



TOM SERWATKA, A MAN OF INFLUENCE

Spend any time with Tom Serwatka, and you will soon learn he's gay and HIV positive. He's a small fellow, an impeccable dresser with a closely cropped white chin beard, shaved head and dancing eyes. University of North Florida President John Delaney, who was Serwatka's boss, has been known to tease his Chief of Staff.

"On Coming Out Day, he says, 'Who are you going to come out to?' I said, 'I don't know. Maybe there's a freshman.'"

But talk to people who know Serwatka, and it becomes abundantly clear that there is much more to him and that he has made a big impact on Jacksonville.

Serwatka was a major cog in providing protections and benefits for LGBTQ students and staff at UNF, he has worked closely with JASMYN to support LGBTQ youth in Jacksonville and he was influential in Jacksonville's passage of an expanded Human Right Ordinance that includes protections for the LGBTQ community. In doing so, he has been able to help bring people together you wouldn't normally think of as being allies.

"Tom is to the left of Bernie Sanders, and he was wary of this formerly elected Republican," Delaney said in describing their relationship. "We became close pretty quickly ... I have to say I love the guy, as does my entire family, including my very conservative father.

"I was never a homophobe," Delaney said, "but on the other hand I was pretty ignorant about homosexuals, and frankly very naïve. Tom had an immense influence on my views. I came to realize how hard it was to be gay in America and the discrimination that gays had to overcome."

Bruce Musser served with Serwatka on the JASMYN board for nine years.

"I always thought of him as a brain trust," Musser said. "We would strategize an event, and we would have him be the closer. He would do the ask and get out there in his compact frame, you know, and just be this magnanimous personality, and I would watch him and say that I could never say those things. How can he do that?"

Musser uses an adjective to describe Serwatka that becomes a familiar one when talking to people about him.

"Tom is courageous," Musser said. "He's fully engaged. He's 100 percent."

Musser continued, "I went to a board meeting about a year ago.....and I was not in the mood to go. But I went to the meeting mildly, distracted by the fact that I don't want to be here, and in comes Tom wearing an eye patch and using a cane in the middle of having a Bell's Palsy episode. I was like, wow. He put himself aside to be there."

Susan Greene was one of the first heterosexuals to serve on the JASMYN board, and she ended up there because of Serwatka.

"He reads people well," she said of Serwatka. "He's very much an encourager. He's smart, sexy, sassy, savvy and a lot of fun."

She then adds one more "s" in her description: spiritual.

“In recent years, Tom has been experiencing a great deal of pain and is pulling from a deep well of faith and Godly life to keep him grounded. But because he sees God in others, Tom readily invites others into his life knowing that love and light can ease pain. I really do love him.”

EARLY YEARS

Serwatka was raised in Lakewood, a suburb of Cleveland.

“I wasn’t particularly happy in my junior and senior year,” he recalled in the interview, “and a lot of it had to do with the fighting with my mother about my gayness and that whole atmosphere, so I left high school early to go to college.”

He majored in speech pathology at Baldwin Wallace and returned to Lakewood to teach deaf students. He then got his master’s degree and doctorate at Kent State.

“I got to Jacksonville through the crony system,” he said, referring to his Kent State professor who knew the man who began the deaf program at UNF. “So I came down, looked around and they offered me more than three times what I was making as a school teacher. My then partner and I packed up the ratty little cars we had and moved to Jacksonville.”

A CITY OF INTOLERANCE, ACCEPTANCE

The year was 1975, and Jacksonville wasn’t exactly known as a gay friendly city.

“I graduated from undergraduate in 1969 and that was the year of Stonewall,” Serwatka said. It was on June 28 of that year that New York police raided a gay club in Greenwich Village. A riot ensued that led to six days of violent clashes with police. Those riots spurred the gay rights movement in the United States and throughout the world.

“I was oblivious to Stonewall,” Serwatka said. “(But) Kent State had started a Gay Liberation Front, which now has morphed into Flashes of

TOM’S FAITH JOURNEY

A chapter of his book – Queer Questions, Clear Answers – is titled “Sacred Scriptures and Homosexuality.” In that chapter, he asks: ‘Do the sacred scriptures prohibit love and physical intimacy between same-gender partners?’

“If you believe the story of Sodom and Gomorrah is about the sin of homosexuality, you will probably answer that, yes, a scripture does prohibit same-gender love,” he explains. “If you believe that Sodom and Gomorrah is a story about God’s anger over people turning their back on the less fortunate and abusing strangers, you will probably say no.”

“And if you believe that this is a myth told over the ages to explain some disaster, you will probably ask why we even stop to ask this question.”

Serwatka was raised in a Lutheran church, and like many gays, he struggled with the rejection that often comes hand-in-hand with religion.

When his pastor didn’t want him taking communion because he’s gay, a friend suggested a book written by John Boswell, a historian and professor at Yale University whose work focused on Christianity and homosexuality.

Serwatka recounted how finding that book was a major turning point in his faith journey. “I get that book and I take it home and I start reading it and I can’t put it down ... it takes you through all of the biblical passages and explains them. And I’m going, wow. Why haven’t I ever been taught this?”

“I happen to be a person of faith, and this opens a whole lot of doors for me,” adding that he shares this when talking to LGBT individuals. “Go study. You will find that some of the shackles can be taken off.”

In retrospect, Serwatka says, being denied communion was horrible, but “in the long run the outcomes were basically good, and I’m at peace like I haven’t been.”

Pride, so I became involved with the Gay Liberation Front, and it was like my eyes began to open in terms of what the struggle was.

“Up until this point, I understood gayness to my individual perspective and my struggles, but I didn’t understand it in terms of the national conversation that was just opening, but I got baptized quickly in terms of that.”

At UNF, Serwatka found a different atmosphere than he had known at Kent State.

“While this university was not an open university, it was still a university, so I led a sheltered life to a degree,” he said. “It wasn’t difficult to be gay and to be out and to take my partner to events and so forth. There was homophobia on this campus, but it wasn’t blatant homophobia. It was more closed.”

Off campus, however, life was different.

“In the apartment that we lived in,” Serwatka said, “we had a neighbor who was sometimes pleasant and often not pleasant. He was a veteran who drank too much. And when he and his girlfriend would walk down the stairs, he would often yell, ‘That’s where the two fags live,’ or something like that.

“One day we are sitting on our patio and we had a little white fluffy dog. And Toto ran over to his patio, and she came back crying and howling. He had obviously done something to her. That was not her nature.”

“I thought, OK, I’ve had it. I went over and said, ‘What the hell did you do to my dog?’”

Serwatka insisted his neighbor had kicked the dog or something like that. The conversation that followed was a telling one: Serwatka doesn’t back down, and he’s confident in who he is.

“He said, ‘Were you in the war?’ I said, ‘No, I wasn’t.’ He said, ‘Yeah, your kind never are.’”

“I said, ‘I went down to the draft office, and I checked the box that said I was gay. If they wanted to take me, they were free to take me, but if they weren’t taking me on my terms’ ... so anyway we had words.”

Six months later, that neighbor moved.

“He came up to us and he said, ‘I’m going to miss you as neighbors. You were really good neighbors.’”

Serwatka had no fear of losing his job at UNF, but many of his friends off campus didn’t have that comfort. He had friends who were losing their jobs and others who weren’t getting hired because their gayness was obvious.

But Serwatka experienced another side of Jacksonville during the illness and eventual death of his partner Jimmy. They met in 1981, before the existence of AIDS was widely reported or known.

“I was on the phone with him and he said my friend has the gay cancer and I said, ‘What gay cancer? There is no cancer that knows to attack a gay person.’”

They had been together for five years and believed they had escaped the AIDS epidemic. But Jimmy began to have suspicious symptoms, which they tried to dismiss. Finally, Jimmy went to a doctor who insisted he go to the hospital immediately.



“We don’t listen to the doctor’s advice,” Serwatka remembers. “We go home and we lie in our bed and cry and hold each other.”

Jimmy was hospitalized and almost died from pneumonia. When they returned from the hospital, every neighbor in their Mandarin cul-de-sac had come by the house with food or other support. The network had put out that he had AIDS.

Even the neighbors with two little kids who called them Uncle Tom and Uncle Jimmy came over and let the kids be with Jimmy, Serwatka recalls. “Mom and Dad did not say, ‘Don’t get close. Don’t kiss him.’ They knew what causes transmission and what doesn’t cause transmission.”

Jimmy battled the disease for two-and-a-half years before dying.

“Throughout all of that time, people were being helpful,” Serwatka said. “People were doing things that I don’t do like mow the lawn and things like that. We were still neighbors. We were still friends. We were still loved.”

BUILDING RESUMES AND EULOGIES

In April, Serwatka returned to Kent State to speak at the university’s Lavender Graduation, which honors the achievements of graduating lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and ally students.

He said he borrowed a theme from a book by David Brooks in which The New York Times columnist talks about writing your resume and writing your eulogy.

“I know he talks about the importance of the eulogy,” Serwatka said. “I don’t dismiss the importance of the resume.”

His message to the students at the Lavender Graduation was direct.

“Look at what you are doing as you are moving ahead and do the damn best you can because you are going to be a role model, and make the best role model you can and go as far as you can and be openly gay as you are doing this because it is important that the world sees that we can succeed.

“Look at what legacy you are leaving for other people. Are you reaching out and helping? Are you truly offering yourself to other people?

“Will they say something about you at your funeral that will make you feel proud of yourself, make you feel good about yourself?

“You are writing both of them. You are leaving college and you’re writing both of them from this point. Be careful how you write them.”

STEVE HALVERSON ON TOM SERWATKA

As predicate, I have known Tom long before the HRO battle. I watched him serve two presidents at UNF and became a big fan and friend.

With respect to the HRO, of course it was a collective effort by many and there are many noteworthy champions. To my mind, Tom was uniquely important and effective in a couple ways.

First, he was an educator. He patiently helped me and others better understand the nuances of LGBTQ culture. He did it in an almost academic way – not preaching or even advocating. Just teaching. I read his book and learned a lot. Tom grasped that understanding was a fundamental precondition to advocacy and acceptance.

Second, he was a unifier. He brought together sometimes disparate voices; he helped all the proponents cohere around a plan. He was a quiet voice of reason, individually working with people to keep everyone aligned and moving forward.

I get a chance to work with lots of advocates on lots of causes. I haven’t met many who are more effective than Tom.

Steve Halverson is chairman of Haskell and past chair of the Jacksonville Civic Council.

ONE FOR THE RESUME AND EULOGY

Jimmy worked as a neonatal intensive care unit nurse at what was then University Hospital.

“He loved his job as a NICU nurse,” Serwatka said. “When it was time for him to go back to work, he went to University Hospital and they put him in a make-work job.

“Now he’s in the make-work job and doing nothing. There was just this, ‘OK, I’m the one and I have to stay in the corner,’” he went on. “I think after his second illness, the hospital said he may not want to come back and we don’t know if we can keep the job open for him.

Serwatka insisted that Jimmy be placed back in the NICU, but he says the hospital claimed it was for his protection so he wouldn’t be exposed to illness. Serwatka refused to back down. He met with hospital officials and pointed out that the Supreme Court had ruled that AIDS is covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act.

“You are going to have to show that he can’t do his work or we are going to sue you,” Serwatka told them. “During the meeting, someone let slip that when they have pregnant nurses, they don’t assign them to certain babies because if the nurse caught what the baby had, it could affect her pregnancy.”

He warned them, “You are willing to do special accommodations for pregnant women who are not covered by the ADA, and I applaud you for that, but you are not willing to do special accommodations for someone who is covered by the ADA, and I’ll sue you for that.”

The hospital relented and offered Jimmy his job back as a NICU nurse. In the end, Jimmy was too worn out by his disease by that time to manage his duties. But Serwatka insisted the fight was worth it.

“We had helped them understand that they can’t make these decisions the way they are making them even if they think they are making them for your best interests. They can’t do it. They have to watch how they handle individuals.”

KAITLIN LEGG ON TOM SERWATKA

Tom’s commitment to inclusive policy, social justice and community change is decades-long, and yet his extensive list of accomplishments doesn’t scratch the surface in communicating his spirit. He has led a path dedicated to the interconnectedness of people and our humanity, doing so as a life-long learner and teacher. I’ll never forget meeting him early in my career as a young LGBT staff member at UNF. He was one of the first executive-level leaders I’d ever met. While I was distracted and worrying about my handshake, he surprised me with a big hug and kiss on the cheek. That’s who Tom is. He sees people.

Tom’s visibility has served as a possibility model for the rest of us, whether you’re an LGBT student or perhaps a heterosexual skeptic about the LGBT community. His honesty, advocacy and spirit have helped to transform the culture of UNF. Tom has made it a practice to live out loud in his truth while leading with credibility and brilliance – and in doing so, he makes it possible for the rest of us. Navigating the world from within a marginalized community can feel like walking through a minefield; Tom set out to transform that field into a budding garden. For a long time, he has been shining the warm glow of humanity on the conversations we have about people and communities. He’s taken a conversation so often marked by trauma and stigma to one that floats with joy and connection. If you’ve met Tom, you can sense that he wants everyone to feel loved and welcome.

Kaitlin Legg is the director of the LGBT Resource Center at the University of North Florida

CHANGES AT UNF

Serwatka had been working in the president's office at UNF before Delaney was selected to head the university.

"I'm a bleeding-heart liberal, HIV positive, gay male and you are going to know that within 10 minutes of meeting me."

"He's a Republican. He happens to contend he's heterosexual and I believe him," he says, chuckling.

Serwatka visited Delaney's office about a month after the new president arrived.

"I say, 'John, I'm enjoying this, but you need to have somebody that you wanted in this office because it's not fair that you are taking somebody else's person. The relationship has to be one of trust and good communications.'"

"He said, 'Tom, if you want to go back to faculty or if you want to go back to the provost office in a graduate dean spot, I'm more than willing to let you go, but I will have to set up an application for somebody else and I'll probably write it: Needed – A HIV positive, bleeding-heart liberal faculty member who knows the campus well.'"

"I said, 'If I saw that ad, I would come and apply.' He said, 'Well, let's skip the ad.'"

Serwatka said that improvements for the LGBTQ community were being made on the UNF campus before Delaney came, but they weren't great strides. Serwatka began to educate the new campus president.

"I said if I wasn't in the union, you could fire me right now for being gay. He said, 'No, I couldn't.' I said, 'Yes, you could. You're the attorney. Go look.'"

Delaney confirmed Serwatka's assertion, then said, 'We have to do something about that.' A nondiscrimination policy for UNF came into being.

"He [Delaney] becomes known as someone who would support LGBT rights on campus and off campus," Serwatka said. "He's outed himself at that point."

Later a flap ensued over Pride Week on the campus. Delaney sent Serwatka to talk to the protesters. Serwatka told them they would do a campus survey about the major issues confronting LGBT faculty, LGBT students and staff. One of the things the students wanted was an LGBT center. And they got one. At first, the LGBT Center was in a trailer—hardly optimal, but UNF was tight on space. Delaney promised they would improve the situation.

Serwatka says, "We opened the door of the LGBT center and since then it's been staffed and it kept getting better and better until it has some of the best space on campus."



Serwatka and members of the LGBT Community Fund at a UNF LGBT Resource Center event

The survey also found that faculty and staff wanted domestic partner benefits, including sick and funeral leave, a free class each term for family members and access to all of the facilities on campus. UNF was able to offer everything, except one: health insurance for domestic partners.

Rules governing state employees' health insurance prevented the university from extending that coverage. Serwatka and Delaney were stymied, until they discovered that the University of Florida had figured out a workaround via a separate insurance company that that paid for the partner's insurance. After several months of searching, UNF found another insurance company that would do the same thing and paid for it through foundation money and other monies.

"So little by little we have done all of the things," Serwatka said. "We're not 100 percent, but we are like 97 percent."



LGBT Community Fund receives JASMYN's Emerald Award; left to right: Tom Serwatka, Michael Meyers, Cindy Watson

A HARDER BATTLE, THE CITY'S HRO

The fight over expanding the city's Human Rights Ordinance to include protections for the LGBT community in employment, housing and public accommodations was brutal and one of the most contentious in the city's history.

Before the City Council took up the proposal in 2012, Serwatka had been meeting with a group to plot strategy. Delaney happened upon one of those meetings and offered to help, and was able to pull in people like Audrey Moran, Steve Halverson and Bill Bond. They in turn pulled in members of the Jacksonville Civic Council.

"This is not just gay people fighting for their rights--this is gay people surrounded by the top leadership in the city fighting for our rights," Serwatka said. "If you are voting against this, you are not just voting against this little minority over here, you are voting against people who have influence and money and back candidates and so forth."

The group worked City Hall, and Serwatka was confident they had enough votes on the City Council to pass the expanded HRO.

Along the way, some dirty truths of politics were revealed. Alvin Brown had become mayor after he defeated Mike Hogan. Serwatka had backed Audrey Moran in the first election in the spring of 2011, but she had lost. Afterwards he met with Brown.

"I said Audrey lost and she was the one who was going to make this happen," Serwatka recalled. "We can't vote for Hogan, so we'll come to you, but we would really like some sort of indication that you will support us.

"Alvin says to me, 'I do not believe in or support discrimination of any kind.' And I heard that as, 'Of course, heard that as 'I'm going to vote for you.'"

In fact, that allowed Brown to argue that he didn't believe there was discrimination against the LGBT community, and he refused to back the expanded HRO.

Still confident that the votes were there, Serwatka attended the standing room only City Council meeting on the night of Aug. 14, 2012. As the votes were recorded on the screens in the council's chambers, a second ugly lesson of politics became apparent. Councilman Johnny Gaffney, who had previously supported the expansion flipped, and the vote was 10-9 against it.

"We are sitting there and listening to the count and we are going to have our majority and it wasn't there," Serwatka said. "I said some things to some people that night, some colleagues and friends, and I went to my car and I just cried my eyes out."

THE FIGHT WASN'T OVER

The group pushing an expanded HRO didn't give up. It grew stronger.

When Serwatka moved to Jacksonville in the 1970s, he couldn't envision that the city's Republican-led business establishment would become his ally.

"I don't know that I ever believed that we would get them or that this town would have the wherewithal to even propose this," he said. "I certainly couldn't imagine that some of the best people in this city are going to support it and they are going to come out twice and the second time even more strongly than the first time to get this done."

Among the reasons for the sea change were economics and the reality that almost every major city offered protections for their LGBT communities.

"Companies are bringing in really talented people," Serwatka said, "and they don't want their people being protected while on the job but not having protections when they leave, so it is a real economic issue."

The second time around, the proponents had even stronger support from the city's clergy.

AUDREY MORAN ON TOM SERWATKA

Back in 2010 when I was running for mayor, Tom Serwatka asked to meet for coffee. He told me that he had wanted to ask a question at one of my campaign events but decided it might not be the right place. I told him I knew what his question was and the answer was "yes" – our city needed a Human Rights Ordinance that would ensure equal rights for all of our citizens. I also told him that he needed to start asking the question in public – out loud – so that our community could begin this important conversation. He enthusiastically agreed.

After Mayor Brown was elected, Tom pulled together a group of community leaders to talk about how we might be able to get an HRO in Jacksonville. The group met regularly, and Tom worked hard to make sure the conversations were substantive and that we were moving forward. He also served as a liaison to other interested community groups – keeping the critical lines of communication open. He worked tirelessly on drafting language for the ordinance, providing his expertise and counsel on what had worked in other communities. When the ordinance first came before council in 2012, he was at every single City Council committee meeting and rallied others to attend and make their voices heard. When the ordinance failed – by just one vote – in 2012, we were heartbroken. But Tom kept fighting. Tom's leadership, knowledge and ability to build bridges was critical to the ordinance finally passing in 2017. Tom Serwatka is a community hero.

Audrey Moran is senior vice president for Social Responsibility and Community Advocacy at Baptist Health.

“We had a much broader range of clergy, including some powerful members of the African-American faith group,” Serwatka said. “So now you couldn’t say churches don’t like it. You could only say your church doesn’t like it.”

Then Mayor Lenny Curry, who refused to support the measure while using the same tired bromide Alvin Brown had, saying that he doesn’t support discrimination of any kind, held public meetings on the HRO that once again



Nancy Broner, executive director of OneJax, with Tom

brought out the ugly side of the debate and irrational fears over which bathrooms people use.

“These were huge gatherings of people,” Serwatka said. “I don’t know if we changed people’s minds or we revved up people who supported it to take it seriously and to come out for it.”

Serwatka believed that a majority of Jacksonville’s population was supportive before the first vote, but he watched as the voices got louder after it failed.

“People who were so upset by the first vote but hadn’t done anything I think now thought about it and said I’ve got to do my part, and that was both in the gay community and the heterosexual community.”

The City Council again took up the expanded HRO on Valentine’s Day, Feb. 14, 2017. This time it passed on a 12-6 vote. There was no need for Serwatka to go to his car and cry his eyes out.

“I know that I screamed, and it was a scream of utter joy,” he said, noting that he and his husband Michael had been married the year before on Valentine’s Day. “I was celebrating my first anniversary and the passage. Not a bad day. Not a bad day at all.”

THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

Ask Bruce Musser, Susan Greene and Tom Serwatka what’s the greatest difficulty ahead and they all answer: the transgender community.

“That’s difficult for people to wrap their heads around,” Serwatka said. “Sex and gender are binary to everybody. You can’t go back and forth between them. We will let you sleep with your same sex, but we are not going to let you change your sex.”

Serwatka recalled a transgender woman he knew at Kent State, and his confusion about her status. “I get it if she wanted to sleep with men, but what is this? It was like why didn’t you follow the rule that I wrote in my head? You’re writing a whole different script.”

He understands that it is confusing and disturbing, and acknowledges the subject makes people uncomfortable, and sometimes scared.

“So transgender is the largest issue at this point,” he believes. “The other is getting full acceptance in the community.”

Serwatka tells the story of looking for a dentist after he and Michael were married, when Michael had been added to Serwatka’s health care. On the first visit, Michael was filling out the paperwork and the office staff saw his coverage was under Serwatka.

"I say I have to go out to the car because I didn't bring my wallet in. They say 'We got you covered. We've got your husband's.' I was just giddy when we went to the dentist's office because I thought this is just too easy," he recalls.

"But we go to other places, and you can tell they are thrown off and don't understand it and would rather not deal with your relationship."

LOOKING BACK

Serwatka is 71 now. He used to spend a lot of time at the gym and he ran a lot. That was before the back surgery and before the knees went bad. He and Michael enjoy going to museums and collecting art.

"I like working in organizations that are doing something, that are helping in some way or another. If it becomes just going to the board meeting and I'm not contributing, it doesn't hold a fascination anymore.

"If it's direct service, like if I'm cooking at the soup kitchen, I'm really happy with that because that's what life is supposed to be. Life is supposed to be about giving and freely giving of yourself."

Serwatka's vita is long and filled with his educational accomplishments, the papers he has written and the book he published in 2010: *Queer Questions, Clear Answers. The Contemporary Debates on Sexual Orientation*.

"The resume is probably better than OK," Serwatka said of his vita. "But the real question: How is the eulogy coming along? A question I cannot ponder."

Serwatka could have chosen to live in other cities that were friendlier to gays when he moved to Jacksonville.

Bruce Musser was asked what would have happened if Serwatka had made that choice.

"I just see light bulbs going out and the city gets darker," Musser said.

That's not a bad start to a eulogy.

TOM SERWATKA ON HIS HUSBAND, MICHAEL BREEN

We met at fundraiser for a clinic in Haiti. The event was at MOCA, where I later served as interim director while UNF and the MOCA board were searching for a new permanent director.

Michael owns a small salon at the beach, named Michael's Cottage Salon. Three years after our marriage, he made me a part-owner, but he was quick to point out that I have 49% of the salon. So I can't cut hair (no license, no skill and no hair), and there's no way I can win any votes. For the first time in my life, I can say I am a small business owner, albeit without any input.

In his prior life, he was employed in aerospace engineering. I can see the skill set he needs in each of his careers, but I benefit more from his engineering acumen around our condo.

He was born and raised on Long Island. He started college in NY but finished in Denver.

We love travel, he is as sweet as can be and I consider myself one very, very lucky man to have him in my life. We have developed a tradition of leaving a sometime mushy, sometime funny note for each other to be discovered at some point during our day. And he has the most adorable dimples.