

Ellen Morgan's Coming Out On 'Ellen' Was A Transcendent Moment In TV History, But One That Came With A Price (June 8, 2017, Decider)

Over the last several weeks, Decider polled over 40 LGBTQ entertainment professionals — writers, directors, showrunners, actors, journalists — and asked them to list their picks for the most important LGBTQ TV characters of all-time. We let “important” be defined in the eye of the beholder; these characters all meant something to us in our own personal ways. Check out the complete list of the [Top 50 Most Important LGBTQ TV Characters of All-Time](#) here; what follows is one of our [essays on the top 10 characters on our list](#), in recognition of their particularly significant place in LGBTQ entertainment.

It's impossible to talk about the importance of Ellen Morgan's coming out without talking about [Ellen DeGeneres](#)' coming out, because the two are inextricably linked. Twenty years ago, the thought of a major television star coming out was still unthinkable. Yet, that's exactly what Ellen DeGeneres did on April 14th 1997, on the cover of *Time* magazine. Her character on [Ellen](#), Ellen Morgan, would follow her two weeks later in the groundbreaking [“The Puppy Episode.”](#) After living for years in a glass closet of sorts (DeGeneres was out to friends and family but not the public), DeGeneres decided to take a huge step, and bring Ellen Morgan along with her. It was a risk she would pay for professionally.

It's also hard to separate Ellen Morgan from Ellen DeGeneres because both Ellens were very much alike in personality and style. Awkward, funny, kind and generous, Ellen Morgan was her proxy's doppelganger of sorts. When audiences first met Ellen Morgan, the show was called *These Friends of Mine*, but it was clear early on that Ellen was the star and the focus of the show shifted to her, as did the name.

Like many ambiguously queer coded characters, Ellen Morgan had ill-fated relationships and dates with the opposite sex. Even in “The Puppy Episode,” Ellen throws herself into a romantic entanglement with a male former classmate, hoping that it will deflect from her attraction from his beautiful and charming colleague (played by the remarkable Laura Dern). The resulting scene is one the show's best, with Ellen trying to explain in her signature rambling awkward style, how she successfully bedded her friend. (She didn't.) “I guess I'm just a sucker for man-woman sex.” (She wasn't.)

Ellen Morgan's coming out was painful yet hopeful, and reflected what a lot of other LGBTQ folks were feeling at the time. Change was in the air, you could practically feel it cracking, but who would lead the charge? Turns out, Ellen Morgan was that unassuming person. Millions watched, including tiny gay me and a group of my straight friends. Ellen Morgan was the first out lesbian many people ever knew, and the fact that she was fictional doesn't take away that power. While at the heart of it, Ellen DeGeneres did what she did to be free and for her LGBTQ community, but her bravery transcended that. When Ellen Morgan says, “I'm gay” into an airport gate microphone, what she was really saying was, “You loved me five minutes ago, and I'm still the same person.” That moment took a sledgehammer to the status quo of keeping our

queerness hidden away, and made room for shows like *Will and Grace*, and for characters like [Buffy the Vampire Slayer's Willow Rosenberg](#) to fall in love with another woman without trauma or fear behind it.

In the end, Ellen Morgan did get by with a little help from her friends, which is another gift that Ellen bestowed upon TV audiences. Ellen's cousin Spence (early era [Jeremy Piven](#)) and co-worker Audrey (Clea Lewis) embrace her immediately, while bestie Paige (Joley Fisher) struggles a bit. It was realistic and showed allies (even if they didn't know they were at the time) how to stand by a friend or family member who was coming out.

While Ellen Morgan was ready to move on with her life and finally fall in love, audiences and advertisers weren't all quite as eager. As *Ellen's* final season focused on Ellen Morgan as an out lesbian, ratings began to fall. It would appear that audiences were ok with Ellen being a lesbian, but not so interested in watching her be a lesbian. The show also started veering into more serious topics, which was far from the tone of previous years. It was a risk, and unfortunately, one that did not pan out. The show was cancelled after its fifth season.

Twenty years later, there are over 140 LGBTQ characters on television in leading and supporting roles. While there are still many obstacles to overcome, we would not be here without Ellen Morgan, Ellen DeGeneres and her having the courage to say two tiny words that would become the biggest triumph in many people's lives: I'm gay.