

**LGBTQ** from 10A**“Just being authentic”**

Jeremy Austen is a Florence native. The owner of Florence Old Town's toy store, Funky Monkey, moved to the city when he was 8, and said he's thankful for growing up in a small town.

“It wasn't easy growing up gay, but it would have been much harder in California, especially the area I'm from,” Austen said.

That's not to say that school was easy for him. He didn't identify as gay until he was in his 20s, but he knew he was different at the age of four.

“I'd always been attracted to girls in my class,” he said. “There were girls in high school that I was infatuated with. And it really felt like love to me.”

But the attractions were purely emotional for Austen.

“When someone says ‘I didn't know I was gay until I was an adult,’ I think that's kind of BS,” he said. “If someone has hit adolescence and puberty, and you have sexual feelings, then you'll know. I had very sexual feeling toward men since adolescence, but I never had emotional feelings toward men. So it was very confusing for me.”

Austen found a sort of solace in that confusion.

“It gave me hope. ‘Maybe I'm not gay, or maybe I just haven't met the right woman,’” he said. “But that never happened. It wasn't that I didn't try. Looking back, that was what I was the most angry about. How much effort I put into trying to change, and self-loathing.”

And it wasn't just his attractions that worried him.

“I am a stereotypical gay person since I was very young,” he said. “I was into theater, I was into costuming, I was into fashion, all of these things that were very ‘gay.’ I always fit that mold, and it really bothered me.”

Other students also picked up on this. He was often bullied in school,

particularly in junior and senior high school.

“I think I was called a f\*\*\*\*t everyday,” he said.

But still, Austen said that he had it easier than many children growing up gay.

“I hate that this is considered ‘a good experience,’ because some kids don't have it as good, but no kid should have to deal with that,” he said. “If that was ‘easy,’ then that really sucks.”

But he also had a trove of positive experiences in Florence as well. While he was never good at traditional academics in school — he called himself a terrible student — he found other outlets to boost his self-esteem.

“I loved growing up here. I was really active in theater. I helped with costume design at the Florence Events Center's very first production when I was 14. I did that for years. I did really well in art and it was the only thing I took seriously in high school. I loved my teacher. I had a really good community in that aspect.”

And things have gotten better for Austen as he grew up.

“I've never felt threatened here,” he said. “As an adult, I've been called a fag twice. Once by a group of 8 year olds on a bike,” he said with a laugh. The other was a drunk man in Old Town.

Austen has been out of the closet for seven years now. It happened in London at a convention to buy collectible high fashion dolls, a hobby he still loves to this day. He fell in love with a man, a feeling that mirrored the infatuations he had for women when he was in school.

Except this time, it felt right. “That was amazing,” Austen said. “That was my coming out.”

When he came back to Florence, he made it a point to systematically tell everyone he was gay, but it was difficult.

He grew up in a religious community that wasn't accepting of homosexuality. Most of the friends he had were from his religious congregation, and they didn't take it well.

“I lost 90 percent of my friends and support group,” he said. “It was hard for my mom, because I was no longer part of the congregation. I wasn't shunned, but I wasn't a part of that anymore. To this day, I see people I grew up with. They might not ignore me, but it's very weird when you know everyone in town, for good and for bad.”

Austen, though, isn't one to dwell on the negative. He found new friends, reaching out to the only gay person in town he knew, Matthieu Korso. He immersed himself in the doll community, traveled more and built up his toy store.

“My customers were awesome,” he said. “It's not like I was telling my customers, but they could tell there was a weight that was lifted off, and it's very true. There was something about admitting it to yourself and just being authentic. I don't like that word, but it is true. It's being true to yourself. Definitely no regrets.”

Florence can still surprise Austen. “For being so small, I don't think it's closed-minded at all,” he said.

The year he came out, Austen played an openly gay character in Last Resort Player's production of “Cabaret.” He said that he doesn't plan on going on stage again, but he felt the experience was liberating.

“We've come so far, but there's always room for improvements,” he said. “I'm very grateful for what's happened in the last 10 years and it's definitely a lot better. But we're at a standstill politically.”

Austen knows there's a lot of people who identify as LGBTQ in the community. He said Florence could do better with LGBTQ rights, but it's not necessary.

“I don't need to feel included for being gay, because being gay is a very small part of who I am,” he said. “I don't need a lot of gay friends, because that's not something I think about a lot.”

“My adult life has been really positive. I've done the shop for 14 years, and it's been great. I feel very safe.”

“I'm just me”  
“In my case, I had a girl brain and

I had a boy body,” Jane Hudson said about being transexual.

Hudson, who is the president of Florence's Parents, Friends and Families of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) chapter, felt so strongly about being trans that she spent \$23,000 for surgery and \$18,000 for hair removal, fully transitioning to a woman seven years ago.

“I tell people how I woke up from surgery. I lay there for a minute thinking about the enormity of what I had done. And I started smiling and I couldn't stop. My friend Patrice said, ‘Yeah, and you haven't stopped yet.’”

Hudson is transexual, which is different from the term transgender. That is an umbrella term encompassing a variety of different gender identities and stages of transitioning. Some only wear clothes of a different gender, while other take hormone therapy but never get full sexual reassignment surgery, like Hudson did.

“I know a lot of people who are transgender who have not had surgery and no ideas in that direction,” Hudson said. “They're just happy who they are.”

But the terms aren't really important to Hudson.

“I'm just me,” she said. “There's a lot of labels, but I think more people are getting away from labels, simply because people just don't fit under a specific one. Why should I be labeled anything? I'm just a person.”

Hudson's long, flowing blond hair and delicate features usually wouldn't give a person pause as to her gender, and if anyone is confused about it, she suggested people just take a look at her.

“As long as it's not said with hatred, that's how it is,” she said. “Some people make mistakes, and some people get it right. You've got a 50-50 chance.”

As for her sexuality, Hudson considers herself pansexual.

“Traits and characteristics is what I'm interested in,” she said. “I like masculine energy, whether it's male or female. And I like intelligence, and of course a sense of humor. Who the person to me is more important.”

Hudson realized she was a woman when she was around 6 years old, which is common for the trans community.

“There was nothing wrong with me. I just didn't look the way I should,” she said. “And, of course, later on, I was not treated the way I thought I should be.”

As a child, Hudson did get the opportunity to be her true self, at least for a while. Her father was a trucker and would be gone for long stretches of time.

“My mom was sitting at her dressing table one morning, so I asked her about putting on makeup and clip-ons. I think she thought it was just a phase I was going through, and she just let me be.”

She passed for a girl for years until her father got a job as a dispatcher and came back to live with the family. Hudson was forced back into the closet, living as a man into adulthood, eventually getting married to a woman and becoming a trucker herself.

“I had a stash of clothes, but I was always denying it. I mean, who wants to be weird? It's called internal transphobia. We've been told for so many years that this is bad.”

She was married for 37 years.

Hudson wasn't open about her feelings with her wife at first, but after a while, she couldn't live with herself as a man. Hudson's wife initially allowed her to wear women's clothing, but only if she wore her clothes inside the home.

“It almost got to the point where it physically hurt to take off female clothes and have to look like a guy again,” she said.

Hudson packed up her belongings, got in a truck and left. Her wife attempted to convince Hudson to come back, but after she went through her operations, the marriage officially failed.

Hudson lives in Mapleton now. She lives alone, which doesn't bother her in the slightest.

She's since been a rather quiet but hopeful leader of PFLAG, working to rebuild the organization.

While great strides have been made regarding the public's view of the transgender community in recent years, there are still issues.

“They're all in an uproar about bathrooms at this point,” she said. “I mean let's face it, everything takes place behind a closed door anyway. Those fears are unfounded. Most of this is the case that, people are just normal.”

But she does believe that, for the part, the public is becoming accepting of the transgender community.

“It's just not completely understood,” she said. “I would like to be a part of the community simply because there's more acceptance when there's more people. One of the things I see as an impediment to trans people is finding the resources they need, because younger people don't know who to see to begin with.”

Finding physicians and therapists to transition can be extremely difficult, even in large cities. It took Hudson months to find any doctors who even had the medical knowledge to help her, much less the willingness. At the beginning, she was taking hormone therapy by herself with medications she purchased off the Internet.

“It would be nice to have a stronger community in Florence,” she said. “What I see at this point is that people have this feeling that it's a conservative town. ... And that's why a lot of people don't come to PFLAG. They don't want to be recognized. I just shake my head over it because it's not that way anymore, but they still haven't gotten past it.”

And if they haven't gotten past it, how can others who are still questioning their identity come to terms with it as well?

Of course, it does get easier with each generation.

“If you look at who's complaining, it's the older generation. The younger kids in school don't seem to have a problem with it anymore. No big deal. They've seen it; they understand it. They have classmates that are coming out. It's going to be normalized, it's just a matter of how many generations it takes,” Hudson said.

# the spotlight

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