

CHEESEBURGERS AND RAINBOWS

The author reflects on coming out as bisexual in middle age BY RAINA BOWE

Bisexuals don't eat cheeseburgers. This thought had never crossed my mind in 20 years of advocating for LGBTQ people and issues. But having come out of the closet as a bisexual just a few days earlier, it seemed like this might be true.

I came out at a high school staff meeting in 2014 after my fellow teachers had spent an hour debating the nature of LGBTQ students. Earnest but clueless, many of them were discussing something they knew nothing about. My favorite: "I don't know why it's such a big deal who you have sex with."

I had to say ... something. So I told them what I had only recently told myself: "I'm bisexual."

Their reaction was not what I expected, though I can summarize it in one note a friend passed me: "We all love you. Now pull up your pants; your crack is showing." If that's not friendship, I don't know what is. To them, nothing had changed.

In some ways, nothing had for me, either. As I said, embracing my bisexuality wasn't about whom I wanted to have sex with. A married person then and now, that's still just one person: my wife. A husband nearly a decade and a father to one perfect 5-year-old daughter, I was still both of those things.

Yet now I was more than all the things I had ever liked and done. Now it was about the things I could admit I liked.

That staff meeting was in many ways the end of a long journey. From 1998 through 2001, I toured with Disney On Ice. An open community, everyone was upfront about their LGBTQ status. Often, I found myself attracted to skaters from both dressing rooms. For the first time in my life, I wondered if I might be bisexual. I even thought about exploring that, but my touring days ended before I could.

Fast-forward a dozen years to that high school staff meeting: It was both terrifying and liberating. It was also confusing as hell. I hadn't become bisexual in the last few months; I had just acknowledged it. Still, I felt like a completely different person than before coming out.

Did I need to read *Esquire* for more than just the interviews? Was I supposed to hang out in different bars now? Could I keep eating cheeseburgers? On that day, I decided no. Saddling up to the bar at Red Robin as I often had, I got a Boca burger with a fruit plate. I wasn't sure if bisexuals ate fries, either.

This might strike you as nonsense, whether you're straight or LGBTQ. People like what they like and do what they do.

And in many ways I am a "guy's guy." My preferred weekend afternoon is spent watching football on TV. I drive a bright red convertible I can't really afford because it goes really fast, and I think it makes me look cool. Until 2008, I was content with that.

That was when a Pride festival started in Lincoln City, where I was living and teaching. Noted all over town for having a costume for every special event, a parent of one of my students asked me what I planned to wear.

"A dress, if you'll make me one," I said jokingly.

She did and I did — and I loved it. A floodgate opened.

Never the most secure person with my body image, that dress got me flattering attention from all kinds of people. Both men and women found me attractive and interesting, and the feeling was mutual. This time I didn't wait to explore it, at least on an intellectual level.

Perhaps the best way to think of it is this: My wife and I have always had our "list." Five people for whom, if you



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met one of them, you were allowed to temporarily dump your marriage vows. My wife's list includes John Barrowman of *Doctor Who*. Mine included Zoe Saldana of *Guardians of the Galaxy* and *Star Trek*. Now it also includes *Guardian's* Chris Pratt and *Trek's* Chris Pine. (I'm a new demographic: "Sci-Fi-Bi.")

Beyond that, I decided I liked dressing as a drag queen and indulging in the attention of men and women. I had another dress made, then another, each one brighter than the next.

In time, I found that as "Raina Bowe" — my drag queen alter ego — I like what I've always liked. For one thing, my rainbow dress goes stunningly with my bright red car.

More than that, however, I am what I have always been: a teacher.

Whether it was a function of being an out bisexual or a highly visible drag queen, I found myself a magnet for LGBTQ-related questions. Kids who were out, adults who were thinking about coming out, parents who were trying to understand their kids — they had questions and assumed I had answers. I made every attempt to get answers, so that when I have someone's attention, I know enough to help, just as I had wished there'd been someone to answer my questions after that staff meeting.

Funny thing is, Raina Bowe — "edutainer" — made her debut at Eugene Pride two years ago. Having since moved to Eugene, where I am still an educator, I'm looking forward to attending again what is now my home festival. Come say "hi."

Or, if you miss me there, stop by Red Robin after the festival. I'll be the one having the cheeseburger. ■