

## RAINBOW &gt; ROOM

Demystifying the "radical" gay agenda &gt; by Guest Columnist Tim Ryan

## An "It gets better" tale

**Note:** Back in March, Trinity Church in Asbury Park hosted a meeting of the Monmouth County Consortium, the youth gay and lesbian organization (which you can find out more about here: [meisibetter@youth.org](mailto:meisibetter@youth.org)). The day was dedicated towards a very special project - expressing the stories of individual men and women who came to terms with their sexuality while dealing with the pressure of growing up.

Below is one of those stories, written by Tim Ryan. I'd like to thank Steven Crespo of the NJ Gay Men's Choir who facilitated getting this tale to me, and would like to point out that on April 2 they will be hosting the Hamburg (Gay) Men's Chorus for a concert called "It gets better: A Journey of courage in song" at Trinity (details will appear in next week's TCN). All the proceeds of the concert will be going to a NJ LGBT youth help organization.

Now, here's Tim Ryan:

I always knew I was different. Even before I had the words to label who I was it was clear I was not like my friends. While they enthusiastically enjoyed a game of backyard basketball or the summer waffle ball tournaments my neighborhood hosted, I preferred playing with my sister's Easy Bake Oven or deciding which accessories were appropriate for GI Joe's next combat mission. I was a good student, respected authority and did what I could to please my parents when it was clear that I was not going to be captain of the football team like my father. My younger sister was a ballerina, and my whole family was swept up in the arts for many years, so my interest in theater, music and dance wasn't just tolerated, but encouraged to some extent. I guess I was lucky in that regard.

Still, growing up in a fairly conservative, racially

diverse farming community in South Jersey had its challenges. I attended Catholic school for the first eight years of my education, went to Mass with my family every Sunday, even served as an altar boy for many years. Exposure to gay culture, while never openly talked about, was limited to drama club productions, summer theater and my sister's dance recitals. Negative messages about gay people and gay life surrounded me, and I would be hard pressed to come up with any positive ones. It was clear from what I heard in church or the taunts at school that somebody was a "fag" or somebody's behavior was "so gay" that the feelings I had about myself and who I might choose to love were wrong, deviant and even a sin for which I would burn in hell someday. I recall watching television with my father one night and some character's effeminate behavior was met with scorn by my dad, "That guy's a queer." It was clear to me that I had to keep my secret buried deeply inside or risk losing the love and respect of everyone around me.

Leaving that small town for college would be my way out, so I chose to attend university in big city Philadelphia. Penn was a wonderful place and I quickly found my niche in the theater community there. A chorus part in "Pippin" my freshman year was followed by acceptance into one of the most selective and prestigious groups on campus. The Mask and Wig Club. Mask and Wig had been in existence for over a hundred years and was one of those all male musical comedy groups like Harvard's Hearty Pudding or Princeton's Triangle, only we were better.

During the run of a show, the Wiggers performed every Thursday, Friday and Saturday evening at our own theater/dubhouse in downtown Philly. We toured the country every spring break and I relished every minute of my on stage and off stage time with a wonderful group

of guys. Donning an auburn wig and blue gingham dress to play a role or kicking up my heels in the traditional show ending kick line was a blast and never seemed weird to me; after all, most of my mates in the show were straight. Others were openly gay though and it was a wonderful safe and compassionate refuge for me, much like this chorus is for me today.

Even though I had Mask and Wig, by the end of my sophomore year I was suffering from clinical depression. By the beginning of my junior year I was a hermit in my single dorm room, rarely attending class, sleeping by day, self medicating with drugs and alcohol at night and thinking seriously about suicide. I was in a very dark place and I knew it was time to get help when I actually started to formulate a plan on how I could end my life but make it look like an accident because I didn't want to embarrass my parents. Their love and approval, even during that desolate moment, was still of utmost importance.

I could not reconcile being a happy, healthy gay man and still being loved and accepted by family and society at large. This dilemma is shared by many young gay people, some suffering right now with similar feelings of despair, and I share this story with you today as proof that the reality is, there are wonderful, loving, caring, compassionate and accepting people in the world who will embrace and love you not in spite of your homosexuality, but because you are gay. I am indeed fortunate to include my family in that collection. After a failed attempt at counseling through the college's student health service, I eventually found a psychologist that helped me work through feelings of shame and self hatred, and uncover an optimistic, accomplished and empathetic man that is most certainly worthy of being loved.

I recently changed my career path and work as a reg-

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I will begin a master's program in adult psychiatric/mental health nursing with the hope that I can make a difference in the lives of others who may be struggling with sexual preference/identity issues. There is light at the end of the tunnel. It does get better - a lot better.

Today I live my life as an out and proud gay man with the love and support of my family friends and colleagues and think back on my struggles of "coming out" as a temporary hiccup in my development that has made me stronger and more compassionate.

This past summer I asked my dad to join me for a few days exploring the northwestern Kingdom of Vermont, a part of the state in which he grew up but had never visited. We had a wonderful time together, sharing stories of his youth and my formative years. At dinner one night, I asked him if he remembered the conversation we had when I finally came out to him.

He said of course he remembered and that it wasn't that big a deal. He

looked at me and asked if it was a big deal for me. "Hell yes," I replied. "I took me forty years to tell you; I was afraid you wouldn't love me anymore." My father cried that night for only the second time that I can remember. "I'm sorry you had to go through that," he said. "Your mom and I would never stop loving you - you have always made us proud."

Fear and ignorance often get in the way of the truth, so reach out to your sons and daughters, your brothers and sisters, your friends and relatives today and make certain they know that you love them unconditionally. It can make a world of difference for someone struggling to "come out."

**"Your mom and I would  
never stop loving you -  
you have always made  
us proud."**



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