

ISSUE 25
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FRIDAY
JUNE 18, 2021



SGN

CELEBRATING
47 YEARS
IN
PRINT

SEATTLE'S LGBTQIA+ NEWS & ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY SINCE 1974

ELEVATING
PRIDE
2021
AMPLIFYING

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 49-year-old person of Filipino descent. In drag queen years, I am a 28-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.

see FINDING MYSELF page 4



Photo by Nate Gowdy
Styling by Kara Sutra

Thank You!



Skyy Martini Ice (left) and Gaysha Starr volunteering at Northwest Harvest's SODO Community Market.

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.

Please join us as we celebrate and highlight the LGBTQIA+ community's history throughout this Prideful month of June!



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Photo by Nate Gowdy
Styling by Kara Sutra

ELEVATING

PRIDE 2021

AMPLIFYING

FINDING MYSELF

continued from cover

Depending on the day or night, or the people I am with, I can flow between all three parts of my life, weaving back and forth effortlessly. Some days, I feel 49, complete with midlife aches and pains but with the confidence of someone who has been around the block a few times and doesn't really care about the little things anymore.

But as someone going through a second puberty due to hormone replacement therapy (HRT), I also feel like I've turned 21 all over again, figuring out myself as a straight-identified transwoman trying to (re)find my place in the world, maintain friendships, and date men in a COVID world.

For this special Pride issue of the *SGN*, I was invited to write about my experiences as a Transgender woman who transitioned publicly with the support of my chosen family and community. My life continues to be filled with highs and lows — not only impacted by COVID, civil unrest, and contested elections but also a set of new challenges that I assume anyone newly living their life as their authentic selves would face. One of my biggest lessons has been getting to know my newly Transgender self, GS Matencio.

Like most entertainers this past year, I've had to adapt and learn how to captivate an audience in the virtual medium, and I'm appreciative to have been invited to host a few LGBTQ+ events. But the pandemic was a perfect time to be alone with my thoughts and take a break from being out in public. Living alone for two months, not seeing anyone, I had the freedom to explore my true self. In the eternal tug-of-war between my male and female selves, the female side finally won. Soon after, in June of 2020, I began the legal process to change my identity.

For my name, I chose GS, short for Gaysha Starr, as I use that to sign off on all my social media posts anyway, and it's androgynous — I don't look like a typical Becky, Jennifer, or Lauren. I also wanted to keep my last name, to honor my family.

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 experienced, 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 wasn't sure how my life was going to change after coming out. I think I expected it to be like in the movies, when the lead actress get 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 a company 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 so I don't have to take public transportation? Check. Money for food, water, and cocktails? Check. Modest savings, 401(k), and a 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, depend-

ing on their gender identity, and then leading up to surgery.

Some of the dangers, however, include self-dosing 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 go 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 (top surgery) and what I am not planning to do (bottom surgery and facial feminization surgery). I am undecided on any hip 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 idols back then were larger-than-life '90s supermodels. The wigs were shaggy bangs in my eye, and lots of disposable fashions from the bebe and BCBG sale racks were designer knockoffs.

see FINDING MYSELF page 6

Photo by Nate Gowdy
Styling by Kara Sutra





Photo by Nate Gowdy
Styling by Kara Sutra

ELEVATING

PRIDE 2021

AMPLIFYING



FINDING MYSELF continued from page 5

As I got into my mid-thirties and mid-forties, I accidentally found my niche: looking like a cast member of a *Real Housewife* 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 an employee discount). 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 GS. I spent the ages of 21 to 47 being Gaysha and knew everything 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 pan stick 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 HRT, 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 ten years off my appearance and instantly softened my features.

It also shaved probably another 20 minutes off my makeup process, as all I do is wash it a few times a week and flat-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 my core.

With the time I save getting ready, I can now do other things, like snooze, cuddle with my pup Nico, or plan out my day, rather than be in the mirror for two hours. When I do 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 was going to be an easy transition from my drag wardrobe to my “everyday” clothes, and that it would be realistic to appear like a *Real Housewife* every day. I assumed that the bright clothes 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 and comfort of wearing day-off leggings and sports bras, an off-the-shoulder hoodie, and Nikes, living out my own Lululemon U Village stroller mom fantasy. The funny thing is that I wear the same five comfortable things over and over each week, in synch with the employee dry cleaning schedule.

But one of the hardest parts of presenting full-time the way I choose to is wearing multiple undergarments, in order to feel snatched in the waist. After being in them for a full day, I get welts 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 backside the way I do in 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.

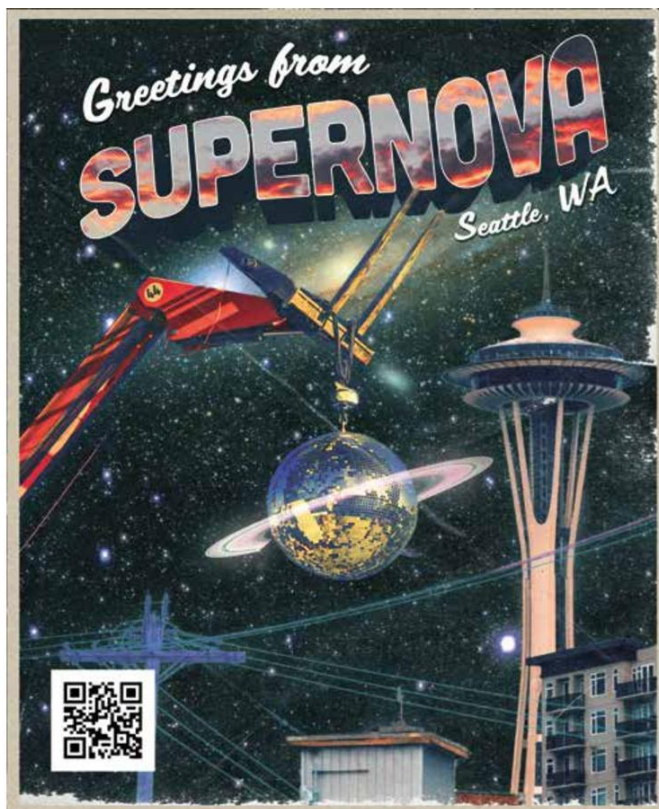
Another challenge is wearing shoes that

make my women’s size 11 feet look not so big but that are still comfortable. I try not to 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 feeling better, I end up chasing 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 Matencio.



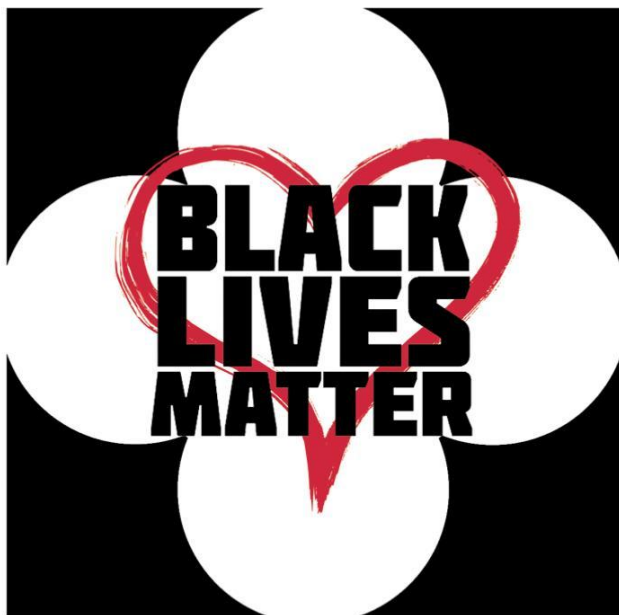
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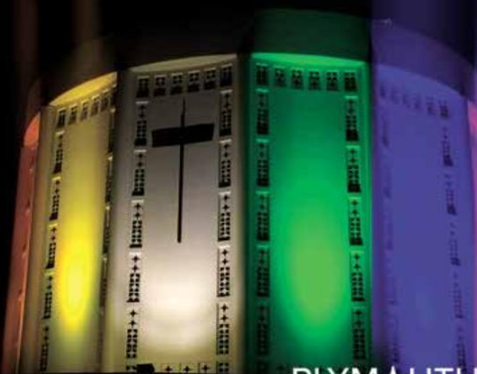
This notice was paid by the St. Patrick LGBTQ+ Engagement and Accompaniment Circle of Parishioners, and several other Parishioners, who invite LGBTQ returning Catholics and others to join us in person or online.

For more information about St. Patrick's LGBTQ Circle of Parishioners contact John Dunn - dunn570@aol.com

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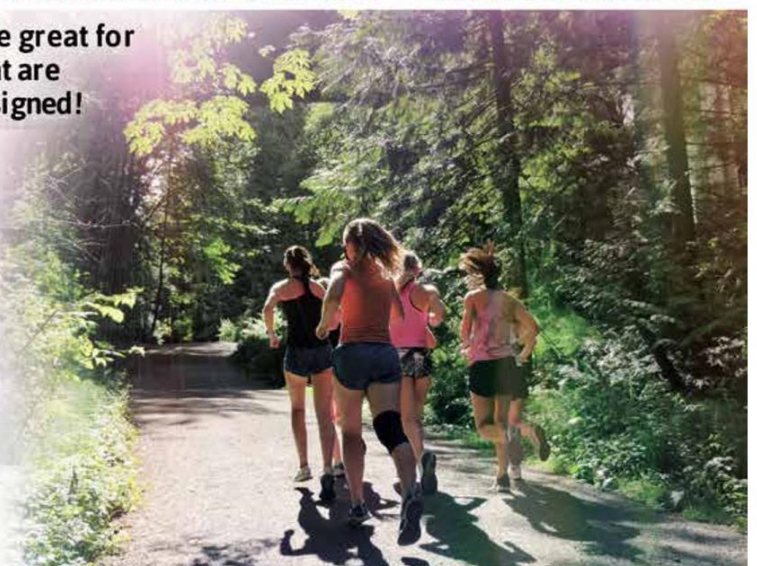
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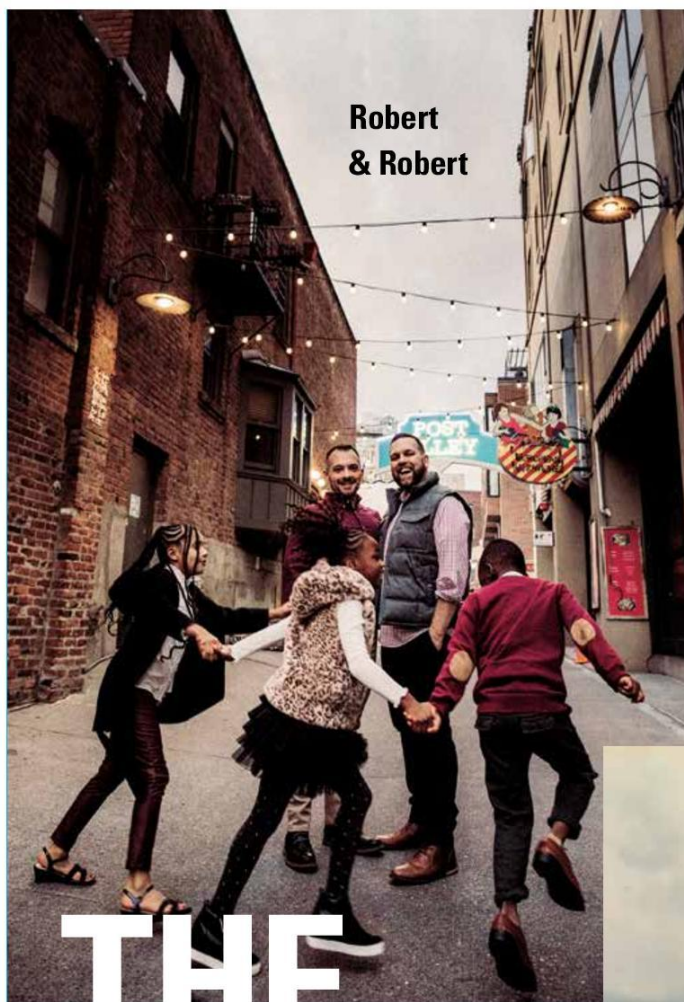
**July 6 - Carkeek Warmer 5k, 10k
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**July 17 - The Whidbey Woods Trail Run
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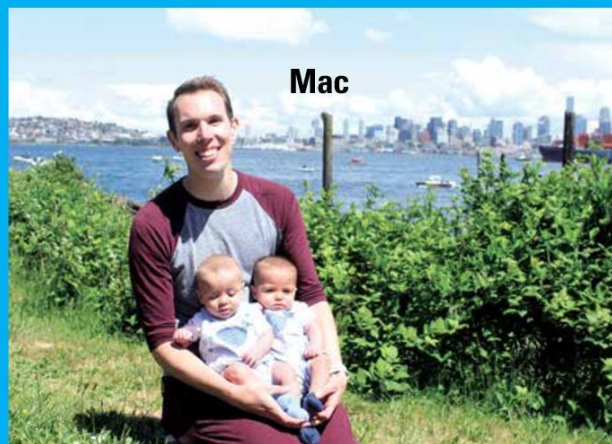
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**Robert
& Robert**



Mac



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Photos provided
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THE LOVE OF A FATHER

Three Stories

by **Lindsey Anderson**
SGN Contributing Writer

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

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 came 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 florist, and his 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 [went] 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 Amara, of an adoption agency, they were placed with 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, who they named Mirabel. “I even got to cut the cord, which was so incredible,” Martin gushed.

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 familiarly fateful call inviting them, once again, to become fathers.

see DADS page 13

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Pearl Dick. *Us*, 2017. Blown, sculpted glass; 12 1/2 x 16 x 6 inches.
 Photo by Randy Korwin. Courtesy of the National Liberty Museum.

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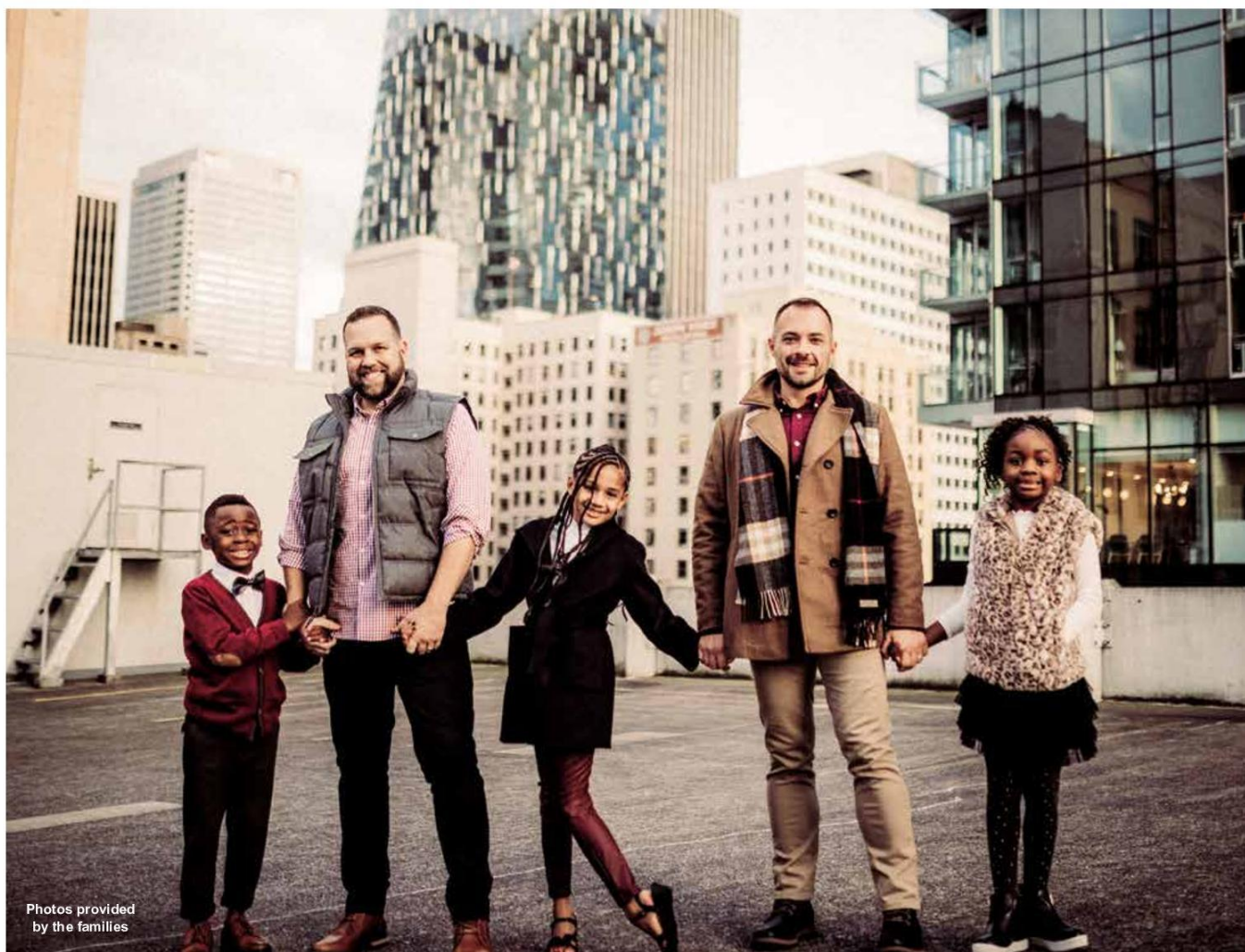
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Photos provided
by the families

DADS

continued from page 10

"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.

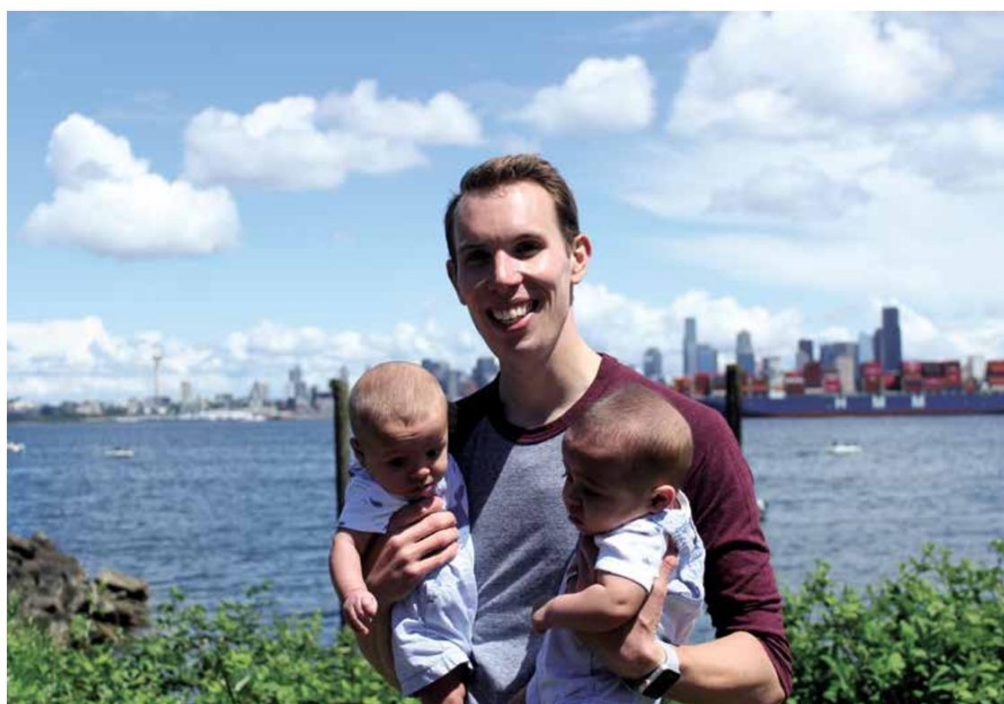
Crowley and Martin's efforts seem to be working. I sat down to talk to Mirabel about what her experience has been like with two dads. Her first response was, "I love being mixed! I love having my siblings! I love having my parents! I just love my family!"

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.

see DADS page 14





DADS

continued from page 13

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 chuckled.

The exhaustion is worth it for the Lowerys, 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, Rhys 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 dads 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. So 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 Lowerys 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 Lowery kids will get to experience. For some, father figures were found, sought out.

For decades, young Queer kids all around Seattle found a father figure in *SGN* editor George Bakan. 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 Cragin. 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 he delighted 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 Mormon 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.”

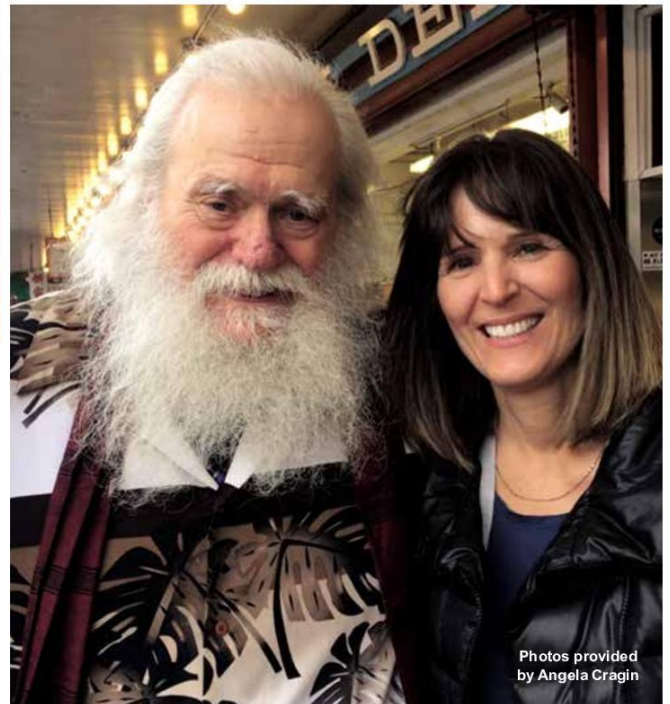
“As I got older, it got a little more difficult, because life does get a little more difficult as you get older,” she reflected. George was kind and loving and proud, but there was another side to him, as there usually is to everybody. He could get angry, “and I was a little afraid of him,” Angela remembered.

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 even alive.

George was alive, though. He had



ELEVATING
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Photos provided by Angela Cragin

moved to Seattle. George had known he was Gay since he left the navy 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 this 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 shunned from their families, unfortunately, and here you have this great, big fatherly figure with big arms and hugs, 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.

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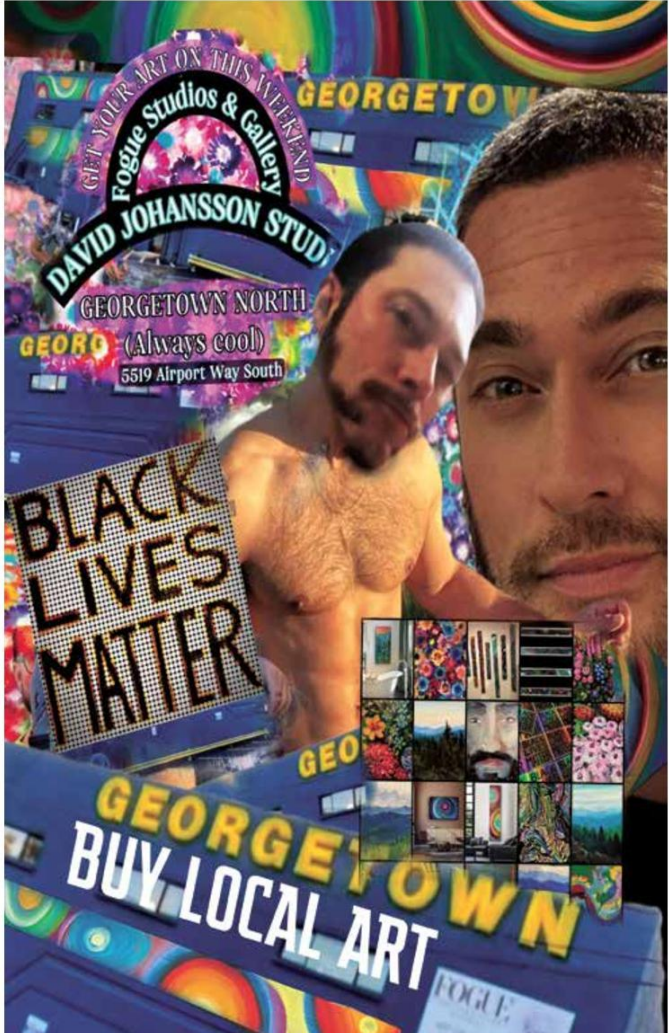
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CASS DUVANI

A 'triple threat' in his fight against oppression

by Renee Raketty
SGN Contributing Writer

Cass DuVani just turned 27 years old. He is a brand ambassador and campaign model for Mediums 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 burned 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 houseless 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 justice. People are still dying. People are still getting murdered. 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 remarks 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.

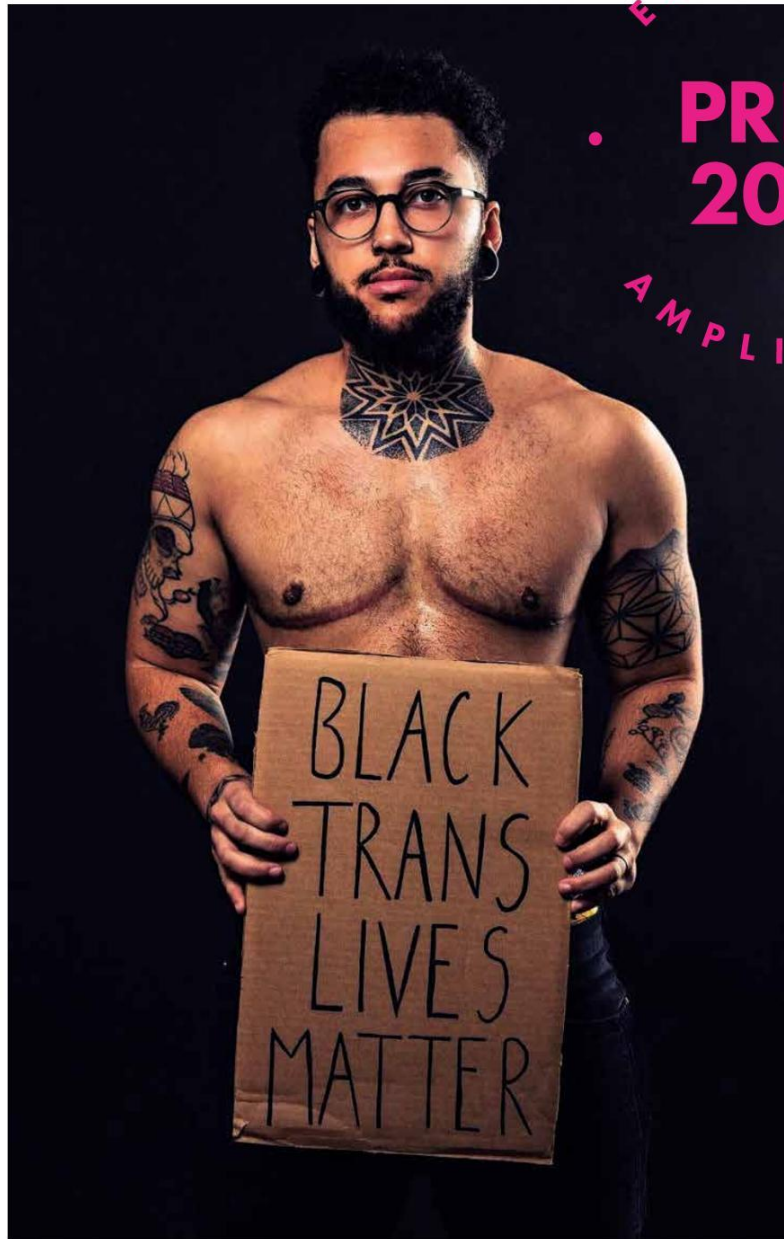


Photo courtesy of the artist

"I didn't have any other Queer people in my family. It was just me," he said. "I kind of had to keep it to myself until I was 14 years old, when I came out. I had dated guys 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, Joscelyn, 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 more."

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, such as my sister, close friends, and my wife, obviously," said DuVani. "My dad was supportive, and 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 unhomed neighbors.

"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 life 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

Neil Lequia
— Photo courtesy of
Vice Documentary

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 the long road ahead.

The documentary is narrated by a man living with HIV. He is a prominent host, hairdresser, and author: *Queer Eye* star Jonathan Van Ness. The narration dives into the history of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the United States and describes how the virus was first identified in June of 1981 by Dr. Michael Gottlieb. Some of his first patients had contracted pneumocystis pneumonia (which is uncommon in healthy adults), as well as yeast infections. The report that month from the CDC stated that five Gay men were experiencing a sort of atypical pneumonia. Not long after, more reports of the same illness began popping up in San Francisco and New York.

In the early 1980s, the virus was called “GRID,” or gay-related immune deficiency, due to its impact on the Gay community. By the mid-’80s, renamed AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome), it was popping up outside of the Gay community, in heterosexual people, and even in children. From the get-go, Dr. Anthony Fauci (again well known due to his role combat-

ing the novel coronavirus) became heavily involved in studying the HIV, as well as acting as an alarmist in the medical field.

For the documentary, *Vice* interviewed not only those who have been diagnosed with HIV within the last decade or so but also HIV survivors from the 1980s, a time when the world had little idea of what was taking place, and when the death rate associated with HIV was at an all-time high. These survivors described the difficulties and stigma they faced when trying to obtain information at the height of the epidemic, such as nurses placing biohazard stickers on hospital doors where they were receiving treatment.

Although it has been 40 years, much of the misinformation, as well as societal and medical stigma, still exists today — even with the remarkable medical advancements, and even during this age of information. Many people are still uncertain how the virus is contracted and spread; some believe that becoming HIV positive is a death sentence. Furthermore, many Americans do not have any positive associations with HIV, and frequently draw parallels between the disease and criminal activities, such as intravenous drug use and prostitution.

A Seattle man’s tale

Neil Lequia is 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. But after a chain of events, he found himself moving back north to Washington state.

“I was diagnosed in 2013 in the fall. This was when I was in that addiction phase. I had met someone who was all wrong for me, and really quickly I had become an everyday meth user. Within a year, I was an addict, I was HIV positive, and I was homeless,” explained Lequia.

As for the specifics of his diagnosis, the story goes like this: One day, he decided to go into the emergency room. He had a

lesion on his face, but he also had a skyrocketing fever that was more concerning to him at the time. While at the ER, he was asked if he wanted to receive an HIV test. He agreed and awaited his results.

“They called me in, which kind of made me think that something was up, and my boyfriend asked if I wanted him to join me. I strongly felt that I needed to go in there and do it myself, because if it was positive, then this was something I was going to have to take care of for the rest of my life for myself, and I needed to take that on and be responsible,” he said.

When the nurse presented the information, she was on the brink of tears. Although Lequia had anticipated the positive test result he received, he felt numb. How did he contract HIV while in a relationship? Turns out that his partner was already HIV positive and was not taking his antiretrovirals daily.

Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), which prevents transmission to those who are at risk of contracting HIV, hit the market only after Lequia’s diagnosis. If PrEP had been on the market prior to his diagnosis, it could have prevented Lequia from contracting HIV.

Nonetheless, an HIV-positive person can be sexually active with a HIV-negative person without spreading the virus, if they are taking their prescribed antiretrovirals daily.

In the medical field, there is a term known as U=U, which means that if an individual’s viral load is undetectable, the virus is untransmissible — and antiretrovirals make that possible.

After the diagnosis

At the time of his diagnosis, and as a healthy young man, Lequia did not have health insurance, because it was not a concern of his at the time, but he discovered that his newly needed HIV medications would cost \$4,000 without insurance.

In 2015, he moved to Ellensburg, Wash., to help his grandmother out with tasks such

as grocery shopping, yardwork, and her pets. It was in Ellensburg where Lequia was able to start afresh. He kicked his drug habit and founded Pride of Ellensburg, “a nonprofit community organization dedicated to inspiring and celebrating love, equality and diversity through local events, outreach and fostering opportunity,” according to the website. “It was a pivotal project that helped me turn my life around,” Lequia said.

During his time in Ellensburg, Lequia began seeking treatment for HIV, but there was also a long battle with stigma. “I was not getting any kind of respect or acknowledgment from these doctors, who treated me as a punk kid that was trying to score pharmaceuticals. Doctors think you’re crazy... and I literally heard a doctor say, ‘Meth is a heck of a drug.’”

With no HIV specialists in Ellensburg, Lequia had to come up with an alternative plan. The closest specialist was in Yakima, but the 45-minute drive each way was difficult for someone without a car. So Lequia found it challenging to access the healthcare he required. “I feel like that in itself is a discriminatory bar, to require patients to drive that far for something that’s been around for 40 years now. Like, are you kidding me?” Lequia stated.

Since he was struggling with healthcare professionals in Ellensburg and strongly desired to get the appropriate care, it became apparent to Lequia that he needed to move to a city. One day, however, his grandmother discovered his HIV medications, and she threw him out of the house with one day’s notice. After he left for Seattle, Lequia’s grandmother hired workers to bleach and sanitize the house. According to Lequia, his grandmother believed that she could contract HIV from his coughs or sneezes. “My uncle told her that she was better off burning the house to the ground and starting over from scratch,” he said.

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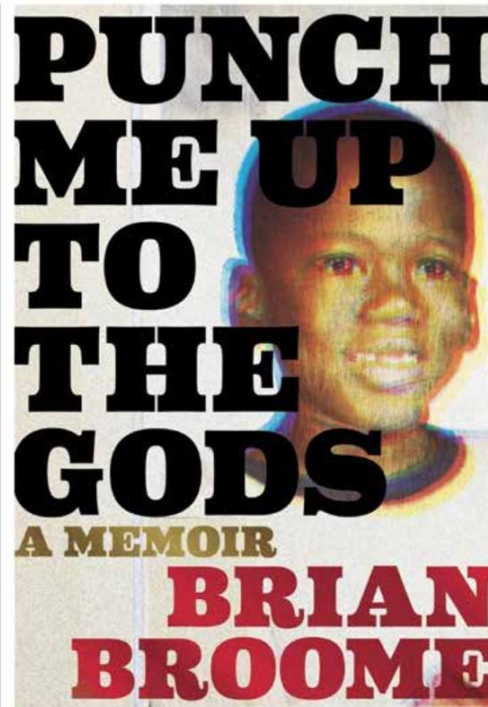
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BRIAN BROOME

Breaking generational curses

by Janice Athill
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 aIn 250 pages, Broome shamelessly catalogs some of the most damning 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 hugging 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. Junior (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 nonchalance and tough love adopted by people trying desperately to hide from the world what they love most in it.

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 "huggie-huggie kissie-kissie" 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 I 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 so busy trying to survive that they did not have time to fortify 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 arm them against a racist America.

"My 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 affection 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, defining 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 foul 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, 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.

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VICE

continued from page 20

(Although there has been some ongoing family tension, when the *Vice* documentary featuring Lequia was released, he held a Zoom viewing party, which his uncle's 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 would talk to people about getting involved in research studies. "I got comfortable talking about HIV that way and understanding exactly where HIV was in the present time, and that 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 wait-

ing period in advance of the release, he felt waves of anxiety. Lequia describes himself as guarded, 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 reception. "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 hopes for the future are that more people, whether HIV positive or not, 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 AIDS 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 on their meds. Connect with other people who have it, be open about your status, find 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=c500115gLho.

ELEVATING
PRIDE
2021
AMPLIFYING

by Lindsey Anderson
SGN Contributing Writer

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 in his struggles. "I came out, officially, as bi in late 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 gays or lesbians."

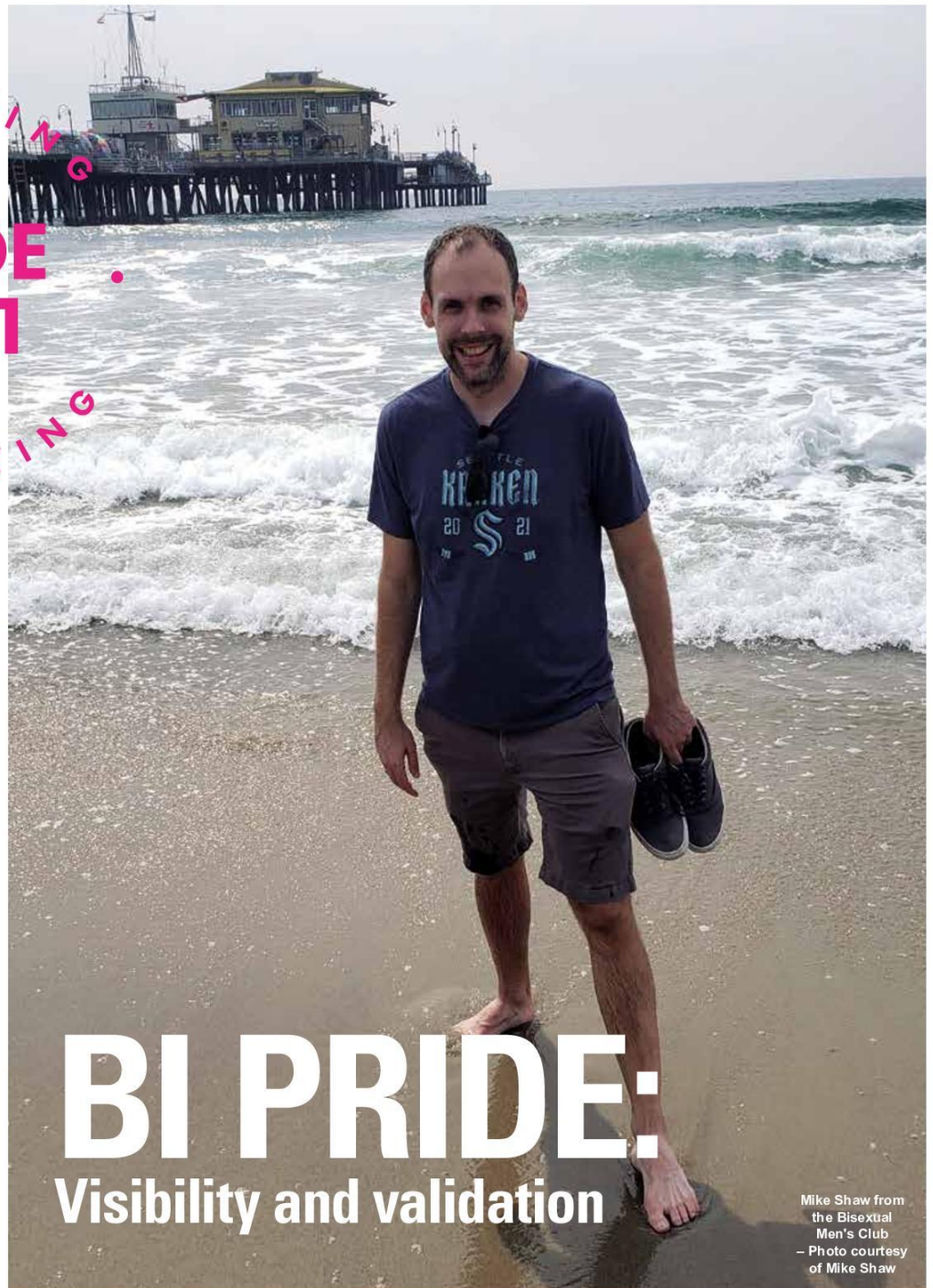
"I just happened to ask on Reddit, and another bisexual man in Seattle responded, 'I don't think there are any other bisexual groups in Seattle, but we could get together and chat.' And so we grabbed coffee, and we kind of came up with this idea of founding the group."

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 invalidation

"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 normalizing. 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 just 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, 'I'm 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 invalidation. 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 do 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 meetup."



BI PRIDE: Visibility and validation

Mike Shaw from
the Bisexual
Men's Club
— Photo courtesy
of Mike Shaw

In sharing experiences, many of the men in the group have found validation in identities so often dismissed by others. In fact, the dismissal 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 invalidation 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 invalidation. "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 the male Bisexual community faces, as opposed to the assumptions

Bi women are subject 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 stigmas bi women get, that they're just going to leave you for a man, [that] phallocentrism that we all just want to be with men," added Bernstein.

If understanding that sexuality exists on a spectrum is the hardest concept for those who struggle with biphobia, the next hardest concept to grasp is that attraction to men is not always superior to attraction to women.

Erasure and taking space in the community

Bernstein elaborated more on the phenomenon of erasure, sharing with me the story of his first relationship with a man. "I wasn't out when I was dating, so I was mainly dating women," he explained. "I only had one real, maybe two, small flings with guys."

"Because I wasn't out, the only time I actually had a short relationship with a guy was when I was studying abroad in Guatemala, and I was completely away from everyone I knew, and it felt like a safe place

to experiment. It was funny, because he was bi too. Once our friend group realized we were dating, they were all like, 'We knew it, we knew there was something different about you,' and then immediately I was just gay to everyone. I remember realizing people can't deal with nuance."

"It felt kind of scary, knowing that it's hard to really be seen as bi. So when I moved back to the States, I didn't really come out. I started dating my current partner and didn't feel the need to come out until recently."

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 also still be attracted to men.

It can be hard for outsiders to the Bisexual community to understand how one might feel attraction 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

see BI PRIDE page 26



by Evan Sexton
Special to the SGN

If you ask the average American what moved them on issues of Gay rights, they'll often tell you that it's because they were convinced it wasn't a choice. It's a popular argument, maybe best encapsulated by Lady Gaga's "Born This Way." It's an argument that was at the heart of one of the most rapidly successful social movements in history.

The argument feels convincing on its face. If 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 our "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 dejected species whose rights are born out of pity for their Sisyphean jihad. This approach concedes far too much ground. The difference between homosexuality and pedophilia is that, if homosexuality *were* a choice, it still wouldn't be immoral by any rational, consistent measure. Two consent-

ing 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 inflexibility 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 experiment. Instead, they'll suppress their interest and stay within the confines of what they see as virtuous behavior. Ensuring that the public understands that homosexuality *isn't* immoral allows people to be more comfortable in experimentation without endangering their sensibilities. In essence, greater sexual liberation comes from normalized homo- 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 lacks a direct translation for "homosexual."

These societies certainly aren't models to copy — Ancient Greek pederasty is infamous for a reason — but they do show that our current understanding isn't as "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.

[1] <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/2706562/>

[2] <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12462476/>

[3] <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26766410/>

[4] <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/homosexuality/>

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 said. "I mean, 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 loud 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

These feelings 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 Juan and James too, I think for bi men, you probably will notice [they] come out later in life, because it is a bit of a journey. You're trying to figure yourself out."

Bisexuality is a spectrum, and Mike, Juan, and James all have their own unique experiences. Mike is in a committed relationship with a man, Juan 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 validating each other.

Regardless of what their relationship statuses look 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 Juan, and others in the dating pool,



Mike Shaw from the Bisexual Men's Club — Photo courtesy of Mike Shaw

the challenges can be even more daunting. "It is tricky, because I don't approach dating as I did when I was younger, before I came out as bisexual," Juan said, "so now it's more pursuing 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 Bi men face when out in the dating world. "I'm not dating, but I have heard from countless people, namely women, that they wouldn't date bi men. Kind of like you're inferior because of that."

The demasculinization placed on Queer men can be very harmful to their self-esteem, as it equates sexuality to gender identity, reinforcing that both should exist on parallel binaries.

Hidden in plain sight

"I think that, quite frankly, bisexual men are everywhere," Mike explained. "They are kind of the main group in 'LGBTQ,' they're probably the most hidden — I think something like only 12% of them are out. Unfortunately I think it is sort of a chicken-and-egg scenario: I think that Bi guys will feel more comfortable coming out if people accept them more, if people don't think of them as less masculine, if people don't reject them from a dating perspective. Unfortunately, I don't think other people will come around on those things until more guys come out."

"I think we're hidden away, but we're everywhere, and you know, my group is kind of meant to be a safe space, where those people who are most hidden can feel comfortable."

Empowerment and inclusivity

The Bisexual Men's Group is empowering Bi men around the Seattle area to engage in these difficult conversations, to question binaries and relearn so much of what society teaches us about sex and gender. Regardless of what relationship these men are presenting, regardless if they are out or not, regardless of what others might say, once a week they find a safe space to be visible and feel valid.

There are still many misconceptions about bisexuality, and while it is not the job of Bisexuals to educate others on their identities, the guys did have a few tips on how to be more Bi-inclusive.

First, stop assuming someone's sexuality based on their current choice of partner. "Even in the queer community, not just saying, 'Oh, that's a gay couple,' 'Oh,

that's a lesbian couple.' Don't define someone's sexuality until they actually tell you," Bernstein said. "You can say, 'Oh, a same-gendered couple' or something, and maybe that's a little more inclusive."

Second, let Bisexuals come out in their own time. "I think people should honestly do what they feel comfortable with. There are many guys in my group who won't come out, and they have many reasons why," Shaw said, noting that a majority of Bisexual men aren't publicly out. "For a lot of guys, coming out is a personal choice, and I don't hold it against them. They'll do it when they feel comfortable with it."

Finally, normalize Bisexuality by talking about it. "There are a lot of things that could be done to have more visibility. I mean, I know we have our own day, Bisexual [Visibility] Day, but you know we have Pride month, a whole month. It would be great for LGBTQ research centers to dedicate some time to talking about bisexuality, and the huge number of us that are out there," Juan added.

Bernstein also noted that "it's, like, a trend not to label people as bi, but just to say they're queer, and I think we need to stop that. We're already so invisible, and we need the representation, so if someone actually comes out as bi, let's say they're bi and not queer. A lot of people use both — I do too — but specifically I'm bi, and I'm a part of the queer community."

Understanding that the experiences of each individual in the Bisexual community are unique and, whether they be with a man or a woman, should not take away from their acceptance and inclusion in the LGBTQ community is a good first step toward visibility. Bisexuals have faced extreme adversity when it comes to being validated — in the media, from heterosexuals, and from the LGBTQ community itself. It is time to step up and make sure Pride is Bi-inclusive.

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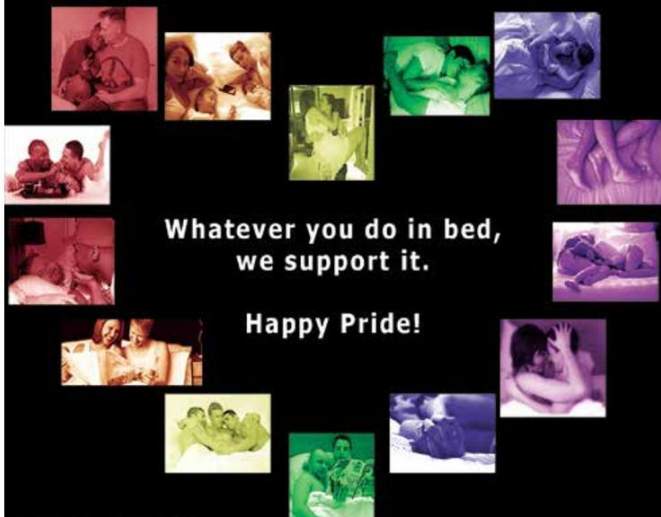
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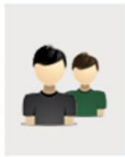


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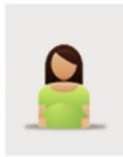
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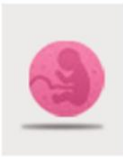
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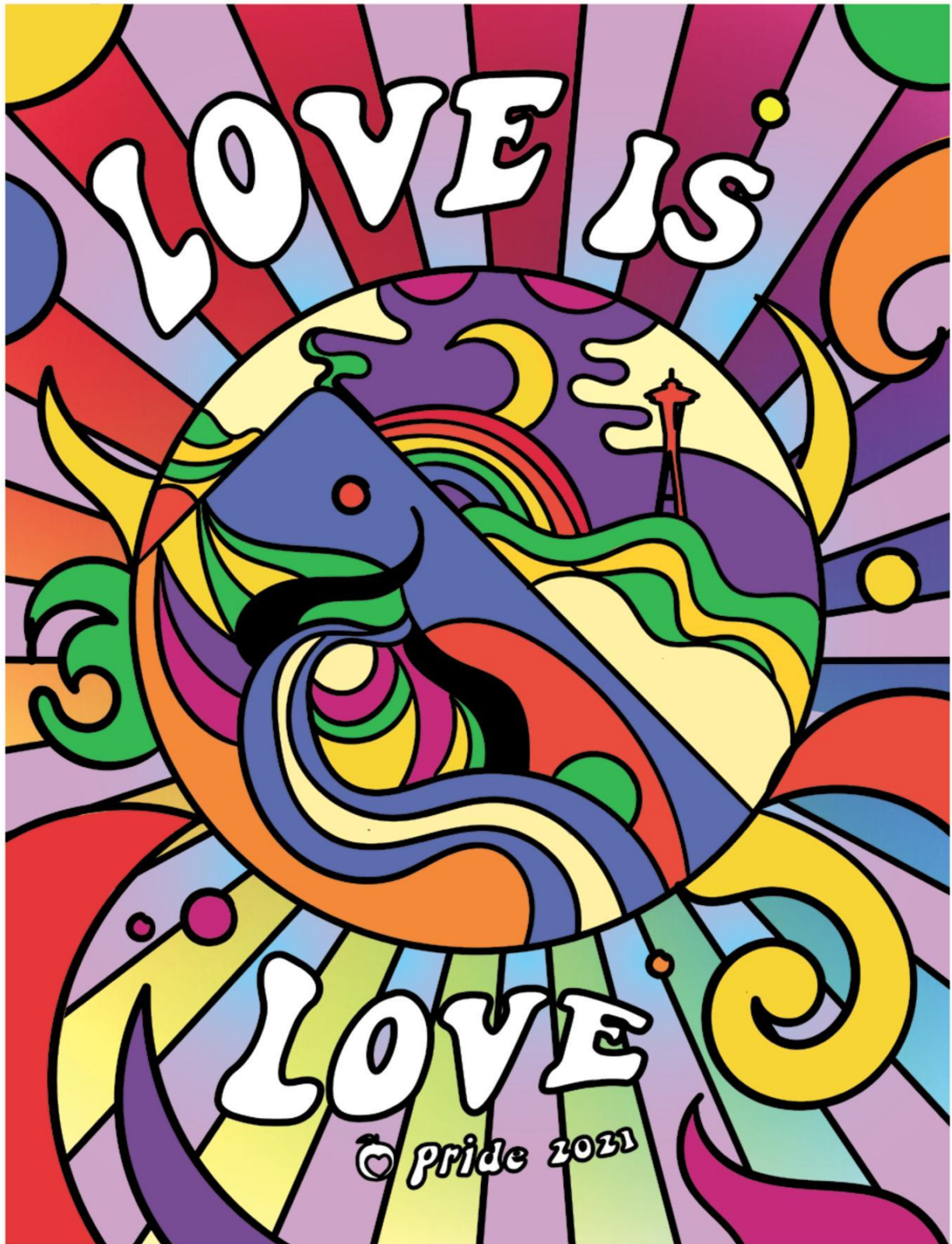
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