

A Boy, His 2 Mothers and Some Unlikely Support

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WHEN Jesse Powers-Patey was 10, and living in foster care, a Boston television station did a "Wednesday's Child" feature on him, in hopes of getting the boy adopted. A local newspaper printed an article emphasizing his friendliness and love for baseball. Still, no family responded.

By then, he'd been to six schools, could barely read and was in special education. He'd lived in a homeless shelter with his drug-addicted birth mother and in eight foster homes. At 4, he was adopted by a single mother, but when he was 8, that woman returned him to the state. She claimed that he was hard to manage. Jesse said, "She dumped me because she was getting married and moving into a big house and the guy didn't want me around."

Finally, one couple who heard about Jesse at their church showed an interest: Laura Patey and Leigh Powers. The two began going to his baseball games, then having him visit their place, a few blocks from his foster home. Jesse played basketball with Ms. Patey, and PlayStation with Ms. Powers. After school, he'd wait on the front stairs for them to get home from work. Soon, he was leaving important things at their house, like his baseball cards.

When it was time for "the talk," Jesse was ready. "He told his friend Sam that there were these two neat women that he met and liked a lot," Ms. Powers recalled. "And Sam said, 'You mean Leigh and Laura, the two lesbians down the street?' And since Sam was cool with it, Jesse was."

Jesse's Moms are not rich — they rent one side of a two-family house on a busy street here — but their home enriched Jesse. It's a house full of books as well as computers, along with three cats and a bird feeder.

To help Jesse with school, Ms. Powers, a researcher who's a computer whiz, installed a program that reads his writing aloud to him. To make summer reading lists more manageable, they would get books on tape to listen to as he read along. "He'd been told he was stupid," Ms. Powers said. "We wanted to show him he could read."

Ms. Patey, who oversees disability services at Lesley University, concluded that he did not have learning problems — "just big gaps in his education from all the disruptions" — and got him switched to mainstream classes.

When it was time for high school, the Moms knew what they wanted. "A Catholic school," said Ms. Patey, who attended parochial schools and reluctantly left Roman Catholicism as an adult for an Episcopalian church where she could worship openly with her partner. "They say, 'A Catholic education is an advantage for life,' and I agree. It helps develop a moral compass, a sense of right and wrong and how to treat people with respect."

There were other reasons. She figured Jesse would have trouble passing the state graduation tests, which are not required at private schools. Plus, he hit puberty early — he was six feet tall and shaving at age 12.:)

"Jesse was pretty girl-crazy," Ms. Patey said. "I liked the idea of an all-boys school."

When they filled out the forms, the women crossed out "father" and wrote in their names. Jesse had to do two essays; one was on his Moms. "We didn't hide a thing," Ms. Patey said.

Last month, Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley announced that Catholic Charities of Boston, which has handled more foster care adoptions than any other private agency in the state, was getting out of the adoption business, rather than comply with Massachusetts laws mandating that gay men and lesbians be allowed to adopt.

Boston church leaders cited statements approved by Pope John Paul II in 2003 calling gay adoption "gravely immoral." "Allowing children to be adopted by persons living in such unions would actually mean doing violence to these children," the Vatican said.

Still, this may not have been a fight the Boston church was spoiling for. The archdiocese's decision came only after an article in The Boston Globe pointed out that in the last two decades, 13 of 720 Catholic Charities adoptions involved gay families. In the weeks leading up to the policy change, eight Catholic Charities board members resigned.

Jesse's Moms were angered by the official church position, but they also know this: At the two Catholic high schools Jesse has attended — Catholic Memorial in Boston and Saint Clement in Medford, where he will soon graduate — they have not been treated like "gravely immoral" people. They have been embraced and made to feel welcome.

Jesse plays three sports, and from Day One, Ms. Powers said, "We joined the booster clubs and we were out there."

"The parents got together before football games and we'd all go to breakfast," she added. At basketball games, Ms. Powers kept the score book for the team.

Jesse started on probation at Catholic Memorial, because of his weak academic history, and at the end of first semester, Ms. Patey met with an admissions officer, Brother Stephen Casey. "He told me, Jesse is a great kid," Ms. Patey recalled. "He said: 'At dinner the other night, the brothers were all talking about you guys. We're really impressed. You two are doing a wonderful job with this kid.'" "When the couple adopted a second boy, Alex, Catholic Memorial welcomed him, too.

Jesse still struggles. He gets by with C's, and one semester he was ineligible for baseball because of his grades.

When he was younger, he said, he'd get teased. "Kids would say, 'Shut your mouth, you have two moms.' Big joke," he said.

But there were adults to go to, he said, like his theology teacher, Daniel Dion. "I could tell him about kids giving me a hard time and problems at home with my Moms," Jesse said. "We talked, and it wouldn't boil up inside me."

At Saint Clement this year, Jesse was a football co-captain and baseball captain. Among the family's photographs is one of Jesse with the principal. But school officials do not appear comfortable speaking publicly about the kindnesses to Jesse and his family. A Saint Clement coach said he would be happy to talk to a reporter, and a few minutes later called back, saying he couldn't. The Saint Clement principal, Robert Chevrier, did not return several calls.

THE REV. J. BRYAN HEHIR, president of Catholic Charities of Boston, said that while the Vatican's strong positions on family had dictated the adoption policy, the social service agency's 130 other programs were committed to serving all people, including gays. "I'm not surprised to hear that these schools would welcome this family," he said.

Jesse has been accepted to two local colleges and hopes to play baseball, but will defer admission. He's spending next year at an Americorps program working with poor children. He could have picked a program anywhere, but chose Boston so he could live at home.

It's not perfect at home. He wishes his Moms were less strict; they took away his cellphone when his grades dropped, and Ms. Powers, the computer whiz, can track every Web page he visits. "I'm 18!" Jesse said.

When Jesse was little, an adoption social worker said, "This is your forever family — for the rest of your life." If the Powers-Patey household is having a bad day, someone will make a face and shout, "For the rest of your life!" as if they're all lashed together, going down with the ship.

But they're not; it's a house afloat with love. The two Moms juggle their jobs, so one is always there for Saint Clement school events and games. "It's a must," Jesse said. "Who else do I have to look at in the stands? When I hit a massive home run, I can't wave to someone else's Mom."