



The Cantor's Song

How a nice Jewish clergyman and loving dad became a warrior in the battle over gay marriage.

It's October 2, Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement that ends 10 days of reflection and repentance.

At the back of Bellevue's Temple B'nai Torah, Cantor David Serkin-Poole stands in a white robe, white canvas deck shoes peeking out below; many Jews eschew leather on Yom Kippur. He slowly walks past the congregation to the bimah, or stage, chanting the *hineni* prayer, his rich tenor filling the hall. He seems rapt, intent on each word of the prayer. *Hineni* means "I am here"; it is a prayer of supplication in which the cantor steps forward and implores God to forgive those present. It is also a call to action. When the rabbi gives her sermon an hour or so later, it will be on the theme of *hineni*, and of those moments when one

by Lisa Jaffe Hubbell

is called to stand and shoulder a burden, assume an active and sometimes awkward or difficult role in life.

It is a theme Serkin-Poole knows well. For much of 2005 he and other temple leaders worked and fought to bring the Tent City IV homeless camp to Bellevue. The meetings with neighbors and anxious parents from the adjoining Jewish Day School grew heated, even nasty, and lawyers and mediators were finally brought in to settle the dispute. The camp arrived at the end of the year and remained on temple property for an uneventful 90 days. Then came a less happy event.

Pam Waechter, a temple member and Jewish community leader, was Serkin-Poole's close friend, part of his life since he moved to Washington in 1980. Last July, when a disturbed gunman named Naveed Haq stormed the Jewish Federation office in Seattle, announced he was "angry at Israel," and shot six women, she was the only one to die. Serkin-Poole had no time to mourn his friend; it fell on him to comfort her two children, help plan her memorial service and funeral, and console a shaken community.

Serkin-Poole had known disillusion and disappointment before, but nothing like what befell him that year, 5766 in the Jewish calendar. Just two days before Pam Waechter's death, a dream crashed and a long struggle seemed to come to naught. The Washington Supreme Court upheld the state's Defense of Marriage Act, which declared marriage a bond that can only be forged between a man and a woman. David and his partner of 25 years, Michael Serkin-Poole, were lead plaintiffs in the lawsuit that precipitated the decision. For a glorious moment, it seemed they had succeeded in overturning a discriminatory law that once seemed unassailable, and winning same-sex couples the right to marry—a milestone David Serkin-Poole longed aching to reach.

Serkin-Poole is a devoted father of three. As a clergyman, he is widely respected in the Jewish and broader religious communities. And he is gay—a rare exception among Jewish clergy—one half of the first gay couple allowed to adopt children in Washington.

David Serkin-Poole's family's history reads like a Hollywood script. His parents arrived in Canada as children after their families fled persecution in Eastern Europe. They wound up in Los Angeles, where his father, Norman Serkin, a classically trained violinist and arranger, worked as a Hollywood studio musician. He was a Zionist and leftist, a union supporter and a civil rights activist. "He was involved in just too many left-wing causes," sighs his son; sure enough, he was blacklisted during the McCarthy era. To feed his family, Serkin père sold shoes, worked

in a circus, and played for cash with other blacklisted musicians at studios where everyone was called "Jim" or "Joe" and entered through the back door.

David was just three or four then, but he recalls stories told around the dinner table, how there was always a meeting about a march going on at the house, and how persecution never dampened his parents' commitment to building a more just world. That commitment extended to the humblest everyday moments. Riding in the car with his dad one day, young David referred to someone at one of the many Jewish organizations they belonged to as "just the janitor": "My dad pulled over on the highway and stopped the car. He set the brake and said to me, 'What the hell is wrong with being a janitor? Isn't anyone who works hard for honest pay noble?'"

For all the turmoil over civil rights, gay rights weren't even on the political horizon in the 1950s and early '60s. But David, who had realized he was gay since he was five or six, suspected his parents wouldn't disown him when they found out. They had many gay friends, including the flamboyant piano player Lee Liberace; David's father would return from recording sessions marveling that Liberace actually believed no one knew he was gay.

Nevertheless, David first came out not to his family but to his closest childhood friend, Michael Miora. When he was about 22, he phoned Miora, then a student at UC Berkeley, to ask if he could visit because he had something to tell him. "Oh my God, he's gay!" Miora said to himself after hanging up. It hadn't occurred to him until that moment.

Soon after, David told his family. The news made sense to his siblings, but his parents were surprised—especially his mother, a Ukrainian immigrant who'd grown up in a traditional Jewish family. After all, her son was a jock, not a sissy. Though he was only five-foot-six, he played basketball, baseball, and tennis, and studied martial arts: "I spent a lot of energy trying to prove I wasn't gay." His father's first response was that now they'd have no grandchildren from David. "I remember being puzzled by that. The presumption was that if you were gay, you wouldn't have a family."

Five or six years later, on his first date with Michael Poole, David Serkin found himself discussing parenting. He was amazed—not just that another gay man had thought about parenthood, but that he would bring it up on a first date. Serkin nourished his own deep desire to be a father, and suddenly it did not seem so strange.

Serkin had a passion for music, which his father encouraged from an early age. It blossomed in the early 1960s when he prepared for his bar mitzvah, the Jewish rite of manhood. He was lucky enough to study with a master cantor in Los Angeles named Samuel Kelemer—

"known by all who loved him as Shmulik"—whose texts are still used to train cantorial students. Even after his bar mitzvah, Serkin continued studying with Kelemer, assisting other students and leading youth services. "I loved it, and I got to sing in the temple," he says, unabashed about being stagestruck. He thought he might go to Broadway, but knew he was too short to get lead roles and figured he'd wind up teaching music. Then, while an undergrad at Occidental College, he took graduate-level cantorial courses at the nearby University of Judaism and worked as a cantorial intern. After earning his degree, he landed a gig as assistant cantor for a large Los Angeles congregation.

Serkin-Poole is a born teacher; put him in a room with a white board and he'll find a pen to illustrate the lecture that's sure to follow. Even

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today, his voice rises and his words come faster when he recounts the history of his chosen profession. Originally the ancient office of *hazan*, or cantor, was devoted to leading temple congregations in songful prayer. But modern cantors have assumed expanded roles. In addition to preparing young people for their bar and bat mitzvahs, they help lead services and officiate alongside rabbis at weddings and funerals. And they still bear special responsibility for their synagogues' sacred music. Much of their training is devoted to the traditional chants of the Torah, recorded in what is believed to be the world's oldest musical notation.

After a short stint in LA, the young cantor took positions in Albuquerque and Salt Lake City. At all three synagogues he kept his private life private; he says a "healthy handful" of congregants knew he was gay but kept the secret. Few gay clergy dared to come out then, even in Reform Judaism, the most liberal of the religion's three main branches. Those who did were often fired.

In June 1980, Serkin-Poole left Utah, and the religious life. "I thought I had burned out on being a cantor. I just didn't want to spend the energy on living a dual life anymore." He moved to Bellevue, opened a gift shop with a friend, and invested in a deli. For the first time in a decade, he attended High Holiday services, at Temple B'nai Torah, as just another worshipper. He became friends with the temple's founding rabbi, Jacob Singer, who he believes knew he was gay though they never talked about it.

Singer, who was battling pancreatic cancer, asked Serkin-Poole to assist at services and instruct bar and bat mitzvah students. Within six months, Serkin-Poole was working full-time again as a cantor. He sold his interest in the Bellevue shops, glad to be done with business. Helping out in the synagogue felt like "putting on an old, comfortable slipper," he says. "I slid into it as if I had always been there. I loved being back."

Illness struck at home too. Serkin-Poole's father had been a smoker in the 1950s, until his young son contracted encephalitis and fell into a coma. Norman Serkin made a deal with God: If David woke up, he'd quit smoking. "I woke up the next day and my dad never touched another cigarette," says Serkin-Poole. A deal's a deal, but dad was no health nut. He was overweight and had coronary artery disease, though he never told his family. In 1981 he suffered a massive heart attack and died. "He took care of everyone on this planet, his family, his friends, the poor, those who were ostracized. But he didn't take care of himself."

It took a year for Serkin-Poole to hear the *hineni*, the call to action, of

his dad's death, but on April 15, 1982—he still remembers the date—he gave up his own three- to four-pack-a-day smoking habit and started exercising. He determined to take care of himself physically, emotionally, and spiritually. That meant no more lying. And *that* meant coming out.

Meanwhile events in his congregation and on the wider religious front conspired to force the issue. The national Union of Reform Judaism (URJ) had tried for years to draft a policy on homosexual congregants and clergy. Just before the union's 1985 meeting, the URJ president invited a dozen clergymen informally known to be gay, including Serkin-Poole, to help write the policy. The final text stated that homosexuals and their families would be welcomed into Reform Judaism and would not suffer discrimination. Serkin-Poole is especially proud of the three key words he contributed: "and their families."

Back in Bellevue, a scandal at another local synagogue over a rabbi's affair with a secretary helped force a decision: "The Jewish community is pretty small here, and people were talking about that scandal, and also about me. Like I was a scandal. That bothered me tremendously because I was not doing anything dishonorable."

The time had come to publicly confirm that he was gay. "I was pretty sure I was going to be fired," he says—so sure that he and Michael flew to San Francisco to look for work and a new home. First he told the temple's executive committee, which supported him. Then he met face-to-face with each member of the board. Finally, at the congregation's annual meeting,

its president, Pam Waechter, called him up to the bimah. There, on stage, Serkin-Poole spoke to his fellow congregants about commitment and honesty. "I told them that the person I share my life with is Michael, that I love him very much, and I hope that they would all get to know him." They gave him a standing ovation.

"The announcement didn't create much of a stir," says Elizabeth Fagin, then a teacher at the temple's school, and now its principal. But a year later David and Michael adopted a son, Gene, then eight years old. It was the first adoption by a gay couple in the state of Washington. They'd called and written every adoption agency they could find. "Some hung up. Some were rude. Some preached." Only two consented to work with them.

When word got around the temple, the initial harmony evaporated. "For many, seeing two men together was abstract," says Serkin-Poole. "But two men and a child—that was concrete. We were a family." He and



SERKIN PLUS POOLE "I told them the name of the person I share my life with is Michael."

Michael had crossed a line, one that many even in this supportive congregation held inviolate.

"I think it gave homophobes a kind of cover," says Fagin. "They didn't want to see a family with two men staring back at them from pictures on the cantor's desk." Some members cited a presumed relationship between homosexuality and pedophilia. "They would say that they didn't think it would happen here, but what if it did?" Several wrote an open letter vowing to quit the temple if Serkin-Poole didn't resign.

They stood in the parking lot before services to seek more signatories and, once inside, avoided sitting near Michael. Some even refused to talk to him. At a board meeting, one congregant stood up and brandished a check from a relative across the country. "It was a sizable donation," says Fagin. "And they said it would be matched, but only if we fired David. The phrase they used was something like 'if we dealt with our dirty laundry.'" The board told the man to keep his money.

In the end, 22 families left the congregation. Since then, a number of those who left have apologized, says David Serkin-Poole. He is friendly with some and will not speak badly of anyone involved. Michael is less forgiving: "I don't dwell on it, but even though it was 20 years ago I remember it like it was yesterday."

Since then, the Serkin-Pooles have adopted two more children, Jason, now 22, and Danielle, 23. All three of their kids have special needs, ranging from mild retardation and fetal alcohol syndrome to autism and speech difficulties. All have thrived in their family. Gene, now 25, works for PCC and lives with a roommate. Danielle lives with her boyfriend and works for Safeway. Jason, who is mildly autistic, remains at home. Serkin-Poole thinks that he, too, will eventually live on his own.

David and Michael knew that older children in the foster-care system usually have problems, but they didn't want to adopt babies: "We thought we were too old, particularly if we had to wait years for a baby," says David. The adoption agency had made clear what challenges these children were likely to face as they grew up. "This too goes back to my dad," says Serkin-Poole. "These children were available, and all people have value and sanctity. Just because you have something that isn't typical or not normal doesn't make it less valuable. You just work past the struggles."

And struggles they are. Michael jokes that when people accuse him of an alternative lifestyle, he can say that with three children, all with special needs, he doesn't "have a life, let alone a lifestyle."

David Serkin-Poole's views on parenting in general and fatherhood in particular have sparked some unexpected connections. The Friday before Father's Day in 1995, Serkin-Poole gave an interview to KWRM, a local easy-listening station. Among the other guests was former NFL quarterback Jeff Kemp, now executive director of the Bellevue-based conservative advocacy group Families Northwest. During the show its moderator, Mike Webb, came out as gay. Webb recalls how "bewildered and confused" Kemp seemed by the revelation. Adding shock to shock,

Serkin-Poole says Kemp "was really surprised when it dawned on him that the other parent in my family was a man." But then the conversation turned to fatherhood, and the gay cantor and conservative Christian football star found much to agree on. Both saw fatherhood as a special responsibility and a special joy. Both deplored the way entertainment media portray fathers as absent narcissists or clueless buffoons.

"David talked about nourishment," recalls Webb. He explained that "he had a responsibility to nourish his kids, so the breakfast and dinner table were very important. And he extended the theme of nourishment to the conversations at the table. He talked about how nourishment was familial and social as well as physical. It was an awesome way of explaining the importance of family dining together."

Eleven years later, Kemp still opposes same-sex marriage. But he recalls Serkin-Poole as "an engaging, sensitive, and socially adept man with a humility that makes people comfortable," and admires his passion for fatherhood: "He

so obviously loves being a dad. It was cool that we connected and were on the same page about fatherhood and how men have often forgotten about their responsibilities as fathers. We are both men of faith and both parents. We have common ground."

Common ground doesn't come easy in the debate over gay marriage. In Jerusalem in early November, ultra-Orthodox Jews rioted at a gay pride parade. Last year, two paraders were stabbed. But Serkin-Poole believes the local Jewish commu-



TWO PROUD DADS At daughter Danielle's adoption, 1992, with Jason, Gene, and Judge Bobbie Bridge, who finalized all three adoptions.

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nity has done more to bridge the gap than Jews elsewhere, and more than many other faiths. "I think there is a much greater level of civility among Orthodox Jews here than there has been with a lot of conservative Christians. They both go for the same quotes in the Bible, but in the Orthodox community here, it seems to be played out without the animus and meanness you often hear in other faith traditions."

Serkin-Poole deserves some of the credit for that gentler tone. When Jewish Federation leaders asked him to join a steering committee for outreach to the gay community, he insisted that the federation board's Orthodox members agree to accept him first. The plan's backers "said they could push through the vote," Serkin-Poole recalls, "but I wanted consensus. I didn't want to just be allowed at the table." He faced the federation board for hours, answering its members' questions, without resolution. Finally he quoted from the Pirkei Avot, the third-century "Book of Sayings": "It says all of us have a place in the world to come. Not men. Not women. Not just some. All of us. There shouldn't be a difference of opinion about us all having a place at the table. If we do, we fragment ourselves. And I don't want to be guilty of that. I don't think they did either. After a few minutes, they came back and said they will support and welcome my presence. That was a big moment."

And so in early 2004, when the Northwest Women's Law Center asked the Serkin-Pooles and several other gay couples if they would challenge the state's Defense of Marriage Act, he could hardly say no. He likens the cause to the pursuit of peace in the Middle East. "We should behave fairly towards one another, even if we don't like or approve of each other. It's not about loving everyone. That isn't a reachable goal. But being just is. And I have to start with me." He invokes the Pirkei Avot again, one of its most famous maxims: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"

In other words: Hineni. "I am here." It sums up a life devoted to serving and to fighting for what's right, and for what's rightfully his. Serkin-Poole believes adamantly that he should be able to marry here, where he feels most at home, rather than some other state. "Marriage stabilizes relationships and communities. It isn't the only way to live one's life, but it is the way that is tried and tested and understood by society. I officiate

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at weddings, and it is one of the best things I do. Why can't I experience it?"

Before joining the case, the couple talked to their children. "It was news to them that we couldn't get married," says Michael, "so first they had to get over the shock.... After we talked about it, they were happy we were part of it. But they were befuddled at why people cared. We assured them that, win or lose, nothing would change for our family."

They challenged the Defense of Marriage Act on three grounds, beginning with the issue of fundamental rights—what their attorney, Jamie Pedersen, calls "a certain class of decisions that are fundamental to personhood and with which the government shouldn't interfere." Second, they argued from the principle of equal rights for all, and third, sex discrimination.

In August 2004, King County Superior Court Judge William Downing upheld the Serkin-Pooles' challenge, ruling that the ban on same-sex marriage was unconstitutional. But in July 2006 the state Supreme Court ruled 5 to 4 that the Legislature had a "rational basis" for enacting the ban: to "encourage procreation and child-rearing in a 'traditional' nuclear family where children tend to thrive," as Justice Barbara Madsen wrote in the lead opinion.

Serkin-Poole and the other plaintiffs asked the court to reconsider, arguing that it had misunderstood the nature of their claim. "We aren't challenging the right of the state to give marriage licenses," their attorney Jamie Pedersen said at the time. "We are challenging whether there is a rational basis to exclude same-sex couples from getting them." Excluding them to encourage procreation would make sense only "if there is a limited supply of marriage licenses. We aren't stopping others from getting married."

Pedersen warned the plaintiffs that the Supreme Court granted reconsideration very rarely—once about three years ago, and once two decades before that. This time it did not. "We were deeply hurt and sad that we were not seen as equal to everyone else," says David Serkin-Poole. But he had no time to grieve. Suddenly his dear friend Pam Waechter was dead, and his community seemed to be under violent attack. It was one of the few times friends and congregants recall seeing him without a ready smile on his face. He pauses and admits somewhat reluctantly, "I would be less than honest if I didn't say that some of my general optimism has been shaken." The hineni call had grown faint. "I hope it will come back." ❀