



Dedicated to helping LGBT people build and strengthen their families.

For Joe's Sake

When we're with our children, especially if they're verbally precocious, friendly toddlers, queer parents wear our queerness like neon rainbow triangles with superimposed lambdas. Our children love to announce in crowded, but otherwise quiet places, "That's my other daddy at the end of the line," or, "No I don't have a daddy, but I have two mommies." But without our kids – especially when surrounded by those who are gaydar challenged – we, like many lone queers, risk passing as straight.

So what? At least a part of the answer depends on who's watching. By chance, a teenager sitting near you in a restaurant or standing next to you in line is in need of real-life queer role models – and maybe a bit of hope. Recently, I attended a meeting at my daughter's new school, and for the benefit of the folks who didn't know me, I made sure that even the most gaydar challenged committee members knew that I wasn't a straight dad. My being out proved to be an unexpected gift for a young committee member sitting to my right.

In September, my partner and I enrolled our daughter in an independent school. I learned at the first parent meeting that the school administrators prefer the term independent school as it sounds less elitist than private school. So now I tell folks that Mona attends an elitist independent school. "A rose by any other name." Having played the role of an overly involved and charmingly obsessive parent for the six years that Mona attended an urban public school, I saw the change of schools as an opportunity to recreate myself as a nonchalant and reticent parent.

My most recent iteration of how I will keep a low profile was to serve on several committees concerned with evaluating Mona's new school from a multicultural perspective. So much for nonchalance and reticence!

Having been a teacher for thirty years – elementary, middle school, staff development, university level – I am well aware of the education industry that has developed around multiculturalism: evaluations, programs, textbooks, consultants. Over the years I have promoted a few of these products, hired consultants, and I've facilitated and taught workshops and courses in the name of multiculturalism or diversity, but industry trumping intent, modest progress and a cultural backlash has left me cynical.

Regardless, when I was asked to serve as a member of this multicultural review in Mona's new school, I agreed. If nothing else, under the rhetoric of multiculturalism and diversity, folks discuss issues that are otherwise denied or dismissed. The first meeting, addressing admission policies, occurred a few weeks ago. The second meeting, evaluating "student life," occurred last week. In attendance were two teachers, a counselor, two parents and four high school students.

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I introduced myself as being a part of a two-dad transracial family. We were several minutes into the meeting when I discovered that the student sitting to my right was gay (we'll call him Joe). I learned from Joe that he had come out the year before and that his father is a conservative Evangelical Christian.

Joe was especially verbal, and his opinions portrayed an out gay youth who wants desperately to fit into a predominantly heterosexual environment. There were times when he sounded more conformist than his peers.

I mentioned that Mona has felt supported by several faculty and students in her adjustment to the school, especially around having gay parents. Her French teacher, for example, had made reference to French historical gay figures and had posted a picture of someone who was apparently transgendered. This class immediately became a safe space for Mona.

"I don't mean to be rude," Joe commented, "but my father would find that class offensive. He doesn't believe in homosexuality."

I responded, "Yes, a lot of folks would also find my being gay offensive, but not believing in homosexuality won't make me disappear."

What I didn't say is, "Don't worry, you won't disappear either, son."

The meeting proceeded, and as we scratched through the veneer of what is clearly a supportive and nurturing school, evidence of organized institutional attempts at proactive inclusion became less clear. Even Joe admitted that predictable safe spaces to explore differences were far from commonplace.

At the end of the meeting, folks milled around the room sharing small talk. Joe and I simultaneously approached each other. I told him that I was very proud of him. With tears in his eyes, the articulate and opinionated teenager stammered, "This is the first time that I've seen success." He was referring to me.

I don't know how Joe defines success, and I'm hardly role model material, but maybe just being out, honest and involved is enough. At least it's a beginning. After all, you never know who's watching.

Addendum

About a week after I wrote For Joe's Sake , the Syracuse Post Standard dedicated several articles to the challenges and amazing accomplishments of LGBT youth.* One article described a local high school's Gay-Straight Alliance, another was an interview with a member of the Alliance, and the last article was written by a seventeen-year-old young man, Harry, debunking the myth that being gay is a choice .

Harry wrote: "I love who I am and I'm proud of the accomplishments I have made in my life, but if I had a choice, I would be straight."

He wrote of the harassment he's endured, and then explained that, "I will never be able to get married, have children or be accepted into society."

Harry's concerns reminded me of Joe and of all the youth who need to see daily examples of LGBT adult success. Coincidentally (or not), I stumbled upon another relevant article, this one about boys taking dance.** Initially, I was pleased to see the article, and I know many of the boys and instructors mentioned, but I cringed when reading how one instructor described his childhood views of ballet, "I had all the stereotypes – it was gay, it was girly-girly, it wasn't manly." A student is also quoted saying, "people called me gay..."

Now, these were just honest comments and we've heard them all before. And, granted, only so many issues can be addressed in one article, but by the columnist leaving "gay" out there flapping and unchecked as the stereotype male dancers (read as straight male dancers) must overcome turned this article sour for me. Maybe, having recently met Joe and having recently read Harry's piece in the Post Standard made me especially sensitive to the barrage of destructive messages queer youth endure, not only through blatant harassment but also through innuendo and silence.

For Joe's Sake, was meant to be a little reminder that our families being out and visible and involved is not just for the benefit of our own adopted or biological children, but for all of our children – the children that we once were. Meeting Joe, reading Harry's article and the article about male dancers reminds me that (especially) queer parents cannot retreat into the demands of a nuclear family. Even in our so-called more open and tolerant (I hate that word) society, LGBT youth are hurting. They need queer adult role models, support, hope and maybe a little parenting. A special thank you to all the folks who take on this responsibility in a myriad of ways.

* The Post-Standard, February 19, 2008

** Syracuse City Eagle, February 21, 2008

It's come to my attention that the instructor quoted about ballet felt that his comments were taken out of context; he also had problems with the article.