

FROM THE EDITOR IN CHIEF Bruce C. Steele

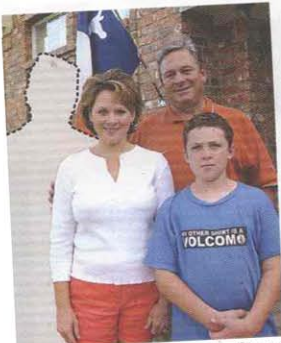


The closer we get

In this "best of the year" issue there's one story that, for me, perfectly encapsulates where we are at the start of 2006—and what's "best" about it. "Good Neighbors," on page 69, reports how Jim Stewart, a Texas man at odds with his gay son, learned something about family values from his new neighbors, a gay male couple with an infant son. The lesson brought Jim and his son Jason together without animosity for the first time in years.

"I began visiting with the gay family and realized that they are just like everybody else," Jim, who lives in Austin, told *The Advocate*. "And I started thinking that discriminating against my own son was the worst discrimination there is."

So there you go. Certain Texans' preference for antigay discrimination may have been a starting point for 2005—say, on Inauguration Day in January—but humanity and love will, given a chance, trump homophobia. Lies about pedophilia and "lifestyle choices" and attacking traditional marriage may poison people's



■ After meeting a gay couple, Jim Stewart (in back) reconciled with his grown gay son, who'd been largely missing from the family.

minds, but at a neighborhood barbecue with the queer neighbors pitching in, the truth will out.

After hanging with the gays next door, Jim Stewart says, "It dawned on me that being gay is not a choice. I didn't understand it's in the DNA. I realized prejudice is through fear or ignorance, and in my case, I had both."

If we are to have hope for the new year, we have to believe that this story is being repeated daily across the nation—not just between dads and sons but between mothers and daughters, schoolyard bullies and their targets, preachers and their congregants, bosses and their workers, athletes and their teammates, and so on and on. It doesn't take a reality TV show—which brought that gay couple and their baby to Jim Stewart's cul-de-sac—for people to come together,

even when one side starts from a place of "prejudice...fear or ignorance." Very rarely does a person move from a place of acceptance and love to a place of suspicion and hate. The vast majority of people who shift their views are moving in the other direction, toward our common humanity. From darkness into light.

Looking back at our cover stories from 2005 [see page 28], you can see how this truth plays out: within families in the "red states," among Mormons and high school students, at colleges and day care, and in the growth of gay and lesbian images and media outlets, from *The L Word* to *Logo* to the phenomenal *Brokeback Mountain*. As 2006 begins, marriage equality is still the law in Massachusetts, Olivia Cruises continues to help lesbian sports heroes out of the closet, and science is getting ever closer to a "gay gene." Even a story about gay men's recovery from crystal meth addiction is in part a story about truth and love winning out—in that case, but they cannot hold. Every year we move a little further into the light.

Many battles loom for 2006, both political [see page 37] and personal. Our "strategy for victory" (to borrow a phrase) needs constant revision, and we all have a lot of work to do to reach full equality in our society and in our families—more work than we really want to think about. But every day brings more families like the Stewarts back together. Every year moves us closer to love. ■



"Jake Gyllenhaal and I convinced ourselves of the love story and committed to it 100%"

PLUS LESLEY GORE • NATHAN LANE • ANNIE LENNOX

Joan Crawford's nemesis, is the butchest broad in the old West.

1956: *Giant*: More McCambridge, plus queer icons Rock Hudson and James Dean.

the hot yet sultry Tab Hunter.

1993: *The Ballad of Little Jo*: Pioneer Suzy Amis survives the West by donning man-drag.
—Alonso Duralde

(12.24.96) ARCHIVES

A lifesaving cocktail

The anti-HIV drug "cocktail" had begun changing the face of the AIDS epidemic a year after the introduction of protease inhibitors. *The Advocate* reported in late 1996.

With the introduction of saquinavir in December 1995 and two other drugs the following spring, patients were now seeing HIV viral loads drop to undetectable levels—and they were reengaging with the future. "A year ago AIDS was always touted in the press as an inevitably fatal disease, and today that is totally without merit," said R. Scott Hitt, head of the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS.

But the silver lining came with a number of dark clouds. The new drugs were expensive and had side effects that forced some patients off the therapy. "Other people discover, to their dismay, that the drugs simply aren't effective for them. Even for the people who respond well, the treatments require a commitment, possibly lifelong, to a complicated regimen," explained *Advocate* writer John Gallagher. —Don Romesburg



STEELE: CHRISTOPHER DANLEY; STEWARTS: LARRY KOLVOOR/AUSTIN AMERICAN STATISMAN

TELEVISION

■ Jason Stewart: "I never gave up on my dad."



Good neighbors

How a young gay Texan and his dad reunited thanks to *Welcome to the Neighborhood*, ABC's canceled reality show By Debi Martin

One of 2005's happier TV endings came about thanks to a reality show the public never saw. ABC opted not to go forward with its hopeful-homeowners competition, *Welcome to the Neighborhood*, after groups including the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation and equal-housing advocates voiced concern that the series would aggravate the very problem it addressed—housing discrimination in America.

Yet the show led to a new beginning for a real-life dad and the

gay son he'd never been able to accept.

Neighborhood followed seven families of various ethnicities, races, and religions—including a white gay couple with an adopted African-American baby—as they competed for a home valued at an estimated \$300,000 in the upscale Circle C subdivision of Austin, a largely conservative, Caucasian enclave presumably not marked by support for gay rights. The criterion for winning: not how much the family needed the house but how well they would fit in with a close group of neighbors who lived in a cul-de-sac in Circle C and gathered regularly for holidays and weekend family entertainment.

One of the judges was Jim Stewart, a 53-year-old Circle C resident who works in sales for a food processing company, drinks beer, hunts deer, and would be flattered to be compared to John Wayne. Stewart didn't love gays.

Speaking to *The Advocate* in his first interview with the gay press, Stewart is frank about his "conflicts with the gay family," Steve and John Wright (Steve had changed his name to make it easier for the couple to adopt a child).

The conflicts went both ways. As Stewart recalls it, one day Steve Wright told him, "I don't understand the redneck issue." I fired back, "I don't understand the gay issue and don't care to."

Neither the producers nor the neighbors knew that Jim had a gay son from his first marriage. Jason Stewart, now 25, had come out to his dad a few years earlier while home from college.

His father's reaction back then: "Check your gayness at the door. We don't want to participate [in] or support your lifestyle in any way."

Jason's announcement that he was gay "totally floored me," says Jim Stewart. "It was like being hit in the head with a bat. Jason had been captain of the football team. I had had no reservations that anything was wrong or out of place. He was all you'd want in a son."

When he came home to see his dad for the holidays, Jason agreed to the "don't tell" policy. "I was very angry and hurt," he says, "but I didn't want to lose my connection with the family and my little brother [from Jim's second marriage]. It's twice as hard to rekindle a relationship with your parents if you write them off because they won't accept you as gay. All the holidays you miss together, the 'first' times of everything. There were times when I felt like, *I'm his son, but how deep does that love go?*" says Jason, whose mother and stepmother were more accepting and supportive. "My dad's love was conditional, and I would compare that to my little stepbrother, who was loved unconditionally." Jason

knew his dad was "a man that sticks to his guns and is not going to change. I know, I'm just like him. But I never gave up on him."

Jason couldn't have known that his dad would vote to award the gay couple on *Neighborhood* the show's top prize: the house next door to Jim Stewart.

Jim says all the contestants—including African-American and Asian families, a family that practices Wicca, and a family with a stripper mom—were deserving. But "the Wrights were right for the neighborhood," he says. "They're classy people. Friendly. You ►

couldn't ask for better neighbors."

What transformed him? During the six episodes, Jim had gotten to know the Wrights. "I began visiting with the gay family and realized they are just like everybody else." Over dinner one night, Jim asked John what a day in the life of a gay man is like. "John said he'd been chased, spit on, beat up, and humiliated," Jim says. "And I started thinking that discriminating against my own son was the worst discrimination there is. As the show went on, it dawned on me that

"I started thinking that discriminating against my own son was the worst discrimination there is. I realized prejudice [against gay people] is through fear or ignorance, and I had both."

—Jim Stewart

being gay is not a choice. I didn't understand it's in the DNA. I realized prejudice is through fear or ignorance, and in my case, I had both."

Two weeks after the show finished taping and Jim had done a lot of soul-searching, he called Jason. Jason was unprepared for what his dad had to say.

"The call came out of nowhere," he says. "My dad told me he loved me unconditionally and was a changed person and ashamed of how he treated me in the past and that he would accept me and anyone in my life—that was a huge decision. I was crying in my car."

Now, Jim says, he knows that "being a redneck is not cast in stone." What's more, he's proud of how his elder son handled their difficult times. "Jason had truly been the better man," he says.

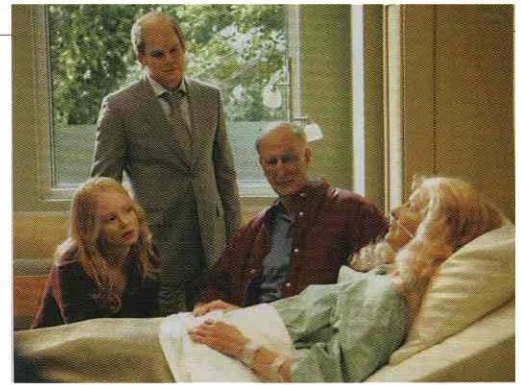
As for Jason, he finally has a father-son relationship. "I feel now that if anything happens to me personally, he'd be there for me, and I have never felt that before," he says. "The connection we are having is amazing and so important."

Jim showed his son he believed that gays should have the right to be families by standing on the state capitol steps at a rally opposing a state constitutional amendment against same-sex marriage. The proposition passed on November 8, but Jason was proud of his dad.

Jim would like America to see *Welcome to the Neighborhood*. "I think for America to see everyone on the block, not just me, transformed and confronting their prejudices, it would benefit the gay community and other contestants. Feelings unfolded and were released in ways I don't think will be captured again."

ABC declined comment.

Martin has written for many alternative and mainstream publications including McCall's and The Austin Chronicle.



TOP 10 television

- 1** **Six Feet Under** The final season of creator Alan Ball's brilliant HBO series was moving, unexpected, and clever. We'll miss our family, but at least we know how they die.
- 2** **Postcards From Buster** The PBS series took kids to Vermont to visit with some lesbian moms, and to D.C. to visit with the homophobes who pulled the episode.
- 3** **Noah's Arc** Smart, sexy gay men of color coupling and uncoupling and making us blush, laugh, and snifle. A dream of creator Patrik-Ian Polk finds reality on Logo.
- 4** **Nip/Tuck** Many of us are latecomers to this sly, steely plastic-surgery soap, but loyal fans recognized Ryan Murphy's twisted genius when his series premiered in 2003.
- 5** **Logo's launch: Varla Jean Merman** explaining Stonewall and the terrific doc *The Evolution Will Be Televised* made the debut evening an event of true promise.
- 6** **The Long Firm** Jake Arnott's page-turner about a ruthless queer gangster became a compelling BBC miniseries with Mark Strong as the brutal, charismatic Harry Starks.
- 7** **Project Runway** From the flighty fabulousness of Austin Scarlett to the outrageous snark of winner Jay McCarroll, Bravo's fashion reality show had us hooked.
- 8** **Lackawanna Blues** Ace theater director George C. Wolfe scored a TV hit with this period tale of one dauntless black businesswoman and her boarding house.
- 9** **TransGeneration** The Sundance Channel and Logo placed a spotlight on a rarely-heard-from set—college-age trans folk—resulting in eye-opening television.
- 10** **Third Man Out** This first entry in Here TV's gay detective series, starring Chad Allen as Donald Strachey, stirred our appetite for further trips into New York's gay underworld.

In a category all its own

Party Line With the Hearty Boys A fresh new kind of reality TV, with real-life couple Dan and Steve offering cooking tips on the Food Network. What took so long?



■ Jim Stewart (center), Steve Wright (right), and their families relax in the neighborhood.

NEIGHBORHOOD: LARRY KALVOOR/AUSTIN STATESMAN; SIX FEET UNDER: DOUG HYUN/HBO