

## **Kris & Wesley: A Journey of Love**



Before I begin our story, let me start by saying how amazed and in awe we are of the businesses and organizations that are contributing to this phenomenal event. Wesley and I never thought we would see the day we could legally get married in the United States, and for that now to be a reality and to have businesses like yourselves embrace and support the rights of the gay community in such an incredibly generous manner is beyond words. So, we want to start our story first by saying thank you for recognizing this tremendous struggle and journey towards marriage equality by giving this amazing gift.

Our journey towards marriage equality began in the late 80s, though at the time we might not have realized it.

## **Our Journey to Each Other**

Wesley spent the majority of his adolescent and teenage years in South Dakota. He pretty much knew he was gay all his life, but actually admitted it out loud to his best friend, Jodi, his junior year of high school. Unfortunately, the timing of this conversation could not have been worse. It was over the phone, and unbeknownst to Wesley, she was on a date with the captain of the football team. Over the next few days, it became obvious that the captain of the football team was privy to their conversation and life became a living hell for Wesley.

Living in a small town and being a gay teenager is not a very healthy living arrangement, so Wesley decided to leave SD for the big metropolis of Omaha. Wesley's upbringing was a bit unconventional so convincing his father to let him leave home so he could have a brighter future was pretty easy.

Living alone and being a gay teenager in Omaha was like a dream come true compared to what he experienced in SD. His senior year consisted of three music classes, two drama classes and gym - plus there were other gay teenagers that attended Central High School! It was at CHS that Wesley, with the help of his drama teacher, gained the courage to audition for the American Musical and Dramatic Academy in New York City.

Getting his acceptance letter to AMDA was one of the best days of his life, but there was one minor issue. How was he going to get there? He spoke to his father, and he agreed to drive Wesley to NYC if he came home and painted the house that summer. Little did Wesley realize that his father driving him to NYC meant he would be doing it his giant 18-wheeler truck. So I guess you could say Wesley's road to marriage equality was in a big rig, listening to his father's favorite 8 track tape, Convoy!

My journey to NYC was not quite as colorful as Wesley's, but pretty momentous, just the same. Growing up in super conservative Texas, in a very religious household, coming out of the closet was something that never even seemed an option. As I moved through my adolescent and teenage years, I knew I wasn't like my straight friends, but I just could not admit to myself that I was gay. I enjoyed childhood and had lots of friends. I guess you would say I was popular. In high school, I was on the gymnastics team, I was Senior Class President, I was an honor student, but I never had a girlfriend.

After graduating from high school, I headed to college about 3 hours away from home at Texas A&M University. I ended up studying architecture and graduated in 1988. But something happened as I started my junior year: I found out that I had a decent singing voice. I decided to audition for a small theater production at the college. I got the part, and was given a small singing part. That's all it took. I was bitten by the bug...and bitten hard. I continued to do shows, and was quickly being cast as the lead in the mainstage productions.

It was during this amazing period of my life that I became to understand who I was, and that it was okay that I was gay. I came out to a close friend, and suddenly the huge weight that had rested on my shoulders for years was lifted. I found clarity in my life that had been missing all those years, without me even knowing it. I decided I needed to follow this new passion to perform. I auditioned for AMDA and was accepted, and even granted a scholarship. I was comfortably out of

the closet and heading to New York City. My life was about change forever.

That brief summer before I moved to the Big Apple, I considered telling my parents that I was gay. But I just felt they weren't ready, that coupled with the fact that I was leaving home in a big way.

Both Wesley and I believe that everything we've ever done in our lives were just steps on our way to finding one another.

And that was about to happen on October 8, 1989.

### **Destiny is Fulfilled**

During orientation week, AMDA separated us into two groups - one group of students were those who had college degrees before AMDA, and the other group were kids right out of high school. Wesley and I were obviously placed into separate groups, so our paths still did not cross. But as destiny would have it, one of Wesley's roommates was in my group, and not trying to sound boastful, he had a little bit of a crush on me - which came in handy for a future purpose (I bet you'll never guess where that little bit of foreshadowing will lead).

One of the activities planned for orientation week was going to see a Broadway show. AMDA provided all new students with complimentary tickets to a hot new show called *Lend Me a Tenor*. I was sitting with a group of students I became friendly with that lived in my apartment building on the Upper West Side called the Beacon. Wesley just happened to be sitting a few rows over.

Now, the next few occurrences are from Wesley's recollection because I had no idea what was happening. Before the theater lights went dark, Wesley looked down a few rows and spotted me. Now, it was the late 80s, and being super tan was still very popular, and I had just spent the summer, poolside, in Texas...I was very dark. Wesley likes to re-tell the spotting of the white cardigan I was wearing, along with a gold necklace, which contrasted with my dark skin. He was immediately interested.

What ensued was probably even more comical than the hilarious farce that was about to take place on stage. Wesley decided to try and get my attention by walking by in the aisle that was directly in front of me. Unfortunately, I never noticed...I was too busy chatting with my new friends. Claiming he had bladder issues from too much coffee, he walked back and forth in that aisle at least 20 times before the show and during intermission. With no luck.

It wasn't until after the show, out in front of the theater, that I looked over from the group of friends I apparently was chatting incessantly with, and spotted the most gorgeous person I had seen since arriving in NYC....seriously...he was jaw-dropping handsome.

Well, this is when destiny kicked into full gear - I noticed the person he was idly chatting with was the guy who had a crush on me. I know it was a terrible thing to do, but I took full advantage of the situation. I immediately walked up to them and said hello. Wesley, trying to be as coy as possible, offered a very cool, "Hey" from behind his 'Risky Business' sunglasses. I exchanged pleasantries with my wanna-be-suitor, and learned that he was roommates with Wesley. I became nervously excited. Wesley tried to remain as James Dean-ish cool as possible, which if you know Wesley now, can be quite comical. After a few minutes of very awkward conversation with his roommate, I said goodbye and returned to my group of friends.

I know people can be very skeptical when talking about love at first sight, or finding your soul mate, but what happened next can only be chalked up to exactly that.

As we were leaving, I was walking down the street in one direction and Wesley in the other direction; we turned around at the exact same moment and looked directly at each other. Wesley lowered his glasses, and we locked eyes - it was truly as if all time had stopped around us. We both knew in that exact instant we were soul mates. Wesley told me later that his roommate had informed him after our brief exchange in front of the theater - he better back-off. Too late.

### **Sowing the Seeds of Love**

Within a week, we were 'seeing each other.' Many of the fellow students at AMDA guessed it was just a matter of time before Kris and Wesley would be last week's news. But that didn't happen. A love began to develop that grew stronger and stronger every single day. By the beginning of the second semester we were living together, along with two roommates.

During our last year of AMDA, we moved into our very own tiny apartment in the West Village. Tiny might even be a stretch - you showered in one room and the rest of the bathroom was in another room. Wesley liked to call it 'European.' We could have cared less. It was an amazing feeling to have a place of our own - our very first home.

After we graduated from AMDA in 1991, we both began auditioning for shows. We eventually started to work, but none of this work was together, or in the same city. This was not easy, but when we were apart, we talked every day. There were no unlimited calling plans back then, so you could just imagine our phone bills. In hindsight, we both feel our time apart truly did make our love even stronger.

Back in our small apartment in the early 90s, we talked a lot about our future. We both knew we were meant to share our lives, and looked forward to the thought of growing old together. We both came from families that had very strong family values and parents who loved each other very much, so it was only natural for us to discuss marriage.

We began to think about having a wedding ceremony. Of course, the idea of same-sex marriage was never discussed in 1991 (I don't think the term, same-sex marriage, was even part of society's vocabulary yet), but the more we talked about it, the more it just felt like it was the right thing to do. We loved the idea of marriage: two human beings committing their union together in front of friends, family and God. Our union was as natural, and as good as any couple in the world. Why shouldn't we get married? It just seemed natural.

We were struggling actors, so planning a wedding with hardly any money was proving to be very difficult. But as word began to spread about our wedding amongst our friends, we began to hear from people that we didn't even know wanting to help or donate their services for this groundbreaking event...it was truly amazing. I'm getting choked up just writing about it.

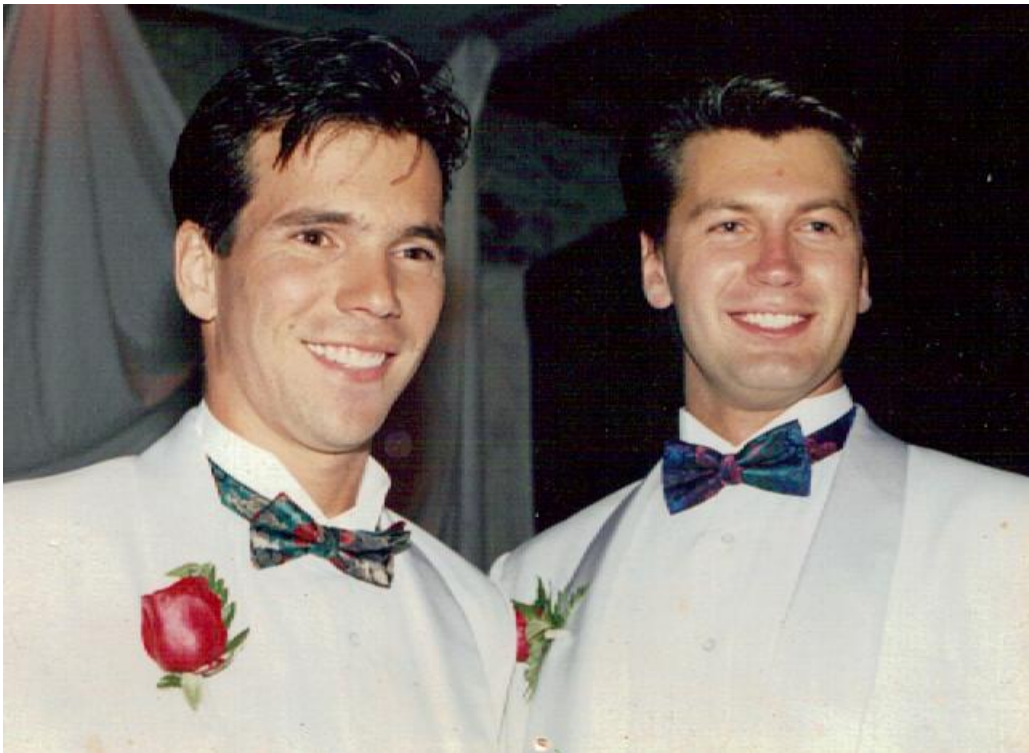
The Gay & Lesbian Community Service Center on 13th street gave us a fantastic room to use for only \$2 a head! A wonderful caterer and his wife provided us a fabulous cheese and fruit display, a full buffet with the choice of three entrees and a full bar - all for a \$1,000. A woman from Texas provided us with tuxedos for no charge and our dear friend, Wendy, made a three-tiered wedding cake. Last but not least, my parents provided us with some much needed monetary help.

My parents are truly amazing people. I told them I was gay during Christmas of 1991, and instead of asking me to see a psychiatrist, they met with one themselves to help them begin the process of acceptance. I put this acceptance to the test a few months later when I told them we were getting married and needed some help. There was a prolonged pause in the long-distance phone call conversation - all I could think of was it was too soon to do this to them - but when I began to interject, my dad immediately replied and said he was just thinking of the quickest way to get us the money. In a very short time, my mother and father went from uncertain parents of a gay son, to true activists.

We are so blessed with the incredible support and love that comes from my family. I could write several pages of examples of the activism and work they have done throughout the years in the fight for all human rights. My mother says it best, "I think your father was a gay Mexican in another life."

### **May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1992**

All the planning, panicking, preparation and worrying that come with your wedding day finally came to an end on May 8th, 1992 when we officially tied the knot in front of 75 of our dearest friends and family.



People still speak of the ceremony today, over 20 years later. There was something very special about that occasion. Because there were no legal, family, or even societal obligations in getting married...it was so clear that the only driving force was love. The kinetic spirit in the room was beyond palpable. All of our guests stood through the entire ceremony - it was as if they all wanted to be as close as possible to this invisible fire that was burning bright.

## **The Journey Had Just Begun**

For the next 20 plus years, we continued to build upon our deep love for each other. We've actually worked together for the same company for the last 14 years. Of course, people ask us all the time, how can we stand spending that much time with other? The answer is very simple - we are best friends and still make each other laugh more than anybody else can.

In 2004, we packed up our belongings along with our adorable miniature daschund and moved to suburbia...New Jersey. We were terrified at first. Will the neighbors accept us? Will we be awakened in the middle of the night by a brick going through our window? Well, it turns out New Jersey is just as gay-friendly as NYC, plus we discovered this wonderful, thriving, local community theater five minutes away from us. We were in heaven. We immediately became involved with the theatre and quickly realized what an amazing community to be a part of.

As we began to spend more time at the theatre, we developed more and more lasting friendships. Amongst these friends were a lot of young people. Wesley and I had discussed having children from time to time but it was never in the cards for us, but these kids began to look at us as role models for a loving, committed couple, not just in the gay community, but for any couple, gay or straight. Young adults seemed to gravitate towards us. We began to take many of them under our wings, and many of these kids referred to us as their newly adopted Dads. We provided these kids moral support, love, often financial assistance, and a safe place to be themselves. We showed the young gay kids that they could have anything they wanted...especially when it comes to a happy marriage.

In 2007, New Jersey legalized civil unions for same-sex couples so we felt it was our obligation to the gay community to be counted as one of those unions, even though we did realize that it was still not equal by any standard.

Through the years, Wesley and I have picketed, marched and fought for the same rights that our straight brothers and sisters are afforded - but as we've become older, we came to the realization that the most affective form of activism was just being us. Living our lives as a normal, loving couple has proven to be a very powerful instrument in the fight for equal rights.

Although, attitudes and laws were rapidly changing across the United States about same-sex unions, the thought of us living in a state where we could actually have our union recognized by the government was hard to fathom. The repeal of DOMA proved to be the straw that broke the camel's back....the camel being the governor of NJ.

Now that our journey to marriage equality is actually law in the Garden State...we are prepared to apply for a marriage license. But now that we are older, mortgages, car payments and building some savings have to take precedent over us investing in a beautiful wedding ceremony and celebration.

Of course, we have always dreamt of one day having a wedding that would celebrate nearly a quarter century of love, and the fact that our very union and commitment to one another help blaze the trail for young gay couples today.

The thought that this dream could actually become a reality is simply incredible.

Once again, we are truly thankful for organizations such as yours for congratulating the GLBT community by rewarding a very lucky couple with their dream wedding. Wesley and I have lived our lives by following one simple rule 'actions speak louder than words.'

Thank you for doing the same.

With Highest Regards,

Kris Longwell & Wesley Loon

P.S. When my parents and sister heard what you were offering, and that we were entering ourselves, they wanted to add their thoughts about our union. Did I mention how amazing these people are?

*Dear Sir/Madam:*

*The characteristics of a good marriage are not dependent upon the gender of the couple. When love, faithfulness, mutual caring, and a willingness to share both the good times and the challenges of life are as obvious as they are in the union of Kris and Wesley, there should be no room for doubt about that marriage being right. Our entire family joyfully and proudly embraces that union and sees it as a role model for us.*

*In spite of the fact that we always lived far apart, Kris and Wesley have never allowed that to diminish their involvement in family life. They attended the high school and college graduations of our three children, they played important roles in the wedding of our daughter, and have gone out of their way to join in the celebration of birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays. One of the highlights of those occasions was to take part in Kris and Wesley's civil union ceremony. It was a wonderful family celebration.*

*We have the pleasure of introducing Kris and Wesley to many of our friends who continue to hold them in the highest regard. Our pride in being in the same family with them could not be greater and we are excited about what the future holds for them and for our relationship.*

*Sincerely,  
Erin Schrock*

*Dear Sir/Madam:*

*I suppose we are stereotypical parents. As soon as our children were born and we knew they were healthy and apparently whole, we began to develop dreams about their future. Some of the important things included in those dreams were continued good health, advanced education, successful careers, and, perhaps most important of all, a happy marriage and another generation of joyful family life. It turns out that we are lucky parents, because that's just the way it worked out for us, even though there was one wrinkle in the plan that we had to iron out together.*

*It was the "happy marriage" part that required a little extra attention. Having a husband for Kris was not exactly what we had dreamed. To be honest, that might have derailed the entire dream, but Kris was a master at leading us through the experience and, given time and space, the dream came back*

*into focus and is now a reality. The characters in the dream changed, but the dream remained the same. And in the process we gained a more profound understanding and appreciation for marriage, love, and family. After 20 years together, Kris and Wesley's marriage continues to be a model for all of us. We feel so very fortunate that, with them, we are able to live out that dream of "another generation of joyful family life." Parents' dreams do come true.*

*Jerry & Maudell Longwell*

