

By GREG SHARROW

Rip Jackson, short for Tinsley Euripides Reeves Jackson, is Minister of Music at the Grace Congregational United Church of Christ in Rutland. Rip is an out gay man and moved to Vermont with his partner, Mike Guay, an organic farmer. Despite Rutland's conservative social environment, Rip is hailed as "God's gift to Grace Church." His gentle, open spirit and superb musicianship have carried the day, and he has produced one extraordinary musical event after another — most recently Henry Purcell's Baroque opera *Dido and Aeneas*, staged at Rutland's Paramount Theatre.

Rip is a concert harpsichordist, organist, and pianist as well as a vocalist, with a special interest in Baroque music and period instruments. As director/conductor, he has a special talent to work with both amateur and professional musicians. His music at Grace Church has become well known in the greater Rutland community, and with my parents' recent move to Rutland this was good reason to attend services at Grace. Beginning with the *Prelude*, the music was uplifting, an exemplar of music-making in the context of worship. I was wowed and sought an interview. Here is Rip Jackson in his own words:

When I was growing up both of my grandparents had pianos, and I just sat down and started playing by ear. I really loved to play the piano and I loved to sing.

As a child I didn't fit in, you know, the sort of person who felt socially awkward. I think the gay issue made me feel awkward, because I perceived myself in that way and it was a really uncomfortable thing, when you're young. But also I was a musician. I was artistic. And so I was a little different, I think.

I didn't do well in school, in middle school, except for music. So one psychologist at the school recommended me going to a disability class for learning because I wasn't doing well. Another psychologist recommended me going to a child therapist. Luckily, my parents decided to go with the second option and when they tested me, I wasn't below average. I was way over the chart. So instead of bringing me into learning disability class, they put me in a challenged class and I made straight A's because all of a sudden a teacher understood me and understood that I was different and creative.

Later I went to a performing arts high school, and I really was very appreciative. To this day it's made me who I am more than any other influence in my life. I did ballet and piano, and did shows and oratorios, and got to go see symphonies. And when I was there they had just gone through the Civil

Rights era and Northside was completely integrated. It was really great to be in such an integrated, diverse campus.

I don't think I was ever "out" in high school, but I never had to painfully hide it or anything. I had boyfriends, which was great. We didn't hold hands and kiss or anything, but a lot of people knew. We had plenty of friends who knew, who were straight. But it was hard to find any time alone. It was generally at each other's houses and our rooms. And then when I was able to drive, we would make out in our cars and stuff. But there were just a few of us that we knew were gay and we dated each other.

I came out very early. I actually knew gay people when I was like twelve. I looked older than my age, and the neighborhood I grew up in was next to midtown. So I rode my bike, five blocks later I was into the gay ghetto. So I knew lots of gay men, lots and lots of gay men. I even went to bars in high school. So coming out for me happened real young. I really did not ever grow up thinking there was anything other than gay. Never. There was shame attached to it in school, so I had to keep it really quiet in school, but I never really, fundamentally, felt bad about it.

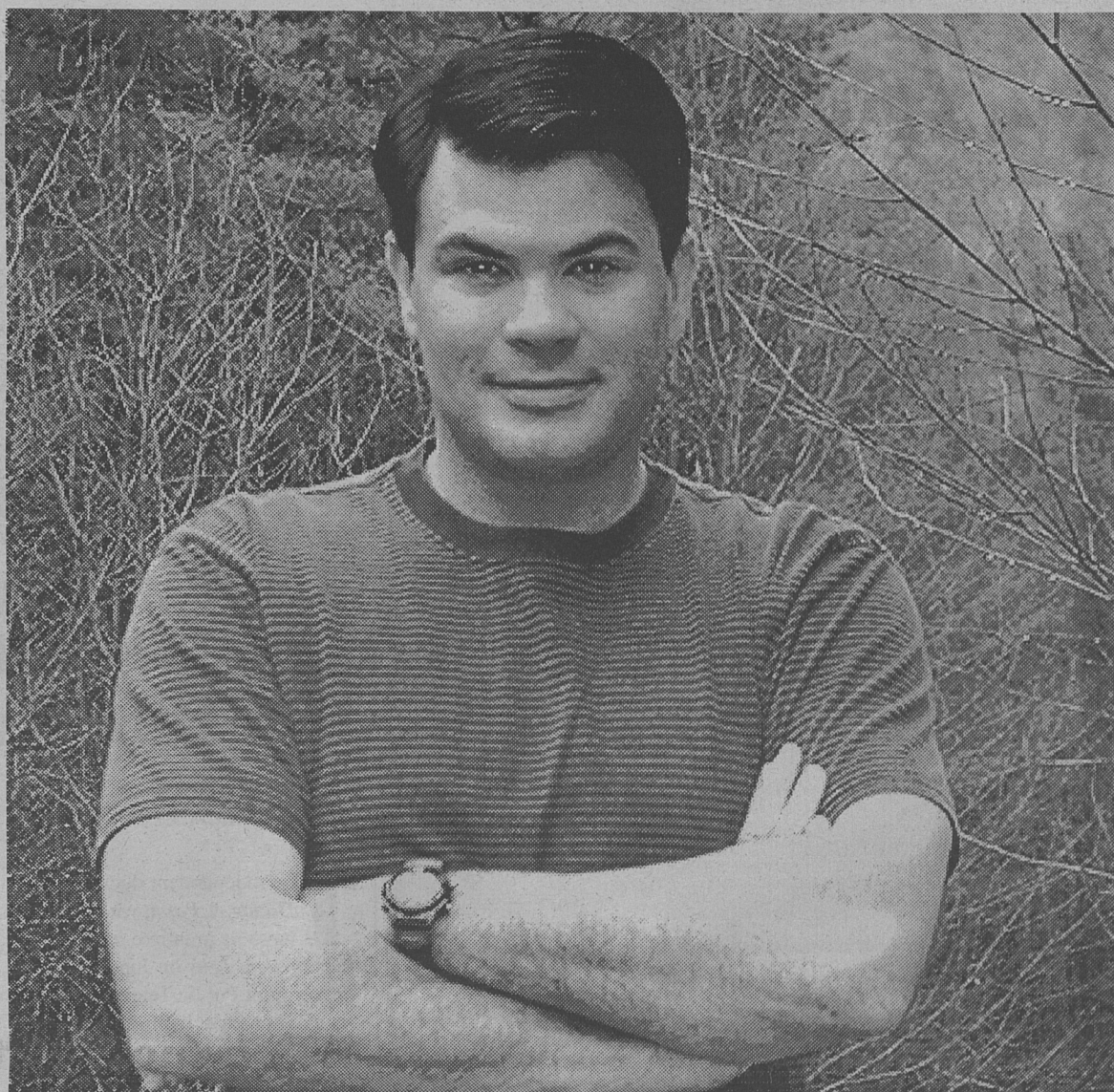
When I was in high school my prime goal in life was to become a ballet dancer professionally. The school allowed me to practice [piano] for an hour, and then I went to the dance studio. I usually finished my homework just about the time that the five o'clock class started, and my parents picked me up at nine o'clock.

I loved dance. I had all the dance leads in all the shows and I did ballet. Like we did *Carmina Burana* and Leonard Bernstein's *Mass*. In fact, I choreograph all the shows I do now. Like we just did *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat*. I really haven't danced since high school, but if I can get back in shape I might dance again, just for fun.

I didn't really grow up normally, in the sense that, you know, I got to go to movies or go out to the park. I spent most of my nights and weekends doing shows, rehearsing, or practicing piano. Looking back on it now, I would have liked more balance in my life. I'm trying really hard now to cultivate my own personal life through friendships and spending time doing non-musical things.

I went to Case Western, which is in Cleveland, because they had a really good orchestra and I wanted to direct a baroque orchestra. We didn't have a lot of money. So I got a job out in the suburbs at a Presbyterian Church working part-time as their choir director and organist. And I loved it! I loved working with people of all ages, because I did the youth choirs. I loved doing choral works in the spring. I enjoyed Sunday, playing the services.

And I loved the spiritual



god's gift to grace church:

rip jackson makes transcendent music

component to it, you know, it wasn't just a concert. It was a way for people to interact, to express themselves, to connect, to see that we're all woven together in the fabric of life. It was a wonderful experience, and it basically pulled me out of academia. So I decided to find a job full-time doing church music. And [Mike and I] eventually settled on Vermont because the job at Grace Church opened up.

Here at Grace I'm excited about the diversity of mediums I'm able to work in. I'm able to play harpsichord recitals, I'm able to play the organ and the piano on Sunday mornings, I'm able to conduct choirs, I'm able to direct musicals, I'm able to choreograph musicals, I'm able to interact with a lot of people, and I get a lot of appreciation and kind comments back to me.

It's important to know that you're reaching people. I don't want to just abstractly make music that makes me feel like I'm doing good. I want people to feel that vibration and connect to it. And I want to feel that happening. That's the best reward of what I'm doing here.

It happens when I'm creating music on the keyboards, but it

can also happen when I'm singing. I can be this careful singer who doesn't take any risks, or I can just express myself, open up my voice — or just create improvisations on the piano, or do these tempos that are daring. There are a lot of different parts of music that can be either safe or more creative. When I'm feeling open, I push and I take risks.

Sometimes I'm really surprised. You know, with the standard repertoire that I know really well, all of a sudden these things come out and I'm like, "Wow! That was great!" And other times I know going into it that if I can open myself up, I can really do some beautiful playing. If I'm grounded and I'm having a good week, I'm not too stressed out and I've taken care of myself and I'm prepared and I go in there ready, I have a strong foundation and I can just reach far because I know that I'm connected.

It's wonderful when it happens. In fact, I feel like I could run a marathon when I get to that level of inspiration. And when it's so beautiful and so inspired you're transcended onto another plane, which I call the spiritual plane. That's when I feel like I'm making

art. That's my goal in life, is to get it to that point, because I feel a centeredness that I can't really describe in words. But it's something you can feel and it's very spiritual.

I think being gay has made me more sensitive and compassionate and more aware of life than if I just lived a more conventional lifestyle where I took these kinds of things for granted. I think life has to be full of people who are "normal" and people who are "not-normal." The two work well together. I enjoy being one of the not-normal people. I like having that be who I am. I feel like I can live in those shoes. The fact that I was young and different and oppressed by it, now I feel like I'm flourishing because of it. I feel this incredible appreciation that I can flourish and be different. ▼

Greg Sharrow conducted this interview for the Vermont Folk Life Center in Middlebury — which provided transcription services and allowed us to print the material — as part of a project to collect the stories of gay and lesbian Vermonters. Greg lives with his partner in Pittsford.