



*Dedicated to helping LGBT
people build and strengthen
their families.*

Family Reunion

We sat on the curb across from Now Voyager Bookstore, in front of the Provincetown Library. Jack was fastening our bikes to a rack on the back of our overstuffed car. Mona held Gertrude – our five-month-old schnoodle - on a short leash, so passersby roaming Commercial Street wouldn't trip over her. I rested my arm around Mona's shoulder while tears streamed down her cheeks. Moments earlier I was also overcome by emotion, when I kissed Vickey and George goodbye - familiar summer friends, who own and, during the summer, occupy two of the string of attached bungalows that form double single files, beginning just behind Now Voyager Bookstore and ending at the beach. For the past eight years, our family has rented the bungalow on the beach. From our windows and sliding glass doors we view Cape Cod Bay and to the right we see McMillan's Wharf with its collection of fishing boats, schooners, tour boats and yachts. From our deck we step right onto the sand. When the moon is full, high tide draws the ocean water within inches of our deck.

Earlier that afternoon, we had gathered for Lucy's seventh birthday party - Jack, Mona and I, Vickey and George, Sylvia and Renee (both from Quebec, Renee spoke very little English), Wes and Julio (Boston principals – Wes was originally from Hawaii and Julio from Puerto Rico) and Lucy, the birthday girl, Wes and Julio's beagle. Three other men, I had not met before, joined us. Wes mentioned that one man was a concert pianist. Another, whom I spoke with at length, spent much of his time traveling in countries where governments were in turmoil. He had traveled extensively through Central America, and now concentrates on African Nations. He claimed that his motives aren't political; he's simply attracted to chaos. I wondered if the initials C.I.A. meant anything to him, but I didn't ask. George, in his seventies, was born and bred in Boston and now spends colder months in Florida and summers in Provincetown. He bought his place for a song when the bungalows went condo. So did Vickey, a retired schoolteacher who lives most of the year in Queens, NY.

continued on page 2

Where else, but in Provincetown, would you find such a cast of characters celebrating a beagle's seventh birthday? Wes, upon George's advice, nuked the hotdogs. Their skins were a bit tough to bite through, but at least they weren't raw, as they had been in previous years. Fortunately, there was also a salad tray from the Grand Union on Shankpainter Rd. and two cakes and ice cream that weren't bad for desserts made with artificial sweetener. George reminded me that one doesn't come to this party for the food.

Lucy, usually cradled by either Wes or Julio – they alternated between eating and holding the beagle – started to seize. We all looked on in horror, imagining Lucy giving up the ghost at her seventh birthday party. "Is she okay?" Mona asked. Julio explained that Lucy has epilepsy and shared a rather involved story about Lucy's diagnosis and prognosis. Vickey leaned toward Jack and whispered that she should have saved the receipt from Lucy's birthday gift, just in case.

The party proceeded with pleasant conversation, lots of joking, folks chomping on nuked hotdogs, and Lucy falling over and seizing whenever she got too excited. Finally, it was time to sing happy birthday. We all donned pointy birthday hats, including Lucy, but unfortunately the noisemakers with dogfaces were a disappointment: when we each blew, a paper tongue would roll out, but the horns were defective. We enjoyed our Splenda-rich desserts, but Lucy had difficulty biting into her rock hard gourmet doggie muffin. Finally, after numerous attempts at jabbing the muffin with various knives, a screw driver and banging it on the table, it broke into palatable chunks that Lucy was able to crunch.

So went the culmination of our family's two great weeks in Provincetown, beginning with a spectacular Family Week; this year the annual event attracted over 600 of our families (some 2,000 people) www.familypride.org. We've been attending Family Week since Mona was ten-months-old. This summer marked our tenth year. It has become more of a family reunion than a vacation, not so unlike the stories I've heard from relatives about summers in South Beach, Staten Island.

On the last day of school my mother and aunt (as children), grandparents, great grandparents, great aunts and cousins left their Harlem flats, packed up their cars, drove to lower Manhattan and caught the Staten Island Ferry. My grandfather rented a huge house from an elderly couple, Mr. and Mrs. Ranaldi, who would move into their attic for the summer. As a kid, I especially enjoyed hearing about Mrs. Ranaldi hiding in a closet under the staircase whenever there was an electrical storm. My great grandparents were given the master bedroom. Other adults, divided by gender, shared the remaining bedrooms. The children, including my mother and aunt, slept on cots or mattresses – some nights overwhelming the wraparound screened-in porch. The men, including my grandfather, would trek back to Harlem during the days – my grandfather returned to South Beach every night, but others mostly on weekends. Visitors came and went and came back again, mostly family, but also friends whose roots went back to small towns on the outskirts of Naples, Italy.

For Jack, Mona and me, Family Week in Provincetown is our queer version of the Ranaldi's house in South Beach some 80 years ago. The scores of children who return to Provincetown each summer that Mona runs and plays and laughs with may not share a common bloodline or ethnicity, but they're family nonetheless. At home, our refrigerator door is a collage of Family Week photos, reminding us that like all family members we are a part of something that is much bigger and stronger than ourselves. Several years ago, Mona was struggling with outside pressures around being the African American daughter of two European American dads. I shared ways that I've dealt with intrusive questions and taunts, having also been adopted and for being gay. But I hadn't lived Mona's life, so I pointed to a picture on our refrigerator of a girl named Hope, one of the older girls Mona knew from Family Week. I mentioned that it might make sense for Mona to write to Hope since they had so much in common. Mona wrote and Hope replied – no profound resolutions, just a nod from someone who's been there. When Jack and I first took Mona to Family Week, Hope was the age that Mona is now. Now Hope is an amazing young woman who, this spring, successfully completed her first year of college. She is an outspoken and courageous advocate for queer families.

continued on page 4

We first attended Family Week on the advice of a friend, Harriet Alpert. Harriet was our social worker when we adopted Mona. She and her partner Susan had two children. Our families became close friends; Harriet and I became especially close. We never ran out of things to talk about, even on the phone – a mode of communication that I've never been into. And I never grew tired of how boldly Harriet moved through the world. Once while we were waiting for a shuttle bus to take us to a fair in Ithaca, a woman asked Harriet if we worked for a church or civic organization. She wore one of those syrupy sweet smiles that are more patronizing than respectful. Harriet appeared perplexed and explained that she didn't understand. "Why are you asking this question?" The woman tried to clarify without admitting that her perceptions may have been influenced by what she perceived as ambiguous adult relationships and by the multiple races and ethnicities that made up our little group. Harriet wouldn't yield. The more the woman persisted the more baffled Harriet appeared. Eventually a bus came much to our anthropologist's relief. Though I felt a tinge of sympathy for the now befuddled woman, it was insignificant when held against the love and complete admiration I felt for Harriet. Not too long ago, I was paying for food at a deli that I frequent in Syracuse. The owner asked, "Where's your little friend?" I asked whom he meant. He replied, "You know, that little girl who comes in here with you." Annoyed, I said, "You mean my daughter." Another time paying my bill, this time Mona standing at my side, he asked me, "And what did your little friend have." He can remember that I always order a spinach knish and a half sour pickle, but he can't remember that Mona's my daughter. What part of Mona, me, or the two of us together made it so difficult for him to get that we're family? Unfortunately, I no longer had Harriet to ruminate with over the phone.

Our families enjoyed several years together, including Mona's christening, Harriet's 50th birthday party, Seders and Family Weeks, before Harriet was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. I will always be grateful for our last Family Week when she mustered up the strength to walk to where the backwaters flow behind Herring Cove dunes at high tide, magically turning a desert into an oasis. We often joked about Herring Cove and the Lesbian beach where women drag U-Hauls, and set up camp as close to the parking

continued on page 5

lot path as possible. As compared to the men's beach, miles beyond the path, where only Speedos and a towel are permitted, if that. That day she ventured away from familiar U-Haul territory, and we waded in the tepid backwaters, listening to the summer sounds of the children of queer parents, splash and laugh and occasionally argue. Maybe the backwaters are so precious because they are fleeting, as was Harriet's life. She died that following November. I have a picture of her, looking incredibly healthy and happy, floating on an inflated raft through the oasis behind Herring Cove dunes.

The following year, as Jack, Mona and I walked along Commercial Street, we recognized a tall familiar boy walking toward us. "Isn't that the kid who resembled Mona when they were babies?" Mona was ten months old, and he was a year and ten months at the time, their birthdays a year and a day apart. Not far behind the young boy, Shaiyah, were his two moms, Ari and Sundance, and his little brother, Elie, whom we had not yet met. Mona and Shaiyah picked right up where they had left off, as if they were fulfilling an oath once made in strollers. Our families now spend much of Family Week together, and we visit during the year. Last year we celebrated Mona and Shaiyah's birthdays by seeing Lion King together in New York City. Curiously, Ari reminds me a bit of Harriet. I'm not above believing that Harriet had a little something to do with the Sgambati-Stevens family reconnecting with the Istar-Lev family. A bit of P'town magic.

Three years ago, Jack and I decided to add a second week to our Provincetown vacation. We had a few friends who stayed two weeks and Family Week, with its flurry of activities, went by so fast. Initially, I found the second week to be anticlimactic, if not downright depressing: every square inch of Commercial Street seemed to be occupied by straight families. There was the occasional same sex couple pushing a stroller, and, as I mentioned, a few other families we knew stayed on a second week. But during Family Week straight families were merely background and easily ignored. Now they dominated the place and too often straight and queer folk just don't play well together. In fact, I got into an altercation with some straight men when their stray hardball struck Mona's shin and knocked her down. Mona's favorite part of the incident was when I called the men, "a bunch of macho assholes." She still loves repeating that story, especially my closing metaphor.

continued on page 6

The second week, however, has taken on its own specialness. We do the kinds of things that there is little time to do during Family Week. This year, a friend John and his son Stefan introduced us to a great spot called Gull's Pond in Wellfleet. We kayaked through three connected lakes. The first two were joined by a sandbar, where we swam in crystal clear, bath-warm water. To reach the third lake, we meandered through reeds and water lilies. Another friend, Daniel, and his two children spent a couple of extra days with us before returning to NYC. He's a gentle and patient man, a role model for any parent – straight or gay, male or female. The night before they left, we had a delicious seafood dinner at Clem and Ursie's, where we also ran into two other friends, Dorian and Marian, and their kids - kind of a Family Week rerun.

Mona has befriended and become a bit of an apprentice to a woman named Christie, who owns a stained glass studio a few doors down from where we stay. She's taught Mona to make earrings and pendants, foil pieces of glass and wash and polish finished pieces. This year Mona even completed a few sales. If we stayed in P'town for a month, I'm sure Mona would know every merchant and street performer on Commercial Street. During our last walk through Provincetown, Mona stopped in shops to say goodbye to people and their dogs. I snapped a picture of Günter, who has worked in several shops over the years, including Recovering Hearts and When I Was a Tree, literally sweeping Mona off her feet. Even Captain Kid, standing in front of Town Hall, called out, "Take care, Mona." And of course there was Lucy's birthday.

Our trip would be incomplete without singing happy birthday to Lucy the beagle, and spending time with summer friends who return each year to the string of bungalows behind Now Voyager Bookstore. They've known Mona since she was barely three and each year they've marveled at how much she's grown. Vickey always remembers to save Mona a hat from her annual theme party.

Not too many years ago, in Syracuse, Mona was sad about something. She sat on Jack's lap, crying and repeating that she wanted to go home. Jack reminded her that they were sitting in our dining room.

continued on page 7

They were home. “No,” Mona wept, “I mean P’town.” I’m reminded of another Family Week, maybe four years ago: a bunch of dads and our children were enjoying dinner. At this particular gathering each family had been formed through adoption. I walked into the kitchen where the kids were eating – dads were dining out on the deck. The kids barely noticed my presence; they were preoccupied with their own conversations around adoption, race and having two dads. They were connecting, learning and identifying with each other. They were not objects of curiosity or ridicule; their lives, if only for that moment, were at the center – not the margins.

I allowed Mona her tears as we sat on the curb across from Now Voyager Bookstore. I understood. Provincetown is hard for us to leave. When we’re there, surrounded by its luminescent light, sparkling water and warm sand, we allow ourselves to feel what it’s like to not be there. And we know that more than the light or water or sand, we’ll miss our community. For us, Provincetown and Family Week are synonymous. It is a time and place where safe spaces are actualized. Beyond it, such spaces are fragile and easily disrupted. But knowing that they existed and will exist again sustains us through the more challenging times.