

## Love and Marriage: Rob and George

Zina Saunders (January 07, 2010)



28 years together. A long love story, they are more than a couple. In this interview they tell us about the difficulties they as a gay couple had to go through, even with their families. What happened when George's Italian/American mother found out he was gay? Now they are looking at the prospect of aging and the legal issues that concern all gay couples...



For the [second in my series of profiles](#) [2] of gay couples, Rob Eisdorfer and George DeStefano told me about their 28 years together. During these years, they contended with the discovery of AIDS and recounted how the disease affected their lives in particular and the gay community in general. Now they are looking at the prospect of aging and the legal issues that concern all gay couples.

**George:** We met in May, 1981, at a demonstration against the Reagan Administration's involvement in El Salvador, and we just clicked right away. We were both baby boomers, we had a lot of the same cultural reference points, and we had very similar politics. Both of us were sort of surprised that we met someone who was that compatible, because we each felt a little alienated from what we considered the mainstream gay world. I had been pretty much apart from that world for years.

I identified more with the counterculture I had grown up with, and the Lefty cultural milieu, and I had certain attitudes about the gay community, silly stuff like I have to like Judy Garland, and I don't like Judy Garland. But that attitude was starting to wane shortly before I met Rob, because I'd started to read about gay liberation and became more aware that there were people like me in the gay world. I started to see that I could be gay, I could be left, I could be countercultural and there really wasn't a disparity between those aspects of my identity.

I also came from a working class, Southern Italian/American family, so I brought some ethnic and class baggage with me as well.

**Rob:** That was important for both of us, because I came from a working class background, too; my stepfather is a butcher, and he was on a union negotiating committee, so the fact that George was from a similar background and not from an educated middle class or upper class background really attracted me.

**Rob:** My mother found out I was gay when she found a love letter from my best friend, when I was 19. My mother got me alone in the car, it was summertime and hot, and she closed the windows and said, "You're bisexual, right?" I said, "What??" And she said, "Well, what's your problem? Is it boys or drugs?" Drugs, she didn't care much, because she smoked pot for her migraines.

So when she found out, she cried for a week and then it was fine. And my stepfather was no problem, he's not book educated, but he's all heart. And he's scary too-- he used to be a boxer. I don't want to go into it, but he had sex with men in World War II when he was a boxing champ.

**George:** He was what is known as Trade, meaning that he was available to gay men for sex for favors.

**Rob:** The boat would come in, and they'd take him out to a fancy restaurant. Before I came out, he said that he would just pose for them in his boxing briefs. After I came out, he told me and my mother, he said, "Shirley, you know what I used to tell you about the guys that would pick me up? Well, sometimes I'd be so drunk I'd wake up in bed. Christ, maybe they blew me or something." So he was fine.

**George:** My parents were working class, Southern Italian-Americans, children of immigrants from Naples and Sicily. My father and my uncle had a garage up in Connecticut. I came out to my family in my late 20's when the local newspaper that I had been an editor for did an article about gay life in Southern Connecticut, and I was quoted in the piece and described as, "The former editor of the newspaper, who is now a gay activist in New York City." That was how my parents found out.

They called me up and my father asked, "Is this true?" And I said, "Yes." My mother was on the other



line, and it got a bit heated.

My mother was the typical mother, blaming herself: What did I do? How could you do this to us in public, in this medium, through a newspaper? It became all about them, not about me, and I got furious and hung up.

There was some silence for awhile, maybe a few weeks, and then my mother called back and basically said: Look, we love you regardless, and that began the rapprochement.

Despite the stereotype of Southern Italians being very volatile and expressive and noisy and all that, my family is anything but. In fact, they keep a lot of secrets and I've only found out many things about my background in recent years. So I said to them: Didn't you ever suspect? How often did I bring girls home? I had a date for the prom, but other than that, I didn't have regular girlfriends. And my mother said: Well, we just thought you were shy about things like that.

My take is that they had some idea but didn't want to know and preferred "Don't ask, don't tell". And this was all around the time that Rob and I met.

**Rob:** We met the month the first AIDS cases were reported. At that time, people would get together because they were afraid. We didn't do that at all, but people were scared.

**George:** The partying and carrying on of the previous decade was over, and now we needed to settle down and find one partner; certainly not everyone felt this way, but there was quite a bit of that. I think people wanted to get out of the sexual marketplace.

**Rob:** Yes, and during the first few years of the epidemic, it was particularly terrifying, because no one knew what was causing it, and people were getting ill and dying very quickly; it wasn't until 1984 that the actual virus was identified.

It had some really profound emotional, psychological, cultural, political effects on the gay community.

**George:** And on us. We were in San Francisco on what was kind of our honeymoon and we heard about it driving over the Golden Gate Bridge on the radio: about this strange new malady, that at the time they were calling a gay-related immune deficiency. It wasn't even called AIDS at that point.

**Rob:** We thought you got it and just died. A lot of comrades from political organizations, from the gay movement, you'd see them one day and they'd be fine and a month later they'd look deathly.

It was terrifying. I had thrown myself into gay life in the '70s and George was rightfully concerned, because they were saying that everyone was going to get it. The New York Times said virtually every gay man in New York City was going to be dead in 10 years.

**George:** Every little blemish or pimple or bruise I'd get would trigger an anxiety attack.

**Rob:** George bruises very easily, and he would see a bruise and he'd be like, "Oh my God, oh my God." It was total panic and there was nothing you could do. Even when the test first became available, there wasn't much you could do to treat it, so why get tested?

**George:** And we definitely felt under siege, because AIDS wasn't just a disease, there was also this political backlash around it.



The New York Post referred to every place that gay men gathered as an "AIDS den," and the equating of Gay and AIDS was so prevalent at the time that we were being seen as disease carriers. And this was also at the beginning of the Reagan era, a very conservative, even reactionary time in America.

**Rob:** The era of "Greed is good".

**George:** We really felt like an embattled minority, and it was a very difficult time. Particularly in New York City because New York was seen as so much a gay epicenter, along with San Francisco. Some of the first cases were identified in New York, and it was the city of Stonewall and Fire Island and a lot of the wild gay lifestyle of the '70s took place here. Because of that identification, a lot of people in the gay community were doing a lot of self-flagellating: maybe it was wrong what we did; look where it's led to. There was a lot of internalized shame and self-hatred: all the accumulative insults from living in a society that basically despises you.

**Rob:** And won't do anything when you are dying.

**George:** I really felt that straight people didn't much care what happened to gay people and there seemed to be almost a certain glee among some people: Well, you dirty boys, this is what you get. And there were a lot of commentators in the press -- and not all of them far right wingers like Pat Buchanan -- who were saying that it was a moral judgment, a divine judgment, and it was the inevitable consequence of all your bad behavior. It was couched in different ways, but that was the essential message: This is the payback for what you guys were doing.

**Rob:** We didn't know if either of us had infected each other, until '84. We were still having unprotected sex, because we figured, when you got it, you died, so we must not have it. Then George started writing for a gay newspaper and the medical editor told us: You know, if you think you're safe, you're not, because you could have gotten this in the '70s, and you could be incubating it.

The irony is, we thought we'd all be sent to camps, but in a sense, HIV sort of forced people to come out. When people got sick, they had to come out to their families, and I think Harvey Milk was right, that coming out is the ultimate political act. Because when families get to know their gay relatives, then it's harder to hate.

**George:** Yes, and while we felt under siege and beleaguered, and all those things, it also triggered a lot of community organizing, and community building. If not for AIDS, some people who were still in the closet would probably not have come out at all -- like stockbrokers who voted for Reagan -- and some of them ended up becoming very militant and founders of groups like Act Up. So I think the other effect was that it made gay people more visible and it also rallied people in the community to fight.

A little later, with the founding of Act Up in 1987, a number of both lesbians and heterosexual women who had had organizing experience in the women's health movement and in the gay movement and in the Left, brought their analytical and organizing skills into Act Up and I think that had a lot to do with it becoming the successful organization that it was.

There were gay men who had some history with gay liberation politics and activism, but the women by and large had more political experience, largely because of feminism.

**Rob:** Straight men were afraid to support us. Nowadays what I see is just so totally different, but back then, for straight men to be supportive was considered very courageous, because people would think they were gay.

**George:** I grew up and spent most of my adulthood never even contemplating the possibility of



marriage. It was never on my radar screen, and even now I have a real ambivalence about it. There's an important economic aspect to it, that same-sex couples are at a disadvantage, and so I think there's a simple matter of justice; I mean, why isn't our relationship any more worthy of protection than a heterosexual marriage? Britney Spears can get married overnight and divorced the next day and that gets society's OK, but we've been together for 28 years and we don't have the legal protection that Britney Spears got on a whim. So on that account, yeah, I think if it became legal in New York State, we would definitely do it.

**Rob:** Yeah, I want marriage for economic reasons; I want George to get what I want to leave him. I have a 401K and my name is on the ownership of this co-op and I don't know if he'd be hit with all kinds of transfer taxes if I were to die, so I want it for economic reasons.

Both of us feel that young gay people get sort of caught up in wanting to be like straight people, getting married, and we understand it, but we're bohemians, our idols were the beat poets of the '50s and marriage was never our dream. So I would want it for purely economic reasons.

Zina Saunders is a writer and illustrator with a passion for discovering and revealing the extraordinary nature of ordinary people. In addition to contributions in a variety of periodicals (including The Wall Street Journal, The Progressive, The Nation, The San Francisco Chronicle, and The Utne Reader) her client list includes Chronicle Books, Simon & Schuster, Random House, and Scholastic.

The original interview appeared in [Zina Saunder's website](#) [3]  
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