



# THE NEW NORMAL

LOOKING TOWARDS A  
DIVERSE FUTURE

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**S**ade Carter knew she was attracted to girls early on, but it wasn't until high school that a girl was obviously attracted to her. Sade was a ninth grader, the other girl a senior. The other girl would walk Sade home from school most afternoons and they would talk, just getting to know each other.

"I remember doing Google searches about my feelings," she laughs, "just trying to figure out what was going on."

"One day after school I decided to walk her back to the bus stop and we were just standing there when she leaned in and kissed me. I could look over her shoulder to see another student staring at us from the school bus window and I thought, what's it going to be like tomorrow at

school? I was exhilarated by the kiss. And scared of what would happen next."

People in the queer community think a lot about visibility in ways straight people don't. Call it hetero-privilege.

They have to think about it. In an era that still hasn't recovered from a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy—a policy that was seen as progressive only a few years ago—simple public acts become political: holding hands on the sidewalk, a peck on the cheek at dinner, an casual declaration of love. Going to the bathroom.

To many these acts are seen as flaunting and provocative when queer people are involved, yet completely acceptable for heterosexuals. To be public is to somehow force your views upon others. To many, being queer itself remains a provocation.

Sade is 26. She's a tall, slender African American woman with a wide smile, an

easy laugh and a boundless enthusiasm. She's a freelance model and photographer, studying psychology at GTCC. She grew up in the Bronx and relocated to Greensboro three years ago when Stephanie, her wife of 10 years, landed a job in the area.

"The next day, everyone was like, did you kiss her? Do you like girls? And I just straight denied it, said it never happened. I stopped seeing that girl...just cut her off. I was 13. I wasn't ready."

Corey Wooten was out in high school in Sanford, N.C. He 'tested the waters' by dating a few girls, but by high school he was 'out and proud'; he was confident he was gay. It wasn't 'a phase'.

Corey chuckles, "I was in Marching Band and it was like our own little Gay Pride Parade. It wasn't that everyone was gay or trans, it was just that everyone was so open, and no one cared what anyone was.

We spent a lot of time together, so it was like a real strong support group."

Corey is nearly 24, soft spoken and articulate. He grew up in Sanford before moving away to college: first Wilmington, then Raleigh, now Greensboro. He works as a massage therapist as he goes to school for electrical engineering.

"I never really had any problems in Sanford. I was never really bullied in school. I felt like I was a kid and I was happy. I wasn't different. It's just that sometimes people looked at me like I was different." Still, Corey wasn't ready to tell his Mom.

"She would bring it up. I think she knew, but I would just deny it. I couldn't imagine it would be okay." It was a religious household where there was only a right way and a wrong way.

There were others there to support him. He had a transgender friend in high school who was a real inspiration.





“THE FIRST THING SHE SAID WAS, I JUST WANT YOU TO FINISH SCHOOL. THE SECOND THING SHE SAID WAS, I DON’T CARE WHO YOU LOVE. I JUST WANT YOU TO BE HAPPY.”

**Sade Carter brought her Bronx sensibilities to Greensboro. “Families are mixed. Who you love is who you love.”**

“She was comfortable, she was fearless. And her parents were really cool and so accepting of her. They’d have me and my friends over to their house and we could just be who we were.”

“But, then again, they were from California,” he adds.

Sade remembers agonizing over the decision to tell her Mom. It was two years after that first kiss and she was 15. She worried about it for more than a week, then finally couldn’t help but blurt it out.

“I said, Mom, I think I like girls.”

Sade laughs: “The first thing she said was, I just want you to finish school. The second thing she said was, I don’t care who you love. I just want you to be happy.”

My mom had grown up an only child and her mother died when she was 12. She told me later she could never turn her kids away because she knew what it was like not to have a parent.

“I was so lucky to have that.” Her face darkens perceptibly, “So many people don’t.”

Corey’s Mom learned from a neighbor. Corey was going to N.C. State by then and was Skypeing with a friend in Sanford who noticed the boyfriend in the background. Innocently, the friend’s mother mentioned it to Corey’s mother.

“That’s when the phone call came,” Corey recalls, “and it was not pretty. We just got louder and louder. We fueled out with each other. It took nearly two years to put that back together.”

Through it all, Corey’s grandmother and aunt remained accepting and encouraging. They were the bridge upon which Corey and his mother could meet again. Corey shrugs: “We’re friends now. She allows who I am. I mean, my sexuality doesn’t change who I am.”

“We met on that trashy Grindr,” Patrick Griggs, Corey’s fiancé, admits with a sigh and a smile. He’s a hairdresser and an artist. “But we just talked for months, off and on, before our first date.”

Grindr is a geosocial networking app geared toward gay and bisexual men, something like Facebook except it can tell you, in real time and within a few feet, where the person you might be talking to is located. Men can talk, exchange pictures, arrange a date. A couple of years after the development of Grindr, Blendr was released, for people of all sexual orientations.

Like nearly all social media apps, Grindr

Visit our website at [www.yesweekly.com](http://www.yesweekly.com) to listen to the podcast by Deonna Kelli Sayed and hear interviews with Sade and Corey in addition to a reflection on the Out In the South series.

has its dark sides and dark uses. Egyptian police reportedly used the app to locate and arrest gay men. And, like every social media app, you can never be sure who you are actually talking to. It could be another gay man, or it could be someone interested in harassing or attacking gay men.

“It’s hard to meet people there and have trust,” Patrick explains, “and without trust, you can’t have a relationship. It’s just something else then. Something I didn’t want.”

That’s why he and Corey took it slow, getting to know each other over months. There were other reasons too. Corey is biracial, Patrick is white. Corey was 21, Patrick was 52.

“I thought, how is it possible he’d want to be with me?” Patrick confessed. “I’m old.”





**Corey Wooten walks the garden in his Latham Park home.**

But they met one evening at a wine bar where Patrick had an art show and instantly connected.

"I felt comfortable immediately," Corey remembers, "and I just got more comfortable. It was easy." They've been together nearly four years.

There's a big difference in their level of experience but Patrick says it's not what I might think.

"I felt like he knew more, he'd seen more, because of technology. Because of the Internet. He'd met so many people that way. The world is just a bigger place for him. When I was growing up, I mean, I was who I was and my family was fine with that, but the world was different. It was a lot smaller. The Internet just broke down the boundaries.

"I'd go to the gay bars. The bars were almost the only place to meet people. And I'd have, like, ten matchbooks with my phone number on them and if I saw someone I liked at the bar, I'd slip a matchbook in their pocket. Later, I'd go home and wait for someone to call. I had to wait at home, you know, 'cause there were no cellphones. And if they called, they called. I didn't care. I was having fun."

Patrick leans back in his chair, glancing at Corey. "He grew up in a world that gave

him access to everything. I think when you have that kind of access, it takes away some of the stereotypes. They're more able to see things my generation couldn't see. They can choose who they want to be with."

Eventually, Corey moved in with Patrick. They're planning on getting married soon.

Patrick has had some health problems. He had a stroke in 2014, from which he's recovered. He has sleep apnea and uses a CPAP machine which requires that he wear a mask when he sleeps. The machine supplies a gentle air pressure to keep his airways open.

"I just looked at Corey one day. I was holding that mask in my hand connected to that damned machine and I asked him, Do you really want to be with a man who has to wear a mask?"

And he said, 'I fell in love with the man, not the mask.'

"That's when I knew," Patrick adds quietly, "it was going to be alright."

"You don't look like one of those. I've had someone tell me," Sade says, "and I think 'one of who?' A human who loves another human? Is there only one way

that can look?"

Sade grew up in the Bronx where the neighborhoods were more diverse and so were the relationships. "Families are mixed. Who you love is who you love."

"I've been told I was too pretty to have a wife, that I just haven't met the right man yet. It's different here in North Carolina. I've lost friends, or people I thought were friends, when they found out I'm married to Stephanie."

Sade came to North Carolina with Stephanie, who was having a hard time finding a good job in the city. She now works as an auto mechanic for Ford. "I'm just a city girl, you know, but I thought, I love Stephanie and it'll be an adventure."

"When we first got here, I kept thinking, where are my people? Where is my community? In New York City, everything is so open and you don't really think about it. It's just there. Everything in North Carolina seemed hidden. And just...quiet."

While still a teenager, Sade began going to a club called The Pier in NYC where she met a young African American gay man.

"He was so happy at the club. He would dance, and flirt with the guys, and you could just see his real self, you know, and how happy he was being himself."

But he was married to a woman and

they had a child together. He felt his family would never accept him as gay, he felt trapped by the life he found himself in.

"I tried to talk to him, you know, I said you can't keep living this secret life, making yourself miserable.

You deserve to be happy, just like anyone else. But he felt like he didn't have a choice, like there was nothing he could do. When we would leave the club, I could see his whole demeanor change. Like all the life was draining out of him."

The story is a lesson to her, a thing she remembers. It's a lesson in not letting who you appear to be grow too far from who you actually are.

When Sade met Stephanie, Stephanie





Corey Wooten grew up in Sanford before moving to Greensboro.



Wooten had a brief falling out with his mother over his sexuality but the two quickly reconciled. Corey and his partner Patrick have been together for four years.

was not out to her parents. Her parents found out when they discovered a love letter from Sade. There was a blow-up and Stephanie left home. Sade encouraged Stephanie to communicate with her parents, as difficult as it might be.

"I think you have to allow people space. And time. I think you can never give up on pushing—and sometimes it is pushing—your parents to understand you. You just have to keep at it.

"But I also wanted her to know she'd made the effort. It was for her too.

"Now, they talk. They come over to the house."

It took time but eventually, Sade met people through Greensboro Pride and other organizations, as well as through her jobs and school. She found people who could accept her as she is. She still gets the comments occasionally.

"Someone asked me, 'You couldn't find someone of your own?' What they meant was, someone African American, someone of my people." Sade is African American, Stephanie is Ecuadorian.

"Who are my people?" I thought. "My people are those I love."

Neither Corey nor Sade are comfortable with labels, shying away from words like gay and lesbian, yet they are completely comfortable and confident in their sexuality. They grew up in a time when more and more people were coming out and the public awareness of the spectrum of sexual experience was becoming broader and deeper. They grew up with friends and family members who were openly gay and were supported in that choice. And, as Patrick said, they've had the Internet which can not only answer any question—with a good or a sketchy answer—but also provide a support network.

They are not afraid to be queer and, while they might be hurt by the reactions of some people, either close to them or in the larger culture, they identify the problem outside themselves. They don't internalize. It's not that they don't see gender, or sexual preference, or even age; it's just that so much of the time it's not that important.

This very attitude is a silent testament to the people we have interviewed for the Out in the South series, and millions of others over the last 70 years who came

out in their own ways, quietly to family and a few friends, or loudly, with signs and bullhorns and marches. It's a testament to those who fought in the courts and on the streets outside the bars; it's a testament to those who stayed engaged with their parents or friends, even when it was extraordinarily painful, working through the differences and misunderstandings to come to an uneasy, at first, understanding.

These things often happen as single moments, not grand gestures. After Patrick had his stroke, Corey stayed with him at the hospital. At night, he would climb into bed with him and hold him because it helped Patrick sleep.

"I was hopped up on whatever they'd given me," Patrick explains, "and one night a nurse comes in and says, Ah, I don't think this is okay. I looked at her and I said, when my mother was dying of cancer I lay in the hospital bed with her. What difference does it make? You can't put your feelings on us." Corey stayed in the bed and Patrick was discharged two days later.

The conversations have to start early and they must occur often.

Parents know, Sade and Corey agree. Parents know early on, sometimes before

the children themselves, who usually begin to wrestle with their sexuality in middle school. Often, a child waits years and years to come out to their parents. Sometimes, still, they never do.

They agree, the earlier the conversation begins the better. Coming to terms with our identity is a process that happens privately, inside ourselves, and publicly, with those around us. Everyone approaches it in their own time, but the process really doesn't begin until the conversation starts.

"Do not be afraid of what people will think of you," Sade states adamantly. "You weed out the people who don't want to be a part of your life by their judgments." Her friend from The Pier is always in her mind.

"If your parents don't accept it at first, you have to allow them to have the space, but you have to talk to them enough so that they can begin to understand because you're not going to change."

Her eyes are bright and wide: "You're not going to change. And you shouldn't have to try. Living a life that's hidden will just kill you."





NC House Bill 2 has taught Corey a lot. He's educated himself on the issues and he's learned more about the transgender community and their particular struggles than he knew before.

"Growing up, I always felt like North Carolina was pretty progressive. Sure, I've been called a name once or twice. But I'm afraid people living outside the state are looking at the news and thinking we must be living in constant fear. That's just not the way it is. These laws don't represent the people I see around me, the people I talk to every day. They're the work of just a few people. North Carolina isn't like that."

"I think it's a good thing," Patrick adds. "It means people are talking. Families have to talk about it. It means kids ask questions." Patrick shares a story about cutting a child's hair the other day.

"He was, maybe, four years old and I'm cutting his hair and he's getting comfortable and one thing leads to another and he notices Corey in the room. His mother is right there and he asks his mom, 'Can men get married?' I'm wondering how she's going to answer that question. She comes

right back and says, 'Yes, they can.'

"And I tell him, anyone who loves each other can get married.

"And that child didn't think any more of that than anything. He just went right on to the next thought. Because children don't see a problem. They just love. And that's all it is."

Patrick leans in closer. "And I'll tell you something else. That child won't be afraid."

The conversation shifts direction slightly with the idea that maybe what happens on a personal level when someone comes out to their parents is now simply happening on a larger scale. Certain elements of society (the Dad, let's say) are freaking out and getting all reactionary while other members of the family are quietly embracing acceptance.

Meanwhile, the LGBTQ population is not going to change. And they're not going away.

"It's a new beginning for people," Patrick says, "and we don't like new beginnings. We don't like change. We all fight against it. But, Lord knows, we need it." He looks over to Corey.

"You just can't apologize for loving someone."

