FINDING MYSELF

from Gaysha Starr to GS Matencio

by GS Matencio aka Gaysha Starr
SGN Contributing Writer

My life, like most people’s, is composed of many different chapters and roles. I am biologically a 40-year-old person of Filipino descent. In drag queen years, I am a 20-year-old Seattle host and entertainer who has worked everywhere from bars and pageant stages to community fundraisers and corporate events. Most recently, I am a nine-month-old male-to-female Transgender woman.

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Thank You!

Organized by Skyy Martini Ice, reigning Miss Gay Seattle LVI, the Imperial Court of Seattle has been volunteering at Northwest Harvest’s SODO Community Market every month since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rates of food insecurity skyrocketed during the pandemic and remain disproportionately higher for LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC communities.

We are deeply grateful to our volunteers working with us to dismantle barriers that our LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC communities face in accessing nutritious food.

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I am changing. Often people associate Transgender people with physical changes, as those are the most apparent. But we should all talk openly about and support the mental and emotional changes too, because those are the most important ones to celebrate, as they require the most work daily.

So in addition to the physical changes, I have also been trying to manage the emotional and intellectual ones, especially as the HRT and other daily experiences have changed me with each step I take as my new nine-month-old self.

To be honest, I was a bit scared of how my life was going to change after coming out. I think I expected to be like in the movies, where the lead character gets a makeover and it seems that everything should go her way — but it still doesn’t. Instead, I’m very lucky that I have a career with companies and health benefits that afford me the ability to live the life I do and transition safely. Overpriced apartment on Capitol Hill? Check. Reliable car to drive around? Check. Reliable car to drive around? Check. Modest savings? Check. Few credit cards for emergencies? Check.

In the early stages of the pandemic, I learned who was comfortable seeing one another and who was not — and that if one did not really make the effort to keep relationships going, they would eventually crack. On the flip side, I also had a few of the most important people come into my life who never really knew Gaysha, entering my pandemic bubble just in time to meet GS.

But I still feel like I still spend quite a bit of time alone with my thoughts, feeling all kinds of high highs and low lows.

Who do I want to be (now that I’ve grown up)? One of the first lessons I continue to learn is figuring out what I want to look like when presenting as a woman. The beauty standards that all people try to obtain can be hard to achieve as we chase perfection by looking to celebrities, advertising, magazines, the news, social media, television, and movies. For Transgender people, it’s even another challenge, as we are first trying to physically identify as the gender we were not assigned at birth, and then trying to “pass” or not get clocked as we lead our day-to-day lives — sometimes for vanity, but also for emotional reasons and personal safety.

The beautiful and special thing about Transgender people is that how we come out and how we express our authentic selves are different — no two people’s journeys are the same. While for personal reasons not everyone who is Transgender will choose to undergo physical changes, most do choose to alter themselves starting with hormone or testosterone treatment, depending on their gender identity, and then leading up to surgery.

Some of the dangers, however, include self-harm or prescriptions that are not supervised by a medical professional, as well as underground surgeons that are not professionally trained, work in unsanitary conditions, and/or cannot help with any post-surgery follow-up. Nonetheless, some Transgender people will do whatever it takes to get under the knife in order to ultimately feel like the best versions of themselves, or that is all they can afford.

Only recently have I allowed myself to think about surgery. I know how far I will go and at what I am not planning to do (bottom surgery and facial feminization surgery). I am undecided on any lap or other surgeries.

Outside looking in, I started to do drag in 1993, when I was 21. I was told for the first decade or so that I was “fish” and could “pass.” Maybe in my early twenties, it was easier, when I could eat anything, my skin was naturally producing collagen, and the beauty ideals then were larger-than-life ’80s supermodels. The wigs were shaggy bangs in my eyes, and lots of disposable fashions from the bebe and BCBG sale racks were designer knockoffs.

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As I got into my mid-thirties and mid-forties, I accidentally found my niche: looking like a cast member of a Real Housewives franchise, playing the role of "divorcee-on-my-third-looking-for-my-fourth." The hair got bigger, the Spanx doubled, and — as I started working in designer stores — the clothes got brighter, shinier and more accessible (thanks to employee discounts). For a while, I submitted to the self-inflicted pressures of social media and brand creation, and I never wore the same thing twice.

Once I started to feel it was time to address my dysphoria between male and female and get serious about my transition, especially in the last three years, I started to have another kind of dysphoria, this time between Gaysha Starr and GB. I spent the ages of 21 to 47 being Gaysha and knew every detail about her — but I didn’t know GS very well.

I am in awe when looking at photos of myself from one year ago compared to now, as I continue to figure out what I want to look like. Thanks to a year of electrolysis combined with hormone therapy, my facial hair fell out, allowing me to avoid using heavy pancake makeup. Now, I just use two different colors of concealer and a translucent powder so you can see my freckles. Instead of "baking my face," and contouring like a Kardashian, it's softer and rounder. My false eyelashes are wispy, and I am finding a balance with makeup: applying enough to feel polished and professional, especially for my work as the store director of a luxury retailer, but not so much that I look like I'm going on stage.

Sometimes, I occasionally wonder if more makeup will make me look "more real," but I think it will just help me hide who I really am: a newly out Transgender woman transitioning in a COVID world.

I used to spend a fortune on nail glue and press-on nails and just pop my nails off, damaging my nail beds. Now, I make sure my nude manicure is done every two weeks so they don’t look too grown out — and I wonder if I could get away with an extra week, just to save some cash.

Also, thanks to the BHT, the balding in the back of my head stopped, and hair even started to grow in, helping me to feel more secure about my ability to present my femininity using my own hair. To offset my receding hairline in front, though, my good friend cut bangs with one precise snip this past spring, which suddenly took years off my appearance and instantly softened my features.

It also helped probably another 20 minutes off my makeup process, as a lot I do is wash it a few times a week and then iron it. On some of my days off, I don’t wear makeup and just throw my hair up. While I may not look like woman, I still feel like one to me.

With the time I save getting ready, I can now do other things, like snorkel, cuddle with my pet Nico, or plan out my day, rather than be in the mirror for two hours. When I get ready, I now listen to self-help podcasts rather than a song on repeat.

Clothes do not make the woman
I naively thought that it would be easy to transition from my drag wardrobe to my "everyday" clothes, and that it would be realistic to appear like a Real Housewives every day. I assumed that the bright clothes I wear in my walk-in closet and those shelves of stilettos would be comfortable and that I would want the same attention that they brought to me when I entered a Gay bar with my friends as in those places still at 50% capacity.

However, as I shopped for my new wardrobe, I racked up charges on my credit cards for clothes in darker, neutral colors and for tailored pieces that were more suited to a different kind of self-expression. My closet is now a comfortable mix of high and low. As of late, I have learned the benefits of comfort and of wearing high off-heel boots and sports bras, an off-the-shoulder hoodie, and Nikes, living out my own Lululemon and stroller mom fantasy. The funny thing is that I wear the same five comfortable things over and over each week, in sync with the employee dry cleaning schedule.

But one of the hardest parts of present full-time the woman I choose to is wearing multiple garments, in order to feel snatched in the waist. After being in them for a full day, I get wet and scarring. During the holidays, though, I gained weight and began to get naturally curvier, so for practical reasons and comfort, I now only wear Spanx when I must.

I don’t pad my hips and padside the backside of my 1,000 and a drag, so sometimes I will use a belt to create a waist, and this fall, I will probably begin to waist-train with a corset. Another challenge is wearing shoes that make my dress’s size 11 feel not so big but that are still comfortable. I try to not wear flats, as I feel too masculine in them; I feel more feminine and in charge wearing heels.

(What I find ironic is that I do not often change the pitch of my voice to be higher or softer, as for now it takes too much effort to both concentrate on the content of a conversation and adjust how I sound.)

Regardless of what clothes and how much makeup I wear, I like most people, also try not to fall into the trap of overfiltering photos I post on my social media so that, instead of feeding better, I end up changing an impossible version of myself that I will never be able to live up to. I also am not sure how I feel about the number of selfies I take and post and the content I curate, as I am still trying to figure out my transition publicly.

I chalk up some of my insecurities to my second puberty — and that, like most newly out people, I am in a phase of self-discovery and growth. I am on the path of accepting that I am going to not look like my drag persona Gaysha Starr; I will always be thankful for her chapter — but I am also proudly writing a new one as GS Matencios.
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Fatherhood, like anything meaningful in this world, is complicated. To members of the LGBTQ community, fatherhood is all the more complicated. It might provoke painful memories of rejection, of men who chose religion or politics over a child struggling to understand themselves in a chaotic world. Fatherhood might be a goal at the end of a long, difficult journey. Fatherhood might even seem like an impossible feat.

Robert and Robert

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Robert and Robert

For Robert Crowley, fatherhood indeed seemed impossible. “Growing up as a small kid, six, seven, eight years old, I knew that early that I wanted to be a parent one day. And as I come to terms with my sexuality and I knew that I was gay, I remember consciously having to make that decision, that if I was going to be gay, I could not have children, because gay people did not have children. And a lot of laws at that time, and especially internationally, you could not adopt if you were a gay man.”

Crowley continued to fight an internal battle between future desires and being authentic until the day he met a Gay father. “When I was in high school, my best friend worked for an ice cream shop that turns out was owned by half of a gay couple… And attached to it was a thrift, and I’m partner ran it, and they had a daughter that was adopted, and that was eye-opening for me in high school, because what I thought I knew — that I couldn’t be this person — like, it actually does happen.”

Years later, Crowley grew up and met his future husband, a man so perfect for him, he even had the same name. Robert. Robert Crowley and Robert Martin had “the discussion” early on in their relationship and decided they both really wanted to become parents someday.

Someday came seven years later. “We thought it would take a while, but it ended up being fairly quick,” Martin said. “We started the process in January of 2011 and we had our first child in December of 2011.”

“We [were] in three different ways… We started the surrogacy process, the adoption placement process, [and] foster care adoption, and whichever worked was going to be what it was meant to be.” Martin explained.

As it turned out, adoption was what was meant to be for the Crowley family, and with the help of Amara, an adoption agency, they were able to place a birth mother within days, with whom Crowley and Martin developed a close bond. The night her water broke, they were at the movie theater with her. Crowley and Martin rushed her to the hospital and were able to witness the birth of their daughter, whom they named Mirabel. “I even got to cut the cord, which was so incredible,” Martin pushed.

The new fathers knew they wanted their family to expand again one day, and so they left their applications open with Amara. Just two years later, they got the familiar call inviting them, once again, to become fathers.
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"The second adoption was through foster care placement, and that was a much longer, much more challenging journey," Martin explained. Crowley and Martin were matched with a set of twins, a boy and a girl. The moment they met these children, they fell in love, but as it so often is with foster care, the fathers faced an unknown future with their babies.

"We did almost lose them, early on in the process," Martin remembered. The birth mother fought tooth and nail, and at one point it seemed like Crowley and Martin were going to lose the babies for good.

"Those were the toughest memories," Crowley recalled. "We were told, that because of the scenario, they may be going back, and I was leaving on a business trip. I had to go to a photo shoot in another state, and I knew this was going to happen while I was gone, and so I boarded the plane, and it was hard leaving them... I was a mess at the airport, I was a mess on the airplane..."

"I was a mess at home with three children," Martin added in with a laugh. "It was really, really emotional." As it turned out, the birth mother made a bad decision, setting the clock back and allowing Crowley and Martin more time with the babies.

After four years of custody battles, Camden and Camille officially became Crowleys. Martin and Crowley had finished the long journey they had started, but the battles were only beginning.

"So, our oldest daughter, Mirabel, she's biracial, she's white and African American, and our twins are both Black," Martin explained. Both he and Crowley are white. Learning to be thoughtful parents of children of different races led the men to become more aware of the world they live in, and the privilege that has coddled them. Amara provided them with resources on transracial adoption, and Crowley and Martin reached out to Black friends to learn more about the cultures and identities of their children.

"I remember thinking, we cannot fail them in this regard. It is not an option. It's been a challenge; we're not perfect. We strive to do that for them every single day, as best we can," Martin said.

"In addition to that, we had to be really, really eyes wide open in terms of white privilege, in terms of what exists for us that might not be extended to our children, and as they grow up, what is that going to look like?" Crowley added. The dads explained how they began to realize just how much children's media is marketed toward white children.

"We would overindex on the one Black Disney princess, Tiana, that exists out there, or Pocahontas or Mulan, anything we could to create diversity in the toys that exist."

Crowley acknowledged that "there is so much we don't know, and can never know. Being Caucasian people, we have never had to treat our hair or our skin in a different way, but with a devotion to loving their kids, instilling a sense of pride in their identity, and more hair care products than they had ever imagined, Crowley and Martin are bringing up three smart, socially aware, and very confident children.

Crowley and Martin's efforts seem to be working. I sat down to talk to Mirabel about what her experience has been like with two dads. Her first response was, "I love being mixed! I love having my siblings! I love having my parents! I just love my family!"

Mac and Derrick
Like Crowley and Martin, Mac Lowery always knew he wanted to be a father someday. "But it wasn't until I met Derrick, really... We just had a conversation -- it wasn't even a debate -- we both knew we wanted kids," Mac said, referring to his husband, Derrick Lowery.

Mac and Derrick met in 2015 when singing in a Gay men's choir, and in December of 2020 they took the leap, choosing to start their family via surrogacy. Six months later, they had chosen a surrogate and the embryos had been implanted.

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Born in Mexico at just 31 weeks and 2 days, the babies were stuck in the NICU for nearly a month. “We weren’t expecting them until February of 2021, so we didn’t meet them until inauguration Day, January 20th, because of COVID,” Mac recalled.

From the day of their birth until he could hold them and take them home, Mac stayed in Mexico with his newborn sons. When it comes to being a first-time parent of twins, he was honest: “I’m tired, a lot. I consume a lot more caffeine than I ever had,” he checked.

The exhaustion is worth it for the Lowreys, however. Mac gushed about his favorite parts of parenting: “Oh, their smiles! It was so hard in the beginning, and then finally one day, I got a smile, and it was like, “Oh, that’s why I’m doing this.”

Looking toward the future, he is most excited for holidays with his sons, Reyes and Griffin, “but what I want most, I want them to talk. I’m waiting,” he laughed.

Mac and Derrick are aware that being gay with twins comes with unique challenges, and Mac was honest in discussing some of his fears when it comes to being a father. “If I make their life more difficult than it already is, that would really hurt me. I have the plan to just be open and honest with them, finding ways to answer questions, and finding books specifically about how they came here.

Moving to Seattle was a conscious choice for Mac and Derrick, who like Crowley and Martin, are St. Louis natives. The Lowreys hoped starting a family in Seattle would allow their children to experience childhood in a welcoming and progressive atmosphere, as well as provide a beautiful natural environment for the boys.

“I am so jealous that this will be their hometown! Look at this! Look at this! We live here! This is their neighborhood, even! We walk here everyday. We can see Mt. Rainier from our house!”

George and Angela

Many children who grow up in the LGBTQ community don’t have the same experiences of love and acceptance the Crowley and Lowrey kids will get to experience. For some, father figures were found, sought.

For decades, young Queer kids all around Seattle found a father figure in SGN editor George Italian. It seems everyone in Seattle knew a beloved side of George, a large and friendly man who dedicated his life to Seattle’s Queer community.

But one person knew George like no one else, his daughter, Angela Craig. When reading a sympathy card after George’s passing last year, Angela came across words that seemed to embody the early relationship she shared with her father: “One thing I do know is that you were the light of his life. I remember when I had recently met him. I marveled at how delighted he was in your toddler company and every mundane activity, having enormous patience with your curiosity and distractions. I thought this is what it looks like when fathers cherish their daughters.”

George always treasured and loved Angela. Some of her fondest childhood memories were sitting atop George’s broad shoulders. “You could see the world,” she said smiling, as she remembered the pure love her father provided in her early childhood.

A strong sense of family was innate in George, who came from a large, tight-knit family that valued closeness. George not only fostered closeness but also pride in Angela’s intelligence. “He would take me to the library, and I would look at books, and then all of a sudden he noticed I was kind of starting to read the words, and he went around bragging, ‘Angela knows how to read at three! She’s three and she knows how to read’!”

Angela laughed as she remembered how proud he always was of her. “That was the good part of my dad.”

“As I got older, it got a little more difficult, because life does get a little more difficult as you get older,” she reflected. George was kind and loving and proud, but there was another side to him, as there usually is to everybody. He could get angry, “and I was a little afraid of him,” Angela remembered.

Through the anger, Angela still loved her father and cherished their relationship, until the day he left. “I was twelve years old when he went off on a business trip, and he never returned.” George left Angela and her mom in financial ruin, with no contact for years.

Angela grew up watching the bank take her home and belongings out from under her, wondering if her father was ever alive.

George was alive, though. He had moved to Seattle. George had known he was Gay since he left the nunnery early in his twenties. His wife had known, but Angela never did.

“It just wasn’t a topic anyone talked about,” George said in an interview with the Legacy Project in March of 2020. Angela found out her father was Gay when she was a sophomore in high school, and she held onto that same sentiment: leaving George’s sexuality a skeleton in the family’s closet. “He was exploring the other side of his life in Seattle,” Angela acknowledged.

At the same time George had abandoned his only daughter, he had begun to nurture his new baby, the Seattle Gay News, becoming a father figure to Seattle’s LGBTQ community.

The year Angela became a junior in high school, she reconnected with her father. “It was very tense, and it was hard, and awkward,” she recalled. “Over time we established a relationship, but it was very complicated. I wanted him to know his granddaughters, and he completely enjoyed his granddaughters.”

When Angela thinks of her father, she remembers him as gregarious, confident, charismatic, purposeful, and intimidating. While she could have held onto resentment toward him for abandoning her, Angela instead reflects on the struggles of their relationship with wisdom and hindsight. She has made peace with the fact that he needed to leave her and her mother to find himself, and to help others.

“Not only did he help others, he changed their lives. He fathered some of these people. He not only fathered them, he sometimes grandfathered them. A lot of people are stunned from their families, unfortunately, and here you have this great, big fatherly figure with big arms and bags, and with him you’re totally accepted.”

While Angela grew up missing her father, and at times resenting him, she was ultimately able to look back and see that “the loss that I had, in the fatherhood piece, he gave that fatherhood to other people, and more people, who needed it more than I did, and I am at peace with that.”

In adulthood Angela and George found a way back to each other. Time found a way of suturing old wounds. Angela was able to forgive George, and George was able to show his daughter the side of him he had hid from her for so long.

After George’s passing, Angela stepped into George’s literally very large shoes and began the task of saving the paper that had become George’s life work.

George and Angela’s bond is one that transcends time, mistakes, sexuality, and even death, as she dedicates her time now to preserving the legacy of her father, a man who became a father to hundreds of others.

Fatherhood is complicated, and sometimes, even the best people can get it wrong, but at the end of the day, it can be simplified into one word: love. For some, fatherhood is a journey, a fight to be recognized, a constant struggle. For others, it is an opportunity, a chance to give to someone what you didn’t get yourself.

Fatherhood is about acknowledging mistakes. It is being there for your children, and loving them, regardless of their blood, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, or location — or if they are a fifty-year-old Gay newspaper.
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- Alan Hart, 1918

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Cass DuVani just turned 27 years old. He is a brand ambassador and campaign model for Medinax Collective, one of Seattle’s hottest high-end streetwear brands. He is one of the hardest-working hustlers out there: selling his own stickers and printed T-shirts while doing landscaping and landscape architecture to keep his household afloat during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, he is also one of the most interesting men I have ever met.

I first came to know DuVani through his fight for Black liberation here in the streets of Seattle. Through thick black smoke rising from heaps of burning trash spilling out of overturned dumpsters, he could be seen on the front lines of a long-simmering struggle against those seeking to preserve institutional racism and the instruments of our society that have historically fought to preserve it.

“I feel like I’m almost a triple threat: Black, Trans, and male,” said DuVani, jokingly. “The first year, I was on the front line the entire time. Then, I kind of got burnt out, and I switched my activism to mutual aid. We started coming back, now. I’m curious to see how that’s gonna play out.”

“I try to be an activist for Transgender rights and Black lives, and the homeless community. There’s just so many things in this country. It’s hard to not be an activist or engage in activism for something.”

Like the thousands of people who took to the streets of Seattle, he was moved by the death of George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man who died at the hands of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. A jury concluded that Chauvin, who was recorded kneeling on Floyd’s neck for 9 minutes and 29 seconds, was guilty of his murder. Despite the conviction, DuVani believes little has changed.

“I think they used Derek Chauvin as an example. Just last week, Winston [Smith] was killed just 10 minutes away from where George Floyd was. It is not going to stop until we literally stop the system, tear it down, and move forward and create something new,” he explained. “We haven’t gotten past that. People are still dying. Police brutality is still going on. That is not what I would consider justice. We are just going to keep fighting until abolition comes.”

Family
The fight for racial equality is personal to DuVani, who describes himself as a “light-skinned” Black man and whose wife is white. “My mom is white. So, I’m half Black and half white,” he said. “If you see my skin color, I can’t really identify as white. To anyone in the system, I’m Black. I’m not white.”

DuVani’s dad was a professional soccer player, and he moved around a lot. He adds that his family was also subjected to racism, which he was too young to recognize at the time.

“As a kid, I spent time in San Diego, California. I spent a good amount of time growing up in Arizona, unfortunately. I’ve kind of just lived all over,” he said. “Looking back, there were little moments that I heard toward my dad and, even toward my mom [for] being with someone who is Black… I have definitely seen a difference in how each one of them was treated.”

Besides dealing with issues of race, DuVani struggled to understand his gender identity and sexual orientation. He said there were few positive depictions of queer people growing up, outside of what he saw on MTV.

“I didn’t have any other queer people in my family. It was just me,” he said. “I kind of wanted to keep it to myself until I was 14 years old. When I came out, I had only slept with girls in middle school, because I thought it was the right thing to do. I was going into high school, so I kind of came out. I was kind of pushed into a box of being Gay or, before I started transitioning, being a Lesbian. That never really felt right to me. I would not identify as straight and I wouldn’t identify as Gay. I’m just here and Queer. I don’t want to be in a little box.”

Breakthrough
DuVani says he had a breakthrough regarding his gender identity after he met his wife, Joselyn, seven years ago. She identifies as pansexual, according to DuVani, and has been super supportive of him during their three-year marriage.

“I had actually gotten super depressed before coming to terms with my identity and my gender. I was at a very low point,” he said. “It wasn’t until I started dating my partner and my wife that I was getting ideas to explore my identity. More, my gender.”

DuVani began taking testosterone, a hormone that stimulates the development of male secondary sexual characteristics, three years ago and underwent a gender-affirming top surgery procedure about two years ago. Likewise, he finalized his legal name change earlier this month.

He says he knows it is rare to have a supportive family and feels very lucky.

“Some of my family was really supportive from the beginning. My twin sister, close friends, and my wife, obviously,” said DuVani. “My dad was supportive, my mom is super supportive now. However, when I first told her, she said she was going to need time, almost like a grieving kind of thing.”

The future
DuVani worked as chef before the pandemic for 10 years. Recently, he decided to enter a community college to pursue a career as a therapist, because “we don’t have that great of a representation in that field.”

The DuVanis were profiled in a story by KUOW as they delivered supplies to encampments across the city. Their mutual aid efforts mirror those of other Seattleites who have taken it upon themselves to meet the needs of their unhoused neighbor.

“We really try to do anything we can to help. There’s a lot of holes to fill due to capitalism,” he said. “We usually just get to different encampments… build community and bring the resources that they need.”

DuVani says he and his wife, who have lived in Washington for the past four years, discuss welcoming a baby into their home one day, once he is further along with his degree program. “I’m hoping that we’re building a better future now for our children to be able to live in a more accepting world,” he said.
HIV: THE NEGLECTED PANDEMIC

The long journey of a Seattle man in a new Vice documentary on Americans living with HIV

by Hannah Saunders
SGN Contributing Writer

For over a year, we, as a community, have focused on combating COVID-19. We have focused on keeping ourselves and our loved ones safe. What has not been a primary focus is an epidemic that has caused so much pain, a global issue that shares immense commonalities with our current pandemic, caused by a virus that has yet to be eradicated from our community: HIV.

On June 2, 2021, Vice released a documentary titled "HIV: The Neglected Pandemic," which highlights the history of the HIV crisis, the incredible medical advances that have been made along the way, and most importantly, the internal and external struggles of people living with HIV. It shows not only how far we have come with learning about, preventing, treating, and living with HIV but also how far we have yet to go.

The documentary is narrated by a man living with HIV. He is a prominent host, hairdresser, and author. "Queen Eye" star Jonathan Van Ness narrates the story, giving us a glimpse into the history of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the United States and how the virus was first identified as a disease. He also shares stories of inspiration, hope, and survival.

The documentary follows the lives of several individuals living with HIV, including Neil Lupin, a Seattle-based HIV-positive man who appeared in the documentary. He grew up in a Mormon household, and by the time he was 21, he had moved to San Diego, where he worked in Gay bars for six years. After a chain of events, he found himself moving back north to Washington state.

Neil's journey is full of twists and turns as he navigates the complex landscape of HIV treatment and care. He shares his experiences with stigma and discrimination, as well as the profound impact of the pandemic on his life.

The documentary also explores the history of HIV, from its discovery to the present day, highlighting the progress made in treatment and prevention. It features interviews with experts in the field, including doctors, activists, and community leaders, who share their insights and experiences.

The documentary is a powerful reminder of the ongoing battle against HIV and the importance of continued investment in research, education, and support for those living with the virus. It is a call to action for all of us to remain vigilant in our efforts to combat this pandemic and to support those who are living with HIV.

Neil Lupin, Photo courtesy of Vice Documentary

Vice is a global news organization that produces in-depth content on a variety of topics, from politics to culture. Its documentaries are known for their in-depth reporting and thought-provoking narratives. "HIV: The Neglected Pandemic" is a testament to Vice's commitment to bringing important stories to the forefront.

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Thank you!
Breaking generational curses

by Janice Atwill
SGN Contributing Writer

Brian Broome’s memoir Punch Me Up to the Gods is, in a word, metamorphic. With every turned page, you get farther away from the naïve self 250 pages ago. Broome shamelessly catalogues some of the most devastating moments of his life with the humor of a changed man. He shows readers how racism has in many cases made it impossible for Black parents to give their children the type of love they need, and how that affects the decisions the children make and the type of adults they become.

Each retelling of events from his past comes together to show the unique discrimination he faced at the intersection of his dark skin and homosexuality, and how that influenced his need for acceptance by white people, which in turn steered his need for escape, leading him to drugs and alcohol.

This talented author’s portrayal of his early childhood near Newton Falls, Ohio, pulled one thought from the back of my subconscious: Black men are equally expected to be monstrous, stupid animals as well as more of a man than any other you meet.

Everyone had expectations of Black men that they tried to force on young Brian, from the teachers who accused him of cheating and using words he “shouldn’t know”—to the school official who paddled him for helping a white girl to the Black students who called him out for being Gay, considered him an abomination, and refused to accept him as one of their own.

A historic curse

One author that Broome admires is James Baldwin, who wrote that the judgment people subject themselves to “begins in the eyes of one’s parents (the crucial, the definitive, the all-but-everlasting judgment).” As Broome writes in the “We Real Cool” section of his book, “My father back then believed in beating Black boys the way Black boys are supposed to be beaten. For our own good, he would say.”

The relationship Broome had with his father can easily and accurately be labeled abusive, but the deeper tragedy is the cycle it reveals. Jurnee (Brian’s father) could not show him the love or understanding he needed, because he had never seen it.

Carried over from a time when Black children were used against their parents or targeted directly as a form of control, the cruelty of white people had branded Broome’s family the same way it has branded many other Black families: with the curse of nonbalance and tough love adopted by people trying desperately to hide from the world what they love most in others.

His father’s attempts to beat masculinity into him came as much from a twisted form of love as it did ignorance and hatred. While Brian’s father may have hated the idea of him being Gay, what he hated more was the thought of white men killing him because of it.

His mother, while far less abusive, also did not give young Brian the love he craved — the “briggie-briggie kinkie-kinkie” love he mentioned in our interview, as well as in his book, that he watched obsessively on television as a child, portrayed solely by white parents with the financial security and free time to care about their children’s feelings.

His parents had never experienced the softer, more affectionate side of paternal love and were too busy fighting to survive while trying to provide.

When asked him what he thinks played the biggest part in how he valued white people over himself — his parents, peers, or teachers — without hesitation he said, “I think all of those things. I went to a mostly white school, and those white kids immediately let it be known they knew they were better than me. They put things in my head — including the teachers — and I knew I was being treated differently. I was treated like a different species, and my parents were too busy trying to survive that they did not have time to notify my blackness. They did not tell me these people were evil and deluded. They warned me, but did not teach me that I was worthy, So, directly my peers and teachers, but indirectly my parents.”

Learning who children really are

My focus after reading Punch Me Up to the Gods became identifying not only what young Brian was missing but also what he felt he needed. What parents of little Black kids, little Gay Black kids, and even little Gay kids of any race could do to help give them a fighting chance in a cold world.

“I don’t believe in tough love,” Broome said to me when I asked what type of parental attention, what love language, he felt he needed as a child. “I believe in love love. That’s not to say there shouldn’t be boundaries, but tough love feels like force. But if someone had looked at me and said, ‘I see you and I accept you,’ it would have helped.”

In one of the most insightful moments of our conversation, Broome told me that parents should learn who their children are before they aim them against a racist America.

“Every environment was trying to pound me into this shape that didn’t suit me, and it was painful, and I wish they had asked little Brian who he was. But my parents were busy, and I believe my father was deeply depressed.”

He told me a story about a professor of his who had a son whose favorite color was pink. By the time the boy got back from his first day of grade school, he hated the color altogether.

“And just that quick, the molding begins to make kids into what we’re comfortable with. If I had a child, I would try to get to know her before I started trying to reinforce her against a racist American culture, and that way, I could better protect her.”

Even children born in the same household with the same parents need different things. Some will be more independent, while others will require more attention and support from their parents. Allowing children to show their parents who they are instead of applying a cookie-cutter parenting style will be more beneficial to their overall development and self-worth.

This is what I believe Broome’s memoir embodies. The way he organizes his chapters and delivers information will make you very angry with his parents — and then will make you understand they did the best they physically and emotionally could at the time.

They did the best they could with what they were given, as so many Black parents do, and unfortunately it left Broome relatively defenseless, as so many Black children are.

A beacon of hope

Broome’s memoir, though, is more than a testament to his pain; it is a beacon of hope.

Through misery and chaos, he found himself. He had help and encouragement, but in the end, he pulled himself up by his bootstraps and decided to be better.

“I don’t know that there was a real, definable moment,” he said in regard to deciding to get sober, “but after rehab I would wake up every day and say I am not going to use today.”

“One of the most important things in my life right now is recovery. I have been sober for eight and a half years now. The book exists to put things out there; to help me with my recovery. I was a fool person before my recovery, and I put things in the book to help me recover from my drug and alcohol addiction. I do not ever, ever want to be the person I was, and this book helps me to be a better person.”

Broome is now an award-winning writer, poet, and screenwriter. He is an instructor in the writing program at the University of Pittsburgh where he earned his MFA and a credit to people everywhere struggling with addiction, making a comeback, and fighting for a second chance, to those trying to be more than they thought they could be.
VICE
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(Although there has been some ongoing family tension, when the Vice documentary featuring Lequia was released, he held a Zoom viewing party, which his uncles and daughter attended supportively. “I can still be close with family that understands me, even with all these challenges,” Lequia explained.)

While in Seattle, Lequia became heavily involved in HIV studies at the University of Washington. They set him up with a social worker immediately, and he was able to consistently take his medications while also contributing to research. In addition, he was able to hop on a health insurance plan, and finally began receiving the healthcare he needed.

Lequia spent some time working as an outreach specialist for Fred Hutch’s HIV vaccine trials, during which time he worked to help people get involved in research studies. “I got comfortable talking about HIV and PTSD and understanding exactly where HIV was in the present time, and really helped me overcome my own stigma,” said Lequia.

By sharing information and personal experiences, he made peace with his diagnosis, and later came out as being HIV positive via social media.

The documentary

Prior to the release of the documentary, Lequia had never been so open about overcoming his former drug addiction or living with HIV. During the three-month waiting period in advance of the release, he felt waves of anxiety. Lequia describes himself as guardedly, and he finds it difficult to be quite so open or vulnerable — particularly given how toxic social media can be nowadays.

On Facebook, Lequia created a lengthy post explaining some of the information in the documentary. He was unsure how much footage Vice would use, and he wanted to get his full story out there.

After the documentary came out, Lequia received a tremendously overwhelming response. “I had a lot of people reach out to me and say, ‘Me too,’” he said. As a result, his openness has promoted more open dialogue surrounding HIV.

Lequia’s hope for the future are that more people, whether HIV positive or not, will maintain both an open mind and an open heart when talking about HIV. He suggests educating oneself via books or online, taking some time to watch the Vice documentary, having open communication with others, and stopping cracking HIV jokes.

As for those living with HIV who may be struggling, he said, “It’s no big deal. It’s no longer a death sentence. It’s something that a lot of people live with and manage, and the meds have gone a long way. Research has shown that those who are open about their status are more likely to be better off. Connect with other people who have it, be open about your status, and people you trust to disclose to. And hopefully, we’ll one day have a way out of here.”

To watch the documentary, go to www.youtube.com/watch?v=g500J15gJho.
It's Pride month again, which means all across the country, sexualities are being seen and celebrated.

For many members of the LGBTQ community, however, the celebration can become complicated, especially for those with an often invisible identity. The experiences of people who identify as Bisexual are very different and come with their own unique challenges, ones not usually faced by Gay- and Lesbian-identifying members of the community.

It was these experiences that led Mike Shaw to seek out a group that shared his struggles. "I came out, officially, as bi in June 2017," Shaw said as he reflected on the journey that led him to founding Seattle's only Bisexual Men's Social Club. "In early 2018, I was looking for a social group specifically for bi men, since most of the LGBTQ social groups were sort of focused around guys or lesbians.

"I just happened to ask on Reddit, and another bisexual man in Seattle responded, `I don't think there are any other bisexual groups in Seattle, but we could get together and chat.'" And so we grabbed coffee, and we kind of came up with this idea of founding the group.

The group now meets weekly, usually for drinks and conversation, but they will throw in the occasional picnic, hike, or baseball game. "Usually people respond best to just gathering around the table, ordering a few drinks, and just sharing their experiences," Shaw explained.

Validation and invisibility

"It's been great to have a ton of bi people, in this case men, around me," fellow group member James Bernstein noted. "I think it's very validating, Mike always says, 'This isn't a support group, it's a social club, but at every meeting, we have conversations about very deep stuff, like coming out and people's experiences. It is very normalizing to hear so many similar stories. I think it's normal for bi people to come out a little later than our gay and lesbian counterparts, so it felt good, too, to be like, you're not rare. It's really validating to have a bi-specific space.'"

The group offers a break from a world full of criticism, misunderstanding, and invisibility. There, the men's struggles are valid, and discussing experiences is helpful to all members. "It's a huge help," added Juan, another group member, who did not want to use his last name. "Just talking about our experiences, like when did we first realize we were different, how are we dealing with it now? Are we in relationships? Family acceptance and all that stuff. We talk about it, and it helps. And I think for all the new members that are still a little less secure, it helped them to be like, 'Oh yeah, this is fine, this is normal.' So it's a great, great meeting."

In sharing experiences, many of the men in the group have found validation in identities that are often dismissed by others. In fact, the denial of bisexuality, by both straight and Gay friends alike, is a common experience of many of the men in the club. Juan recalled coming out to friends and family as Bisexual: "With gay men, some had the same sort of comments. You're just confused? Or: you're just not out yet? And, 'Oh, don't worry, just give it a couple of years, you're just in the transitional bisexual period that a lot of gay men go through.' But I pretty much knew from the get-go that wasn't me."

The experience of invisibility felt by members of the Bisexual community was echoed throughout the club. "A few people in the LGBTQ community assumed this was my stepping stone to Gaytown, and in two or three years I would tell them I was actually gay the whole time," said Shaw.

"The question that always annoyed me was 'Are you more gay or more straight?'" Juan explained when recalling similar experiences of invisibility: "I'm like, well, I'm with you, so if you want to put a label on it, just say I'm with you and committed to the person."

The experience of coming out, only to be invalidated and assumed to be Gay, is a common trope in the Bisexual community, as opposed to the assumptions Bi women are subjected to. "I read a quote that was something like 'Bisexual men are actually gay men trying not to get attention, and bisexual women are actually straight women trying to get attention,'" Shaw recalled as we discussed the prevalence of the male gaze, even in Queer communities.

"Yeah, I think it's almost the corollary of all the terrible stereotypes you just want to be with me," added Bernstein. "It's hard to be seen as a man. But the fact that we are seen is what becomes the definition of one's sexuality. It is hard for people to see a man with a woman and understand that he may still be attracted to men."

Bisexuality, by definition, is a sexuality of fluidity, existing outside of the binary. However, attraction is invisible. For Bisexual people in relationships, what is visible — the gender of their partner — is what becomes the definition of one's sexuality. It is hard for people to see a man with a woman and understand that he may still be attracted to men.

It can be hard for outsiders to the Bisexual community to understand how one might feel attracted to both men and women. Bernstein is a Bisexual man, married to a woman, and his choice of a partner has led him to sometimes feel further alienation from the LGBTQ community. "I just get the sense from some of my gay friends that they don't understand what it's like for us," he explained.

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June 18, 2021

SGN 25
THE WRONG ARGUMENT
A treatise on advocacy, morality, and homosexuality

by Evan Sexton
Special to the SGN

If you ask the average American what most comes to mind when they hear the word "gay," they'd most likely respond with the words "love," "love," and "love." One might think that means they're okay with what’s happening. But that isn't always the case. This misconception is one that we need to eliminate.

The argument feels compelling on its face. Gay people don't choose to be gay, so the reasoning goes, how could we be justified in upholding legal discrimination against them?

That, though, doesn't really hold up under scrutiny. For example, there is some evidence that pedophilia is even more common than homosexuality,[1] and further still that pedophilia should be classified as a sexual preference.[2] Obviously, this does nothing to change the fact that child sexual abuse is wrong. A child cannot give informed consent to an adult. It's pretty clear that even if someone is "born" a pedophile, they don't have the moral right to act on that impulse.

What then, must our defense of homosexuality be? The answer is clear: simply don't concede that it's wrong.

Implicit in this "born this way" argument is a subtle form of bigotry. In this mindset, homosexuals are not equal citizens deserving of equal rights but rather a "natural" or "primitive" group whose rights are born out of pity for their Sisyphus-like plight. This approach correces too far too much ground.

It's entirely not to cohere with the way that pedophilia is that, if homosexuality were a choice, it still wouldn't be immoral by any rational, consistent measure. Two consented adults engaging in a sexual act for pleasure or love isn't immoral — a simple principle that concedes no moral ground.

This difference in argument is not just for moral righteousness, though. It also works to undermine the illegitimacy of the way people view sexual orientation. Suddenly, "homosexual" isn't a thing people are but rather a thing people do. Lots of people don't identify as Gay or Bisexual but still engage in same-sex behavior.[3] If a person believes that homosexuality is immoral, and that Gay people are only acceptable because they're "born that way," they just aren't going to go out.

Instead, they'll suppress their interest and stay within the confines of what they see as virtuous behavior. Ensuring that the public understands bisexuality is more inclusive than simply letting people know that moral allowances make it possible for people to be more comfortable in experimentation without endangering their sensibilities. Even heterosexist ideas of moral liberation comes from normalized hom- and bisexuality.

The final piece to the puzzle is that, in reality, none of our social designations for sexual orientation really make that much sense. For example, we know that some historical societies didn't share our model of sexual orientation. In these societies, the idea of gender-based sexual orientation just wasn't that prominent. Ancient Greek even licks a direct translation for "homosexual.

These societies certainly aren't presenting to copy — Ancient Greek pedopedy is infamous for a reason — but they do show that our current understanding isn't "scientific," as it is made out to be. We don't need to impose a restrictive, gender-based model of attraction.

Gay liberation has come a long way. We have more power today than we've had in centuries. It's time to take the next step.

BI PRIDE continued from page 25

friends that they don't see that I should have the same amount of space in the community." Bernstein says.

I've been in a straight-presenting relationship for the majority of my adult life, and now it feels like I have to be so odd to be seen, and I am constantly overlooked, and feeling like I'm not queer enough to wear the label or be in the community.

Challenges

The first is of isolation, of not being "gay enough" for the LGBTQ community but also not "straight enough" for the heterosexual community, and this difficulty to be understood, even by other members of the LGBTQ community, lead many Bisexuals to stay in the closet, and often not even understand their own sexuality until later in life.

"It was a journey," Shaw said about his own coming-out experience. "Like Jean and James also too, I think for some people, you probably will notice (they) come out later in life, but because it's a journey. You're trying to figure yourself out.

Bisexuality is a spectrum, and Mike, Jean, and James all have their own unique experiences. Mike is in a committed relationship with a man, Jean is currently exploring the dating scene, and James has been married to his wife for several years. However, they also all understand the importance of coming out of the closet.

Regardless of what their relationship status looks like, all three men face different struggles when it comes to being seen as Bisexual. For Mike, the struggle is being seen as Gay and just "not ready to come out." Many have questioned James' need to come out, since he is in a straight-presenting relationship.

For Jean, and others in the dating pool, the challenges can be even more daunting. "It's tricky, because I don't approach dating as I did when I was younger, before I came out as bisexual," Jean said, "so now it's more pressing a person, and I find that dating gay men is really hard because they have their own... notions, they have their own experience in coming out and what that's like, and a lot of time they put that experience and that baggage into a relationship and onto me."

Bernstein also commented on the struggles Bisexual men face when out in the dating world. "I'm not dating, but I have heard from countless people, mostly women, that they wouldn't date bi men. Kind of like you're inferior because of that."
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ANAL CANCER IS ON THE RISE
FOR THOSE OF US WITH HIV

ANAL CANCER IS MUCH MORE EASILY TREATED WHEN CAUGHT EARLY, BEFORE SYMPTOMS DEVELOP.

WE NEED HIV+ VOLUNTEERS OF ALL GENDERS WHO ARE 35+ TO TAKE PART IN A NATIONAL ANAL CANCER PREVENTION STUDY.
VISIT THE WEBSITE ANCHORSTUDY.ORG OR CALL US AT 1-844-HIV-ANUS.
Volunteers will be reimbursed up to $100 for each completed study visit.

June 18, 2021
Simple Surrogacy was founded in 2002 to assist couples and individuals with the desire to achieve a family through third party assisted reproduction. We were founded on one simple principle: to provide our clients with the highest standard of care in the surrogacy and egg donation industry at an affordable price. Our team of dedicated staff and consists of parents through surrogacy, current and former surrogate mothers and egg donors, and counselors. Learn more about us at SimpleSurrogacy.com

Simple Surrogacy should be your agency because:

- One of the largest surrogacy and egg donation agencies
- One of the most affordable Surrogacy Agencies
- We donate services to LGBT Clients through Men Having Babies Gay Parenting Assistance Program
- Staff consists of previous Parents, Surrogates and Donors
- Excellent reputation helping our clients achieve success for more than 17 years
- Expedited matching with our database of surrogates
- References available from previous clients of our program
- Hundreds of beautiful donors to choose from
- Over 43 babies already expected for 2019!

We have helped many couples complete their families through surrogacy and want to help you as well.

For more information please visit us at www.simplesurrogacy.com, or www.simpledonations.com

Call us toll-free at 1-866-41-SURRO to speak with our Executive Program Director for a free consultation.
During the month of June, say “Pride” during checkout at any Have a Heart and get 10% off your order.