

Coming out as a parent and a Jew

VIEWPOINT

DIANE
ARMSTRONG



JUSTINE'S voice sparkled with excitement. "It's going to be fantastic. Mum," she told me. "We had our meeting last night about the float for the Mardi Gras. We've got more people wanting to be involved than we expected, which is great. We're going to wear T-shirts with Magen David on them and we're learning a dance routine."

There would be some parents and heterosexual supporters joining them. "Naturally, I'd love you to take part too, and I think you'd have a lot of fun, but I'll understand if you don't want to," she added.

My heart was already hammering, and I could feel my hands trembling. The idea of walking through the streets of Sydney in the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras as part of a noticeably Jewish group pressed all my panic buttons. I spent my childhood in Poland during and after the Holocaust having to conceal the fact that I was Jewish, and this has left me with a lifelong anxiety about publicly parading my Jewish identity. Being Jewish was something you didn't advertise in public, but kept private and invisible.

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Like having a gay child. In any case, I'd always thought of the Mardi Gras Parade as flamboyant, raunchy and dominated by exactly the wrong kind of people, the ones who reinforce the worst stereotypes of homosexuals. It seemed to me that it attracted those who came to gawk and giggle at the weird participants, outlandish costumes and bare flesh. There was no way I was going to be part of that.

A week or so later, my son Jonathan asked me what I thought about taking part as a supporter, as he has done for the past three years. He listened patiently while I explained my reasons, and then said: "I think it's important for families to take part to show their support. If more relatives and friends join the parade, people will realise that gays are normal people with normal families who care about them."

From that moment on, my mind churned as I struggled with the dilemma. On one hand, I clung to my views and anxieties, but at the same time, I sensed that Jonathan was right. But the more I thought and agonised, the more I went around in circles. Nothing was getting resolved.

Four days before the Mardi Gras, I happened to be at Bondi Beach, hovering on the edge of the water, wincing with every freezing splash, until suddenly I stopped worrying how cold the water would feel and just plunged in. When I got home, I decided to stop thinking about it. All my opinions and feelings were valid, but I wanted to be with my daughter, and that's what I was going to do. And since the thought of wearing a Star of David on my T-shirt made my chest tighten with apprehension, I wouldn't wear it.

In the late afternoon of the day of the parade, as we walked through the city towards our meeting-point, I was struck by the terrific atmosphere of camaraderie between the bystanders and the participants. I had plenty of time to wander around, chat with other people and admire the creative floats and intricate costumes. But when I came back to our float and saw the hot-pink Magen David placards that most of our group were holding, my stomach knotted with apprehension.

Finally, the parade began. There seemed to be quite a few religious floats, and as they passed us, Catholics, Uniting Church members and Quakers waved to us and called out friendly comments. Jonathan pointed to the banner on

the Koori float, which was about Aboriginal reconciliation and diversity, and it struck me that this was what this whole parade was really about — acceptance of our human differences and a celebration of diversity.

Finally, it was our turn to move off. I felt a surge of excitement as the truck with its huge *Magen David*, and the infectious beat of *Havenu Shalom Aleichem*, began moving along the city street. Behind the truck came our lively dancers, whose pink placards made a distinctive but tasteful black-and-pink pattern of colour and movement as they danced down Oxford Street. Right in the very front, dancing her feet off, eyes shining, was Justine, obviously having the time of her life, dancing beside her partner, Lucie.

In front of me, a sea of pink placards in the shape of Stars of David bobbed joyously in time



Jewish participants in the Sydney Mardi Gras.

to the music. Now it was our turn, and I took a deep breath as our supporters' group turned into Oxford Street. How would the bystanders react to us?

All around us, down the entire length of Oxford Street, crowds had lined up as much as ten deep, just waiting to see us. Walking beside me with a banner that said "Proud Brother", Jonathan pointed. Above us, every window, balcony and roof-top was crammed with people leaning out, craning their heads, hanging out of every building. And as we passed, they waved, clapped, cheered, swayed in time to the music and called out "Happy Mardi Gras!" Those standing in the street tried to shake our hands. We could feel goodwill and warmth reaching out to us in the most accepting and powerful sensation of solidarity and acceptance I've ever felt.

What made this even more exhilarating was that apart from walking beside my son, I had two of my closest friends there as well, jumping up and down with excitement. We couldn't stop saying incredulously: "Isn't this amazing!"

As I waved back to the cheering crowds, shook the hands that reached out to me, and wished them "Happy Mardi Gras" in return, I felt euphoric. This felt like a victory march, a ticker-

tape parade. And in a sense, that's what it was. A collective victory for the Jewish gays and lesbians who were breaking down sexual and religious barriers. But for me, it was a personal victory as well because I was overcoming decades of anxieties — anxieties about showing that I was Jewish and about having a gay child. Coming out, you might say.

As he waved happily to the crowds, Jonathan suddenly said: "Tonight I feel really proud to be Jewish". I felt choked up. After all the persecution I've lived through, to see him walking so confidently among this throng, to have my daughter choose to march as a Jew in this parade, and for me to be marching with them, was absolutely miraculous.

I felt proud of my daughter, who has the courage to stand up for herself and the leadership to inspire others, proud of my son who stands up for what he believes in, and proud of my husband who supports us all. Proud too of this city which, with bigoted exceptions, has taken this celebration of diversity to its big heart.

■ Diane Armstrong is a Sydney writer and the author of *Mosaic*.