

A CLASS ACT

A 2ND STORY STUDY GUIDE
INSPIRED BY THE ORIGINAL STORY BY BYRON FLITSCH



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A CLASS ACT

Text of the original story by Byron Flitsch.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Welcome to our study guide.

2nd Story is a collective of story-makers and story-lovers committed to building a more empathetic world by sharing one great story at a time. We believe in the unique power of sharing one’s personal story.

This guide takes a closer look at a real story told by a real person.

In *A Class Act*, teller Byron Flitsch shares what it’s like to be a queer educator and the moment he decided to “come out” to his students.

Inside this study guide, you will find activities, an interview with Byron, and contextual information, including a celebration of queer folks who have impacted our world. We hope these additional materials will add to your understanding of his story. On our website, you can find even more resources and related learning standards.

To use this guide in any capacity, please start by listening to Byrons’s story, available on the 2nd Story website at 2ndStory.com/studyguides.

Happy listening! Happy learning!
The 2nd Story Collective

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START TALKING.

2nd Story uses **true, first-person stories** as an entry-point for conversation. After listening to Byron's story, use the following questions for a guided discussion with your students.

GROUP AGREEMENTS

When sharing personal narratives, stories, and sensitive information, we begin by establishing the following agreements with participants. Before beginning your discussion, we recommend going over the following group agreements. When finished, ask them, "Do you agree?" and then have them collectively and vocally respond with "I agree."

1. What is learned here leaves here. What is said here stays here.
2. Take care of yourself.
3. Practice equity by sharing the floor.
4. Stay curious.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- What moments in this story feel familiar to you and your life?
- What are the stakes of this story for Byron? For his students?
- Why does Byron want to become a teacher? What challenges did he face when he got into the education field?
- What experiences did Byron have (or not have) that made him hesitant to talk about his husband Nate with his 4th grade students?
- How do the responses of the different students he meets affect how Byron thinks about sharing his queer identity?

SOCIETY’S EFFECT ON THE INDIVIDUAL

When Byron considers how open to be with his students, he wrestles with an inner conflict as well as a societal one. Byron shares that his school is pretty progressive. It is also unlawful both in California and the United States to discriminate against any employee or potential employee because of their identity, including sexual orientation. However, because of the comments of his professor and what he heard from his students as a student teacher, Byron still felt the need to hide his identity as a gay man in order to keep himself and his position as a teacher safe. Throughout history (and even today), how a society—or any group of people—behaves toward one another can have a large (and often traumatic, or even deadly) impact on people it deems different. The way a society thinks and behaves can also impact governmental rule. In this article, we take a look at three instances where social opinion impacted the safety of individuals and how they adapted.

THE ALHAMBRA DECREE

In many instances, social opinion has been influenced by institutions enacting dogma that mobilizes its followers against particular groups, causing people to deny or make invisible certain parts of their identity. A well-known version of this began in the late 12th century, when the Catholic Church developed the office of the Inquisition. For several hundred years, inquisitors traveled throughout Europe and territories of the European empires (including Africa, Asia, and the Americas), torturing and killing “heretics”—anyone deemed an enemy of or who went against the practices of the Church. This threat led many to convert to Catholicism publicly while continuing to practice their non-Catholic religions in secret. This act of false conversion meant that people could only observe and celebrate their own religion under a fear of punishment, banishment, or death. When in public and at risk of discovery, they were forced to violate the rules of their own religion.

Building on hundreds of years of the Inquisition within the Catholic Church, in the late 15th Century the Catholic rulers of Spain—King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella—established the Spanish Inquisition. In contrast to previous inquisitions, it operated completely under royal authority, turning centuries of religiously-driven discrimination into law and government practice. The Spanish Inquisition focused primarily on forcing converts from Islam and Judaism. For example, in 1492, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella issued the Alhambra Decree (also known as “the Edict of Expulsion”). Believing that “Conversos” (Jews who had converted to Catholicism to escape anti-Semitism) had caused corruption in the Spanish Catholic Church, the Alhambra Decree forcefully banished all Jews from Spain. Despite attempting to convert to Catholicism (and thus hiding their Jewish ethnicity and religion) to protect themselves, hundreds of Conversos were tortured and killed within a year of the Alhambra Decree. In the years following, Spanish Jews were forced into ghettos and, eventually, exiled from the country. This is one instance (of many) in history where an institution seeded hate and violence among its followers before gaining official support from those in power.

“LAVENDER MARRIAGES”

One way to protect oneself from the persecution of social opinion, as with the case of the Conversos in Inquisition-era Spain, is to hide in plain sight. However, this can be detrimental to one’s own mental health and happiness. Throughout LGBTQ+ history, you can find instances of “Lavender Marriages,” where gay men and lesbian women marry each other so they can claim to be straight and avoid being shunned by their families and communities. This was common, historically, for gay actors in Hollywood, who had to carefully maintain a specific public image of heteronormative masculinity or risk being blackballed by a prejudiced society.

While homosexuality is significantly more accepted than it was just a few decades ago, there are still areas of the world where people will enter into Lavender Marriages today. For example, in some regions of South Asia, coming out publicly as queer can have negative effects not only for the individual, but for that individual’s entire family’s place in the community. This external pressure leads many South Asian folks to seek out straight-passing marriages (or marriages of convenience), hoping to protect both themselves and their family. This forces members of the marriage, as well as any potential true partners of theirs, to live an extended lie, causing additional mental and emotional stress. [In a 2022 article by Vice News](#), reporter Rimal Farukh interviewed two Pakistani couples about their lavender marriages. For one couple, there is pressure to have a child, but the husband’s boyfriend has threatened to leave if that happens. For another couple, they have to hide their true identities from their child to protect them. In this case, what presents itself as a solution to societal prejudice leads to the creation of new problems.

POST-9/11 ISLAMOPHOBIA

Another example is when a society's collective misunderstanding causes cultural prejudice. On September 11, 2001, two hijacked planes crashed into the two towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. A third plane was used to attack the Pentagon, outside of Washington, D.C, and a fourth plane crash landed in rural Pennsylvania after the passengers on board revolted. The perpetrators of these attacks were members of Al-Qaida, an Islamist extremist group, and their connection to Islam (coupled with the subsequent U.S.-led wars in the primarily Islamic countries of Afghanistan and Iraq) led to a spike in anti-Muslim sentiment across the United States. According to the FBI and the Southern Poverty Law Center, Islamophobia and anti-Muslim/anti-Arab hate crimes spiked significantly after 9/11 and have continued to rise steadily over the last two decades. At the same time, Muslim Americans are, statistically, the largest source of information used by the U.S. government to prevent further terrorist attacks from Islamist extremists.

This cultural prejudice affected, and continues to affect, not only Muslims but also other ethnic and religious groups who are mistaken to be Muslim or Arab. For example, South Asian Sikhs are also targeted by Islamophobes by virtue of the fact that many Sikhs wear turbans - a distinct but somewhat similar form of headwrap as is worn by some Muslim men. In this instance of racial or ethnic profiling, the ability to hide or make invisible parts of a person's identity is much harder. While Muslims, Arabs, or Sikhs can make the difficult choice to not wear the traditional clothes of their religion or culture, or to change their names to assimilate more into American society, they can not erase certain phenotypical markers (like skin color, facial features, etc.) that can cause others to treat them differently, with prejudice and even violence.

In this example, the insidious nature of cultural prejudice and discriminatory hate spills over, creating a sense of isolation, othering, and general distrust. In the U.S., the societal consciousness of Islamophobia permeated into the upper echelons of government power when the 45th president signed an executive order in 2017 prohibiting foreign nationals from seven predominantly Muslim countries from entering the U.S. While we can trace the spike in this prejudice to a given moment, those who are affected by social prejudices and opinions will continue to suffer unless active efforts is made to combat it.

Talking about prejudice can often be difficult, not only because it is uncomfortable, but also because it can be quite hard to measure the effect of something as abstract as hate or fear. However, all the above snapshots of prejudice come from fear of the "other" and a pressure to remain hidden and silent about one's own identity and truth. How could we as a society show our peers that we support their true selves? How might we help our neighbors, relatives, and friends feel comfortable being visible? As Byron's story shows us, a moment of visibility can mean the world to someone who may have felt that they suffered alone.

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THE FINE LINE BETWEEN BRAVERY & ACTIVISM

Byron Flitsch is an educator, writer, and storyteller transplanted from the Midwest to L.A. He's written for MTV, *The Advocate*, *Forbes*, *Chicago Sun Times*, *Time Out Chicago*, and more. His essay "Cold Cab" was published in *Windy City Queer*, and "Dirty Dancing" was published in *Briefly Knocked Unconscious by a Low-Flying Duck: 2nd Story Stories*. He's performed on the stage of *Comedy Central Hollywood*, *The Moth*, *Solo Homo*, *SCRamble*, and *Chicago Public Radio*. He is a *2nd Story Company Member*. Check out Byron's new book, *Snap Happy: Mindful Photography for Kids*, where kids explore their inner and outer world through a camera lens at www.SnapHappyMindfulPhotography.com.



So, tell me about yourself. Where are you from? Where did you go to school? What do you do? Etc.

I grew up in Racine, Wisconsin, in a quiet neighborhood with a driveway great for bike riding and a cornfield in my backyard. While I have a lot to celebrate about my childhood—a loving family, a brother I can call a best friend, and opportunities to explore my hobbies and interests—one of the biggest challenges was growing up in a town where queerness was unheard of, or at least never acknowledged in a positive light. I grappled with my identity, felt alone, scared, uncertain about my future, and lacked confidence due to this deficiency of representation. I carried this heavy secret with me through childhood. Shame was a game I was good at winning.

After high school, I ditched my small-town life. I attended Columbia College in Chicago and received a double major in Writing and Photography. It was in Chicago where I was first able to explore my queer and artistic identity. The diversity of the college and city allowed me to connect with others in an authentic manner I'd never experienced before. I learned I wasn't alone in my suffering and shame, and it was stories of sameness and other people's triumphs that inspired me to start to share mine. I began to explore queer culture, carve out my true self, and surround myself with people who valued me for who I was, not just who I portrayed myself as in order to stay safe.

My writing and storytelling interests connected me to different Chicago literary scenes: 2nd Story was my creative home and family for almost seven years. I could hone my writing and storytelling skills while developing a supportive community of artists, writers, musicians, and actors. It was a personal Renaissance and healing I needed in my growth. I also freelanced for magazines, and one of the most exhilarating opportunities was to write for *The Advocate*.

I explored my gay identity in the LGTBQ+ scene, dated, and eventually, after many wrongs, I found the right and fell in love with my husband, Nate. After a year of dating, he asked me to move to California. I leaped, and from there, I discovered that education was another road I was ready to take. I taught writing in after-school programs around Los Angeles. I continued publishing essays in anthologies and online publications but desired more purpose. I decided to pursue my master's in education, focusing on curriculum design. I hold a California Cleared Credential for K-8, and am certified to teach photography from grades K-College. I taught 4-5th grade at a progressive grade school tucked in the mountains of Altadena.

Being a teacher supported me as a gay man and helped to heal me and my childhood wounds. The students, staff, and parents gave me a place to remind my inner little Byron that this was my purpose.

Now I am an assistant principal at Aveson Charter School in Altadena, California. I may be out of the classroom, but I have a new opportunity to coach educators on celebrating diversity and identity in their classrooms.

Outside of my career, I'm an avid traveler and have been to all seven continents. I published a kid's book about Mindful Photography called *Snap Happy: Mindful Photography for Kids*, which supports kids to explore their inner and outer world through a camera lens. I've been married for 10 years. I became an uncle to two adorable little humans and continue to live life in gratitude and curiosity.

How do you identify as an artist?

Regarding my art, specifically non-fiction writing, I'm all about authenticity. I spill it all by sharing personal stories, experiences, and lessons I've learned. It's like conversing casually with readers, letting them into my world and hoping they can relate or find a nugget of wisdom there. I believe in the power of vulnerability and honesty, and that's how I connect with my audience. It's not about rigid structure or formalities; it's about telling it like it is and hoping it resonates with someone going through similar things. Art is all about making real connections and shedding light on life's messy, beautiful, and sometimes complicated journey. It's about staying curious about how our experiences—while woven into different characters, scenery, and dialogue—are very similar at their core.

What role does story and storytelling play in your life?

I'm all about being a storyteller who's into the power of stories to connect and make us better people. It's not just a job or a hobby; it's how I live.

Stories aren't just about the stories themselves; I love how they bring us all closer and how they make us reflect. A good story can make you feel like you're part of something more significant, like you're understood and others have experiences like you. It doesn't matter where you're from or what language you speak; a great story can reach everyone because it speaks to our shared emotions and experiences.

Being a teller is all about using stories to push for change and growth. Stories can challenge your beliefs, question things, and inspire you to change. They make us think, confront our biases, and ultimately help us grow. Stories heal. Art and writing are like a peace offering in a world where it often feels like everyone's arguing about something.

“THIS STORY IS ALSO A BEACON TO OTHER QUEER EDUCATORS WHO HAVE BEEN IN THE SAME FRIGHTFUL PLACES, FEARING RETALIATION FROM SCHOOLS FOR THEIR IDENTITIES. I HAVE BEEN LUCKY TO THRIVE IN MY SCHOOL, BUT SO MANY STILL CAN'T. THIS STORY IS HERE FOR YOU TO KNOW YOU ARE NOT ALONE.”

It encourages us to look at all sides of the human experience and imagine a better future. Being a storyteller who's all about the power of narrative means being a mediator and a dreamer, weaving tales that help us connect and become better versions of ourselves. It's a big responsibility, but it's also a huge source of hope that people can change and make the world a better place through the power of story.

Why did you want to tell this story?

There is a myth in teaching that the teacher must be stoic, have all the answers, and be an exemplar of wisdom. There is also the political side of education in the U.S., where classrooms are battlegrounds for “correct” perspectives and knowledge to present to students. Often, those traditional “safe” ideas indoctrinate our future minds with misinformed resources or blatantly deny our students the opportunity to know the diverse identities that surround them. Being a compassionate educator means sharing vulnerability, and while I can't always be 100% authentic in a classroom or educational space, I can share it in my storytelling.

What do you hope students or listeners take away from your story?

I hope there is an awareness that being a queer educator involves walking a fine line between bravery and activism. Being authentic in our learning spaces, even to this day, is risky and, in many environments, discouraged. Learning spaces are for more than just absorbing traditional content and maintaining stellar transcripts.

This story is also a beacon to other queer educators who have been in the same frightful places, fearing retaliation from schools for their identities. I have been lucky to thrive in my school, but so many still can't. This story is here for you to know you are not alone. This story shows everyone we still have a long way to go in the fight for representation and truth in our education system. And, finally, a reminder to students: your educators are genuine humans with lives much more complex than what you see in your learning spaces. Coming with a positive intent towards your teachers will elevate your connection to them. It will be a life-long lesson as you continue to engage with people and rarely know their whole story.

Are there queer folks that you feel like have been erased from history, that you look to or that you like to lift up in your own work?

Oh, absolutely, there are so many queer stories that have been overlooked due to societal prejudices! As an educator, I highlight these voices in my work, from trailblazers like **Marsha P. Johnson**, who played a pivotal role in the LGBTQ+ rights movement, to poets like **Audre Lorde**, whose writing explored intersectionality and queerness. I also introduce my students to figures like **Bayard Rustin**, a key figure in the civil rights movement and a gay man who often stood in the shadows of history. By lifting these often-marginalized voices, I hope to give my students a deep

appreciation for the diversity of human experiences and a drive to ensure that queer individuals are acknowledged and celebrated for their significant contributions to society.

What do you think the role of education is in combating prejudice and increasing acceptance and understanding of differing identities?

Education is a platform for dismantling stereotypes, fostering empathy, and promoting inclusivity. It equips individuals with the critical thinking skills to challenge bias and discrimination. By incorporating diverse perspectives, histories, and experiences into curricula, education can broaden students' horizons and cultivate a deep appreciation for the richness of human life. Schools also play a crucial role in creating safe, inclusive environments where students can explore their identities and learn to respect others. Education empowers future generations to become informed and compassionate advocates for a more equitable and harmonious society.

How can educators (no matter their gender or sexual orientation) signal safety to students?

Educators can foster a welcoming and inclusive classroom atmosphere. You must be willing to communicate, actively listen, and use inclusive language that acknowledges the diversity of gender and sexual identities. Educators should establish clear anti-discrimination and anti-bullying policies and make them known to all students. Creating safe spaces for discussions and questions about gender and sexual orientation can also help students feel supported. Above all, educators must lead by example, demonstrating respect for all students and promoting empathy, kindness, and acceptance, ensuring that every student feels valued and secure in their educational environment.

How do you celebrate (your) queerness in your classroom?

Celebrating my queerness in the classroom is all about creating an inclusive and affirming environment where all students, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, feel safe, seen, and valued. I'm fortunate to be in a school district where social justice and equality are explored and encouraged. So, I incorporate LGBTQ+ history, stories, and contributions into the curriculum, ensuring that the voices and experiences of queer individuals are represented. I display LGBTQ+ inclusive flags and posters, providing a visible sign of support. I launched a GSA at our middle and high school location, where students hold weekly lunch meetings, sharing supportive anecdotes and mentoring each other as they explore their identities. Additionally, I use inclusive language and correct any instances of heteronormativity or cisnormativity to promote a more accepting atmosphere. Most importantly, I foster open dialogue and encourage questions, allowing students to explore their identities and learn from each other.

LET IT BE SEEN:

QUEER EDUCATORS AND ACTIVISTS THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

Throughout his story, as Byron wrestles with whether or not to share his queer identity with his students, he also notes the lack of queer role models and stories that he could look to when he was young. History is full of queer individuals who made lasting impacts and contributions to society. Sometimes, their accomplishments have been overshadowed or even erased entirely because of a society's lack of acceptance of (or open hostility towards) queer identity. In this article, we wanted to highlight just a small number of queer educators and activists whose actions and work have shaped our world.

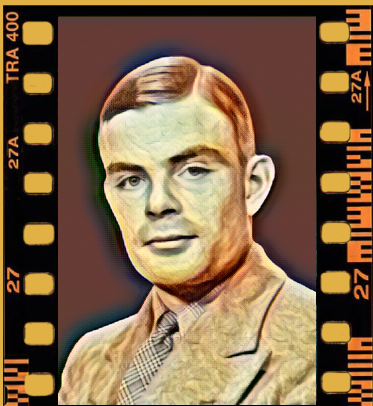
*Note: While some of the people highlighted have been able to share their queer identity publicly, there are an innumerable number of people who have not or were not able to. Due to the ever-changing nature of language and society's understanding of sexuality and sexual orientation, definitive confirmations of the queerness of some historic figures can be hard to come by. This contributes to the harmful mindset that queerness, as well as certain identities, is new. In reality, these identities have always existed—even if we didn't have the shared vocabulary to express and acknowledge them.



JANE ADDAMS
(1860-1935)

Born in Cedarville, IL, to a wealthy and politically active family, Jane Addams was part of an early generation of women in America able to access university education. While health issues kept her from completing her medical degree, Addams dedicated herself to progressive causes of the time, including bettering the rights and treatment of children and women. Addams is perhaps best known for the founding of Hull House in Chicago, a settlement house that would provide poorer folks with access to housing as well as education—the first establishment of its kind in America. Hull House also became a place of research, allowing Addams to study less well-documented issues that affected poorer classes. While she never self-identified in public as a lesbian, private letters and writings indicate that Addams had a longstanding relationship with teacher Mary Rozet Smith. Addams and Smith lived in an era where any sort of public queerness could have endangered their lives and freedom, making it difficult to confirm how they may have identified.

Sources: [Hull House Blog](#), [WomensHistory.org](#), [Nobel Prize](#)



ALAN TURING
(1912-1954)

From an early age, Alan Turing showed an aptitude for math and science, and he quickly gained a reputation after publishing a paper on the concept of a “universal machine” that could compute any problem or information fed into it. This paper helped him become a fellow at Cambridge University and, during WWII, one of the United Kingdom's (UK) leading code-breakers. Most notably, Turing directly assisted in breaking the Enigma code, one of Germany's most complex ciphers—allowing the UK and its allies to translate encoded messages from Nazi Germany. Over the following years, Turing continued working on the “universal machine,” often referred to as a Turing machine, and developed prototypes for what would eventually evolve into today's computers & smartphones. In 1952, following a break-in at his home, Turing was forced to admit his homosexuality to the British police. In the UK at that time (and up until 1967), homosexuality was illegal. Turing was forced by the British government to choose between chemical castration or imprisonment. As a result of his conviction, his security clearances were revoked, ending his government career in cryptography. Two years later, in 1954, Turing died by suicide. Turing received a posthumous apology from the UK government in 2009. “We're sorry—you deserved so much better,” said Gordon Brown, the prime minister at the time. “Alan and the many thousands of other gay men who were convicted, as he was, under homophobic laws were treated terribly.”

Sources: [NYTimes](#), [Biography](#)



BAYARD RUSTIN (1912-1987)

Bayard Rustin's introduction to the civil rights movement began at an early age. His grandmother was an early member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and his childhood home was often visited by prominent members of the Black community, including W.E.B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson. Rustin himself became a key member of many similar organizations, including co-founding the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). His work with CORE helped pioneer methods of organized resistance that became well-known during the 1961 Freedom Rides. In the following years, Rustin worked directly with Martin Luther King, Jr., and is credited with bringing actual lived experience with nonviolent resistance to King's work in the civil rights movement. Among his many accomplishments, Rustin is most well known for being the key advisor and organizer of the 1963 March On Washington. Despite his knowledge and experience, Rustin was kept behind the scenes, rarely speaking publicly, and even having his name removed from statements and texts, due to his homosexuality. Rustin was arrested and convicted for homosexuality in 1953; this meant his identity was forced into the public eye and made him a constant target for moral attacks. Despite this, Rustin was a prominent activist in socialist and labor movements until his death in 1987. Homosexuality was still criminalized in parts of the United States until 2003. In 2013, President Barack Obama posthumously awarded Bayard Rustin the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

*You can check out the 2023 movie *Rustin* on Netflix that is based on Bayard Rustin's work organizing the 1963 March on Washington.

Sources: [King Institute](#), [BlackHistoryMonth.Org](#)



ROCK HUDSON (1925-1985)

Born and raised in Winnetka, IL, Rock Hudson grew to prominence in the 1950s/60s as an actor and Hollywood sex symbol. Over several decades, Hudson starred in a variety of films—his early films were largely melodramas, and he became particularly successful as a star in romantic comedies. By the late 70s, Hudson's film career stagnated, and he found renewed success on television, specifically in the soap opera *Dynasty*. Throughout his career, Hudson and his agent, Henry Willson, carefully curated Hudson's public image as one of heterosexual masculinity, including a three-year marriage to one of Willson's secretaries, Phyllis Gates. However, Hudson's homosexuality was an open secret throughout Hollywood, though his sexuality never caused him to lose opportunities or roles as long as the public saw him as a traditionally masculine, straight man. In 1985, however, Hudson shared publicly both his homosexuality and his diagnosis with what we now call HIV/AIDS. He died within a year of his announcement, and Hudson is credited with contributing to a major step towards breaking through the fear and stereotypes of HIV/AIDS at a time when the epidemic was still largely stigmatized.

Sources: [Encyclopedia Britannica](#), [CBS News](#)



AUDRE LORDE (1934-1992)

Audre Lorde was born in New York City, the youngest of three sisters. Her parents were both Caribbean immigrants, though her mother had significantly lighter skin than she did—a point of tension between Lorde and her mother throughout her childhood. Lorde began writing poetry as early as eighth grade, and she published her first poem in high school. As a black lesbian, Lorde wrote extensively in her poetry and prose about her experiences with racism, sexism, and homophobia, though she made a point that her many identities—“black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet”—all held equal weight in defining her. Because of this, she often rallied against the lack of intersectionality in the feminist movements of the 1980s, seeing them as upholding a degree of oppression by attempting to work within the established status quo. In 1981, Lorde, along with Cherrie Moraga and Baraba Smith, founded *Kitchen Table: Women Of Color Press* - a publisher dedicated specifically to black feminist writings. In her later years, Lorde struggled with breast cancer, eventually undergoing a mastectomy. This inspired her later body of work, most notably *The Cancer Journals*, in which she wrote about the need for women’s struggles with illness to be seen and understood rather than hidden. Lorde was Poet Laureate of New York for the last two years of her life, from 1991-1992. Among all her accomplishments as a writer and activist, Lorde was married for eight years to Edwin Rollins, a white gay man. They had two children together before eventually divorcing in 1970. While Lorde had several notable partners after then, her life partner was fellow black activist, educator, and writer Dr. Gloria Joseph.

Sources: [Wikipedia](#), [Poetry Foundation](#)



JOE ACANFORA (1950-)

Joe Acanfora attended Penn State University in 1968, majoring in education with the intent to teach. While there, he helped found a student group called Homophiles of Penn State (HOPS), with the stated goal of destigmatizing homosexuality and protecting rights for LGBTQ+ people. When the university refused to allow HOPS a proper student charter, Acanfora and his fellow HOPS founders successfully sued Penn State into recognizing the organization. However, the public nature of the suit led to Acanfora’s homosexuality being made public as well. After Acanfora graduated, he was quickly hired to teach at a public school in Maryland. However, soon after his hiring, he was reassigned to a non-teaching role. At this point, Acanfora entered a series of legal suits, claiming he had been removed from his hired role due to discrimination. Acanfora was able to present evidence of his strong reviews from past professors and supervisors, as well as expert testimony that his sexual orientation would have no negative impact on his students. However, the court eventually ruled they could not reinstate Acanfora as a teacher. Acanfora’s case made national headlines, and it serves as just one example of LGBTQ+ folks being asked to silence their identities before entering public society. Acanfora never taught again after his court proceedings, although he worked in higher education for the rest of his career.

Sources: [JoeAcanfora.com](#), [Wikipedia](#), [60 Minutes](#)



**ALEXANDRA
BILLINGS**
(1962-)

Alexandra Billings began her performance career in drag shows and pageants in the 1980s. Living in Chicago, she soon transitioned to performing in theaters, including shows at Bailiwick, About Face Theatre, and Steppenwolf Theatre Company. In 2003, Billings was cast in the TV movie *Romy and Michelle: In The Beginning*, marking her TV debut and one of the first-ever instances of a trans woman playing a trans woman on mainstream television. Billings continues to work steadily to this day, including prominent roles in *Transparent* and *The Connors*, as well as a run on Broadway as Madame Morrible in *Wicked*. Billings is a long-time activist for the trans community, speaking openly about her trans identity and her life with HIV. In addition to all that, Billings was also a longtime teacher at Steppenwolf and is currently a theater professor at the University of Southern California.

Sources: [Advocate](#), [Chicago LGBT HOF](#)

PUT THE PEN TO PAPER

At 2nd Story we believe that sharing first-person, true stories has the power to change hearts and minds, and we want to know what stories are living inside of you.

We invite you to share your story. Below are several writing prompts that you can use to share a story from your own life that parallels the themes and ideas in this real-life story. Select a prompt and begin writing on the next page!

SHARE A MOMENT WHEN YOU:

- YOU FELT YOU NEEDED TO HIDE A PART OF WHO YOU ARE, OR WERE SCARED TO SHARE A PART OF YOUR IDENTITY.**
- YOU WORKED TO UNLEARN SOMETHING YOU BELIEVED WAS A UNIVERSAL TRUTH.**
- YOU SAW YOURSELF IN SOMEONE ELSE'S STORY OR EXPERIENCE.**
- YOU DISAGREED WITH A ROLE MODEL OR A PERSON YOU LOOKED UP TO. HOW DID THAT CONVERSATION GO?**
- YOU FELT ACCEPTED BY YOUR COMMUNITY OR YOUR PEERS.**
- YOU WERE A ROLE MODEL FOR SOMEBODY ELSE, OR YOU FOUND A ROLE MODEL FOR YOURSELF.**

A CLASS ACT

AN ORIGINAL STORY BY BYRON FLITSCH

My 4th-grade students whip their hula-hoops to the blacktop, chuck kickballs into storage bins, and lasso jump ropes into messy piles. It's the fastest I've ever seen them move. Then, they swoop into a huddle around me like chirping chicks prepared to spill the *ultimate*, hottest playground tea that was apparently *all—about—me*.

"Mr. Byron! Some kids are saying you're *married*—is it true?"

I've been teaching for six years at this progressive Californian elementary school tucked in a gorgeous mountain campus, and I *love* that it's unapologetically unconventional. Teachers aren't called teachers; they're "advisors"; advisors go by their first names. We don't give homework or grades. And our biggest flex: students' voices are heard, lifted even. It also just so happens that those little lifted voices are often spilling juicy gossip about advisors' personal lives.

"That *is* true. I *am* married." I coolly shrug.

"What?! Why didn't we know? You embarrassed?" One student sasses while peering over his glasses with hands on hips.

Typically, I love yammering on about my marriage and my husband. Ask me about him—Nate—and I'll gush because he is Grade-A husband material. Plus, I spent years thinking I wasn't ever going to love myself let alone find healthy love to share. But even after all these years of teaching at a school where uniqueness, diversity, and compassion are commonly celebrated, coming out to my students—to anyone in a school setting—causes a sloshy plunge in my gut.

"No. I'm not embarrassed about being married." Then the kids are like, "Well, then how long have you been married," and I say, "about eight years" and they simultaneously "oooooooooooo", "Did you have a honeymoon?" They ask. I say, "Yah! We went to Greece!" And they serenade "WOOOOOW", then one student who reminds me every day that I look tired asks, "Is she pretty?"

She. She. SHE.

I knew that was coming. I feel like the sun beaming onto the playground disappears suddenly behind evil clouds shooting bolts of shark teeth lightning while the ground beneath us cracks open and imaginary sirens shriek "emergency". I'm frozen in the crumbling turmoil on the playground.

When I went into teaching six years ago I did it for two reasons: 1) watching the U.S. Education system clinging to archaic philosophies that stifle the diversity of learners while lacking equity made my fist turn to concrete, and 2) stickers. I really love stickers.

But it took some time for me to get into education—two decades of adulthood to be exact—because I was terrified to be a queer teacher. Rightfully so. Queer teachers struggle in elementary school environments (like in many professions) where they are subliminally suggested to subdue themselves.

"I suggest not telling anyone about...*that* part of your life." My graduate school professor's voice corkscrews out of the side of his mouth. During a check-in meeting, I'm in my school-assigned "mentor's" office, talking about concerns I have about my program. The stale coffee smell and flickering fluorescent light swirl around my expressionless professor as he sits at his desk, surrounded by shimmering trophies from his high school football coaching gig he often brags about in class. We may have bonded on teaching theories, but we were not syncing on our views about sexual identity privilege or what exactly I could do regarding my nerves about being queer in the classroom.

"But that's hard to do sometimes..." I say, "I don't sound like James Earl Jones or look like Captain America. Plus, kids are naturally curious about their teacher's lives. And your classwork is constantly reiterating how we should be a model for students by living our truth and—"

"Right, you can do some of that..." He cuts me off, "Just don't talk about that part of your life. It makes people and parents uneasy. Keep politics out of the classroom—especially in elementary school classrooms." He crosses his arms in front of his body; the universal signal for "I'm also uncomfortable, we're done with this conversation" only solidifying my insecurities.

I'm proud of who I am, my queer community, the rainbow in my veins, and I have attempted to heal years of lying to myself and others about my identity. What no one told me was that queer adulthood is sometimes a 40-hour-a-week performance of hetero-ness. Even in a school like mine where kids talk about the healing crystals they use to focus themselves, this fear of being "found out" in the classroom has nipped at me for years.

I think most queer people can relate, am I right? No matter how out and proud, you're still like 87% floating in a cloud of discomfort. No one ever says, "Tone it down, Queen." It's more like ruthless raised eyebrows from coworkers, or tongue-biting parents wanting a conversation on "How do I explain this to my child". I've even had parents ask that their child leave the room if there's ever any talk of same-sex couples because they "are so impressionable and we don't want that to rub off on them."

It only took until my first stint of student teaching in a 3rd-grade classroom that my queer teaching fearful fantasy became a reality. While the classroom teacher I shadowed was kind... the students were rude doo-doo heads.

"I bet he's gay." A student whispers behind his hands to his desk partner while I'm crouched down in their pod.

"I'm sorry?" I say, "Did you just say—"

"My mom said it the other night when I told her about you."

"And she said that why?"

"She said that men that go in to teach elementary schools are usually gay and weird and that I shouldn't try to be like you."

For the rest of my time in that classroom, I found myself dipping my head lower as if that would help drop my voice two octaves to be more alpha. I even stopped wearing my wedding band to school in fear of answering the questions I couldn't answer because it was *too political*. I want to reiterate—I felt uncomfortable wearing my wedding band—one of my proudest symbols. Funny thing about teaching: *When you realize you're teaching everything you'd spent years trying to unlearn yourself.*

Now, in my current classroom, I've learned that hiding my wedding band doesn't hide the truth any better:

"Mr. Byron, what did you do this weekend?"

"I went on a road trip!"

"By yourself?"

"Uh, sure..."

"That sounds kinda lonely."

"It does, doesn't it." I'd say.

"Mr. Byron. I saw you at Target last night!"

"You did?"

"Yeah, who was that guy with you?"

"Oh. A friend."

"Mr. Byron. Why don't you have any pictures of your family on your desk like the other teachers? Don't you have a family?"

"I do."

"So you just don't have pictures of them?"

"I have a lot of photos of my family."

"You shouldn't hide them from us. You really should be proud of your life."

Another funny thing about teaching: Sometimes kids sting with such authentic exactness. Because he was right. How many lies do I have to tell in this life before my truth is worthy?

Back at the interrogation scene on the school playground with my 4th grade students clustered around me, my gut wants to respond to their questions about my "wife" with integrity; my brain wants to keep up the faux façade.

So, I take a breath, let my stomach squirms settle, and say:

"It's not a she."

And the kids were like... "We knew it was a 'he' we're just testing you."

And I was like, "Excuse me?"

And I could have left it there, right? I could have just been like SUUUUUSHHH about my social life now, we're done. But if I shoo away the curiosity or even the normalcy of the questions about my marriage from students who just want to know me better then I'm still living in shame. So, when the kids ask more questions about Nate, I fire away.

"Is he nice?" They ask.

"Very."

"Does he like Beyoncé as much as you?"

"No, no not even close."

"Can we see a picture of him?" I show a picture of us on a vacation. Them: "WOAHHHHHHHH, you're really short next to him Mr. Byron!"

And that was it. The questions stopped because everyone wanted to head back to the classroom.

At the end of that same day one student, Travis, asks if he can hug me. He has a little blue backpack that's plain when he arrives at school, but after mom and dad are gone, he clips Disney Princess character pins to the outside. I'd noticed this daily routine: Morning, princesses out. At pick up, princesses gone. He actually hides the pins in his classmate Emily's pencil bag for safekeeping at the end of each day—very out of sight of his home life. I do my best not to make assumptions about my students, but I was aware of his practice—just like I hid my wedding band during my day life and slid it back on at night.

Travis says, "I'm really happy you found Nate. He seems very nice." He squeezes me again, harder than before. Then he lets go and looks up at me, his green eyes pooling with tears. "Do you think maybe one day I could find my own Nate?"

Suddenly, I'm ten-year-old Byron all over again. This kind of genuine moment, this type of conversation would have changed everything for me at his age. I had spent decades thinking I was destined to be lonely, using a map gave everyone else direction but made me feel lost. I knew I was different than the other boys. Moments like these are why representation matters.

"I know you will."

"I hope so." His reassured exhale evaporates the tears from his eyes as he jogs off to his pick-up line.

This. This is the magic of being a part of the queer community. You have the ability to educate with your bravery, your truth, to light up the planet with the beam of your rainbow and drive away the shadows for others, maybe the same shadows that you spent years fumbling within. Maybe you aren't doing it in a school—wherever you are, being authentically you is a masterclass for the world. The joy of your truth, your unapologetic, flawlessly flawed yet perfectly poignant self brings to the room is what every person deserves to see—let it be seen.

I get to do that in a classroom...with stickers.

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OF YOUR LIFE.”**

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