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**COVER STORY: Gays With Kids**

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Brian Rosenberg, of Boston, MA, is a father, husband, HIV-survivor, and co-founder of Gays With Kids, a “first-of-its-kind website that helps gay dads navigate fatherhood – from creating their families to raising them.”

Brian was the middle child of a close-knit family from a suburb north of Boston. He remembers his childhood as an

idyllic time, surrounded by extended family, good friends, and small-town camaraderie.

His parents nurtured in him a sense of independence and a spirit for adventure; he attended overnight camps from an early age, spent the summer between high school and college with an exchange family in Japan, and spent part of his junior year experiencing a ‘Semester-at-Sea’ – in Brian’s own words: “an incredible 100-day experiential learning journey with more than a dozen visits to countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe.”

Looking back on high school, Brian recognizes that feelings he had for a few of his guy friends were actually crushes. “I knew I was drawn to them in a way that was unusual, but I didn’t put much thought into why I wanted to be with them so much, and the relationships were never anything other than platonic.” It was in his freshman year at college, during a trip with his family to the Bahamas, that he realized what those feelings meant. “One night, a guy from Norway working at the embassy befriended my brother and me during a visit to a local club.” Brian shared his first kiss with the Norwegian, but quickly panicked, and retreated from the situation.

“Throughout the years, I would occasionally try to locate him on social media but was never able to find him.”

Last year, on a whim, Brian called the Norwegian Embassy, and as luck would have it, someone actually remembered him. Sadly, it turned out the young man had died from AIDS only two years after their Bahamas encounter.

AIDS would take a significant role in Brian’s life, as he continued to explore his sexuality in secret for the next few years, engaging in risky behaviour that led to him becoming HIV-positive in 1990. Even when he told his family of his HIV status, Brian still didn’t come out as gay.

It was only around the time he met his future husband, Ferd, that Brian started coming out to friends and family.

Ferd van Gameren was born in the Netherlands, the second of five children. Ferd’s father worked in the military and, later, in human resources; his mother was an elementary school teacher. After college in Utrecht and Amsterdam, Ferd decided to travel across the Atlantic. “I was accepted to Boston University’s doctoral program in Classical Studies; I instantly fell in love with the United States.”

Ferd’s coming out process was markedly different than Brian’s. “I came out when I was 22 or 23, but I had known that I was gay for a long time before that. Coming out wasn’t a big deal then, in Holland.”

The story of the couple's meeting is, as Ferd likes to say, the oldest story in the world: "boy meets boy at the gym." The couple vividly recall the details of their first date, one Friday in June of 1993. "I invited him to my place for dinner," Brian begins. "but I didn't know how to cook, and Ferd rescued the meal after noticing I was about to mix raw hamburger meat with cooked pasta. That was the first and last time I ever cooked for him."

From almost the moment they got together, the two men were inseparable. "We got married on June 20, 2013, exactly twenty years after we started our relationship," Brian retells. "We were living in Toronto at the time. It was a beautiful and emotional event for us, declaring our love for each other in front of kids, family and friends."

While the couple enjoyed spending time with their nieces and nephews, they did not consider fatherhood for themselves. Brian had his HIV status, and, "back in those days we didn't think much of the future, as the assumption was that ours wouldn't last long." In their first year together, Ferd and Brian attended 20 of their friends' funerals. "Then the AIDS cocktail arrived in 1996, and the worst of the crisis was ending. I remember the first time the weekly gay newspaper didn't have an obituary; it had been at least 3 years."

Eight months after he started taking a triple-drug combination, Brian received amazing news: there was no longer any detectable trace of the virus in his blood. "I'm not sure why I survived when hundreds of thousands of others did not," Brian admits, in his bio from his *Gays With Kids* website.

Once Brian had more than a year's worth of good health results under his belt, the couple started talking more seriously about fatherhood. Back then, of course, there was no *Gays With Kids* or other resource to learn about the various options available to gay men interested in parenthood. So Ferd took the lead researching and identifying organizations that could help them become dads.

"We initially decided to build our family through adoption," Brian says. "We were matched with a 4-month-old boy living with his teenage birth mom and her 18-year-old boyfriend, who wasn't the boy's dad." The adoption fell through after the young mother left her boyfriend, taking her baby with her.

After that experience, the couple figured adoption would not be their path to fatherhood. Instead, Ferd learned about a research lab in Cambridge, MA, that had tremendous success helping HIV-positive men become biological dads to HIV-

negative children that also didn't risk the health of the mothers.

After putting all the pieces into play to become dads through surrogacy, the men received a call from their adoption agency: a three-day-old black baby boy needed a loving family. "We proudly took Levi home from the hospital on the fifth day of his life, and his twin-sisters (by surrogacy) Sadie and Ella joined the family 17 months later!"

Upon adopting Levi, Brian and Ferd scoured the internet, looking to connect with other gay dads, "so that we could learn from their experiences." They were unsuccessful. Brian explains on his website: "we felt isolated because we had no community of gay dads to turn to and with whom we could identify." Ferd adds, "we also felt alienated by all the mom-centric focus." Everywhere the couple turned, they encountered phrases like 'mommy tested, mommy approved' or 'for moms by moms'. "Almost everything was written by moms, for moms," Brian explains in a 2018-interview with Tom Bourdon from the *Hey Dads, Gay Dads* video series.

Determined to put an end to what they perceived as 'Dadsdiscrimination', and worse, 'Gay-Dadsdiscrimination', the couple created *Gays With Kids*, an online community that "aims to normalize the

experience of gay parenting by sharing stories, news, advice, and in-depth reporting on topics of interest to gay dads, many of which are typically not covered in mainstream media.”

Having initially set up the website, the men re-directed their energies to their three toddlers. Now that the kids are school-aged, Brian and Ferd are able to more-fully dedicate themselves to their online resource.

The couple further explain the inspiration for, and goals of *Gays With Kids*: “as dads, we share all the universal truths and challenges of parenting that are experienced by parents everywhere, regardless of gender or orientation. But, as gay dads, we face many other truths and challenges that are uniquely our own.”

The challenges they refer to include such things as: coming out to kids, dealing with homophobic teachers, guiding daughters through puberty, and – not least of all – navigating the different paths gay men can follow to become dads.

The couple describe *Gays With Kids* as a labor of love for both of them. Initially, they didn’t even think about generating revenue to help offset the costs of running it. “In 2018 we finally launched our first revenue stream: sponsored content.” Brian explains. “We’ve had

terrific success, and revenue committed in 2019 has already surpassed what we took in all of last year.” Revenue hasn’t quite reached break-even, however, so Brian continues with his day-job, and Ferd has his hands full as the kids’ stay-at-home dad.

As if creating a resource and community for gay dads wasn’t enough, the couple also provided their own children with personalized resources. “When the kids were all still very young, Ferd wrote a ‘How We Came to be a Family’ for Levi, and another book for the girls,” Brian explains. “We started reading them these stories before they could talk, so this is all they’ve ever known. When other kids ask them about their family, they always respond so matter-of-factly that the reaction they receive from other kids is always just as nonchalant.”

When asked about the future of *Gays With Kids*, Brian responds, “there’s a lot more we’d like to accomplish, such as more resources for gay dads with older kids, building families in other countries, more about foster parents, and more ways to build a community of gay dads -virtually and in the real world. There’s never a shortage of ideas!”

For more information, visit Brian and Ferd’s site at [GaysWithKids.com](http://GaysWithKids.com).

