

My Father's Story

BY GARRETT KIMBERLY

The following is a partial transcript of an interview with Garrett Kimberly and edited for publication by OITM staff.

My father was born Akiba Jacob Wertheim into an orthodox Jewish family in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1935. It's a pretty horrific but typical Holocaust survival story; his family managed to sell, give away, or lose everything of value they had as they traveled secretly through Europe. They made it to New York just at the end of the war. Like so many Jewish families that went through so much to get out of Europe, when they got to America, they faced incredible anti-Semitism. My father was beaten up practically every day on his way on his way to school because he looked like a little Jewish kid.

He decided this wasn't worth it. Shortly after he was bar mitzvahed, he told his family he didn't want to be Jewish. They kicked him out of the house. They sat shiva for him, which is a Jewish funeral ritual, and never saw or spoke to him again. He was almost 14.

The older I get, the more I look like my dad. He didn't have many photographs of his family, but I have one, and I look more and more like these people. It's weird that there are people I look like and who are my blood relatives that don't want to know me. I'm like a ghost to them.

I had a detective friend help me track down my mother's family after he died. It took two years to find them. When I called, the woman who answered was my father's younger sister. I told her who I was, and she said nothing. I heard the phone fall to the ground. Then there was a long pause; her husband picked up the phone and I talked to him for about 20 minutes.

He basically asked me not to communicate with the family out of respect for them. He said, "You've got to understand, your father walked over the bodies of millions of dead Jews to get his personal comfort." I can't imagine turning my son out on the street, but as horrifying as it is, what they did, it's also understandable on some level. It was clearly painful and intense for them.

My father converted to Catholicism and changed his name to Greg Kimberly. He lived on the street for a couple of years and did some pretty gratuitous things to support himself, as one can imagine. Eventually he rented a room from this family. They became his unofficial

adopted family. He couldn't afford rent, but their grandmother was living there and needed support. So he took care of her in exchange for his rent. He spent the rest of his teenage years there.

They were also first-generation German Jewish immigrants, but Reform Jews, very different. They didn't mind that he was considering Catholicism. They were wealthy, friends with Albert Einstein, well educated. The grandfather was an eye surgeon, the grandmother was a professor, and the woman who owned the house was one of the first women ophthalmologists. It was a cool, progressive family, and they helped my father get back on his feet.

Sometime in his late teens, his sexuality started to play a more important role in his life. He realized he was gay and that was a problem, even for this liberal family. He moved out to Los Angeles to live with the grandmother's twin sister. They figured LA was this liberal bastion.

He and his partner at the time decided to move out to California together. They had no money, but his partner had a beat-up old car. At that time you could return things at department stores without receipts. So the partner would go in, shoplift something, and my dad would go and return it. So they traveled across the country stealing and returning items.

In California, he moved into an apartment with this small group of men and started working in the fashion industry; he'd never finished high school, but in New York, he worked in textiles and got to know it. He went further into the closet professionally. Privately, he was living with these men, but professionally he was very much in the closet. He married a woman because he was professionally afraid, but they were divorced pretty quickly.

He became a popular designer. He designed the first popular jumpsuit, which was a big deal. He had many famous customers; he designed for Groucho Marx, Vincent Price, Marilyn Monroe. And he secretly began designing for costumes for drag queens and became quite famous in that realm.

Around that time, he met my mother. My dad had left a relationship with a man a couple years before he met her and was single. At that point, he owned eight or nine fabric stores through which he did design. My mom came in to apply for a job. The way they both told it, it was incredible first-sight romantic Shakespearean spontaneous

love. He always said he loved men, but he loved my mother.

Before they got married, my dad told my mom, "I'm gay, and I need you to know that before we commit to living together." My mother had grown up in an environment where she didn't know what that meant; she was the daughter of an overly protective Baptist minister. I think she did understand, but on some level that was not something they talked about. So he explained that he was in love with her, but for the most part, he liked men. She said "Are you gonna be having sex with men while we're married?" He told her no. That was enough for her, and for 15 years, that worked for them.

After the divorce, my father and I moved to Seattle and lived in Capitol Hill in a heavily gay neighborhood. All our neighbors were gay men; my father was part of a support group for divorced gay men with teenaged sons.

He was always there for me. I was in a lot of school plays; he was always the parent in the audience taking the most photographs, the one saying "that's my son, right there." He was always embarrassing me in public by telling people how fabulous I was. I spent much of my time being embarrassed in front of him.

He always talked to me with such respect. When he made decisions about our life—whether to move to Seattle, what high school I should go to, whether we should visit our family in New York—he always wanted to know what I thought was the right thing to do.

We would talk about everything—we'd talk about Ronald Reagan. He was a huge Reagan fan. One of my father's greatest achievements was that he and my mom designed a wedding dress for Pat Nixon's niece. He had this beautiful handwritten letter from Richard Nixon that he had framed on the wall, and he thought it was the greatest thing. He was a crazy Republican—he either donated money to whatever school I was at or to the Republican party. The first time I ever saw my father cry was when Reagan was elected president—he cried for joy.

If I brought someone home he thought was questionable, got an F or an A on a paper, won a prize at school—no matter what I did, he always would start conversation about it by saying he loved me and thought I was wonderful. He managed always to separate my actions from my identity.

Once my brother and I were playing in the yard and burnt something down. My father was very angry. But he also made it clear to us, as he was being angry, that he loved us; he talked to us about our behaviour as this separate thing from who we were. He always said that no matter who I brought home, he would always love me. Before I knew he was gay, he told me if I ever was attracted to a man, that would be okay, and he would be proud to call me his son. He did that at a very early age, before I ever was attracted to anyone. There was never shame there for me.

He wasn't interested in culture. I liked poetry, theatre, art. He didn't like any of that, but he loved that I liked it. He didn't really like women, but loved that I liked women. He didn't really like literature, but loved that I liked it. He loved that I was everything I was, and he let me know.

For much of my life, he would go to extremes to get me extravagant gifts for my birthday. In the last few years of his life, I said "I don't really want you to get me a fancy gift—I want you to write me a poem." He'd never even written a letter; the only thing he'd ever written were accounting sheets. But he wrote a poem about how much he loved me—very sweet, cheesy, in iambic pentameter like a limerick, but so beautiful.

The next year, he said "Is there something I can really get this year?" We were at the table, and there was some wax dripping from a candle; I said "Some wax." So he made me this wax sculpture. He went out and got candles and a big block of wax and melted them and made a sculpture. He was just so enthusiastic about me, always working so hard to be a good dad.

During the civil union hearings, I so wanted to testify about the adequacy of having a gay parent, that my father was wonderful and loving, that despite his internalized hatred of his Judaism and homosexuality, he taught me everything about compassion, love, warmth, friendship, trust. There was never a question in my mind that he was the safest person on the planet to be with, even though he made unhealthy personal choices, put himself in harm's way again and again, and eventually got HIV and committed suicide.

He died in February, 1986; February 2, Groundhog Day. I was 16, almost 17. We'd been

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living in Seattle for almost three years. It was a horrible time in the epidemic. People were dying left and right.

The previous December, I was reading *Man's Search for Meaning* in school. It's about how this man survives the Holocaust in a concentration camp and finds meaning in the midst of this.

My father hadn't told me he had AIDS yet. We would see neighbors completely incapacitated from wasting syndrome and had Kaposi's—people were being decimated around us. I knew what was going on, but had no idea my dad was sick. I was in such denial. I knew he was making unhealthy choices; he was going to the bathhouses every night, and he brought lots of different men home. I knew he was sick; he was in the hospital twice that year for meningitis, and he'd had pneumonia. But something inside me was not putting two and two together, probably for my own sanity.

Shortly before Christmas, he was sick in bed. He called me to his room and asked what I thought about euthanasia. I immediately knew he was talking about himself. We talked for hours about why I thought life was valuable; I'm just reading this book in school with all these high-falutin' ideas, and I'm 16, so I've got it all figured out. We talked about how much I loved and needed him, and he said no matter what happened, he always would love me, would know I'd succeed, and was proud of me.

He knew then, I think, that he was going to kill himself, that he couldn't handle wasting syndrome. He also knew I couldn't take care of him, and there wasn't anyone left in his community of friends to do it. So in some ways, he spared me a lot. But he promised he wouldn't kill himself until after I graduated from high school. I asked him not to; I told him I needed him around until I went to college, at least.

But he couldn't make it that long. In January, he went into hospital again; wasting clearly was starting. He was released from hospital in late January. He took a trip to Canada to visit a man he had been in a relationship with since he left my mother. He saw many other men, but this was his lover, the guy that meant most to him. He came back the weekend between January and February.

He killed himself sometime on Sunday when I was asleep. I didn't see him Monday morning