

When the heart wants what the heart wants

Woman married to trans man shares her 'privilege' through local support group

By Debra Downey
Senior Editor

For Melanie Parish, the frigid fingers of fear that once threatened to squeeze out warm feelings of love for a trans man are distant memories, relegated to the long-ago past.

These days, Parish is feeling extremely privileged.

She has a successful career, three healthy children, a husband she adores and, unlike others who may still be burdened with worry and doubt, Parish is comfortable with her identity.

"I feel very privileged. We're out, we're happy and we're not struggling to put food on the table," said Parish.

An executive coach, Parish met her husband 17 years ago while living in Colorado with her young daughter. Her first marriage had broken up, but Parish was ready for another relationship. She had developed in her mind a list of qualities in her perfect partner — six-feet tall, enjoys games, likes the movie *Airplane*, shares Parish's Unitarian Universalist values, has a higher education and wants more children.

Parish didn't have to look far for a suitable mate. Right in her own church community, she found what she was looking for.

"I sent Mel away because I was afraid. I couldn't face coming out to my family and friends and changing my identity in the world. I was scared of change."

At first, she tried to be open-minded about Mel Rutherford, who at the time presented as a butch lesbian, according to Parish's blog. However, deep inside, Parish was terrified.

"I didn't think I was brave enough to step out of my comfort zone to be with Mel, even though I very much wanted to," Parish writes on her blog.

"I sent Mel away because I was afraid. I couldn't face coming out to my family and friends and changing my identity in the world. I was scared of change.

"(But) there was a day that I looked at myself in the mirror and I realized I didn't want to be the person that wasn't brave enough to live my life the way I wanted to."

Parish and Rutherford had lunch together a couple of times, they laughed, flirted, attended church and played board games. Eventually, they became lovers.

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Rutherford, a leading expert in autism and a graduate of Yale University, accepted a position as tenure track professor of psy-



Mel Rutherford (left) and Melanie Parish were among the first to be married after Ontario law recognizing same-sex marriage changed in 2003. The couple now has twin boys. | Submitted photo

chology and director of the Human Development Centre at McMaster University in Hamilton in 2002. The couple, whose relationship began two years earlier, married in 2003 — among the first same-sex couples to do so after Ontario law changed. Another two years later, they welcomed twin boys into the world. The babies were conceived by harvesting Rutherford's eggs, fertilizing them using donor sperm through in vitro fertilization and implanting them in Parish's uterus.

Unhappy with provincial law that required the non-gestational parent to adopt children born to a same-sex couple, Rutherford and Parish fought and won an Ontario challenge in 2006, allowing them to be recognized on their children's birth certificates as legal parents.

Not everyone can take on the powerful wheels of big government and emerge victorious, but Parish rejects a term like pioneers to describe the accomplishment.

"I like creating new things in the world,

and we're proud of the fact that we were able to change a law ... but I wouldn't call us trail blazers," she said. "We're able to enjoy our privilege. We can do some of these other things."

After knowing for years that he wanted to transition, Parish's husband Mel transitioned in 2008. Rutherford told *More Magazine* in July 2010 that as he approached his 40th birthday, he knew the timing was right. His family was complete and he had earned tenure at McMaster, which meant his job would not be in jeopardy if he transitioned. A year's sabbatical also provided the perfect opportunity to make a fresh start.

Rutherford told his colleagues and students he would be using masculine pronouns when he returned to work the following year.

He started weekly testosterone injections, and within three months, people he had never met assumed he was a man. Rutherford's transition continues to be remarkable in its unremarkability.

Transgender:

An umbrella term for people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. The term transgender is not indicative of gender expression, sexual orientation, hormonal makeup, physical anatomy, or how one is perceived in daily life.

Trans man/trans woman:

Trans man generally describes someone assigned female at birth who identifies as a man. This individual may or may not actively identify as trans. Sometimes trans men identify as female-to-male. The same concept applies to trans women.

Transition:

A person's process of developing and assuming a gender expression to match their gender identity.

— *Trans Student Educational Resources*

PFLAG Canada

PFLAG Canada is a national charitable organization, founded by parents who wished to help themselves and their family members understand and accept their children.

The "coming-out" process can be a critical time for families. When the adjustment period is particularly long or painful, relationships can become permanently damaged, resulting in a lifetime of emotional scars. People cannot always rise above the challenge of accepting themselves or their family member, and the results can be devastating, even fatal.

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Parish can't recall the circumstances under which she attended her first PFLAG meeting.

Formerly known as an acronym for Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, PFLAG was formed in the United States in 1972. It is a secular support group for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, and two-spirited persons and/or families, friends and allies.

Almost two decades later, Parish said she might have decided on her own to go, or Rutherford could have suggested it.

What Parish does remember is the impact the meetings had on her life. In a safe and respectful environment, she asked questions and found answers; she shared her own experiences and gained insight from others.

"I found it to be an incredibly helpful place," she said. "Some people don't have any support at all. They live and work in an environment that is painful and scary, and they're worried about losing their church and their family.

"PFLAG is a place to talk, a place where people can share freely without worrying what other people think."

Wanting to give back to the community where she feels "super privileged," Parish helped found the Hamilton Wentworth chapter of PFLAG Canada last fall.

"I was looking for a way to volunteer and be helpful in Hamilton. I wanted to be involved with something that mattered to me, and PFLAG matters to me," said Parish.

"I can't think of a better community to support than Hamilton's LGBTQ community. I feel Hamilton is a tough place. People fear they will lose their jobs, their income and become incredibly marginalized."

The Hamilton Wentworth chapter of PFLAG meets the first Wednesday of every month, 7-9 p.m. at First Unitarian, 170 Dundurn St. S. All ages and ethnicities welcome.

Meetings are free and no prior registration is necessary. Visit pflaghamiltonwentworth.ca or www.facebook.com/PFLAGHamiltonWentworth.