

WILL POWER

MAGAZINE

TOP OF 2022

Featuring new articles on some of our audiences favorite men!



Tom Ernsting

SEXIEST MAN OF 2022

WILLPOWER MAGAZINE

Featuring **Tom Ernsting** @tomdeanernsting
Photography by **David Vance** @davidvancephoto
Location **Miami, Florida**





As it begins

My Dad was a bank president, Mother was a full time mom. One brother. My mom was a very severe alcoholic for most of my formative years (age 10-15) and I do believe that affected me in many ways. While she was really sick, My brother and I would always be on our best behavior. "Do what you're supposed to do." My dad had enough on his plate running the community bank and managing around my mom's alcoholism, so I very much believe that my work ethic and "follow the rules" and "always do your best" was ingrained in those years because we needed my mom to get better. I also witnessed first hand the strength of WILLPOWER when my mom slept through my brother's 17th birthday and NEVER had a drink again. She quit "JUST LIKE THAT." With WILLPOWER.

Our family had tried everything to help her get better, and it boiled down to that birthday.

In High-school, I worked really hard at school and swimming. I had very little free time. School made exceptions for me too (being able to arrive late or leave early). I would leave home at 6am for practice, back at school from 9:30am to 3pm, practice from 4pm-6pm. Home by 7 pm for homework. I do not ever recall being bitter. I think it was because I CHOSE swimming (I loved it) and I just put my head down at school, never actually having the goal to be valedictorian. As the years went by and the list of straight A students got smaller I became more driven. This was 100% willpower, because no one was pushing me.



I started late at full time swimming. Our high school had no swim team so once I got my drivers license I bought a car and drove an hour (each way twice a day) to swim with the top YMCA swim program in the country (an assistant coach at the Y was a part time swim coach at our country club and “discovered me” and convinced my parents I had potential. I was SO driven and quickly became one of the top swimmers in the country by the time I graduated high school and received a full scholarship to the University of Michigan (after being heavily recruited around the country).

The idea of Olympic potential had not even crossed my mind yet, I just wanted to keep improving and winning, but at Michigan I continued to excel and spent my first summer at one of the top rated swim clubs in the US (Santa Clara) where I lived with swimmers and their families. I came back after that summer and set records at Michigan and every pool I swam at that year and was Collegiate All American. That summer I was invited to the Olympic Swim Training Center in Colorado

Springs which was the biggest honor of my swim career. Sadly that summer (1980) the US Boycotted the Olympics but I still had a good experience at the Olympic trials in Mission Viejo that year with Ronald Regan (US President) in the stands.

The only downside from all the training was its “toll” on me socially. I went to proms and dances and experimented with pot and alcohol. I dated and danced. Was voted “most likely to succeed” in HS. So I believe I was well regarded. I was just SUPER disciplined and people respected that. Trust me, I was never the super “FUN GUY”... I’m sure I was always leaving early to go somewhere else.

I feel my swimming and academic success were genetic gifts. I for sure had a talent with swimming and being a late bloomer allowed me to rise quickly. I was never the smartest kid in class, but I worked hard and did extra where I could and I never let up. Where I was smart was knowing I had to work my ass off and be hyper organized. I think by nature I am very competitive.



My future wife was on the Michigan Swim team. After we got married in 1985, my son was born in 1987. That same year is when I finally came to grips with my sexuality and came out to her as gay when my son was three months old. Our lives turned upside down. It was a horrible year. That same year, my mom was diagnosed with Ovarian Cancer, I switched jobs, and did three triathlons. The big story here though is the WILLPOWER to keep a relationship with my son despite all odds and opposition. She is happily remarried and had 4 more children.

What I am MOST PROUD OF in my life is the relationship I have with my son. There were a lot of road blocks, but he has grown into an outstanding young man and the world is a better place because he's part of it.

I just wanted my son to have a great childhood. He was surrounded by his new siblings and our time together was limited at times. I wanted to create memories with him; traditions. Like I had with my dad. That was successful as we still Honor them today.

I never thought I would leave Chicago, especially since my son was in Milwaukee. I had always been intimidated by NYC but had a partner that wanted to move there. I was working in the hotel business and got a transfer into this new organization with Marriott Hotel corporation. I talked to my son about it, he was 15. He was excited about the move and visiting me in NYC. That was 2002. Right after 9/11.

While the partner never ended up coming with me to NYC, it was one of the best decisions of my life. I made amazing new friends, it opened up my entire world to new possibilities and experiences, my jobs allowed me to travel the world (corporate director for Marriott, then Group Director Mandarin Oriental) and really grew up as a man in a big world. I finally felt free of the old, "do what you're supported to do, TOM" and the memories of the pain I caused so many people when my wife and I split. It was a new beginning and I took advantage of that socially and professionally.

My entire career was in corporate hotel jobs: Fairmont, Hilton,

Marriott and Mandarin Oriental. The hotel business was my passion. How they ran. What they looked like. How they treated people, what made them all unique and different. I traveled all over the world to experience as much as I could and shared with our customers. I was always sales and customer based.

In 2015, I felt like I was at the height of my career leading sales with the Mandarin Oriental hotel group, one of the TOP luxury hotel groups in the world. It was time to go while I was "at the top" of my life professionally.

At this same time in my life, my parents had died young (my mom at 54, my dad at 70). They had a fully planned retirement lined up and they never got to take advantage of their hard work and planning. With my parents premature passing, in the back of my mind I had planned to "retire" at 55. I also remember watching the movie "ALICE" with Julian Moore (she won the Oscar....about early onset of Alzheimer's...which my dad had). This showed me that life is short and not to waste precious moments and adventures.

After my parents passed my plan was to retire and move to Naples, Florida in the home my mother bought 35 years prior. People told me I was too young to retire and now was the time to do what you wanted to do. I listened and thought about it and narrowed it down to my two passions: Fitness and Hotel Business. I looked into buying a gym in Naples but it did not make sense. I also LOVE the hotel biz and I stumbled on an opportunity to be a freelance event manager. So upon quitting my job and selling my NYC apartment (That I LOVED) I left on my first freelance job LITERALLY my last day at Mandarin Oriental and began traveling the world as an event manager.

My last three years in NYC were tough for me personally, I had a series of shoulder operations that truly debilitated me. I had one shoulder operated on twice to fix an error on the first one (had what was called a SLAP tear) and with rehab and chronic pain my life was consumed with trying to heal. I tried EVERYTHING. Nothing was working. My muscles and body had atrophied. I was depressed and became a social recluse. I withdrew from NY and my friends.






I was happy for the time in years...

Surprisingly, as soon as I left New York I started the “new career” and I was able to better focus on healing and fitness. It drove me to get stronger and healthier. I had always been into fitness, but this was a renewed passion reclaiming my body and my “soul” that had been broken. WILLPOWER!

I was working out EVERY DAY (and I still do). 1/2 HOUR PT, 1/2 HOUR Muscle/ strength building. I gained about 20 pounds, surpassing any fitness levels I had been at before. My confidence grew. I stood taller. I loved my work and seeing freelancing successfully explode.





A photograph of a muscular man with short, graying hair, lying on his side on a bed. He is shirtless and holding a cigar in his right hand, looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background is a bright window with white frames and two circular handles. The lighting is warm and soft, highlighting his physique.

**It wasn't until recently that I made the connection
between young Tom and current Tom.**





That drive and work ethic and discipline stayed with me throughout my life....in many ways that I have not even brought up here (other job “risks” and moves and decisions). The “WILLPOWER” to be true to myself even while destroying (temporarily) my marriage and my wife’s dreams. The WILLPOWER to leave my first career (as a banker...to make my dad happy) and take a low paying hotel job that led to an amazing career in the hotel business. At the end of the day I have stayed true to myself all these years and I feel so fortunate to be 60 and happy and excited about the future.





WILLPOWER MAGAZINE

“Willpower is the strength and drive to follow through with what you believe in. It’s determination, direction and having goals.”

Featuring **Tom Ernsting** @tomdeanernsting
Photography by **David Vance** @davidvancephoto
Location **Miami, Florida**

TOP OF 2022

Fitness Journey

WILLPOWER MAGAZINE

Featuring **Christoph Babka** @christophfitness
Photography by **Pride Photos** @pridebycp
Styled by **Bike Athletic** @bikeathletic
Location **Miami, Florida**



Failure is not an option. Using willpower, no matter the circumstances or situation, you can always find a solution.

I grew up in a small town in New Jersey surrounded by family. This was back in the 80s/90s when it wasn't as acceptable to be different as it is today. This was before Glee and Drag Race before Ellen even came out and made the cover of Time magazine for doing so. While I had a creative/outgoing personality, **I tried to keep my sexuality under the radar.** I was a target for being the fat kid in school and for being perceived as gay.





There wasn't an exact trigger moment that started my fitness journey,

more a point of exhaustion and lethargy where you know you need to make a change for your future or you'd be trudging towards a negative destiny. Sports wasn't an option since I wasn't athletically-inclined, so I started running and working out in my basement and I stopped eating junk food.

Transitioning into high school, I had leaned out enough physically to avoid the stigma of being overweight, but I had closed my self-expression and shut down my personality to continue flying under the gay radar.

As my fitness developed, so did my confidence. The more I invested in health and wellness the easier it became to show people my true self. It wasn't about looking good, it was about feeling good about who I was, from the outside in.

My first fitness role model was Brad Pitt circa *Thelma & Louise*. Back then lean/hairless bodies were more popular via Calvin Klein and Abercrombie & Fitch.

Knowing I'll never have that body type, I looked more towards *Colt* models and Tom of Finland art to idealize the male form differently.

I'm genetically lucky to have thick strong legs, so I love working those so I see immediate results with little effort. Broadening my shoulders is key to tricking the V-shape so I spend a lot of time on my delts. Thick quads and a barrel upper body is most in line with the *Colt* or Tom physique.

With my only reference point being what I idolize and idealized in others, I discovered my body type by listening to my body and accepting the compliments and opinions of others, rather than my highly-critical self-perception.



I encourage men to lean into their natural body type

and look for ways to enhance or highlight what works best for them organically. If you're a thick guy, don't idealize a lean/ripped body. Look for role models that are aspirational, not impossible. Focus on your best attributes and start from a place of power and positivity.

Working as a Fitness Coach, I empower my partners-in-wellness to focus on presence, positivity, and persistence. These three core elements guided me through some of the most challenging parts of my life. Fitness was the one consistent that made every challenge manageable and transformed every difficulty into an opportunity to grow.

My first fitness career was at Equinox which showed me the power of high-end fitness, catering to a committed clientele. They taught me how a precise, refined, and highly-personalized relationship is the foundation for connecting and inspiring others on their path to wellness. It's the ethos I integrate into all my work endeavors.

Many periods in my professional life I worked in the fitness industry, from sales management for Equinox, business development for WeWork's wellness center. Once Covid struck I found myself without a job and the gym. Rather than shutting down, I got creative.

Without fancy gyms to serve as temples of fitness, I went back to running outside and using resistance bands in outdoor spaces. Just as I had started with basic workouts as a kid, I developed a routine of dynamic stretching, cardio drills, kinesthetics, and plyometrics. My friends wanted to join so I created a Circuit Boot Camp class, which I lead at the Boatslip in Provincetown throughout the summer. Some class attendees asked for private training and virtual sessions, so I got certified through **NASM (National Academy of Sports Medicine)** and became a trainer.

We're in a time of transition where uncertainty is the norm and our baseline is stress.

The most important thing to focus on is self-care - doing what we need to do so we feel our best so we can do our best. With confidence and a strong foundation, we can adapt to whatever changes are happening in the world around us. For me, fitness is that channel where I can be present in my body, positive in my intention, and persistent to adapt and achieve.





WILLPOWER MAGAZINE

Featuring **Christoph Babka** @christophfitness
Photography by **Pride Photos** @pridebycp
Styled by **Bike Athletic** @bikeathletic
Location Miami, Florida

The OG of Athletic Wear is having a comeback.



Featuring **John Woodruff** @woodruff2940

Featuring **TeeJay Thornton** @teejay_thornton

Photography by **Willpower Magazine** @willpowermagazine

Styled by **Bike Athletic** @bikeathletic

Location **The Hacienda at Warm Sands** | Palm Springs, California





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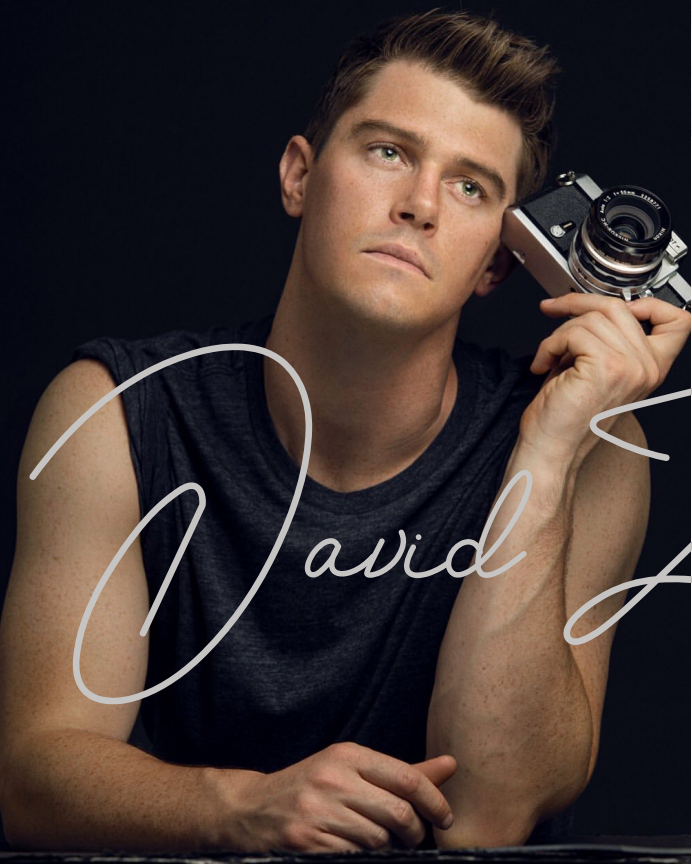
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David Zimmerman

TOP PHOTOGRAPHER OF 2022

zimmerman

WILLPOWER MAGAZINE

Featuring work by **David Zimmerman** @davidzimmerman
Location **California**





I took my first photography class at the University of Denver, it was a film photography class. I became obsessed with the darkroom and the tactile process of developing film and photographs in the solace of the lab. I would spend hours in there and come out and realize it was already dark outside. I had a really wonderful teacher there that invited me to a local art meet-up where she introduced me to people by saying, 'This is David, he is a photographer, he just doesn't know it yet. She had a huge influence on me and really encouraged me to continue on this path. Eventually, I moved from Colorado to California to continue studying at Laguna College of Art and Design in Laguna Beach.

I was fortunate to have another incredible teacher, this time in Digital Photography. He is truly a master and taught me to pay attention to such subtle details. I would think my work was finished and he would find a way to help me enhance it further. Again, he was a consistent champion for me and actually entered one of my pieces into the Chinese International Photographic Arts Exhibition and it was accepted.

So I had a piece displayed in China in an International curated show, which was a really inspiring moment for me as a student. I've been so fortunate to have incredible mentors and honestly so lucky to have connected with so many talented collaborators. I'm always shocked by the power of social media. As much as I want to despise certain aspects of it, it has provided me with so many incredible opportunities to connect with people that would never have been on my radar.

I've held back before in my photography, but the voice has become louder and clearer as I've continued to practice my craft. When I go on a photoshoot, I make the intention of capturing something other photographers ignore, something special about the subject I haven't seen before. I often ask what their personal interests or hobbies are and include them in the shoot. The voice that is singing by the time the end product is delivered is one that is a balanced harmony between myself and my collaborators.



United
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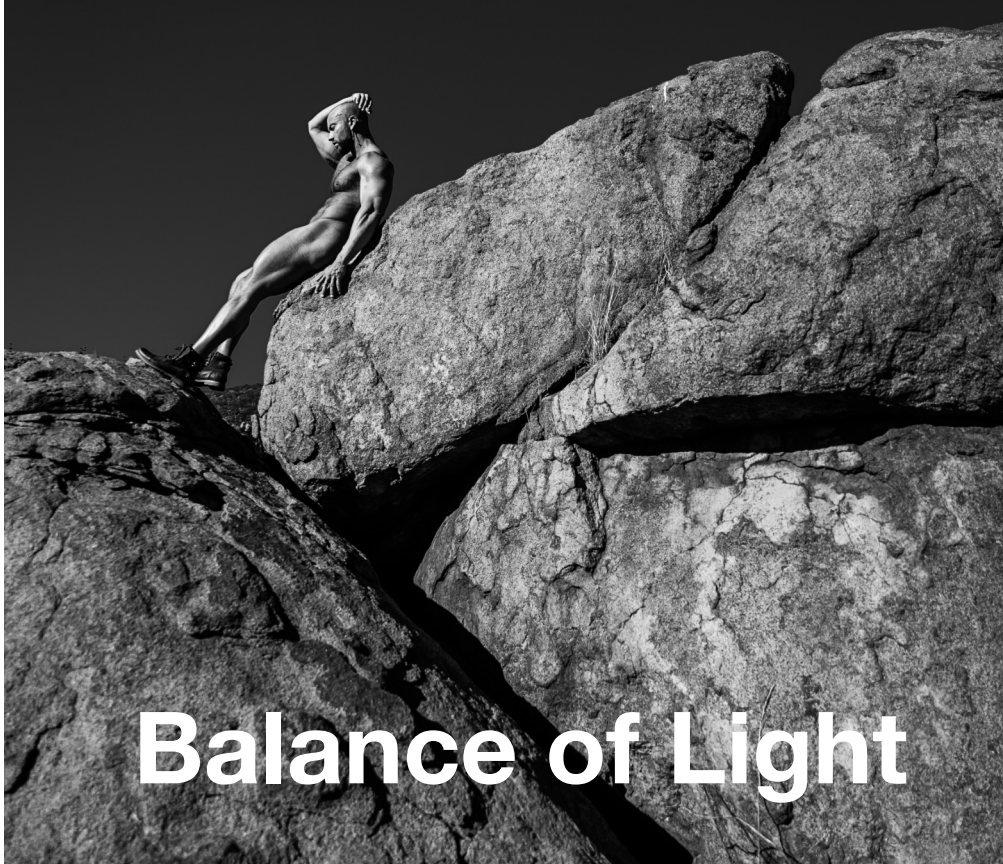
The first guy I ever photographed was actually really cool, he was a bodybuilder and knew how to pose, so it made my job easy. We got some incredible photos that day and I will always remember it.

One of my all-time favorite photographs came from that photoshoot.

Since my first male portrait session, I have explored so many different landscapes and locations, it's been an exciting journey. The thing that stands out the most to me as far as advancement in my craft, is my use of light and composition. It gets better with every photoshoot.

Light is really a subject in itself and it is something that constantly changes and moves, just like a human — so it takes time to learn to dance with it.

And composition is what keeps me excited about the editing process, making sure the tension, balance, and focus are just right.



Balance of Light



I think there is a perception that these days, with all the advancements in technology, you can simply take your camera out and get incredible photos without thought. In reality, a lot of planning goes into the process. I always spend a lot of time conversing with my collaborators. Before the shoot and during. I believe a certain level of trust is required to capture truly amazing portraits. You can see it in someone's eyes if they are nervous or anxious, and likewise, if they are comfortable and open. I always strive to make enough of a connection to be trusted to capture someone at their most vulnerable because that is when their true nature reveals itself in their posture, their tenseness, and their gaze. The eyes are such a special part of the human body, they can tell you so much about a mood or expression.









WILLPOWER MAGAZINE

Featuring work by **David Zimmerman** @davidgzimmerman
Location **California**



WILLPOWER MAGAZINE

BODY OF 2022

Featuring **Ricky**

Photography by **Rick Rusch** @rick.rusch

Location Las Vegas, Nevada





EMPORIO ARMANI

ARMY
SERIAL NO. 12345678
NAME: J. SMITH

TATTOOS: Large outline of a state, red heart, and other designs.





WILLPOWER MAGAZINE

Featuring **Ricky**

Photography by **Rick Rusch** @rick.rusch

Location **Las Vegas, Nevada**



HIS ST RY

“Most Impactful Story”

As I grew up in my little town of Albertville, Alabama, and got older, the layers of blocks got thicker and thicker. I would do things that made people question my sexuality and I didn't understand why. I was just doing what made me happy. I remember one instance in my 7th-grade history class we had a high school helper come over and sit with the teachers to assist. I'll never forget; I was having my computer time at the teacher's desk and the high school helper and another classmate of mine were looking at what I had on the computer, which was abstract artwork. I always loved art and looking at other people's work and I remember they asked me point-blank in front of the whole class, "Are you gay?". I'm getting chills sitting here typing this because I remember this moment plain as day and it still hurts. Of course, I quickly shut off the computer and said something smart back to them to assure them I was not. Another block around my heart went up that day.

I was so curious about my sexuality growing up and trying to understand what all these feelings I had inside me meant. I

thought it was just curiosity. I would look at pictures online of various things, as young boys do, not knowing why I was drawn to that instead of girls. I grew up in a VERY southern church community. My mom's uncle Raymond was a 92 yr. old pastor in a church that would go and baptize members in a creek out back if you know where I'm going. It was VERY conservative and was always preached that gay people were going to hell and that they were sinners and a shame in the eyes of God. Well, I didn't want to be a shame before God. I wanted to go to Heaven! One specific day, when I was in 8th grade, I had just gotten home from school. I had printed a picture of two guys kissing a few days before and ended up throwing it away in my bathroom trash can - but my stepdad found it.

I got home that day and walked past my parent's bathroom and saw the picture unfolded on the counter and I remember my heart dropping into my butt. I quickly went to my bedroom where I heard my mom call to me, "Kyle! can you come here for a minute? I want to talk to you." I felt like I was going to





throw up. I sat down at the kitchen table and I remember the look she gave me. That look of such utter disappointment. She asked me about it and began to scold me and tell me she didn't know why she took me to church and how disgusting that was. I obviously denied I was the one who printed that picture off. I had blamed it on my brother, who had come out not too long ago so it would be fitting but she didn't believe me. I felt so embarrassed and like something was wrong with me or that I was messed up in the head in some way.

Did you hear where I mentioned my brother was gay as well?

My brother's coming out was not received well at all by my family which further suppressed my feelings of who I was. Year after year went by. With my brother moving out to go live with my dad in Michigan, me trying to be "normal", going to a new church where I met new friends, hearing more and more about how being gay was wrong, I had suppressed my emotions and thoughts of being gay so far down I couldn't see them anymore.

My parents divorced when I was 8 and at the time I didn't really understand how it affected me or what was really happening. All I knew was that my world was about to change and it did. It was hard adjusting and I'm the type of person who internalizes my emotions a lot of times so I was really quiet for a while. Adjusting to a new town, new school, new people, and the fact my dad wasn't around anymore. It was hard. I lied a LOT when I was a kid because it seemed to be the only narrative I could control. All the adults around me were telling me what to do and when and by lying I was

controlling the story. It's weird because as a kid you trust grown-ups to protect you and your heart but that's not always the case. I didn't realize how scared I was from my parent's divorce for a long time.

Years had gone by and I lived my life. I was happy with my life. I went to college, had great friends, was making my own money. Life was good! But I always felt a sense of low self-worth or a longing for something and I had no idea why until I came out and literally, it was like Hoover Dam exploding.

All those emotions that I had pressed down since I was a little boy came pouring out.





After

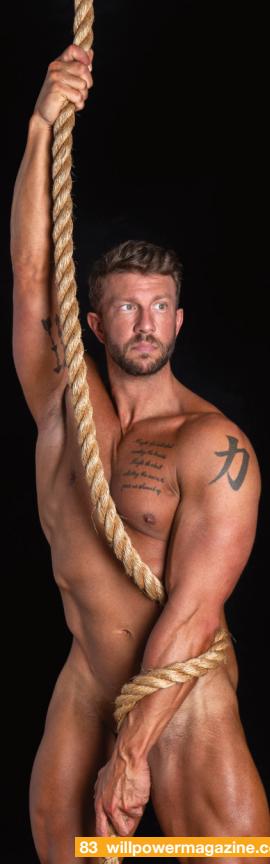
my second year of community college in Alabama, I moved to Chattanooga, TN to live with my Meme and go to school there. I got a job at a local bank and was going to school. All was perfect. I went to my Meme's church because I was so involved with church then that she wanted me to go with her. I quickly got involved in the church. I had joined the choir, joined a college and career group, where I met Lindsey. Ah yes, Lindsey. She was the prettiest girl I had ever seen and we quickly became friends. We started dating shortly thereafter. We had a wonderful friendship and love that I would not trade

for the world. I had never been that close to somebody before and it felt good. After about 8-9 months of dating, we decided to get married. Yep! We tied the knot on October 18th, 2008 at a little plantation in Georgia. Everyone in our college and career group was getting married and having kids, so I thought that I should, too. I was so in love with her and her family. They were and are the sweetest, most giving people you'll ever meet in your life and I felt so lucky to be a part of their lives. It seemed perfect at the time.

We spent 8 wonderful years together. From starting off in a rinky-dink apartment to buying our first home together and eventually a dog. As happy as I was, I always felt like I wanted more or needed more and I wasn't sure why I could never just let myself be satisfied. I felt happy, I thought. Here I was with a beautiful wife, house, dog, and a great family. What else did I need? I didn't know. I just thought this is what everybody goes through and feels so I just dealt with it.

In 2015 Lindsey and I moved to Nashville, TN because of our jobs and because we loved visiting Lindsey's sister, Britt. The Nashville lifestyle was busier and more lively than Chattanooga but in a good way - we loved it! It was in May of 2016 that I started my blog StayFoxy. I wanted to start a blog about style, food, art, etc and thought it was a good place for me to have all that in one website. So I did. I started blogging and taking pictures of my outfits and it was fun. I then started to get comments from guys about my style and how much they liked it and thought I was cute and handsome. I think that started the beginning of those blocks that I had built up for so long starting to chip away. I was so curious as to why they would think I was cute or handsome. I honestly had a bit of an "Ew!" factor at first but then I couldn't stop thinking about their comments and them thinking I was cute.

Why was I so concerned or thinking about them saying that to me?





I didn't know but it was bothering me and I was struggling with it inside. In August of 2016, I went to Chicago with my parents to visit my brother. That was the first time I had been anywhere with them alone and all together as a family since I was in my teens and anywhere without Lindsey since we got married 8 years ago. I will say that it was that trip, for whatever reason, that I ultimately hit a brick wall. It was almost instantly that I knew why I was so concerned about those comments and why they bothered me so much. Also, seeing how loving my parents were to my brother and his life as a gay man had opened my eyes to how much they had grown and understood his struggle and realized that being gay wasn't a choice.

It's a funny thing because for some reason I thought me coming out would have been something that brought my brother and I closer together but it actually created more friction than before. He moved in with my dad when he was around 12 and moved to Michigan. I stayed with my mom in Alabama so there was quite a distance between us already. I grew up never really feeling like my brother cared for me so in a lot of ways I consider myself an only child. After I came out he said that I owed him a debt of gratitude for being the first one to come out. You see my family didn't take his coming out very well and over the years they learned about homosexuality and realized it wasn't something you choose but are born with. So I guess he figured that I came out whenever they were at that point. Granted he never really understood the hardships I had of my own. I mean I was married and taught about the sin of homosexuality in the church so I had my own demons I was dealing with. So to answer your question, no I didn't talk to my brother about my feelings of being gay before coming out.

On the last day of our trip, I literally told my parents I wasn't feeling well. I was so sick to my stomach that I had come to this realization. I spent the whole day in bed crying because I knew who I finally was but also because the life that I had built for 8 years was about to come crashing down and I couldn't stomach it. I spoke to Lindsey several times on the trip and she knew something was bothering me. I told her my brother was being a jerk of course to throw her off of the real issue. I wanted to wait till I could see her face to face to bring myself to tell her what I had been feeling inside.

We left Chicago on a Saturday and the whole trip home I was nauseous and sad and mad and all the emotions you can think of because of what was about to happen. I got off the plane and drove home where I met Lindsey and our dog. Immediately she knew something was wrong with me. I had this cold/frozen look on my face. We proceeded to walk and we ended up by the cemetery, ironically, where I finally broke my silence and told her, "I'm gay". I'll never forget the look on her face when I told her. I couldn't believe what was happening. Our whole world came

crashing down beside the cemetery. It's like I was putting a nail into the coffin of our life together. We went home crying where we opened up the door to find Britt, Lindsey's sister, cooking us all dinner. We were both crying and she immediately got upset and started crying with us without knowing at first what was going on. She's such an amazing person who cares so deeply for the ones she loves so naturally she was very upset for both of us. She was ultimately losing a brother that she had always wanted and it killed me.

Weeks went by where Lindsey and I cried and cried for days together and I kept telling her how sorry I was that I had lied to her. Looking back on it, I wish I had just been honest with myself or had someone to talk to about these feelings I was having, rather than pressing those feelings down inside causing this false sense of happiness and normalcy. I could then have avoided all of this pain I caused. I would not trade a moment I spent with Lindsey or her family. I loved them all so much and still do. I never would want to hurt them for anything in the world, yet there I was breaking their hearts, along with my own.





To them, I say this:

I am truly and deeply sorry for the pain that I caused you. I never meant to hurt anyone, especially Lindsey. I know now more than ever that you have to be true to yourself even when everyone around you is telling you that what you're feeling or wanting is wrong. You were my family and we had so many amazing memories, along with some sad ones, that I wouldn't trade for the world. I feel forever bonded with you guys and hope you can find it in your hearts to forgive me for the pain I have caused you all. I love you! To Lindsey: You were my rock for 8 years and hurting you will be one of my life's biggest regrets. You knew me at my worst and you knew me at my best and I will always be grateful to you for showing me what it means to love somebody. You take after your mom in that you are the most selfless person I've ever met and I couldn't have been more proud to call you my wife. I want nothing but happiness for you and if you ever need a shoulder to cry on or an ear to listen I'll be here for you. I feel that a friendship with you is better than not having you in my life at all.





I AM HERE FOR YOU

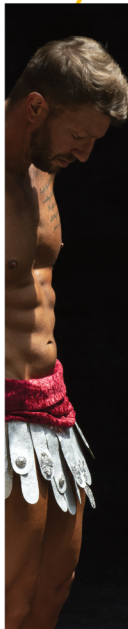
Now, I have sworn to myself that I would never let someone's opinion about who I am or who I should be driving my life again despite it upsetting them or them rejecting me. Ultimately, I was rejecting myself and that was the void that I had been feeling when I told myself something was missing. I was missing myself. My identity. I am more me now than I have ever been and I'm not apologetic for it in the least bit. I have met a wonderful man whom I love very much. You all may already know him. If you don't his name is Cameron. We've been together for over 2 years now and we are like two peas in a pod. He is my everything and I love him dearly.

I have learned the most valuable lesson life can throw at you and that's, to be honest with yourself and trust in who you are no matter what. If you or someone you know is questioning their sexuality, please do not run from it, scoot it under the rug, or tell them it's wrong. Listen to them and let them know that you are there to support them and answer any questions they may have. Or, if you don't know how

to talk to them about their sexuality, find someone you trust that can and will empathize with how they are feeling. Life is too precious and sweet to waste doing things to make others happy in the fear of being rejected or tossed aside. There are plenty of people that want to love you and be there to lift you up.

I hope this story has helped someone that may be struggling with coming out and being true to who you really are. I can honestly say that it's more common than I ever thought. Since coming out I've had so many people tell me they are struggling with the same thing and it breaks my heart. Please be kind to yourselves and be brave and strong. Always know that I am here to lend an ear and talk if you need me. I don't want anyone to feel alone like I did with those feelings. It's a dark and scary place to be and has taken many lives before and I was lucky to have friends and a supportive family to help pull me out of that darkness. If you do not, please do not hesitate to reach out to me and talk.

Resolution



The biggest challenge was letting go of an 8-year marriage and the family I had built with it. It will always be my biggest regret in life because I truly loved that family I had built. But other than that I don't think any challenges are as hard as not being my true self. It was more crippling and numbing than any challenge that could come my way.

What I've learned is that you can't keep going through life pretending. It eventually will catch up to you. Trust me. Loving an honest and truthful life is the BEST way to live. It's helped me really reflect on myself and my goals and where I see myself. Not my pretend self. If that makes any sense. It's like when I let those guards down and fully examined who I was I could see through the fog of my life into a bright and sunny pasture with all the things I could do shining brightly.

I have set to focus on my artwork and my website to hopefully be a well-rounded painter in the art world. I've spent a lot of time in front of my canvas lately and it feels so good. I have a one-track mind so it's pretty easy for me to tackle one goal at a time and this is my focus right now. I still plan on keeping up my fitness regimen but my main focus and goals right now are my artwork which you can find at stayfoxxstudios.com or on IG @stayfoxxstudios. I do commissioned pieces as well so hit me up.



Kyle Boen with his husband Cameron Hickle and Rinna



ROBERT RAUSCH

@oldmanalabama

Shooting with a model you have never met before and setting up the expectations is part of the job. Kyle and I talked about what we both wanted from the shoot. We talked about the vibe and style we were using as inspiration and the nudes that we were going to do. Kyle was bringing his husband and dog to the shoot. So it was going to be a family affair.

The relationship between model and photographer is intimate. There has to be a lot of trust to make great images. The model has to trust the photographer completely and share any insecurities and the photographer has to make

sure that trust is not broken and be honest with his intentions.

When Kyle and the family showed up we went over the images we were going to be shooting and talked about the order of them. His husband brought work to do on his laptop. I typically don't like people hanging around and watching a shoot unless they are helping. But Kyle's husband was a big help when we needed someone to style or help with lighting or any setup he jumped in to help us. And his little pet was well behaved, following me into the equipment room every time I needed something to make sure he approved.



“Highlighted Photographer”

Kyle was kind and gentle with his approach. I saw him sweating and soon learned he liked his environment cold so I immediately turned down the ac. He was so polite he didn't even ask. Modeling is such hard work and uncomfortable sometimes you want to make the environment as comfortable as possible and make sure the model is hydrated and kept fed and happy.


I always like to start with an easy shot to get us used to each other and warm up. It didn't take long to get into the groove. Kyle was comfortable in front of the camera and had done this many times and had plenty to give to the camera. He has an amazing body and just finished a bodybuilding competition and took direction well and was up for trying anything. Doing nudes can be uncomfortable but we were both into creating and with clothes on or off didn't change that. Even when he was hanging upside down nude hanging onto sisal ropes that can rip the skin off your hands, he did it again and again until we got something.

it's all about the lighting for me. You either find the best light or create it. When it's a full day of shooting sometimes it's easier to find it and some days it's best to create it. We did a bit of both the day we shot. We kept the concepts simple because we had so much to cover. And I think we both could have shot for two full days and still not covered it all.

The day flew by and I don't even think we stopped for lunch but just grabbed some snacks and kept on shooting. On days when you are into what you doing hunger seems to be low on the list.

I am happy with the results of the day. And more importantly, I met another incredibly talented person. I look forward to shooting with Kyle again. I think the more you shoot a model and know each other the images get better and better. I tend to be a bit on the experimental side and hate asking for too much from someone I don't know. I expect the next shoot with Kyle to be even better.





It's not often I put pen to paper
to openly speak about my life.

Every person in this the world
has a story and this is mine.

“Most Impactful Story”

My name is Xander Labuschagne,
and this is...

Anapologetically Me

I was born on 22 May 1980 in the north of South Africa in Waterberg Limpopo Province, and brought up in a small farming town in the north. I was brought into this life in an Afrikaans family and have an incredibly talented mother who is an interior decorator. My father was an architect. He passed away two years ago.

I was raised by my mother, as my father, bless his soul, was a full-blown alcoholic. He was untamable and strict, and we had no relationship to speak of, if I'd wanted to, I could go on writing about the damage and issues I've had to work through, but this is not his life story, it is mine. He is not here anymore to tell you the demons he'd had to fight in his own heart.

Because I was always trying to prove myself, I always over-performed. Not in sport. I was always trying to do what is acceptable in society and the Afrikaans Christian community. I was a people-pleaser.

Afrikaans communities are generally known to be very proud and very reserved, almost prudish. You referred to everyone a bit older than you as auntie and uncle, even if there is no family resemblance, it's a form of respect. You would not miss a Sunday without attending church and then another hour after church you will attend Sunday school. Almost fitting into the "perfect family" type box and you would never discuss sex or nudity. It was almost as if nudity is wrong and sex need to happen in bed, under the blankets with all the lights turned off. And of course, only between a married man and wife.

Boys are often expected to be on the rugby team, and the artistic boys were the ones being made fun of. Our accents are often being made fun of as well. Racism played a big role in South Africa and that in itself made growing up confusing. I was blessed to have a mother who taught us not to see someone for the color of their skin, so this was never part of my upbringing.



I am proud of being Afrikaans.

But I do think a lot of issues would have been easier if we grew up more open-minded about life.





I remember playing with and draping fabric in my mother's workroom. She had a female mannequin, which I draped in a different outfit every day. I thought that I'd become a famous fashion designer and I still have an eye for color. Soon, I realized that my father didn't approve, and I think my mother was too scared to encourage me. It wasn't acceptable in our small community for a man to be a fashion designer and I was scared that I'd be teased.

Instead, I now work in the hospitality sector and am currently a General Manager for an intimate Boutique Hotel in Cape Town. Although I have a degree in nature conservation and started off as a Safari Guide in Kruger National Park. I have been an Executive Butler and personal assistant for the rich and famous and royals for a few years, ran and managed charities and my own also, and have worked and lived in London, Mykonos, Dublin, and Abu Dhabi, and have traveled to 39 countries.

But back then, my parents divorced after mom found a woman's earrings in her bed, and we couldn't cope with dad's outrages and constant drinking anymore.

Mom had to work two jobs to keep us going. **Some nights there was no food, and we drank lukewarm water to keep our tummies full, all of us sleeping together on her queen-sized bed. Other days we were lucky. Someone would ring the doorbell and when we opened it, there were food parcels on the doorstep.**

My father refused to pay maintenance for us, as he blamed my mother for leaving him. We cried many nights and listen to "Everybody hurts" by R.E.M, which still and takes me back to those years which shaped me.

Years later, I introduced my mother to my stepfather, who is more like a father to me than anyone ever was.

They have been married for 25 years and are still madly in love. My mother owns several properties now, and we are blessed as a family, but hard lessons were learned on the way. The reason I mention this is that hard work and willpower pay off. You truly can work yourself up in life and it is never too late. Even for a single mother with 2 children.

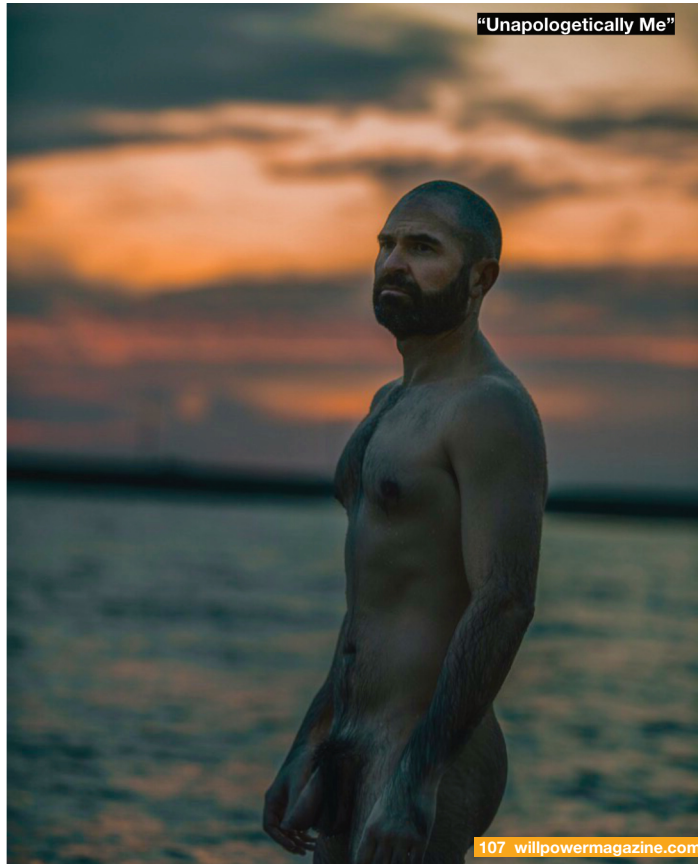
As a young boy, I had a best friend. His uncle had a farm and I used to get invited every easter holiday to visit the farm with him. The owner of the farm was my role model and always so kind to family and friends. He has a beautiful farm with rivers and waterfalls and a dam to swim in a mountain gorge. I felt accepted and happy there. Nature was kind and made all my troubles feel lighter. Over a period of about 12 years, both me and him went through our own struggle. He lost a child in a car accident and shortly after his wife left him with his older daughter. At that same time, my mother left my father. A few years later I went on my easter farm holiday again,

and I said to him I think he should meet my mother... to make a long story short, he is now my stepfather. And still, the role model that I look up to.

One lesson I'd learned over the years is to act like a straight man, whatever that looks like. I was too scared to let anyone know I am gay. I played rugby in school, I was head boy, and people liked me. I learned to be part of the popular boys. Yet deep down I knew I wasn't like them. I had my share of girlfriends and when it became serious, I had an excuse to get out of the relationship.

In church, we were reminded that gay men will burn in hell and that it is the demons in your soul that made you gay, and that they could be prayed out of you.

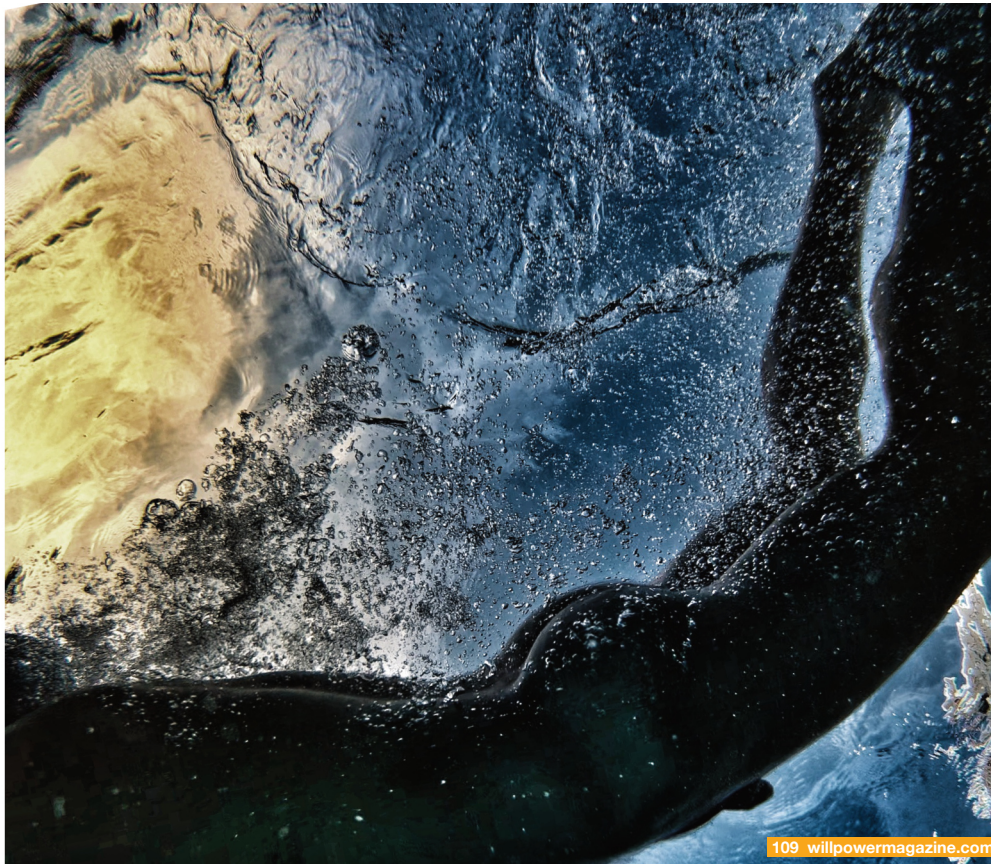
Years later I met a woman, in church, of course. She claimed that God had shown her in a dream that we would get married. I believed her and thought that if it is what God wants, then surely all my feelings for men will disappear.

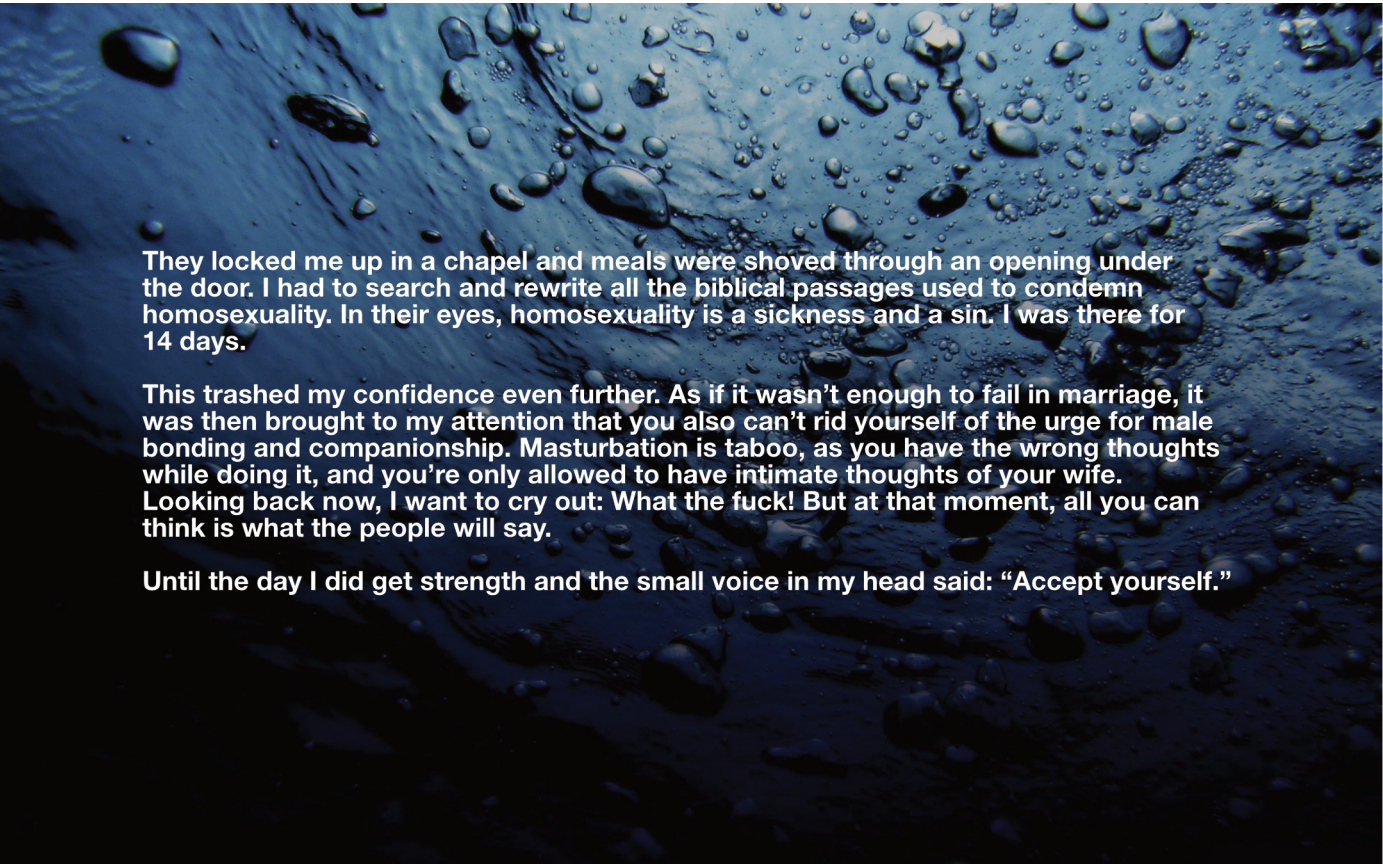


I was a virgin and so was she. I was 29. We had a big wedding witnessed by family, friends, and our small-town community. I truly believed in my heart that we will be happily married, have children, and live happily ever after. Truth is, it doesn't work like that.

I ate my fears away and became depressed and overweight. I could not consummate our marriage and when it became time for bed, I would be an anxious wreck. I had failed as a man. In my head, I knew I had feelings for men, but I never had a gay role models to look up to. I didn't know what to do or who to speak to. One evening I spoke in a soft voice to my wife and said, "I think I have feelings for men."

It brought devastation. The next day, she came home with church leaders who said we will help you. They booked me into an institution where they pray the gay away. **Yes, conversion therapy.** A gay man's worst nightmare.





They locked me up in a chapel and meals were shoved through an opening under the door. I had to search and rewrite all the biblical passages used to condemn homosexuality. In their eyes, homosexuality is a sickness and a sin. I was there for 14 days.

This trashed my confidence even further. As if it wasn't enough to fail in marriage, it was then brought to my attention that you also can't rid yourself of the urge for male bonding and companionship. Masturbation is taboo, as you have the wrong thoughts while doing it, and you're only allowed to have intimate thoughts of your wife. Looking back now, I want to cry out: What the fuck! But at that moment, all you can think is what the people will say.

Until the day I did get strength and the small voice in my head said: "Accept yourself."



I forcefully checked myself out, drove home, sat down, and told my wife that I loved her, but cannot stay in the marriage. Her family was furious and insisted on an annulment and not a divorce. In South Africa that is complicated and costly. We started the process and she moved back to her parents.

Not long after, I woke up one night and packed my car with everything that was dear to me. I drove and drove and drove. Sixteen hours later I stopped in a beautiful small town Knysna on the coast. I rented a room, wrote a letter to my family and told them I am homosexual. I lost most of my friends and my close family took some time to digest it.

I came home one evening after a double shift and found that all I owned was the clothes on my back and my car. Someone broke into my room and cleaned it out.

Soon after, I received a call to let me know that my wife had died in a horrible car accident.

**You could ask
how much pain
can one person
endure in life?**

**How much hurt
can one soul
bear?**

**Then you open
your eyes and
listen to someone
else's story and
say, okay, sure,
they have more
hurt than me.**



At some point, no matter what, everyone has to start thinking of their own survival and my life took a turn. I began doing CrossFit, lost 39 kg, grew a beard. I treasure the ones I love but now live life unapologetically. Some people will frown at my Instagram page and you know what?

I really don't give a fuck.

I don't perceive myself as a model, nor a man with a beautiful physique. But someone that celebrate being a man, living free and that might inspire.

I love to express myself in an artistic way, and water makes me happy. Many of my photos are taken in nature and water, and that's where I feel closest to who I am as a man. It makes me peaceful after enduring so much hurt and having had to learn so much. There are many I haven't mentioned, but if I did, I'd be writing a book instead of an article, and you'd need a box of tissues.

But that's not what I want to focus on. I want to focus on the willpower of the many gay men who have endured and still endure, society's judgment of us, our success, and the need for a perfect body. I know now, though, that if you choose to live life as your true self, the rest will work out and the right people will come into your world. I haven't found my true love yet.


As a dear friend reminded me recently, rather single than in something less than awesome.

Being a single gay man has challenges of its own. But I know, whether I find my person or not, I will be OK. Because I am unapologetically me.



“Unapologetically Me”

WILLPOWER MAGAZINE

A man with short brown hair and a light beard is sitting in a light-colored upholstered chair with a dark metal frame. He is wearing a black turtleneck sweater and white briefs with a thin blue stripe on the waistband. He has his hands clasped behind his head and is smiling at the camera. The background features a large green plant on the left and another on the right. The overall mood is relaxed and confident.

Be the best you.

WILLPOWER MAGAZINE