

Late bloomers

Vinnie Kinsella's new book, "Fashionably Late" chronicles the experiences and the journeys of men who came out of the closet later in life

BY CORINNE ELLIS
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For 34 years, Vinnie Kinsella hid a part of himself from the world. Coming out of the closet in his mid-30s was anything but easy, but on the other side of the door he found self-acceptance and a community of people ready to support him.

Kinsella's latest work, an anthology titled "Fashionably Late: Gay, Bi & Trans Men Who Came Out Later in Life," is a compilation of stories from men of all walks of life giving voice to their own coming out stories. Some are happy, some are sad, from the story of Anil Kamal, a son of Sikh parents who worries that his sexuality will conflict with his family's faith, to Joseph Schreiber who made the transition from female to male in his 30s. The journey of coming out is often not linear nor is it easy. For Kinsella, as well as many others, it is an ongoing process and something that is never really finished.

Street Roots got the opportunity to sit down with Kinsella to discuss his newest book and the personal journey he went on to create it.

Corinne Ellis: What was your inspiration for putting together "Fashionably Late"?

Vinnie Kinsella: This is very much rooted in my life, coming out at 34. After I did, I started an organization here in town called the Late Bloomers Club, which is for men that came out later in life. I expected to find maybe eight to 10 guys in all of Portland who wanted to get together for coffee and just share the experience. I did it through meetup.com and they just kept joining. Last I checked the membership was around 230 men. What we do is meet once a month and do a discussion group. My favorite part is when someone new comes in and they maybe feel very alone in what they're going through – very disconnected and think that they're the only one who's ever gone through this, and then they walk into the room and are greeted with 15 guys that showed up that week and suddenly they aren't alone.

I wanted to duplicate that feeling for a guy who doesn't live in a city like ours that has LGBTQ centers and groups. Maybe the closest thing they can find is two hours away because they're in a rural area. Through my publishing background I knew that one of the best ways to do that was through an anthology.

C.E.: Do you find that there is often a common reason for some men to come out later in life?

V.K.: I think the biggest factor is

generational. Most men, both in the book and the group, are either baby boomers or Gen-Xers, and I found a survey online from the UK that surveyed out-men and asked for ages, and it kind of confirmed what I already knew. The average age for a man coming out who is a baby boomer is 37; the average age for a millennial to come out is about 17. There are lots of cultural shifts. These are men who grew up in an era when coming out was kind of a social suicide. For some of them it meant never getting a job. It could mean being kicked out of their homes. Also where you live is an important part of it. If you're in a very religious community that doesn't accept otherness (for example).

A lot of it is generational. Even 30 years ago we just weren't there yet. A lot of the guys I talked to, their formative years were the '60s and '70s, and then by that time, they're married with families and they're kind of figuring they're just going to take it to the grave. And then all of a sudden things change and they look around and go, "You know, it's actually safe for me to be out now." For a lot of people it's just looking at the world now and knowing it's a different place where I can find acceptance.

C.E.: How did your life change after that?

V.K.: Obviously a lot of things changed for the better. Especially now that I am several years removed from that and looking back on it. But that first year was hell because I pretty much lost my entire social network and social circle. The process of coming out changed me because my relationships now are authentic. When you're closeting yourself you're always keeping a part of yourself hidden because you want people to accept you and they may not accept that part. Now when I meet people I kind of get it out of the way, I say "Hey, I'm gay." If you have a problem with it, there's the door." What I've found is it makes my relationships more authentic. It makes my friendships more authentic because I'm not withholding from that.

The best thing that I can say is now when anyone in my life tells me that they love me, there used to be this voice in my head that said "No, you love the person you think I am. You don't love me." And the biggest change for me was when I realized I can



believe that now. Also not living with the daily stress of wondering how people are going to think about me. It's freed me up professionally, relationally and all sorts of different ways. So there were the negatives but they quickly got out of the way and let the positives come in.

C.E.: What was the process of compiling this anthology?

V.K.: Because I work in publishing, I wanted to go a more traditional approach to it so I did active submission calls through writers organizations and writers groups. I specifically looked for LGBT writers. It is a bit of a challenge because first off I'm starting with gay, bi and trans men, so I reduced it to a small segment of the population. Gay, bi and trans men who came out late – an even smaller segment. And then on top of that, who can write. So it was a bit of a challenge because there was a lot of criteria before I even got a submission. It was a mix of an open call. There were a few stories I solicited. One story in particular was a story that I had heard the speaker present at a storytelling event.

C.E.: It seems that getting to read other people's personal experiences while putting together the book could be pretty powerful.

V.K.: It affected me deeply. Just getting the submissions, reading story after story; obviously I didn't accept everything that came in for different reasons. They're very personal stories, and I can't even count the number of times I've stopped and cried throughout the process. It's different because I've done lots of anthology works in the past with fiction and poetry, but that's a little different because that's somebody's artistic creation whereas this is someone telling you about their life and at some point you have to stop and go, "Oh my gosh this

isn't made up. This happened to this person." Working on stories that weren't my own opened me up to a lot of things. My experiences coming out as a 34-year-old single man were very different from a 55-year-old married guy with grandkids. Or a 46-year-old trans man coming out. Or a bisexual man coming out. Being able to experience other people's situations, you can't do that and not build empathy.

It also just gave me a lot more resolve for what I do and my passions. I had to overcome a few things of my own. At one point during the process, I realized I'm out to all of my friends, everyone who knows me knows that, but I still get to live my quiet little life in Portland. Except this is different. I'm putting a book out there with my name on it so with somebody I've never met across the country this is the first thing they'll know about me. That's coming out on a different level. In a way I'm putting myself forward in a very public way and that actually took me a while to think if I really wanted to be doing this. I realized that, yeah, this is me and this is what I need to be doing.

C.E.: I hadn't thought about it in that context. It's sort of like you are never really done coming out.

V.K.: There was a phrase people would use when I was coming out. They would say coming out is a lifelong process. You're always going to be doing that. I didn't quite get that at first because I thought, once I tell my friends and family, I'm out. But then I didn't realize as life goes on I get involved in new social circles or I join new organizations or work with different clients, in every opportunity is another chance to choose to either go back in that closet or come out. I realized that it is a lifelong thing. With the book, I was basically making a very public declaration on a new level. I

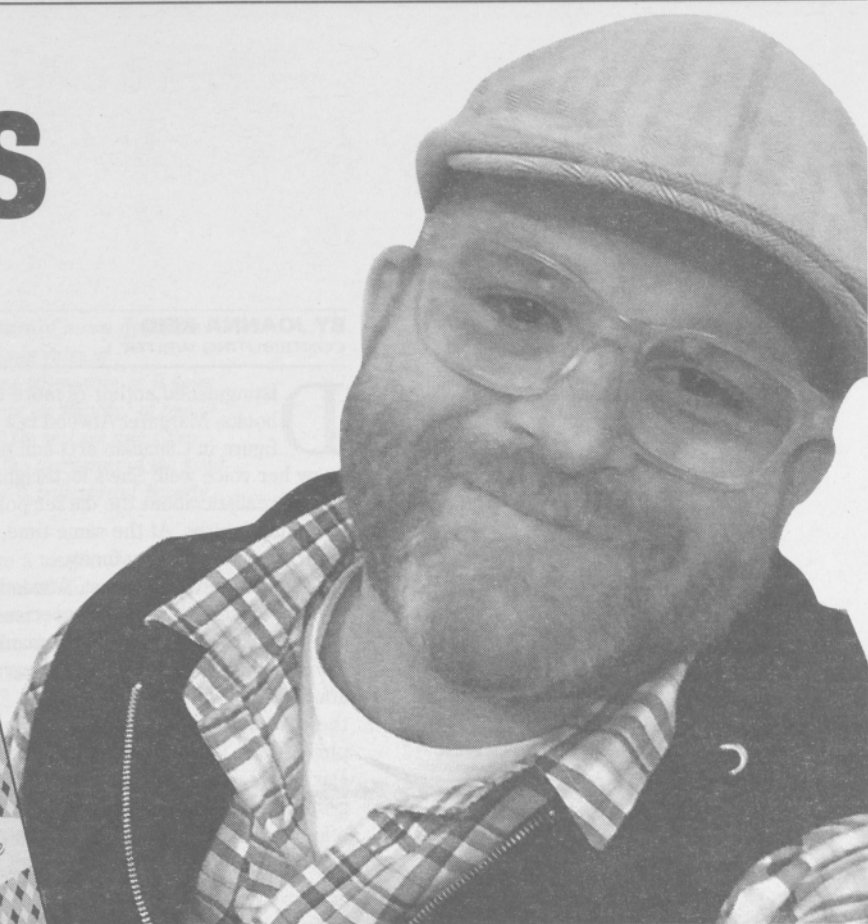


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