

# FIGHT ON 'TIL THE END

ANNETTE BOWEN

*"All my life I've had to fight."*  
— Sofia from *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker

I'm the "L" in LGBTQ and, also, I am African-American, or as I like to say, "I am a minority within a minority." Coming to terms with my sexuality was a mind-numbing experience, especially in a world that frowns upon same-sex relationships. For years, I hid my true self from everyone I knew and loved. I even hid my true self from me!

Family and friends knew I was a "tomboy." Playing street football felt comfortable. Sure, modern dance and chorus gave me a way to showcase my talent, but something was amiss. The gleam left my eyes because I was lying to myself, friends, and family. One day, my aunt asked me, "Why do you act so much like a boy?"

Before I knew it, I opened my mouth and these words came out loud and strong, "Because I like girls, and hanging out with my male friends makes me feel good." Why did I blurt that out? She looked at me like I had two heads! After that, she treated me like the town pariah! To appease her, I got a "boyfriend"; I even had a baby, but it still felt WRONG!

I didn't know that there were brave men and women who suffered and died so that I could step out of the shadows and stand in the marvelous light of who I really am. I didn't know that I could be an out and proud lesbian because I could stand on the shoulders of those who came before me:

- The Stonewall Rioters in New York City whose courageous protest turned a flicker of visibility into a full-fledged fire of LGBTQ people coming out all over the United States.



**BAYARD RUSTIN.** Wolfson, Stanley, photographer. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. New York World-Telegram and the Sun Newspaper Photograph Collection.



- Bayard Rustin, organizer of the 1963 March on Washington, who endured harsh treatment because of his sexuality, but didn't let that hinder him from being a staunch ally to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

- Harvey Milk, the first openly gay person elected to public office in California, who was assassinated by a homophobic colleague.

- And countless dedicated people who fought the AIDS epidemic, who supported each other to be themselves, who set up shelters and staffed hotlines, who wrote and made art that gave visibility to gays and lesbians, who fought for equal protection under the law.

Learning about these past soldiers on the frontline of the LGBTQ movement made me realize that I couldn't join the fight on the outside until I dealt with the fight on the inside. So much turmoil churned within my being. I was putting all my energy into denying myself.

Once I decided to stop denying my true identity, life became clearer. It's almost as if a light switch was flipped on in my head. I stopped believing the belittling words of my family and so-called friends. I met other LGBTQ people, and they helped me feel more like myself. I decided: No more hiding. It was time to bloom! I pulled my boot laces tight and stepped forward. No more shame, no more shrouds, no more lies. It's time to fight for equality, so LGBTQ youth will see that there's no shame in being themselves — only freedom. I joined a gay affirming church. Through our outreach ministry, we let other members of the LGBTQ community know it's okay to be who you are! I guess you could say church was my saving grace.

June 26, 2015, will go down in the annals of history for the gay community. In a 5-4 vote, the Supreme Court voted for marriage equality for same-sex couples. I'll NEVER forget the overwhelming sense of joy I felt that day. Facebook, Twitter, and every news outlet in the world lauded this monumental decision. But that's just a drop of equality into a gargantuan bucket that will probably never be filled. Are we there yet? NO! Do we have a long way to go? YES! Shall we continue to fight? YES and with immense ferocity. 'TIL THE END OF THE LINE!

*Annette Bowen is a student at Literacy Action, Inc. She's a mother, grandmother and bona fide "Marvel movie nerd!!" Annette believes there's a writer inside everyone. All you have to do is tap into yourself and allow the waters to flow!!*