



Dedicated to helping LGBT people build and strengthen their families.

A Father's Pride

Vince Sgambati

We relaxed in the shade while we solved the problems of the world. Susie showed Mona how to cast her fishing line from the dock. Later on, under Sharon's tutelage, Mona handled Sharon's pontoon boat like a pro.

For Father's Day, Mona's godmothers invited Jack, Mona and me to spend the day with them at their house on the Seneca River. Jack and I, the pampered fathers, enjoyed a relaxing day that flowed easily from fishing, to boating down the river onto Cross Lake where Susie and Mona braved a brief swim, to a delicious barbeque dinner – the kind of day memories are made of.

"What's that shiny stuff," Mona asked as Sharon docked the boat. The "shiny stuff" turned out to be rows of opalescent fabric, strung across Sharon's vegetable garden. Their shimmering dance discourages deer, but it also pays tribute to Johnny, a friend who didn't survive long enough to benefit from today's antiretroviral therapy. One of Johnny's many talents was sewing. The opalescent fabric that now guards Sharon's garden once adorned a Pride Parade float. Johnny, with a flick of his sewing machine, had turned a weather beaten flatbed cart into a magical carriage.

Johnny's photograph hangs on a wall in our house with other treasured photographs - depicting a time when we spent too many hours in hospitals and at funerals. He's wrapped in his own AIDS quilt – a flock of white doves emerging from a black background. Not too long ago, Pride Parades simultaneously marked great loss and growth. Our numbers were declining from too much death, but concurrently growing because anger forced many closeted queers into the streets. Sharon's garden is reminiscent of that time, and watching the rainbow of hues illuminate her garden brought back bittersweet memories.

It was in NYC, and a group of us Syracuse queers lined up for another Pride Parade. HIV and AIDS ran rife in gay communities, but mainstream America – those who weren't condemning us - seemed indifferent. We marched about eight across, guiding our friends' wheelchairs. My rider went by two names: Joe and Dolores. Except for a brief moment of silence, remembering the thousands we had already lost, the parade was a brassy, in-your-face celebration. Joe, bald headed, bearded and wearing grease monkey overalls, soaked up the love from the crowds lining Fifth Avenue. The only hint of Dolores was the red heels that peeked out from under the ragged edges of Joe's overalls.

As we approached Christopher Street, Joe rose and began his stunning metamorphosis. He slipped a blond wig from one pocket and a rhinestone tiara from another, and he unzipped and stepped out of his cocoon, revealing a skimpy sequenced leotard, fishnet stockings and ruby red stilettos. Great legs! Dolores left Joe behind in a pile of denim on an empty wheelchair, and she sashayed down Christopher Street blowing kisses to her adoring fans.

continued on page 2

While Sue, Sharon and Mona set the picnic table, and chicken and hot dogs sizzled on the grill, Jack and I sat watching the river. By appearances, we could have been a tableau, advertising the Traditional Values Coalition: men relaxing while the little women prepare dinner. The scene would have warmed Lou Sheldon's heart (assuming he has one). Jack and I, however, weren't discussing the latest Promise Keepers' meeting. Instead, we discussed this year's Syracuse Pride Parade, which had taken place the weekend before.

Pride and Joy Families were the Grand Marshals for the parade. A gold PT Cruiser convertible decorated with rainbow crepe paper made the perfect vehicle for our family outing. Several kids carried a homemade banner: a rainbow of child-sized handprints surrounding the words Pride & Joy Families. The family car followed with a line of kids sitting along the tops of the back seats. The rest of us, including Mona's next-year teacher (fifth grade), marched along side the banner and car.

Our families marching and driving down Salina Street may not have been as deliciously outrageous as bearded Dolores meandering down Christopher Street and our Syracuse Pride Parade not as grand as NYC's, but to a handful of hecklers holding microphones or bullhorns in one hand and flailing bibles in the other, we were just as threatening – maybe more threatening.

The kids asked what to do when we passed the men wearing signs and shouting at us. A mom in the car told them to just keep smiling and waving. I walked directly behind the car with Jack and a few other parents. Stunned, Mona and another little girl, Kataya, turned to us, "That man just said the B word." I asked Mona what she meant. Now I know that, just to survive, a queer has to turn more cheeks than Jesus ever intended a body to turn, but when Mona told me that the man told her, "Stop waving at me, bitch," something inside of me broke. Enough!

By the time I reached the guy who had just called my daughter a bitch, the parade had advanced enough so that the kids couldn't see me. I grabbed his hand away from his mouth, so he couldn't use his microphone. I wish I had thought to use his microphone to broadcast what he had just done, but I was operating in a reptilian mode with very little cerebral activity going on. He told me to keep my hands off of him, but every time he raised his hand and the microphone to his mouth, I pulled it back down again. One of his born again thugs stepped between us, but I shoved past him and continued to hold the guy's hand (and microphone) down while I explained that I didn't care what he said about me, but the next time I heard him swear at my kid, I'd...clearly articulating several expletives and a graphic description of where I'd shove his bible.

I left him spewing something about homosexuals with children. I noticed poor Jack coming to my rescue – probably expecting to bail me out of jail. We ran and caught up with the Pride & Joy Families. Mona asked me what happened, and I told her that I had just prayed with the guy who swore at her. She gave me one of her yeah-like-I-really-believe-that looks, but she let the matter drop and continued to enjoy being one of the stars of the parade.

continued on page 3

Fortunately, though Mona was angry, she wasn't frightened. Still, that night, I couldn't get past the idea of this bible thumper feeling comfortable enough, safe enough and, ironically, righteous enough to call a nine-year-old child a bitch in front of hundreds of people. Not only are queers fair game, but so are our children. I emailed some friends - describing what had happened and acknowledging that my reaction was not one Gandhi would be proud of. For days, my email caused quite a cyber-buzz.

One friend, Brian, clearly articulated, in his email reply, what I'd been feeling:

"...Some people's attitudes are open to being changed when they are exposed to our loving families, but some people are just bullies, plain and simple. Education or dialogue simply doesn't work with these people, because they are attacking us not because of some deeply held convictions, but because they think we're weak...Unfortunately, and even though I wish it would be otherwise, gay people have only made advances once we began to make a fist: cultural, political and economic. I think this is part of what truly makes some people feel threatened about our families: the knowledge that – just like any parents – we will go to any lengths to protect our own children, so that now the gloves truly come off."

Someone, without even knowing her, thought it was fine to swear at Mona, probably for the simple reason that she is the child of gays. Historically, my daughter's ancestors were publicly called bitch and many other pejoratives for the simple reason that they were black. Jack and I didn't adopt Mona to give her some queer Jim Crow status. And I'll be damned if I'll allow some white bible thumping bigot to degrade her. It was time, as my friend and fellow queer dad wrote, to take the gloves off. I wasn't just pulling the microphone away from his mouth, but for a moment, albeit symbolically, I was silencing all the lying voices that are hurting our children in ways that even we, as queer parents, can't understand.

Our Father's day celebration ended with a beautiful card from Susie and Sharon a bouquet of flowers and a great dessert, cannoli from Biscotti's Bakery. Mona finally tried her first cannoli and loved it.

Backing out of their driveway, I caught a parting glimpse of Johnny's rows of opalescent fabric. I thought about how AIDS had both decimated and mobilized our community. I thought about the anger that I felt at this year's Pride Parade and how it reminded me of the anger I felt when I viewed Joe, aka Dolores, in a casket. His body was costumed in a dark blue suit, white shirt and tie – for Joe, the most inappropriate drag imaginable. His family scheduled a specific and segregated viewing hour for Joe's queer friends, so we didn't intrude upon family and neighbors.

Most of all, I was reminded of something I realized over nine years ago, after several sleepless weeks of rocking and feeding and bathing and changing our beautiful infant daughter, Mona. I knew that I was now vulnerable. Now they could get to me by hurting my kid.

continued on page 4

On the way home we talked about what a perfect day it was. Jack and I couldn't ask for a better Father's Day. And bullies like the bigot at the Pride Parade; or parents who deny their sons and daughters, even when laying them to rest; or clergy who tout gay love as a more fundamental evil than bigotry, poverty and genocide; or politicians who play political hard ball with our lives to garner votes. They make rivers and warm days and barbeque chicken and loving friends and a devoted partner and a daughter who swears that she has the two best dads in the world that much sweeter. The river flowing past Sharon and Sue's house is like the queer parents and godparents and aunties and uncles I've known. Our enemies may try to divert us, or even attempt to build a few dams, but there's no stopping us. Again, quoting my friend Brian, " just like any parents – we'll go to great lengths to protect our children."