

S: In terms of the story that I have with the LGBTQ community, it kind of started a while ago, I would say maybe at least ten years ago, in fact it will be about 10. years. I was working for O2. I didn't really think about the LGBTQ community at that point, I was just, I knew that they were, there was a movement, they were there and it kind of, sort of intrigued me.

And then, I met a guy who was, he came into the store from another, another store, he'd been transferred, with his boyfriend. And we got on like a house on fire, and at first I was a bit wary of the fact that he was, he was gay, and I was like thinking, um, you know, I'm not sure of this, because I've never spoken to anybody who was gay.

And he was, well he is, still is, he's a living legend, he is, he is lovely. He opened up my eyes completely to that world, that, he opened it all up for me. He, he wasn't [laughs,] like his boyfriend, his boyfriend is a queen, he is an *absolute* queen and he loves it. But he wasn't, he was quite conservative and very softly spoken is Paul, he's a lovely, lovely guy.

And he, those, I say, Paul and Craig, those two have helped me out so, so much personally, in getting my new job, they helped me out getting my new, no they sat me for four hours just doing, just doing my CV. But also, they stopped a lot of bullying, that I had, that was undergoing. And they opened up, certainly with Craig, he opened up my eyes to that community that I'd never been exposed to. And I just found it was just full of love, and I fell in love with it, and I was like, "Oh my gosh, this is amazing".

So fast forward a few years to 2016, I hadn't been to any pride parades or organised anything like that, but I did go to a convention, I went to a My Little Pony convention. And it was difficult, because not many people get it, you know, it's a very niche sorta thing, and I got dressed up and things like that. And it didn't, I have a lot of confidence issues, so I have two pony dresses that I like to wear, and I couldn't wear them. I just couldn't wear them out and about because I was too scared.

Then Paul and Craig sort of said to me, why don't you go to the Harrogate pride, and everybody else at Pony Con was saying, "yes, go to pride", I was like, "I can't, I can't go." He said, "Go in your pony dress, you'll be fine."

This was in 2018, I did it, so it took me two years from me to get the pony dress to actually wearing it out in public. At first I didn't, I actually went out and I just wore just a basic dress, your basic, you know, nice top and a nice bottoms.

It was Lee and Chanel who I saw first, and I showed them the dress and they was like, "Oh yeah yeah, wear it, wear it, wear it!" And again, I was so self-conscious of it. And, you know, and I was sort of there just adjusting it. And they sort of pulled me out of that shell, because they said, "right, you're in that dress, you're going at the front of the bus." Like, what?![laughs] All I wanted to do was just see if you wanted any help, he was like, "yo, you're carrying the flag and we're gonna do this, we're gonna give you a confidence boost."

And ever since then they've done that, that's what I've found as that community, it's all about the, the love that that community gives. It's all about how, you know, it doesn't matter what you do, it doesn't matter what you're into in terms of, if it be My Little Pony, or gaming, or if you're not into anything, you just want to just have a quiet life like Paul does, he just wants to be nice and quiet and left alone.

It's, it's all accepting, and this is something I've never had 'cause I've always struggled with bullying, and I've never had, I've never been accepted. And even now it's, it's, you know, I mean I've, finally the bullying's stopped, you know, but now I'm accepted, and I feel that that sort of inclusion is my story really, is all about family and getting everybody together, it doesn't matter who you are, it matters that you're loved.

And this is why I'm on the committee, because it's not so much the fact that it's a committee, it's the fact that I've got that passion, that I want to make sure everybody feels that sort of, that massive hug that I did when Chanel hugged me and so did Lee, they both hugged me, to say "oh yeah you're gonna go on the front, we're gonna make sure you're gonna get your confidence back." And I mean sure enough now I've done that, you know, I've worn it in public and I've, I can actually go out in public now wearing different clothes, and that for me is a massive massive step forward. Whereas, you know, when I was, before then, if I hadn't have met Paul and I hadn't have met the guys, and I hadn't met everybody else, even today I'd have just been going out with a, in a coat [laughs], you know.

'Cause I don't, I try to blend in with the crowds, but now I don't have to blend in, I can, I can be my own person, and that's something that I found with that story. And that is really my story really, is it's not so much, sort of like, a relationship story, it's more of them helping me come out from my shell really and be the confident, you know be, I'm not quite there yet, but I'm more confident going out in public now than I was, well, even five years ago, and they were 10 years ago. And that's, that is what they do, [phone pings] they, they are fantastic and, that was my phone to be honest [laughs].

I mean even now I can tell people that, 'oh yes I'm into My Little Pony', I'm, you know, 'I like Thomas the Tank Engine, I like Harry Potter, I like geeky stuff, I like gaming, I like -'. Whereas 10 years ago I'd have been, I just, I just live in my bedroom. You know, and I don't. Paul and Craig they helped me get the house, I've got my, my own little flat, um, I've got wonderful neighbours downstairs who's also helped me as well.

Even though I don't have a partner, I don't have attractions to a partner at the moment, I don't know if I would, ever would. It's not just about that, it's about how they've, the whole community has helped just one person just step out the door a little bit. And yeah, it really is just that, that is my story really is, is how, you know, well one couple has included me into their fold, which has gained me to get the access to find others that are very similar, which has gained me more confidence to a point where, as I say, they literally put me in front of a bus [laughs].

So, to walk down in front of the parade point, to a point where now I'm becoming, you know, by now I'm being accepted as a member of the committee, I've been accepted to do things. And in turn, it's given me the confidence to get out and be, you know, to actually go out there and say, actually, 'I don't agree with this, I do agree with that, I don't agree with this'. Whereas 10 years ago I wouldn't 'a done that. I'd have just hid.

[laughs] They've done a lot, especially through the bullying, the bullying was harsh. I mean, I was physically, mentally, emotionally bullied, to, for, 30 years. Nose broken. As I say, I had my nose broken, beaten, kicked, I, I was choked. I was, it was horrible. So it's nice to, I say for the, and it stopped completely. The last I was bullied was 2018, it was the last time I was actually emotional bullied online. So, and that was put to stop by, again by a team who realised what was happening, and they rallied around me and they said, 'right, you're not doing that'. And literally as this person was posting stuff, 'cause it's all online was most of this stuff, as she was posting stuff online, the team put a bubble round it, and they said, 'no, you're not doing that'.

And they literally got a blanket report, and actually they just completely dismissed it, to point where there was about... she put one comment and she had about 400 replies [laughs]. So, yes! So er, she doesn't bully anymore which is good. But yeah, that was, as I say, and I've got that, it's nice to know that, even now, I've got that network. And that's, that's what I've got from, that is my story really, is the fact that I've got the, my family. They are my family. They're my, they're my second family [laughs]. So, yeah they are, they're definitely my family.

This was a, a model I've had for I'd say 10 maybe 15 years, Paul, as I say it was, it wasn't one that Paul got me, but one that Paul told me to keep, and it was this one here. And this is a little mighty duck figurine, I don't know if you can see it, I'll just hold it up there. So, that is normally on my desk at work.

She's my, Paul told me, Paul and Craig, basically, I talked about mighty ducks all the time, to a point where I got this little figurine, and if ever I was feeling down or anything, I used to just grab it. And that would be sort of like my, my little comfort.

I mean it's nothing, I wouldn't say it's anything to do with the, you know, Paul didn't give me it or Craig didn't give me it, it wasn't given to me by, by Paul and Craig, but it was more sort of... They told me, they said, 'look, if you need something physical, get a model, get something that really means passionate to you. You know, hold on to it if ever you need to speak about it, and then if you're having a bad day just hold it. You know, and then that way you know that that, that support network is there'.

And I suppose it does work. I mean she did go with me to Isle of Wight. She went with me to pride, and she went with me everywhere this little thing! [laughing]. So yeah, she's, she's actually, she was on my bedside so, but yeah she's kind of a cute little model [laughs]. So, she's adorable.

But yeah that's, that's I would say that is my, my figure, I'm very similar to her character. She thinks faster than she speaks, and I speak faster than I think, so [laughs]. Oh yeah, so she's a, she's a lovely little character, and as I say we are, me and Tanya, we are sort of like together or, we are, she does keep hold of me all time, I keep hold of her. So, she is my, yes, that is my model. That's one thing I would say represents me.