for the next couple of years, bumping into each other through mutual friends and work. Not surprisingly, we both worked for Especially for Youth (EFY) the following two summers and naturally became closer friends through it. In the summer of 2009, we both worked as administrative counselors for EFY and saw the best and worst of each other. That's what very little sleep and stress will do to a person, but we credit some of our marriage to that summer because we both learned so much about each other. He even saw me screaming at another counselor over a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup and still wanted to marry me. Although looking back, maybe he thought, “Well she seems just as crazy as me, so we will be perfect together!”

Around the same time that the previously mentioned relationship came to an end, my sister convinced me to go to a regional Young Single Adult dance with her on New Year's Eve. A bunch of EFY friends were also at this dance, including Garrett. He saw me dancing with this particular group of friends and decided to play a little trick on me. He came up behind me and started dancing like a crazy person on me...you know, a friendly little booty bump. I would have laughed and thought it was hilarious if it would have been me he danced on. Unfortunately for him, my sister and I look very similar and he misjudged who he was dancing on. As my sister turned around, both she and Garrett screamed. She bolted to try and find me, while Garrett was left wondering who in the world he had just accosted! Fortunately for him, my sister knew who he was because of the dating faux-pas previously

VOICES OF HOPE

mentioned (my family had never let me live down “forgetting I had a boyfriend”). After finding out who he had really danced on, we all had a great laugh and enjoyed the rest of the night. As my sister and I left the dance, she asked me if I had ever considered dating Garrett. “Oh, I could never date Garrett! I can only take him in small doses,” I told her. Ironically enough, he asked me out a week later and I very quickly began to get one very big dose of him.

Because we knew each other so well from working together over the years, our dating relationship didn’t take much time to progress. From day one things were authentic and natural between us. I think we both knew that we were dating to find out if our relationship was marriage material, and I secretly knew from early on that it was.

Having “The Talk”

When people find out that my husband experiences same-sex attraction (SSA), one of their first questions is always, “When did he tell you?” Technically, Garrett told me after about two and a half months of dating, but what I actually remember is having an interesting discussion early in our dating relationship that alluded to something that he had dealt with in the past. We stayed up late into the night getting to know each other and, at one point; he talked about his decision to go on his mission. Garrett went a little later than most people did. He kept saying, “I just wanted to make sure that it was the right thing for me,” and, “When I finally went on my mission, I knew the gospel was true and I was completely worthy to go.” I was immediately impressed with his intentional decision to serve a mission. It sounded like it had been a difficult journey preparing for his mission, but it was clear that he was worthy and grateful for that experience in his life.

We dated long distance the majority of our relationship, so when we were together, we typically had the face-to-face conversations that shouldn’t be held over the phone. You know, the first “I love you,” the “Will you marry me?,” and the “Oh hey, I’m attracted to men” talks. Lucky for me, he saved all of those talks for the same day. It was Spring Break and we both knew that the other wanted to say the “L” word but naturally, I was waiting for him to say it first. He took me to the Dallas Temple and after walking around awkwardly making small talk about the flowers; we finally sat down to have the much anticipated conversation. I was giddy, because I loved him so much and I could not wait to tell him! I don’t remember verbatim what he said, but it went a little something like this:

Garrett: “So.... (insert cute nice things about me)...and I love you!”

Sallie: “I love you too!”

Garrett: “And I know I want to marry you!”

Sallie (shocked! I didn’t expect that part to come *quite* so soon...): “Oh! Well I want to marry you too!”

Garrett: “Then I need to talk to you about something...I’m attracted to men.”

For the next hour or so, he opened up about everything. He talked about some mistakes

MY ROLLER COASTER JOURNEY

he made in high school and his choice to serve a mission. I remember him talking about how the attractions were very minimal, if not absent, throughout his mission. They had resurfaced to some extent when he returned home. He kept saying, “But I’m worthy now” and that was enough for me at the time. I think I was so giddy with excitement about the “I love you” and the “I want to marry you” part of the talk that I had a hard time focusing on the heart of it—the “I’m attracted to men” part.

We left the temple excited to tell our families about our anticipated engagement, but the conversation weighed heavy on my mind. Like a broken record, I kept replaying parts of the conversation over in my head: “I love him, we’re getting married, but he told me he was gay...wait, did he say he was gay?...maybe that’s not what he was talking about...it must have been worse in the past...we’re getting married...I love him.” It continued to replay in my head the rest of that day and week, until he left to go back to school. As soon as he drove away, I fell into a messy flood of tears. I was completely confused, sitting in my closet with the door shut, feeling very alone and wondering what I should do and whom I should talk to. I immediately said a prayer. Not much was even said in the prayer, just tears and some very tender pleas for guidance. I couldn’t even say the word “gay” out loud because it would make it too real and I didn’t want it to be real. I knew that Heavenly Father would know the thoughts and questions of my heart and I sincerely hoped that He would be able to give me the answers I needed.

The first answer I received made me cry harder. I had the impression that I needed to take any of my concerns to Garrett. I hated this answer, because my immediate reaction was to call my mom and tell her everything. If we were going to get married, the decision needed to be between Garrett, myself, and Heavenly Father—that was it. The second answer I received was a deep impression of peace. I’ve never been a visionary person or even a “still small voice” person. My answers typically always come through feelings of peace. I knew that I was supposed to marry Garrett. Those feelings came to me early on in our relationship, and those feelings still felt right. The third answer I received sitting on the floor of my closet was the same impression I had been having throughout my entire life: God loves all of His children.

But I still had questions—lots and lots of questions that I couldn’t find the answers to. Not even Garrett knew the answers to them. For a few months, the conversation at the temple was put on a shelf while we both tried to reconcile our feelings. Luckily, we both had enough faith to trust that if Heavenly Father made it clear to both of us that we were supposed to get married, things would work out in their own time. We moved forward with our engagement a few months later and Garrett moved closer to me for the summer in hopes of strengthening our relationship.

How I Married a Man Who Experiences SSA

On one of our many morning runs that summer, Garrett told me that he had started to look for some help. He Googled, “gay Mormon help” and the name Ty Mansfield popped up. He immediately recognized the name; Ty lived in the same town he did! That day was

VOICES OF HOPE

a turning point in our journey because we realized that a “mixed-orientation marriage” in the gospel had been done and could be done. Just knowing there were others on the same journey as ours, regardless of how hard or different the journey might be, gave us an incredible amount of hope. Our impressions to continue in our relationship were confirmed as Garrett discovered resources inside and outside the Church that he had never before imagined. There were books, websites, support groups, and even words from members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, available for support and encouragement.

At this point, you might be thinking... *“but he likes men! How could you marry him knowing that he was attracted to other men?”* Good question! I didn’t actually know if I could do that, but I knew two things: one, I loved Garrett more than I had ever loved anyone before and I knew that he genuinely loved me the same way; and two, I knew that Heavenly Father wanted us to get married and that was enough for me to move forward in faith. Growing up, I always wanted to marry a man who put God first and who loved the gospel of Jesus Christ as much as I did. From everything Garrett had told me, he was that and more. Every day, he makes a choice to live the gospel the best way he can despite his attractions. My question is, Why wouldn’t I want to marry a kind, loving man who not only loves me, but also loves God more than anyone else I know?

Hope in Marriage

Many people told us that the first year of marriage would be the hardest, but compared to the year that my then-boyfriend/fiancé told me he was attracted to men, our first year was easy. Yes we had our struggles, but every marriage has their own and ours had very little, if anything, to do with Garrett’s SSA. Finances, chores, sex, and balancing our time were our main struggles—probably similar to any young marriage.

Marriage is vulnerable and raw and I don’t feel that adding SSA into the mix makes it any better or worse. Together, we make it work by being honest and completely open with each other in every aspect of our marriage. When he has an attraction, he confides in me and we work through it together. When I’m struggling with anything, I go to him and we try to work through it together.

My biggest struggle at the beginning of our marriage was not taking his attractions personally. When he would tell me about his attractions, I would automatically blame myself, like I had caused him to have that attraction by not being enough for him. In reality I had nothing to do with them. Eventually I came to the understanding that my husband might always experience SSA and these attractions were going to be there whether I was a part of the equation or not. I needed to trust him, just like he needed to trust me. Most importantly, we try to keep ourselves in a place that is healthy and strong so that we can both contribute to our marriage in positive ways.

MY ROLLER COASTER JOURNEY

Our marriage isn't perfect, but I don't know of a marriage that is. Garrett and I do everything we can to make it the best marriage and then turn it over to the Lord. Allowing the Atonement into our marriage allows us to be imperfect, to struggle, and to have happiness beyond anything we could ever imagine. The atonement of Jesus Christ gives us hope that our marriage can, and will, succeed.

Finding Hope in the Journey

It's been a roller coaster of a ride over the past few years. but since I've always considered myself to be the adventurous type, I'm not surprised how things have turned out. If you would have told me on the day I went to Six Flags on Gay Pride Day that I would one day marry a man who experiences SSA, I would have thought you were crazy. But If you would have told me that I would marry an incredible man who loved to cook, hated sports but loved art, would make me laugh and love me like crazy all the days of my life (as we are planning), I would have said, "Sign me up!"

Along this journey, many of my prayers have been answered as I pleaded with the Lord for understanding. I have felt the Saviors deep love and continuously found hope in His atonement. Though I don't have nearly all the answers that I would like to have, I have hope that one day I will. In the meantime, it is my job to judge less and love more like the Savior.