

Bees love tees: or how a bisexual street activist became a strong ally for his trans* brothers and sisters

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Published April 14, 2014 | Updated June 27, 2018

https://www.transadvocate.com/bees-love-tees-or-how-a-bisexual-street-activist-became-a-strong-ally-for-his-trans-brothers-and-sisters_n_13491.htm

Abstract

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Article

[su_waltertop]

I have a confession, I wasn't always such a strong advocate for my brothers and sisters in the trans* community. It's not that I was hostile towards them or anything; my support was always there, but it was buried amongst my general activism work in the LGBTQ community.

It was my poetry and the right to use the bathroom that changed all that.

When I was a graduate student at Indiana State University in Terre Haute, I was living in the Candlewood Suites at the university's expense. They were working on the dorms on campus, so seniors and grad students were asked to move to the Candlewood Suites and ISU would pick up the difference. Needless to say, for a broke college student, living in a four-star hotel for a year was a little slice of heaven; full-size beds, full-size fridge, maid service, room service, complimentary newspapers, the works.

Since I'm a perpetual insomniac and nite-owl, I got to know the night clerk at the front desk pretty well. His name was Aubrey. I'd go out for a smoke and then come back into the lobby and just jaw-jack for hours with Aubrey. We quickly bonded over our love of weird rock n roll, psychotic preachers, and a taste for radical queer politics.

Both of us were also writers, Aubrey wrote fiction and I wrote poetry, so we started exchanging work, getting feedback from each other.

I got to know Aubrey pretty well, along with his brother Jordan (known together as "The Twins"). They were both artists, old school freaks, and they were trans*. Now, I was familiar with the term - one of my old buddies from my camp staff days was trans* - but I wasn't very sharp on what that all entailed.

The Twins left Terre Haute and headed west to Phoenix, AZ. I didn't ask too many questions, but apparently, they needed to get the hell out of Indiana and start life fresh again. I wished them the best and told them we'd stay in touch.

Apparently, when they got out to Arizona, they started telling their buddies about this weird long-haired poet back in Indiana. So their friends started contacting me on Facebook, saying the Twins had told them about me and they wanted to read some of my work for themselves.

I was happy to share it with them, why not? It was (and remains) a raw edged literary blend of booze, cigarettes, dark humor, plenty of street-style activism and more than a touch of loud distorted rock n roll.

They dug it, telling me my work spoke to them louder than Angus Young's guitar. Before I knew it, I had amassed quite a following amongst Arizona's trans* community, at least those of them who knew the Twins.

The Twins even helped out with some of my recent books, with Jordan doing the cover art for *On the Midnight Stage* and *Menthol Slim One-Twenty Blues*.

The other thing that happened involved a public restroom.

I was working for *Polari* magazine, a British online queer arts rag. At the time, I was primarily a music critic; I had done a couple interviews and a satirical piece on the time I came face to face with the Westboro Baptist Church in Terre Haute, but nothing really heavy or serious.

That's when I started seeing all these posts from my brothers and sisters out in Arizona about Senate Bill 1045, colloquially known as the "Bathroom Bill" as it would make it an arresting offense for a trans* person to use a public restroom not associated with their birth gender.

It was weird on the face of it, personally I thought the question of the right to use a public restroom in this country was settled back in the 1960's during the original Civil Rights Movement. But apparently, I was wrong.

I kept an eye on the whole thing for a bit and noticed how quickly things were getting to a boiling point, the demonstrations were starting to roll out, the petitions were popping up, it seemed like trans* folks out in Arizona were ready to tango with the scum over their right to piss in a public john.

I got a hold of my editors at *Polari*, Bryon, and Chris, and told them what was going on. I had sources right on the ground in all this and was ready to start getting the story as soon as they gave me the nod. They told me to have at it and send them the finished work when it all panned out.

Polari doesn't usually cover political issues, focusing mainly on arts & entertainment, but Bryon and Chris trusted me to bring them one hell of a story; as far as they were concerned, trans* folks were just as much a part of us as anybody else under the rainbow banner and they deserved the right to go to the bathroom without going to jail.

I hit up my connections out there and quickly got waist deep into the whole twisted mess or at least as deep as I could have being all the way out here in Indiana. My brothers out there put me in touch with the media reps of the movement who agreed to be interviewed once they did a bit of background digging

on me to make sure I was a legit journalist and not just some weirdo with a notebook, trying to infiltrate their movement.

I learned quite a bit working on that article, for the first time, I got an up-close look at the trans* community and the fights they were in. It made feel sort of guilty, here I was, fighting for the right to get married someday, and these brothers and sisters were still fighting for something as basic as the right to use the bathroom without going to jail.

The article, which became known as “Freedom to Piss: The Fight Against Arizona’s SB 1045”, was a huge success for Polari and it showed my editors that I was more than just an arts & entertainment writer, that I could go out there and get right in the thick of the action.

It lit a fire under me and soon I was showing my support and solidarity with my trans* brothers and sisters, I bought a trans* pride flag and hung it proudly on my wall with the rest of my colors and like all my other flags, it was baptized on the sacred concrete of the picket line. I unfurled it at a demonstration against Indiana’s HJR-3 (then known as HJR-6) back in October, letting the other demonstrators know that I stood with all our brothers and sisters and not just those who were politically convenient.

It boiled down to seeing trans* people as my brothers and sisters and not just another letter in the acronym. I heard their stories, I talked to them person to person, be it in the flesh or online, and those I got to know saw a chance to tell their stories, even if it was to a weird long-haired rock n roll gonzo journalist like me.

And maybe that made it even better, the people I talked to for the Bathroom Bill piece knew they didn’t have to hold back with me, they were totally free to be themselves and they knew I would print it honestly, without sanitizing their stories or forcing it into a dry professional style. It was a living breathing story and it needed to be written that way.

There may only be so much I can do as an ally, but I’m ready and willing to do whatever it takes to help my trans* brothers and sisters. We’re in this fight together, we will stand together, we will fight together, and we will taste the sweetness of victory together.

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Suggested citation

walter. "Bees love tees: or how a bisexual street activist became a strong ally for his trans* brothers and sisters."

TransAdvocate, April 14, 2014.

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