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Years of struggle, coming out mark Kelly McGillis' life

Globe-nominated 'Top Gun' actress talks marriage, divorces, civil unions

by Jen Colletta :: Philadelphia Gay News

Though one person's coming out story certainly doesn't convey the history of the LGBT rights movement, it is through telling these accounts that the community makes its own history. This is Kelly McGillis' story.

Despite two failed marriages, a years-long battle with substance abuse and a retreat from the career that once earned her a Golden Globe nomination, Kelly McGillis doesn't shy away from her past.

"I don't think I'm any more dysfunctional or crazy than anybody else is. I'm just more willing to talk about it," said the 53-year-old out actor.

McGillis, star of such films as "Top Gun," "Witness" and "The Accused," said she's still getting used to the relatively quiet life she and partner Melanie Leis share in Collingswood, N.J. — a vast departure from the years of struggles she endured.

A native of Thousand Oaks, Calif., McGillis was a self-described tomboy as a kid. The oldest of three girls, she was close with her father, a physician, frequently going sailing with him and accompanying him on his house calls.

When she hit her teenage years, however, McGillis said her relationship with her parents began to unravel.

"I was an incredibly rebellious teenager," she said. "I thought I should be 18 and have all the privileges of 18 when I was 13. I was just out of control."

McGillis' behavior became too much for her parents and, when she was 17, they kicked her out of the house — which, in retrospect, was "the best thing they could have ever done for me."

McGillis enrolled in the Pacific Conservatory of Performing Arts in Santa Maria and later transferred to Juilliard.

Before heading east, McGillis married, although not for the usual reasons.

"I really wanted my parents to love me," she said. "They chucked me out of the house at 17 and said, 'We don't want to see you anymore,' so I thought that to win their approval back, [getting married] was the right thing to do."

Once she was accepted to Juilliard, however, she knew the marriage couldn't survive the school's demanding schedule.

The split was amicable, and McGillis said her time in New York opened her eyes to her own sexuality, which she had struggled with for years.

"I was very attracted to girls in high school, and that horrified me because I just knew that wasn't right. That's what I told myself," she said. "Mind you, my family never ever talked about sex — not sex, not even menstruation — they were all taboo subjects that you just didn't talk about. So it was a very, very scary and confusing time for me."

McGillis began dating a woman and the two moved into an apartment together; however, their relationship crumbled after they were sexually assaulted together by a home intruder.

"I never got over that," she said. "When you're the victim of a violent crime like that,

I think it's normal to think, What did I do to deserve this? And the story that I came up with that I could cope with was that I was being punished because I liked girls, because I'm gay."

McGillis went on to date several men before she decided she wanted the stability and safety of a husband and children, and married her second husband, Fred Tillman.

"I met Fred, and I thought, Fred will protect me. Nobody will ever hurt me again. And that only worked for so long because the fact is that I wasn't being true to who I was and what I am. You can only live a lie for so long without absolutely destroying yourself. And that's what I did."

McGillis had two daughters with Tillman, but continued to spiral downward into drug and alcohol dependence, what she called a "coping mechanism for all the shit I created in my life."

Her addictions became so consuming that she eventually stepped out of the film industry and went into rehab.

Tillman was awarded custody of their children, which she now says was deserved, and after she emerged from rehab, McGillis began the long process of piecing her life back together.

Starting over

"When I got out, I had nowhere to go, and I found myself at a halfway house in Mohnton, Pa., and I thought, OK, I'm just going to stay here and learn how to not drink and not do drugs. I've never scored drugs here, and I don't know anybody who does drugs here. So this is where I'm going to stay and learn how to get sober."

After nine months in the small town near Reading, McGillis was reunited with her children and worked to rebuild the relationships that had deteriorated, a process that put her film career on hold.

"That's one of the main reasons I didn't work," she said. "I had an agent who kept calling, and we finally got in an argument, and I had to tell him, 'You don't seem to understand. I have to do this for my children and for myself. I have to be the best parent I know how to be.' And that's what I did."

McGillis and her daughters lived in Pennsylvania from 2001-08, and although the girls accepted her relationship with Leis, a former employee of a restaurant she and Tillman owned, she said she initially didn't address the issue with them.

"I did what my parents did and just didn't talk about it, didn't talk about the elephant in the room. I had so much shame," she said. "For the longest time, when Mel and I would be out, I said, 'You can't possibly touch me in public. You just can't do that.' It embarrassed me."

Coming out

McGillis said her sobriety, however, eventually empowered her to accept her own sexuality and share her life with her children.

While she didn't fully embrace her own identity until she was in her 40s, she said

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