



## **South Florida Connects (SFC) No Spouse Left Behind: Straight Spouse Awareness.**

### **Our History**

**South Florida Connects (SFC)** was founded in 2009 by a mother and daughter team who wanted to help bring back awareness to some very basic social issues. The economy had taken a down turn and many people were having a very difficult time coping financially. At the same time, many homeowners who lost well paying jobs, were going into foreclosure, and having difficulty feeding their families.

Many people were so private and all this financial hardship was new to so many of them that there was a code of silence. At that same time the CEO began to volunteer with NACA, a national organization that helps distressed homeowners, secure affordable mortgage solutions from their mortgage lenders. This work brought even more awareness to the financially, distressing plight of more people. Something else had to be done.

So the women at SFC, Debbie Thomas-Brown and her daughter Lori-Ann Pace decided to give people a way to help each other without any feelings of shame or ego problems. The philanthropic arm of SFC was formed and the first website went up with at <http://www.southfloridaconnects.org>.

Everyone was encouraged to become kindness ambassadors. People are encouraged to help someone else in need of assistance, in a way that does not make them feel obligated to return the favor, but make them feel good enough about the act of kindness, so that they want to help someone else. The SFC pay it forward initiative was born and they began to use "Pay It Forward" bracelets to help people to remember, to continue helping others in need.

The "**SFC Tagg Card**" also came into use. This is a friendly card given to someone who received a kindness act, to remind them to do the same for someone else.



The staff knew they had to raise public awareness about what was happening in some neighborhoods and families so the information was shared in local churches and community organizations. A number of local pastors liked the idea and the pay it forward principle continue to thrive. People were able to contribute to the lives of others without having anyone feel like they were receiving a hand out.

It was at that time that SFC first introduced its logo: **hands outstretched to each other with a light between them.** The hands represent caring, giving and receptive spirits. The light represents the deliberate gesture of giving and receiving, without any pressure to give, or expect anything in return. The circle represents all people world wide, but especially our circle of South Floridians.

**South Florida Connects** hopes to bring back a very unique style synonymous with immigrants...communities and people helping others, who are less fortunate in whatever way is needed. This helps to make communities more invested in building each other, and looking out for the others welfare.

### **A New Day**

In 2010, SFC reorganized as the climate within the Caribbean and immigrant community started to change, or to say it better, some things became more apparent than they were before. It was the beginning of a new era for the organization. The organization is faith based so it became aware that many marriages were disintegrating because it was discovered that one spouse was living a secretly gay life. The deception was more than what some spouses could handle.

Their cultural awareness and religious expectations were also a dominant part of the way how disclosures were handled. It was a devastating time for some families.

SFC officials determined that many people were suffering unnecessarily due to a lack of correct information. People felt devastated, ashamed, and alone because there was no organization that they could identify with culturally or locally. South Florida Connects decided to add social philanthropy to it services. Much research was done and the picture showed that many people in the local churches, were struggling with same sex orientation, and spouses were dealing with the aftermath of the disclosure or discovery of gay orientation of their long time spouse.

The immigrant community, especially Caribbean people does not necessarily know enough about homosexuality, except from what the bible says about it. That makes it more difficult to disseminate information that will provide any measure of stress relief. It is difficult for some Caribbean nationals to openly accept or even tolerate any form of gay orientation.

Even those who are of gay orientation can sometimes be homophobic in their speech and behavior. The culture does not readily accept this and so the problem arises where some of those who are of gay orientation, choose to hide it under the cover of a marriage, and or membership in a church.

Other organizations offer wonderful advice and assistance to straight spouses. They are a particularly exceptional source of help for many, but Caribbean people have some different needs. The culture is different; the religious values about homosexuality are so set in stone that it is hard to penetrate. So our immigrants and Caribbean straight spouses were not getting the assistance they really needed. Some people were not even aware that they could get support.

With no funding, except from personal resources, the founders of SFC realized that there was a greater task ahead than they had imagined. They realized that there needs to be a system in place that allowed people to reach out for peer support, and help in a non judgmental, very confidential way.

So after extensive research and talking to many people, and some straight spouses, with limited funding, a website was set up with a dedicated phone line used as the Straight Spouse Awareness Hotline. Some local interviews were done to bring more awareness to the problem and also point to the support that was available.

One of the unknown problems highlighted when people did decide to open up and ask for support, was the high cost of divorce when straight spouses decide to divorce. Such divorces seem to never be uncontested even when no kids or tangible property are involved. Some gay husbands pretend to be trying to hang on to a marriage that they neither want nor really care to save. They just wanted the convenience of hiding their same sex loving behavior, and gay orientation in a marriage, to the detriment of their straight spouse.

They will go through all kinds of motions to stall and frustrate their straight spouse, who they have no use for sexually, except to give the illusion that they have a normal family. Some gay spouses, after all the years of deception and infidelity, are filing motion after motion trying to frustrate judges into allowing their besieged, distraught straight spouse to pay them spousal support, to augment their income, so that they can maintain their lifestyle so they can continue to entertain their gay lovers in relative comfort.

Women in the church suffer the most as it is very difficult for them to even consider separating from a secretly gay husband of many years. Some men are downright vindictive because the straight wife refuses to continue to live a lie in a marriage that

only now exists on paper. Some men honestly did not mean to deceive anyone, as they themselves were not even sure of their gay orientation when they got married.

But now that they are here in the USA, and everything is so accessible. Easy access to the internet, text messaging and telephone service allows them to explore some of the repressed feeling that they were even afraid to name before. That has caused a decline in so many Caribbean marriages. Many men and women have no clue what is going on. Why their relationships seem so broken.

This is where the suffering begins, as so many straight spouses believe it is their fault and is spending their lives trying to fix a relationship that is irretrievably broken with all the secret deception, lies and covert gay behavior of their spouse.

Sometimes a very negative disclosure propels straight spouses to flee their home and marriages, sometimes losing their jobs and becoming homeless temporarily. SFC in the future plans to set up a fund to assist straight spouses going through lengthy, destructive and financially draining divorces.

SFC has set in place the website at <http://www.southfloridaconnects.com> and the 24/7 dedicated, phone hotline and email support, as a way to help those who feel ready enough to reach out. It is a process and people need time to transition through the stages of grief, because for some people disclosure or discovery of gay orientation on the part of a spouse is like a death.

The organization has also teamed with Family & Friends Connection, Inc. to provide information via the radio airwaves. With the aid and assistance of some dedicated volunteers in leadership in the wider community, our research has also borne some good results.

We have teamed with Bonnie Kaye, an internationally recognized straight spouse counselor, and now offer online chat support through her straight spouse support network. This straight spouse support network has thousands of members here in the USA, and internationally. SFC CEO was recently named the [Minority and Immigrant Spokeswoman](#) for the Bonnie Kaye Support Network.

SFC also began the **“No spouse Left Behind: Straight Spouse Awareness Campaign”** a public education and awareness effort to educate, inform, empower and support straight spouses locally in South Florida, and in countries such as Jamaica along with other Caribbean countries.

One of the objectives is to help prevent prolonged emotional suffering of more straight spouses, by teaching some subtle signs that people may be able to identify and help use to put the puzzle pieces together. If more women are able to do this, they will avoid more marriages with secretly gay men and there will be less suffering.

## **Progress Made**

After the first radio interview, SFC founder, Debbie Thomas-Brown was able to reach out to some straight spouses who were so distressed and felt so lost. (Without identifying anyone, permission was granted to use this info if it will help someone else). They had no idea of why their once loving marriages deteriorated to such a degree. One woman was sure her husband was not cheating because he never left the house except to attend church once a week.

He became a hermit. Unknown to her his best friend who visits him often, and he were having a torrid affair in her home. He was afraid to leave the house as he might hit on other man and everyone would know he is gay. His friend who is also married, is his lover, they started exploring their gay orientation, by looking at gay porn and exchanging explicit text messages with other men, but then decided to just stick to each other, so no one else would know.

His daughter saw him use a trick that high school girls use on boys...he had his hand in his friends pocket massaging his private parts. She confided in her mom and she investigated discretely. It was a big mess, as two families were almost torn apart completely. SFC was able to offer peer support and a referral given for the husbands.

Not surprisingly, no one wanted to talk to their spiritual advisers about it. An effort is been made to bring about continued positive dialog with pastors and lay preachers in local churches and in Jamaica, to help them be able to understand the phenomenon and be better able to assist members who are affected directly or indirectly.

It is very surprising the number of straight spouses there are. We hope to continue to inform and empower as more and more straight spouses decide to come out from under their dark cloud and seep help. HIV/AIDS and STD education is very important, as in this culture; people tend to believe that married gay lovers are safe. They sometimes do not protect themselves from sexually transmitted diseases. Some straight spouses have learned about their deception the hard way, with positive HIV and other STD results.

### **Expanding Our Reach: No Spouse Left Behind**

Because this is a worldwide problem, SFC has begun to reach out to countries like Jamaica, The Virgin Islands, Bahamas, and Barbados to bring more awareness to straight spouse issues. We have begun to expand SFC's reach as an organization. The website is visited by people from many countries. The translator makes it possible for everyone, no matter their language, to make use of the information, as this is a universal problem for straight spouses everywhere.

We are working even harder to involve all sectors in efforts to fight back against the misinformation, perceptions and stigma that go along with any gay issue. Straight spouses are encouraged to seek support early after discovery or disclosure, so they will have more support, and time to get their lives back on track.

There was a time when it was acceptable for a man to beat his wife. In the Caribbean, that was between husband and wife...not so anymore. It has a name...Domestic violence and abuse. There is awareness now, and people are making the connection.

This brings us to the place where, we here at SFC understand that the straight spouse awareness process is going to be long and maybe difficult. But we intend to persevere until straight spouses; especially those of immigrant, minority descent are able to access information and services to educate themselves, and find empowerment and support. We will continue to make sure that straight spouse know that there is confidential, nonjudgmental support available to everyone regardless of nationality, education, socio economic status, sex or race.

The groundwork for progress has been laid. We know that we will get to the place where immigrant and minority straight spouses know that help is always available to them and that they do not have to deal with this alone. Our advocacy continues, and we will continue until this minority/immigrant support network is established in the mainstream, completely publicized, and Caribbean straight spouses, and others from all over the world, know that straight spouse awareness is here to make sure that no spouse is left behind.

Today, South Florida Connects is the only Organization providing education, information, empowerment and confidential support geared specifically to immigrant and minority straight spouses in general, and Caribbean straight spouses in particular. To put it another way, we've are helping to provide a light at the end of the tunnel for straight spouses, and we will not rest until we expand that progress so that no Caribbean straight spouse, or immigrant – in South Florida, the U.S. or around the world – will ever feel that they are alone.

**No Spouse Left Behind: Straight Spouse Awareness.**

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[www.southfloridaconnects.org](http://www.southfloridaconnects.org)  
[sfconnects@gmail.com](mailto:sfconnects@gmail.com)

Tel. Hotline: 954-983-9751