

# local news

**I**t's been more than 11 years since Kelly Chronister's handsome face graced the cover of *Newsweek*.

The internationally distributed newsmagazine's feature story for the week of Jan. 13, 1986, was entitled "Growing Up Gay: The Society's Dilemma. One Family's Crisis."

Given the piece's heavy-handed bent, it's not surprising the then mustached 26-year-old sported a serious-bordering-on-somber look.

To enhance the dramatic effect, a plain backdrop enveloped the young man, who grasped a small framed photograph of the Chronister Family circa 1967: mom, dad, sister and brother, in all of their Middle American splendor.

"That's what [*Newsweek*] was looking for—a gay male in his mid-20s who was in an intimate relationship and also had an ongoing relationship with his parents. They also wanted someone who was from a mid-sized city, not a big urban environment like New York or San Francisco," explains Chronister, now 37.

Authors Michael Reese and Pamela Abramson would go on to tell the saga of Paul and Joan Chronister's struggle to deal with their son's homosexuality—even four years after Kelly shared the truth with them.

In 1997's United States, the story seems unremarkable, even cliché: an "all-American" family live in "tidy ranch house," in this case in Vancouver, Wash., though it could be your neighborhood, too. Conservative Dad wants his boy to be "tough as hell."

"If we could just get him to be a little bit meaner he could go as far as he wanted to go," Paul Chronister would say of Kelly.

Son experiences "the best little boy in the world" syndrome, excelling in sports and at school.

Yet, says *Newsweek*, "Despite his achievements, he had long felt himself an outsider, separate from his peers."

Son goes to college and has first sexual relationship with a man. He is, of course, scared, happy and confused. He rides his bike a lot.

He moves from his dorm into his own apartment. With much trepidation he orders a "gay guide" but still can't bring himself to go to a bar. Through with college, he moves home.

Eventually he goes to a gay bar and finds it isn't the hell hole he feared it would be. Relieved, he happily declares to himself: "They're just average Joes!... Guys just like me."

Mom, meanwhile, senses something is awry and goes through son's stuff. She finds a book called *Young Gay and Proud* and freaks.

"He's queer! He's queer!" [Joan Chronister] screamed, running hysterically into the arms of her husband," says *Newsweek*.

Dad struggles internally. Mom finds a Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays chapter. Mom eventually comes around, but Dad never fully warms up to the concept.

## Man of the world

*A seemingly simple act a decade ago made Kelly Chronister an international role model*

by Inga Sorensen

**D**avid Gray was just 23 when he saw that issue of *Newsweek*.

"It was incredible to see a positive role model. Up until then, gay people had always been depicted as either victims or sinister beings. Things were different in 1986," he says.

That was the year of the U.S. Supreme Court's infamous *Bowers vs. Hardwick* decision. Ronald Reagan was president.

"And I was a college student struggling with being gay," says Gray, who has since moved from the Golden State to Portland.

This past November, Gray, who has an accounting degree but is pondering a career in architecture, was digging through some old belongings when he stumbled upon his old *Newsweek*.

It was a Sunday afternoon. Seeing Chronister looking out at him after all these years unleashed in Gray a torrent of emotions, not to mention a few questions.

Gray sat down and wrote *Just Out* a letter:

"[When the issue was published] I was in my early 20s and living in a California suburb," he writes. "I was experiencing inner turmoil over my homosexuality and was terrified of the gay lifestyle and all that it entailed... Gay men were usually portrayed as pathetic, lonely creatures who lived in a boozy and drug-induced world of obsessive sex. Gay men were portrayed as all being HIV-infected monsters who died horrible and early deaths from AIDS."

"However, after reading this *Newsweek* article about Kelly Chronister, I came away with the feeling that a person could be gay and yet also lead a relatively normal and happy life," Gray continues. "Kelly Chronister was everything that I wanted to be, and his story blew away all of my misconceptions about gays.... Kelly had preppy

good looks, athletic prowess and an all-American demeanor. He lived with his handsome lover, Randy Ponce, in a fashionable brownstone in a gay enclave of northwestern Portland.... After reading that article in 1986, I decided that maybe being gay wasn't so bad after all."

He adds, "I often wonder what became of Kelly Chronister and Randy Ponce... I certainly hope that they made it and that they are living together happily somewhere. Perhaps someone knows what ever became of them?"

Such letters are familiar to Kelly Chronister. Indeed, after the *Newsweek* story hit the stands (as well as a similar feature in the local newspaper a few weeks earlier) mis-sives poured in from across the globe—China, Japan, Israel, seemingly everywhere.

Some letters sharply berated the Chronisters, while others applauded their struggle for tolerance and willingness to share their story. Kelly heard from countless gay youth worldwide who shared their often painful stories of loneliness and fear. Finally there was someone they could identify with—or more importantly, someone who refused to hide any longer.

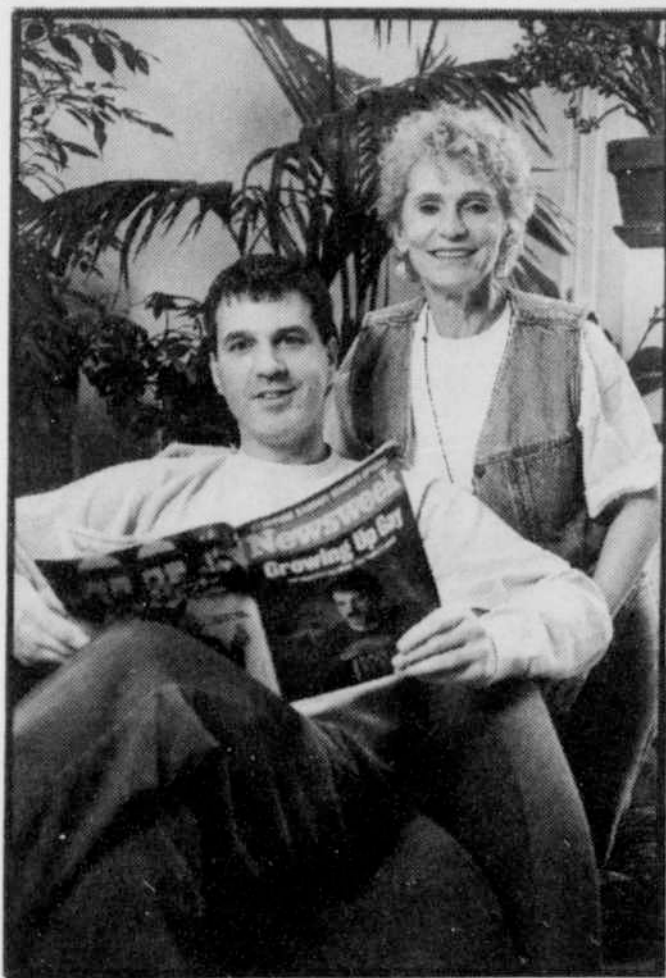
"The enormity of the response did not surprise me," says Chronister, "nor did the different reactions."

A decade-plus later, the Chronisters still receive correspondence spawned by that report.

"The trickle, however, grows weaker every year," he says.

**M**uch has changed in 11 years. Ponce, who appeared with Chronister in *Newsweek*, is no longer alive.

"Randy had a smile that wouldn't quit," recounts Chronister. "He had a marvelous sense of humor. He was bright, intelligent and articulate."



Kelly and his Mom, Joan Chronister

PHOTO BY LINDA KLEWER

During their early years, the couple worked together at a mom-and-pop video store in Lake Grove.

And while *Newsweek* said the couple lived in a brownstone in Northwest Portland, they actually resided in an apartment at 21st and Northeast Halsey near Lloyd Center.

"I don't think there even is a brownstone in Portland—that's New York," Chronister chuckles.

The two were together as a couple from 1982 until 1987. However, up until Ponce's death from AIDS complications on Dec. 6, 1989, Chronister remained his close companion and caretaker.

"Randy died in my arms, in my bedroom," says Chronister. "The day the *Newsweek* article came out was the day that Randy was diagnosed. At that point he was like the 20th or 30th person in Oregon to be diagnosed with AIDS. They gave him six months to live, but he was a fighter."

**T**oday Chronister shares a life and West Linn home with his partner of nearly five years, Jay Moore, 27, as well as their dog, cats, turtles, chameleon and "huge plants."

"Jay's a talented artist with the greenest thumb you've ever seen," Chronister says proudly.

Though Chronister says neither he nor Moore, who grew up in a small town near Salem, typically frequented bars, that's where they ultimately met one hot June afternoon.

Chronister, who at the time was living in Vancouver with his mother while he searched for an apartment, had been at Sauvie Island. Driving back toward Portland he heard on the radio about a traffic jam.

Rather than get trapped in traffic, he chose to stop at a Stark Street bar for a drink. "It was four in the afternoon. The Trail Blazers were playing on television," he says.

It was all rather uneventful when Moore walked in and "flashed that smile."

The two wound up talking until 1 a.m. That was in 1992.

These days the two tend to their home and animals. To pay the bills, Moore works at a plant maintenance company while Chronister puts in 12-hour days as a legal assistant, a job he "just kind of fell into."

Chronister's mother and father, meanwhile, are separated.

Joan Chronister remains supportive of her son and is active in PFLAG. Kelly's relationship with his father, however, is strained, though not for reasons relating to homosexuality.

Chronister says he's never had any regrets about his decision to appear in *Newsweek*. (The magazine found him and his family via the ever-bubbling PFLAG network.)

"I think it made a difference," he says. Thousands, perhaps millions, would agree.

Says David Gray: "I just want to thank [Kelly Chronister] for his courage."

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