



## *I am just me*

**Josh Parker**

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I grew up in a small beach town called Cayucos. It is located in San Luis Obispo County, California. It's one of those towns where everyone is the same religion, the same color, the same size, the same everything. You either fit the mold, or you did not. There were a few of us that did not. We were the poor kids, the fat kids, the aggressive kid who threw things, the not-so-white kids and me, the gay kid.

The thing was, I never saw myself that way. Sure, I preferred to play with the girls on the jungle gym over basketball with the boys, and hop scotch and hula hoops beat football any day. However, I never felt like there was something wrong or different about me. That is, until others made it clear that they felt there was. "Why do you always play with girls?" they would ask. "How come you never play any sports?" As I got older, the questions turned into answers. I would see them written on the hand ball courts, or spoken as I walked by, "Josh Parker is a fag."

In the fifth grade my girlfriend, a few of our friends and I had a great idea that we would do a dance to "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" for the talent show that year. We decided that it would be hilarious if I wore a dress for the show. I remember excitedly rehearsing everyday. I remember the worried look on my mothers face when she tried to warn me that the other kids might not understand, and that they might pick on me. But I was so excited, I didn't care. I was going to do it regardless.

And I did.

The reaction from the audience was one of mostly shock. I have a picture taken from that day and when I look at it now, I can see the parents with their wide eyed stares and their hands over their mouths. I can see the smirks on the other kid's faces as I danced. It turned out that my mother was right. My girlfriend stopped talking to me shortly after. Actually almost everyone stopped talking to me, except of course to make fun of me.

The next year I started junior high. I didn't really have many friends and even the friends I had didn't seem to care too much for me. I was a very timid child. It was very hard for me to speak up at all yet alone speak up for myself. I was teased relentlessly. Even one of my teachers used to put me





## Page 2 of 3

down. Once, she had me take a self esteem test and then proceeded to criticize me because she couldn't believe how poorly I had done. "I've never seen such a low score" she told me with a mixed look of pity and disgust.

So it went on for the next three years. As I started to mature sexually I began feel an attraction to other guys. I was so ashamed of myself that I did everything in my power to make that attraction go away. I denied the fact that I was gay to myself and to everyone around me. I did everything I could to try and be the "normal" person that everyone else seemed to be. Still, nothing changed. The jokes continued at my expense, the other kids continued to ostracize me and my self loathing increased exponentially. I was severely depressed and did everything I could to get out of school. One of my teachers felt so bad for me that he actually had a class meeting to try and encourage the other children to be nice to me. Despite his kind efforts, it only made the situation worse.

At the end of my eight grade year we took a class trip to Catalina Island. We were to be staying in tents and our teacher announced who would be bunking with who in class one morning. I was to be paired up with one of the most popular boys in our school. As soon as the announcement was made, he jumped up out of his seat in protest. "Please" he begged. "Don't make me bunk with him!" Since none of the other children wanted to share a tent with me, in the end I was the only kid that had to share a tent with a teacher.

The following year I started High School in Cambria. It was a whole new school with new students from the neighboring town mixed with the students from my school. At first I made quite a few friends. I even managed to get a girlfriend who was pretty popular. However it didn't take long for these new kids to catch on and over time, fewer and fewer people would talk to me.

I switched High Schools the next year and actually settled in quite well. I did everything I could to hide my homosexuality and just tried to pass myself off as an eccentric. I even had a girlfriend for most of my sophomore year. However, the fact that I was gay was becoming increasingly evident and I knew that I couldn't deny the truth to myself for much longer. As far as I knew there were no other gay kids in the school. Save for one who was asked to leave the school because he was creating a disruption in class. I suppose his constantly getting harassed was distracting other students from the lectures. So the message was very clear: conform, or leave.

So I left. I took my exam and started college a year early. I still wasn't out to anyone, but I was staring to come out to myself. I still hated myself for being gay. But I knew that I either had to come to terms with it, or spend my whole life being miserable and at this point, I was really tired of being miserable.

It was around this time one of my high school friends came to me and told me she was a lesbian. I will never forget how I felt at that moment. The release of having all that weight lifted off my



## Page 3 of 3

shoulders was so great that I felt faint. I realized then that I wasn't the only one! She then told me that there was a Youth Group run by the local Gay and Lesbian Alliance (GALA) for kids like us and asked if I wanted to go.

That week as I got on the bus to SLO on my way to the Youth Group I was horrified to see several of my friends also on the bus. I was mortified that they may figure out where I was going. However, as it turned out, they were going to the same Youth Group. I felt like I was dreaming. When we arrived we were greeted by a room full of other kids, just like us. It was one of the most pivotal moments of my entire life, being surrounded by these people who all had experienced the same pain that I had and the same fears that I had. I can't express the relief of knowing then, for the first time in my life, that I was going to be OK.

Eventually the shame of lying to my friends and family about my sexuality replaced the shame I had once felt over being gay. After months of preparation I had finally gathered up the strength to come out to my loved ones. When I finally did, I could not believe how supportive they all were. The release of coming out and telling the truth was incredible. The fact that they accepted it was so very amazing. Despite all my fears of rejection, in the end it actually brought us all closer together.

Since then I have grown enormously and after a long struggle I have completely come to terms with my sexuality. I still live here in SLO County with my amazing husband Michael. We met

about seven years ago at a gay pride dance here in SLO. He too grew up in the area and we bonded immediately. Four years ago we had a beautiful wedding in Cayucos, which was attended by all of our loved ones. After seven years I am still very grateful to have him in my life.

Currently I am working for the AIDS Support Network running our HIV Prevention Programs. I got started with ASN a few years ago when I helped start a community building and HIV prevention group geared towards young gay men. Two years ago I also became the facilitator for the LGBTQ Youth Group, the same group that I attended about 10 years prior. I am pleased to say that I have seen many improvements in the way that the LGBTQ community is treated both in our county and the world at large.

However I still hear occasional stories from the kids at Group about how they have been turned out of their homes, harassed by classmates or even physically beaten because of their sexuality. It is clear that there is still much work to be done. My childhood was not an easy one. I still suffer from many emotional scars that I may never quite get over. However I am grateful that I have been able to take that past and grow from it and that I am now able to do what I can to help make this community a more loving and accepting place.