

Father Figure



BY SEAN KOSOFSKY

Fifty-six years ago this week, the man who would later become my father, was born. My father's parents were observant Russian Jews who lived modestly in Oak Park - in the house I now own and call home. I feel a deep connection to my father and his parents each day simply by living in the house in which my father was raised. This is the house where he was taught the values that

made him the incredible man he is. These same values echoed through his response when, at eighteen years old, I told him I was gay. Without missing a beat, my father whose own cultural background was intrinsically tied to centuries of discrimination and prejudice, told me that he loved me and that there was nothing wrong with me. The stark difference between his reaction to my sexuality and that of most Christians left a lasting impression on me.

Although I don't identify as Jewish, I have a strong affinity for the Jewish community - partly due to my father. My mother, who raised me Catholic, had unknowingly pushed me into a faith that almost drove me to suicide. Because of my father,

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Remarkably so I never heard anti-Semitic comments growing up - not even at school. But one time, the father of a boy I played with down the street made a derogatory comment

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about Jews being cheap or something and all I could think about was that he was talking about my dad, who was incredibly generous. I never played with that friend again, and I stayed away from his dad because he became ugly to me.

My dad was incredibly engaged growing up. He checked my homework every night. He coached little league, soccer and even led my scouting club. I remember when I had to build a suspension bridge for a school project and I fell asleep at midnight face down on the table. I woke up around four in the morning and my father had completed the project. He was the best dad anyone could hope for. He made sure we took family vacations and taught me to ride a bike and always surprised me with the gifts I wanted growing up.

I wasn't good in sports, until high school. My dad knew that doing well in swimming meant a great deal to my bruised masculinity growing up, so he came to every single swim meet, and filmed them for me so I could improve my skills as an athlete. When I think back on all that he sacrificed for me, it makes me very sad that I was not more appreciative when I was younger. He pursued career paths and living arrangements that made sure my brother and I went to good schools. He took care of college expenses so that I wouldn't have to worry how we were going to pay for it all. In short, he was

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a phenomenal dad.

When my father's parents died, I bought their house - partly to keep it in the family, but also because any excuse to get out of Sterling Heights and into a more progressive and diverse community, was in my best interest. My father insisted that whenever I needed help with any little projects around the house, that I should call him. He really wanted to feel connected to me and to feel needed. As if I could ever not need my father.

Despite many renovations to my house, I have kept Jewish symbols in my home. Not because of the religious context, but because they connect me to my father, his family and my unique experience with religion that I wish more people had the chance to experience. My father is brilliant, beautiful and brave. He is loyal, gentle and thoughtful. His name is Larry and I love him. Nearly everything I have accomplished is because of his influence, encouragement and wisdom. Happy Birthday Dad.

Sean Kosofsky is the son of a Jewish father and a Catholic mother who both think he doesn't visit enough.