

MY MOMMA LOVES ME

IVEY GHEE GETS COMFORTABLE IN HER SKIN

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PHOTO BY JEFF SYKES



Visit our website at www.yesweekly.com to listen to the podcast by Deonna Kelli Sayed and hear Ivey and Jesse discuss coming to terms with their relationship.

It's the dresses that are a problem. They always have been. She argued with her stepmother about wearing a dress to her father's wedding. She argued with her mother about wearing one when she remarried. Both times she acquiesced in the end, seeing it as a kind of gift she was giving them as their daughter. Ivey Ghee has never been comfortable in a dress, but they've had their uses.

"When I was in high school, in this small town in Farmville, Virginia and another student would come up to me and say, Hey are you seeing this other girl? I'd say No, no way, then the next day---Boom!---I wear a dress, just to deflect that idea and stop the talk."

Ivey is 34 years old and she now has a deep relationship with both parents, but that relationship wasn't always easy and it was never simple. "I know some folks, older than me, in their forties and fifties, who still haven't come out to their parents."

Coming out to your parents is coming out to the world. Studies show that most adolescents begin to understand their sexual orientation around the age of 13. This can be the most vulnerable time for gay and trans youth. They may have few role models, little support system, and they are dependent upon their parents. In many instances, especially in church-centered families like Ivey's, coming out can lead to drastic measures: religious intimidation, conversion therapies, or

abandonment. That kind of emotional stigma carries over into adulthood and many find it simpler to deny or minimize their sexuality with their families.

"Oh, parents know," Ivey states unequivocally. "They always know. They just don't want to have to talk about it."

Ivey is lean and muscular; she looks like a basketball player, which she was, lithe and focused. Her gaze is direct and she has no problem talking about herself or her life. In fact, it's something of a mission for her. Jesse, her mother, is a little more inward, quieter, but with no less conviction. Her voice is softer than Ivey's. During the conversation, they constantly check in with each other, agreeing on dates and facts, correcting details they think the other is misremembering. They sit close, Jesse with her hands on the table before her, Ivey turned slightly in the direction of her mother.

Jesse nods in agreement: "I knew early on. She was always playing basketball with the boys but that was it. And I'd think to myself, why's she always hanging out with that girl?"

There was a perfectly good boy next door Ivey's age. They were in the same high school class. Jesse encouraged Ivey to put on a dress and go over there to spend some time with Corey. Ivey did it, to make her Mom happy. She and Corey sat on the couch and watched TV. There was never anything between them.

"But I needed that. Whenever someone at school would question me, I could point

to Corey. That's how it was then."

Ivey now wears a suit at work and when she wants to dress up. A suit with a jacket and a tie. Occasionally she'll be in the elevator at the Proximity Hotel where she works and a young child will ask their parents, "Is that a boy or a girl?"

"The parents get all embarrassed but I say, Naw, let them ask! And I get down beside them and I explain, I'm a girl. I just like dressing this way. It makes me feel comfortable."

After Jesse found out Ivey was gay, they went six months without speaking. Jesse had suggested attending church more, talking to the pastor, going to counseling. Ivey dug in: "None of that stuff was going

to change who I was." So they didn't talk until Jesse came to visit her at Elon.

"I have to apologize to you," Jesse told Ivey later. "While I was looking at you and judging you for sinning, I was sinning myself for not honoring my child. I can't get that time back, but I hope we can move forward."

Ivey smiles, telling the story: "And from that moment on, nothing else mattered. It didn't matter if I met Joe Schmo on the street and he said, Girl, why do you have that suit on? 'Cause I could look at him and say, my Momma knows, and my Momma accepts me. She loves me. So, who are you?"



Ivey played basketball at Elon University after growing up in rural Virginia. She was often opposed to wearing dresses, but agreed to wear one for her mother's wedding. The two women were very close until Ivey's sexuality became an issue during her freshman year of college.

Ivey grew up in a small town in Virginia that was home to a furniture factory and a college. Her mom worked in Accounts Receivable at the college while her dad was a prestigious lawyer in town. She started playing basketball with the boys on the block at an early age and was a star of the team by the time she reached high school. She still has an athlete's focus and determination. It was a basketball scholarship that brought her to Elon College.

"Ivey's always had this passion," Jesse says. "Even at a young age. If Ivey thought something was right, nobody could convince her otherwise. Her father was always a strong advocate and Ivey has that too. She's involved in causes. She never does anything halfway."

Ivey points to her Mom, leaning in to her: "Everything I did, I did to please this one."

"I never saw that," Jesse nods. "It took her Dad telling me, then I knew it was true."

"So, when we couldn't talk, it really hurt me," Ivey continues.

It happened after Ivey's freshman year at Elon. Ivey had met a woman she really

cared for and she wanted to be with her as much as possible over the summer, but she was living with her Mom. Ivey didn't have a car and she was working too far away from the house to walk, so Jesse would take her to work.

"Mom just didn't like it. On those drives she'd say, I don't know why you're spending all your time with Lesley. Something doesn't seem right about it. She tried to limit what I did, where I went.

But I'd been away at school for a year. I was used to coming and going as I pleased. Seeing who I wanted. I remember going to one of my first parties at Elon. I walked in the room and knew I'd found my people. That was something I'd never felt before.

Now, here I was under my mother's roof and I couldn't be comfortable in my own skin. Finally, I decided I'd just move in with my sister, Abbey. I called her to ask her. I told her, Sis, I think I'm gay. We had the best talk after that."

The next day, the phone rings at work. It's Ivey's sister: "Why didn't you tell me you hadn't told Mom you were gay. I called her to talk about it and she wouldn't say a word."

Ivey was petrified. She was angry with her sister for outing her. She didn't know

what to do.

"Mom came to pick me up that afternoon. That was the longest, quietest drive ever. I just looked out the window. Neither of us spoke and when we got home I just ran upstairs to my room." When she came down for dinner, her mother was waiting for her. She told her what she was doing was a sin.

"It was a terrible night, we kept going back and forth. Finally, I went to bed. And I lay there; I just felt so alone. I felt like I had no one.

Mom had to take me to work the next morning and she was still pounding on me. She wanted me to go to Bible Study that night. She wanted me to talk to the pastor. I said, I didn't want to tell you, what makes you think I want to talk to the pastor? It's not going to change who I am.

I moved out. Mom and I just didn't speak."

There is no shortage of advice in print or online about how, when, or if you should come out to your parents. Much of this advice is pragmatic enough to suggest not necessarily coming out as long as you are

financially dependent. Many suggest not coming out to your parents at all if they are extremely conservative or religious.

This does not, by any means, suggest that most parents won't approach the news with some degree of love and acceptance, but it does point to the very real fears the gay or transgender teenager must face when considering the question. LGBTQ teenagers can be subjected to a barrage of intimidation and shame from parents, family members and friends.

Every teenager has heard at least one story of a gay teenager being put out on the street. Nationwide, 40 percent of all homeless teenagers are gay, a number far out of proportion with their percentage in society. Many have been told not to come back home, or have found living there so impossible they choose the streets.

Many, if not most, mainstream churches in the South still view homosexuality as a choice and as a sin. The idea of choice is crucial. If sexuality is a choice, then people can choose differently or be forced to make the 'right' decision; if sexuality is a choice, you're just stubborn or rebellious not to choose otherwise. If sexuality is a choice, everything that happens to you is your own fault. Defining sexuality as a choice, even though all scientific evidence



Ivey's mother, Jesse, was worried that her daughter's sexuality would be an additional burden on her young life. "Acceptance happens in stages. It was this journey we took, we're still taking. Together."

proves otherwise, opens the door to any number of strategies for reversing, modifying or shaming that choice including questionable therapies and counseling whose purposes are to curb or arrest sexuality.

More recently, many religious conservatives have embraced the theories of psychologist Joseph Nicolosi who asserts that homosexuality is caused by a lack of bonding with a same sex parent and a lack of same sex role models. Defining it as an unholy amalgam of disease and choice, he has set up or helped to set up various conversion therapy centers across the country.

Many states have outlawed conversion therapies. National health organizations in the United States have affirmed that there has been no scientific demonstration of conversion therapy's efficacy in the last forty years. These programs and the fierce wish to believe in them underscore the shame, fear and social stigma that still accompany homosexuality today, most often driven by fundamentalist branches in every religion.

In many cases, more reasoned minds prevail and a process of discovery and understanding can begin, as it did eventually with Ivey and Jesse. PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) provides a wealth of material for

children and parents about coming out. The organization suggests a number of things for parents to keep in mind when their child comes out to them:

Your child is the same person they always were and every reaction is different and valid.

This is not a phase. Sexual orientation and gender identity cannot be changed. (As an experiment, try to change yours for a day or a week.)

Coming out is an ongoing process.

In the end, coming out engages very real and profound questions about love and whether it is conditional or unconditional. It goes to the basic issue of what a relationship is and the value of that relationship at all if one or both people feel they cannot fully be themselves.

Not to come out, to parents or friends, is to live a half-life; to be constantly adjusting your identity to suit the circumstances of people around you. Not coming out deprives your family and friends of the opportunity to challenge their assumptions and explore a closer, more honest relationship.

Basketball season was coming up at Elon and Jesse had never missed one of Ivey's games. "She was always in the

stands. She was my #1 Fan." But they hadn't spoken for months.

"It's a journey," Jesse explains, "It's not something that happens all at once. We'd always had this open relationship and we could talk, you know, we'd talk at the dinner table. Ivey asked me, she said, would you please just come down, come on campus? So I did."

Jesse was finding herself spiritually. She'd returned to school, majoring in Theological Studies. She was struggling, but they were talking.

"I just kept thinking," Jesse explains, her eyes on Ivey as she talks, "You already have two strikes against you. You're black and you're a woman. On top of all that, you want to go and be gay?"

"You were worried about what people would think," Ivey pipes in. "The neighbors, people in the church."

Jesse nods. "I kept thinking, I'm going to accept it, but..."

"I'd get these calls, can you come home for this or that, but do you have to bring a girl with you? Can you come to church, but just not wear that suit?"

"Acceptance happens in stages," Jesse states, quietly. "It was this journey we took, we're still taking. Together."

"I finally had to make a stand. I had to say, Momma I love you, but it has to be all or nothing. I've always been a Momma's

girl. It killed me to draw that line."

Jesse smiles broadly. "Ivey's such a loving child. How could I turn that love off, that joy? It was something I wasn't allowing. It was me. Once you begin to allow love, it just flows."

"I think Mom needed to know that other people felt I was okay. And when she knew that, she could feel she didn't have to protect me. She could take the Mom-Shield off. Parents are worried about what people think and they're worried about their child, how they're going to make it in the world."

"I don't know when it happened, the acceptance," Jesse says. "I can't point to a time, a day, you know? We kept talking. You have to talk. Fear, disappointment, anger, you have to talk about those things."

Jesse is an ordained minister and often gives sermons at many churches. She sits in the pulpit as one of the clergy but she recently left the church she'd been attending for years. Now and then, the pastor would say something about gays and lesbians in a sermon; she would talk to him about it after. Eventually, she felt she couldn't sit in the pulpit with the minister any longer. Finally, she approached him.



Ivey said it was painful during the time she and her mother were not speaking to each other. She finally invited her mother to one of her college basketball games. Jesse apologized to her later that day. "I was sinning myself for not honoring my child. I can't get that time back, but I hope we can move forward."

"I mean, I could see that at the times I talked about my journey with Ivey in the church, I could see the shoulders relax around me. So I said to the pastor, why don't you let me begin to reach out to the gay community, to at least start that conversation. I said to him, I'll take that on as my ministry, and he said, Absolutely not. That will never happen in this church. So, I had to leave.

I don't know about other churches, but in the black church it's always tied to one passage of scripture. I think it's more ignorance than anything else, a combination of fear and doctrine. And it's so sad to me.

I have hope, but I don't think most churches will get there in my generation. I do suggest the United Church of Christ to Ivey, for some relief on her spiritual journey. They're the only church I know that fully accepts the gay community. But they've suffered for it. Donations fell off drastically after that vote."

Jesse's struggle, not with God, but with the church, and the pain it causes her, is visible in her eyes. She shakes her head slightly, unconsciously.

"Honestly, if I didn't have a child who is gay, I don't know how I'd feel about it. But I'm so thankful that I do. It's taught me a lot about love.

You know, there's that thing people say, Love the sinner, hate the sin."

Jesse leans forward, her conviction clear. "Love shouldn't have a 'but'. Love is just love."

"I work at the best place in Greensboro," Ivey declares, beaming. Seven years ago, she started as a housekeeper at the Proximity Hotel and has worked her way up. She's now Guest Service Coordinator.

"They are totally accepting there. Dennis Quaintance and Mike Weaver are great people and it's just an amazing place to work. They tell us, 'Play hotel and be yourself.'"

Ivey wears her suits to work.

"It's a good job for her and she loves it," Jesse agrees. "Cause I always worried, you know, where is Ivey going to fit in?"

"Having this job and being accepted here gave me a base and paved the way for me to be involved in the community."

Ivey's been on the Board of Directors of the Guilford Green Foundation, a LGBTQ Advocacy non-profit, for four and a half years. She's on the Board of the newly-formed Southeastern Transgender and Ally Initiative (SETAI). She works with the Welfare Reform Liaison Project and she's on the Employee Advisory Board at Guilford College. She's a relentless advocate, like her father.



Ivey's career in the hotel industry has taken off thanks to the support of Dennis Quaintance (pictured above) and Mike Weaver. "They tell us 'Play hotel and be yourself.'"

"I think if you know something and you're not sharing it and you're not allowing others to grow, if you don't share the stories, the experiences---and if you're not a good listener, then you're not doing what you should. It's not just about one little part of the population, it's affecting all communities."

With the renewed controversy and stigma engendered by HB2, the necessity intensifies.

"Now I'm a little nervous. I mean, here I am, this girl in a suit. I sort of have to announce myself every time I go into a bathroom. Now I have to say hi. It's just me. I'm here.

I'm strong in my skin. But what about these younger minds who have battled and no longer have a safe place? It's not just the LGBTQ community, all lives are being affected by this."

Ivey is undaunted and hopeful. "My whole family on both sides is accepting. It makes my friends sort of jealous but they love going home with me. I'm the complete lucky one.

Where do I get this passion? I just have an amazing support system. I'm gay. I'm not a mistake."

Parents of LGBTQ children have to come out too. The process can be much the same as it is for the child. There's the question of who to tell and how to tell them; decisions about stating it directly or allowing it to be assumed, fear about reactions and judgment. Parents of gay children may have to confront the loss of friendships and family relations, the stigma of neighbors and co-workers, the guilt that they have done something wrong that might have 'caused' this to come about.

"Having a child who's gay, I don't have

a roadmap for how to do it because it's something you have to find together," Jesse says. "It's really inexpressible. And different for every person. Let your guard down. Once the love comes in, it replaces anything you've got inside of you."

When Ivey's grandmother died a few years back, Jesse wanted Ivey to speak at the funeral. She didn't tell the pastor she was putting Ivey on the program, deciding it was better to ask for forgiveness rather than permission. This time, there was no argument about a dress. Ivey came in her suit, with a friend, and everything was fine.

"It takes exposure, education, and an open mind. Ivey helped me with that a lot, a lot. Ivey doesn't give up. She always wanted me to be happy."

"Cause you make me so happy by allowing me to be me," Ivey replies.

Coming out never ends. There are always new people, new situations. There's always the question of whether to address it or let it slide.

"You've got to believe," Jesse explains. "And when the acceptance comes, it's a done deal. You don't need to work at it anymore, you can relax."

Ivey lives in Greensboro and Jesse lives in Graham but they talk on the phone almost every day. If one doesn't call, the other will. If the space between calls goes too long, they might pick up the phone and hear, "Did you forget who your Momma is?, "Did you forget who your daughter is?"

Over the last decade, Ivey and Jesse have actually come out together, both more fully to each other and to the world around them. It hasn't always been easy, but it's always been rewarding.

"We are so clean now," Ivey says. "We talk all the time. We share everything." 🍷