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A Parent's Pride

Tyler and Kevin,
nine years later

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cover story



Nathaniel Christopher

TEN-YEAR-OLD KEVIN is having dinner with his father Tyler Tone. It's a casual meal at the coffee table with Tone sitting cross-legged on the floor and Kevin curled up on the couch.

It's the night before their trip to San Francisco where Tone will do a reading from his short story, *My Pride and Joy*, published in the gay anthology, *Charmed Lives*. The piece focuses on Tone's experience as a gay father. He conveys how, for him, the desire to be a parent transcends all boundaries of sexual identity.

"My son is a union of complete desire; the deepest desire of a gay man and a lesbian woman to be parents," Tone reads aloud. "He was created out of an act of need, not an act of sex."

While some gay men choose to adopt and others have children from previous relationships, Tone passed on his own genes.

His lesbian friend, Fiona, is Kevin's biological mother through artificial insemination. Fiona has another son, also through artificial insemination, by Tone's ex-partner Joel. That son, 14-year-old Keegan, lives with Kevin and their two mothers, two cats, a ferret and a guinea pig on the Sunshine Coast.

So for Kevin, that's two mothers, two fathers, one brother and a cuddly menagerie.

"It means more people to love me and to love," says Kevin. "Some people don't have any parents. Some people just have one, two, three. It's more family; a lot more family."

Xtra West first profiled the father and son in January 1998. Back then Tone was living in an East Vancouver house with Fiona, Kevin and Keegan.

"Kevin's mom and his mom's wife have sole custody," explains

Tone who still lives in East Vancouver. "Kevin and I get together every second weekend and then every once in a while we'll go on one of these grand adventures where we'll go away to San Francisco. I took the kids to Disneyland in 2003."

Kevin is an articulate, courteous kid who sits quietly and patiently as I talk to his father.

"You are so well behaved," I tell him, recalling how hard it was for me to sit still as a 10-year-old. I take note of a book he's been holding all night.

"What's that book you're reading?" I ask.

How queer families are reshaping tradition

"I want to own a video game company someday," he tells me. "So I have this book that tells me how to design and make video games."

The conversation quickly turns to Tone's creativity with a needle and thread.

"My father made me a dress out of ties," Kevin exclaims. "Wanna see?"

After a quick wardrobe change, Kevin parades into the living room in a dress made out of neckties.

"I'm far too hairy to wear dresses," I say.

"You could just shave it all off," suggests Kevin.

Tone, Kevin and I all agree that shaving too much body hair might be too painful.

For Tone, the biggest challenge of being a gay parent has been dating.

"Whenever I was in a relationship with someone I was constantly having to multi-task," he says. "I'd be like 'Hi honey, I need to see you this weekend but I also have my son, so the three of us have to do something together.' I don't know if anyone really got the full attention they needed."

With some men, however, Tone says his fatherhood is a sign of stability.

"A lot of men, I find it interesting, when they find out I have a son instantly they see stable," he says. "There's usually a lot of interest with that which is neat."

Has life changed for Tone's family over the years as attitudes toward non-nuclear, queer families have evolved?

"When Keegan was two we were part of a TV program for CBC for the national news," says Tone. "They were polling people on what they thought about gay people having kids. That was 13 years ago and the poll results were adamantly—like 80-something percent—against gay people having kids. Macleans just did a poll this year and 67 percent were like, 'sure let 'em go for it.' In 13 years that's amazing."

As he looks ahead to the future, Tone sees a world where being gay isn't such a big deal.

"My boyfriend is an officer in the American army and he says all the new enlisted guys are 18 to 26, and they don't care," beams Tone. "They have a buddy or a brother or a sister or a father who's come out. They've watched *Will & Grace* and laughed at it. They've grown up with *The Simpsons* for heaven's sake; they've grown up with *Smithers*."

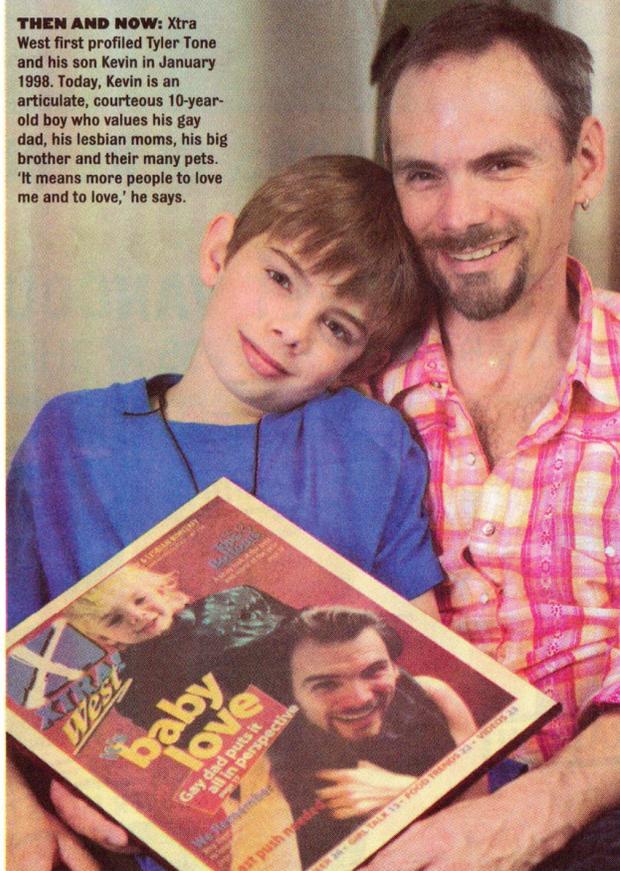
He believes the children of gay parents are the ultimate measure of universal acceptance.

"I think that this is just a nat-

ural want for the gay and lesbian communities to come together to create children, if that's what they want," he says. "Children act, I think, as a bit of a bridge. With that strength, people naturally just sort of tell two friends who tell two friends and so on."

"It's like a big pyramid scheme,"

THEN AND NOW: Xtra West first profiled Tyler Tone and his son Kevin in January 1998. Today, Kevin is an articulate, courteous 10-year-old boy who values his gay dad, his lesbian moms, his big brother and their many pets. 'It means more people to love me and to love,' he says.



I suggest.

"Sure! Why not?" he replies, as he leans back and smiles at his son. "Kevin's at the top and the whole world's underneath."

What will the world be like for him and Kevin in 50 years?

"I'll probably be a grandpa depending on how prolific he is with his kids, if he has any, then great grandchildren are possible," he predicts. "Could you imagine two 90-year-old men with great grandchildren? It's amazing. I love the image."

My pride and joy

Father and son debutantes

Tyler Tone

S NIPPETS OF BARE SKIN. BREASTS exposed to the hot August rays. Naked shoulders kissed by the sun. Tattooed backs, arms, calves. Shaved chests, furry pecs, pierced nipples, others just little nubbins of flesh.

Flashes of colour and texture. An orange feather, a pink tutu, white tassels hanging from nipple rings, a very skimpy red Speedo with a large white cross center front, a sequin bustier, a straw hat, peacock feathers moving in the intermittent breeze.

All this stimulus and the Vancouver annual Gay Pride parade of the summer of 2005 had not even begun.

My day began, with foreign sensations on my body while I sat at my dining room table, with a half-eaten zucchini walnut muffin discarded amongst

the makeup strewn about the tabletop.

My friend, a professional makeup artist, had made her way to my home very early to help with my transformation, my maiden voyage as a parade participant.

A soft sponge massaged my face as my friend applied clown white foundation. She filled in my lips with a fine-tipped paintbrush and then glued paper flower petals one by one to create a halo around my right eye. Paint blackened that eyelid which then was sparkled with silver.

Hairpins dug into my scalp to secure an adornment: a large white Marie Antoinette-style headdress. The sage green dress, that I had spent the winter constructing, bound my torso.

Once cinched into place, it reshaped my body just as the makeup had transformed the surface of my face. With some well placed sparkly jewels and comfortable yet coordinating footwear, the transformation from man to Vancouver Parade Beauty was completed.

As the parade advanced down Denman St toward our beachside destination, I was filled with prideful joy at the multitude of reactions to my costume creation.

The 11 feet of lightweight fabric that made up the skirt of my dress brushed the pavement as the lenses of hundreds of cameras pointed at me, state of the art, fresh from the manufacturer, the latest digital gadgets for that summer. Other gleeful faces

aimed their point-and-shoot disposables. All these people wanted to photograph my pride.

Yet I wore only part of my pride that day. The greatest manifestation was not on my body, but walking alongside of me, at times holding my hand, at times running ahead with a water pistol to spray admiring parade watchers.

My son, a union of complete desire. The deepest desire of a gay man and a lesbian woman to be parents.

He was created out of an act of need, not an act of sex. The mystery behind his conception piques the attention of many people I come into contact with during my day-to-day living. Eyes widen and mouths gape ever so slightly as I launch into the well rehearsed story of his magical conception.

I have used my hands to create many wonderful garments and costumes, but my son is my greatest creation.

Back at the makeup-strewn table, as my new face was applied, I could see my son struggle that morning. I wasn't entirely clear on what was going on for him and, even more frustrating, how to alleviate it for him.

He seemed excited and proud of the dress that I had carefully constructed for him out of men's neckties. He wore the multi-patterned garment all morning, as soon as he woke up.

Yet as he stood in the living room, I saw him struggling with identity, with societal norms, with his love for me: a man wearing a wig.

I saw him wanting to do the right thing. I saw him perplexed and unsure. I tried to encourage him to talk to me about what was going on.

He just told me to be quiet. And I have learned that this is his way of working things through.

After the makeup artist's departure, I was able to tear my attention away from my newfound beauty and focus on his inner turmoil.

He told me that he was uncomfortable wearing the tie dress that I had so lovingly made for him. He said he couldn't wear the dress unless... he had a wig on as well.

So I maneuvered myself around my apartment in the over-sized dress, with the two-foot high extension on my head to search out a wig for my nine-year-old son.

I found a long, bright butterscotch-coloured wig that had been discarded in a box from a long forgotten Halloween costume. Together we combed the tangles out of it and set it with two colourful barrettes.

As my son and I made our way out the door to join the throng of parade revelers, we paused at a mirror to take in our feminine transformations.

My son laughed at the fact that my chest hair was exposed above the deep neckline of the dress. He said that I didn't really look like a woman and wondered at my decision for designing the dress that way.

I told him that I didn't really want to look like a woman; I just wanted to dress up like one. He cocked his head to the side to take in his reflection in the mirror, smiled, and agreed that girls have more fun clothes to wear.

I gave his hand a gentle squeeze as we marched out of the building to become a part of the colour and texture of the parade crowd, confident that I'm allowing my son the ability to express himself in any form he desires.

And on this day, it just happened to be our initiations as Pride Parade beauty queens.

My Pride and Joy was first published in the 2006 anthology *Charmed Lives: Gay Spirit in Storytelling*, edited by Toby Johnson and Steve Berman and published by Lethe Press.