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My Life From Oklahoma to New Jersey

In Tulsa, Oklahoma, in our rainbow gear, hairspray, and glitter, the five of my LGBTQ+ ally friends and I squeezed into a yellow, stick-shift buggy. We were ready to attend our first Pride. As we approached the parade, we walked past protesters with their megaphones shouting insults and waving signs that read, “sinner” and “God demands you change.” I was not expecting these strong sentiments against the city’s celebration of the LGBTQ+ community and allies. The Tulsa Pride 2017 festival was far larger than the protest preceding its entrance, yet this was my first experience with unrivaled and terrifying prejudice in my hometown.

As a 15-year-old, recently self-identified homosexual Jewish boy in uber-Baptist Tulsa, the negative shouts made me tremble, sweat, and walk in shame. Then, serendipitously, an angelic drag queen noticed my disbelief and shock. She embodied positivity and exuded love by telling me that “Love outshines any hatred.” While this message may be considered cliché, it resonated with me and became my motto.

Two years later, I entered a new school in New Jersey, yet again in a situation where I stuck out. The reason I stuck out at Bernards High was not because of my religious affiliation or sexuality, but because I was the new kid. Even without the security of my Oklahoman LGBTQ+ community, I would not let negativity affect me like it had during Tulsa Pride. In the first week, I found peers who helped me transition into a new school and friendships quickly blossomed. I entered Bernards High School with a smile and did not judge my peers, just as I hoped they would not judge me. Yet two months into the school year, I still had not found any deeper interpersonal relationships at Bernards High School.

Keeping in mind that my intersectionalities could be a safe haven, I connected to a part of my culture that I had dissociated from when I lived in Tulsa and went to Holland Hall. As my synagogue's cantor recommended, I began to lead music instruction with two girls at the Hebrew school. With my guitar, piano, and new friends, I rediscovered part of myself, as well as devouring new classic Jewish foods: Babka, Knish, and Kneidlach. Unlike living in Tulsa, here, I no longer had to explain why I missed a few days of school for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. My friends and I even had a Friendsukkah, while the other peers had a Friendsmas. I found out that through participating in aspects of my identity, I could create meaningful relationships with others and newfound communities.

Even with my previous negative experience, my new LGBTQ+ friends and I hopped on the train to Penn Station, applying temporary hairspray and glitter for World Pride 2019. No longer was I insecure or worried about prejudice. I marched through NYC without noticing any hatred around. I suggested to my group that we should meet up with mutual friends who had traveled from New Hampshire for World Pride. My friends hesitated, but I encouraged them to remember that we all share similar experiences. Pride, in its essence, is for friendship, love and acceptance, like the drag queen in Tulsa taught me. So, we met up with these strangers. Although my friends were reluctant to have seemingly random people join us, strangers grew into lifelong friends instantaneously.

Yes, the intersectionalities in my identity force me to feel different wherever I go. Yet, embracing unconditional love and applying previous experiences helps me connect and include others who experience similar situations. When entering a new school, starting a new orchestra group, or starting a new activity, walking to that first Pride led me to seek and value diversity in

others so that I find a connection with anyone wherever I go. A friendly smile and a smiley friend can go a long way when finding a place to fit in and be yourself.