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NORTHWEST news

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

Journey toward personal acceptance helps gay pastor and his family
by Jack Turteltaub

Kerby Lauderdale, a man of many accomplishments and the pastor of Peace Church of the Brethren, is grateful for the life he has lived. As Portland Pride always coincides with Father's Day, he reflects on raising four adult children, one of them also gay, and going on his first date with his partner during the festival 21 years ago.

For Lauderdale, it wasn't easy being gay even though he knew early on ("at age 11 or 12") that he was attracted to men. He admits he was terrified about his own feelings. It was never easy growing up gay in the '40s and '50s, even in the movie capital of Los Angeles. There were no gay role models and no gay bars in those days, and the word "gay" meant something entirely different.

"It paralyzed my life—to be so drawn to males and yet so unable to do anything about it in the way of fulfillment," he recalls. Raised by his father and stepmother (his mother died 10 days after he was born) in a fairly tolerant home environment and in a tolerant Baptist church, he successfully repressed his feelings until college.

When Lauderdale finally fell in love and had an affair with a male roommate at University of California at Berkeley in the early '60s, it was before the free speech movement, the Summer of Love was years away, and the Stonewall riots that would bring gays out of the closet in the United States was at the other end of the decade.

It was not surprising, then, that the academically gifted Lauderdale found he could not maintain his gay relationship when his studies took him to Purdue University in Indiana to study forest economics. He remembers that he and his lover "didn't see a way toward a relationship. We had no images in the community. Any conversation about it with a counselor was met with a disease diagnosis that confirmed our own self-doubt."

For Lauderdale, the alternatives to marriage were bleak: The prospect of almost complete isolation and stigmatization as sick and immoral held little attraction. "Soon after I returned [from California], I felt my only possibility for avoiding pain and loneliness was heterosexual marriage."

Now, looking back 40 years, Lauderdale has a perspective that maturity and societal change have created. "All these years...I've pondered something you feel so intensely, that is so compelling—how could you conceive of that as changeable?"

Lauderdale says that when he developed sexual feelings as a teen-ager, it was "a whiplash change in your life. For me, the frightening part—it was in such opposition to social norms. For the other boys, it was all playful. For me, it was horrifying."

Lauderdale attributes some of his reluctance to accept his gay feelings to his personality. "Pleasing people and being accepted were a strong focus," he notes. "Even in high school and junior high, I worked very hard to date girls and I had no trouble 'passing.'"

At Purdue, Lauderdale met his future wife, Linda. He says he met the woman who would become so central in his life on a double date; she was dating the other guy.

"Linda and I hit it off in terms of values, style, interests and background," Lauderdale recalls. "We became good friends." He says he



Kerby Lauderdale (right, with grandson Damian) is the first openly gay man to serve as pastor of a Church of the Brethren congregation

"felt drawn to his wife in a platonic, sisterly way. My real longing was forbidden."

Before proposing marriage, Lauderdale made a point of telling her about his previous feelings for men, but he also told her—and, at the time, believed—he could change through his marriage, and he dedicated himself to making a future with her.

Together the couple began building a life. Their next stop was Salt Lake City, where Kerby entered a doctoral program in economics at University of Utah.

In his spare time, Lauderdale earned money by working in a nursery. It didn't take him long to realize he didn't want to be an economist, and in the meantime his focus had gradually shifted to divinity school, in keeping with a distinct spiritual bent.

Lauderdale was interested in the Church of the Brethren, an Anabaptist sect that stresses the importance of personal conscience and that is explicitly pacifist. Having served in the Utah National Guard to avoid a tour of duty because he did not support the Vietnam War, he was pleased to receive an honorable discharge upon his admission to Bethany Theological Seminary in Chicago.

After graduation Lauderdale accepted a pastorate in North Manchester, Ind., and the couple began to build a family through adoption. First came Thomas in 1970, followed by two other boys and a daughter.

In 1976 Lauderdale stepped down from the pastorate to work full time on a nursery



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