

Summary: When **Katie Potter** went public about being gay, she got love and support from her father and boss- Portland's chief of police

**Tom Potter** believes there's one thing odd about his daughter, **Katie**: She hates fresh tomatoes.

Teasingly he tells her this as she spikes a fork through a cherry tomato and adds it to his salad. It is 26-year-old **Katie's** night off as a patrol officer in Portland's East Precinct, and she and her father are dining at Hobo's Inn, a candlelit, white-linen restaurant in Northwest Portland frequented by gay women and men.

Since his promotion to Portland police chief seven months ago, the father finds that meals with his daughter are a mainstay for catching up, which they do in an intense, rapid fashion. Brown eyes locked across the table, eyebrows curving in the same arch, they cover family news and cop shop talk before **Katie Potter** asks, with urgency, if he'll be at the gay-pride rally.

He checks his pocket calendar for June 22. Yes, he'll be there. And **Katie Potter** beams.

As Portland Police Bureau chief, **Tom Potter** has distinguished himself in two special ways: as an advocate of community policing, and as a champion for the rights of all citizens, including women, ethnic minorities and homosexuals.

It's a message he believes -- and lives -- to his core: Some people would see **Katie** as odd not because of her aversion to tomatoes, but because she is a lesbian.

**Potter**, 50, is left-handed. When he was a youngster, teachers tried forcing him to wield a pencil with his right hand. It was a fruitless, uncomfortable effort. In the same way, he considers his daughter's sexual preference to be as natural to her as being a southpaw heterosexual is to him. He does not see it as a moral failing, as his fundamentalist upbringing would hold, but as an unalterable part of **Katie** as the tides are to the sea.

``I've heard of parents telling their children, 'I hope you get AIDS and die,' " says **Potter**. He finds such an attitude beyond comprehension.

In May, **Potter** father and daughter were featured in *Just Out*, a monthly Portland newspaper serving the gay and lesbian communities. It was **Katie's** formal ``coming out," capping a series of smaller ones: to herself, as a senior in high school; to friends -- and the unfriendly -- at Taft College in California, which she attended one year on a softball scholarship; to her family, starting with her father and ending with her Southern Baptist grandmother; to co-workers in the police bureau.

**Katie Potter** doesn't want to bury her lesbianism like a naughty secret. At work, people talk about their off-duty hours. She wants to do the same. ``I don't tell a lot of stories to satisfy their need for `normalness,' " says **Katie**. ``I would never tell people, `Please don't talk about your wife at

work.' "

When the gay community newspaper called with a request to write about the father-daughter pair, **Katie Potter** accepted because of the impact other such articles have had on her.

"I get a real high from reading stories of people who came out openly," she says, gesturing with a short-nailed hand, "survived the world and seemed strong as ever." For instance, the April Just Out piece on Gail Shibley -- Oregon's first openly lesbian state legislator -- made **Katie Potter** feel a part of something larger and good. If possible, she wants to do that for others.

- Mother was embarrassed,hurt

Each revelation brought its challenges. The classmates who walked behind her on campus repeating, "Dyke, dyke, dyke," in time with her steps. Initial "where-did-we-go-wrong" confusion from her mother, **Ginger Potter-Hall**, 49, with whom she'd always been close. Debates centered around nature and reproduction with her older brother, **Troy**. Her religiously conservative grandmother's unwavering belief that "just because you're that way doesn't mean you have to live that lifestyle."

"I tried to explain," **Katie Potter** says, an earnest look on her clean-scrubbed face, "that it isn't my choice. It's the way I am. I like guys. But it's my relationships with women that make me most happy."

For **Ginger Potter-Hall**, **Katie's** coming out unleashed embarrassment, hurt and fear. It took several years for her to accept **Katie's** lesbianism, in what was a two-step process.

**Potter-Hall** eventually realized that only her understanding of her daughter had changed. "Katie," says her mother, "was the same person the day before and the day after I knew." Until **Potter-Hall** came to grips with that, she could feel **Katie** slipping away. "Not because of her," **Hall** explains, "but because of me."

The second step came after **Potter-Hall** had a long discussion with **Katie's** father. "I do believe God created **Katie**, inside and out," says **Potter-Hall**. "And I can't believe that something God created, he would also condemn. I've come to believe this is the way it was meant to be."

Within the police bureau -- where **Katie Potter** had figured her lesbianism was common knowledge, anyway -- responses to her in-print coming-out have fallen into three basic groups: those who wish she'd kept her mouth shut because now the public will look at every officer and wonder about his or her sexual preference. Those who had suspected she was gay and, now that it's confirmed, are more comfortable because they felt the uncertainty was a barrier to their friendship. And those who say that whatever she does on her own time is her own business; they trust her as a cop.

Long ago, **Katie Potter's** father had told her he would support her whether she decided to keep her private life private or step forward. He was the first person in Portland to whom she opened up. Sharing a basket of chips at The Original Taco House in Southeast Portland in 1983 over college Christmas vacation, **Katie** summoned the courage to tell him that she and a high school

friend had had a relationship beyond friendship.

**Tom Potter** took the news -- which wasn't news to him -- calmly. Then he talked about how he could help her feel comfortable with herself and ways to tell other relatives, including her mother and three siblings.

All gay children fear rejection from family, says **Katie Potter**. After they come to terms with their gayness, they tend to keep it secret, she explains, until their internal comfort rises past their fear.

In college, it gnawed on her that the people she loved most, who knew everything else about her, were missing this keystone to her being. At the same time she yearned for honesty, she knew much of her family would have a hard time accepting **Katie** the lesbian. She feared the pain of their rejection.

“But having the first person I told be supportive” **Katie** breaks off her sentence. “What a relief for the rest of my life!”

As a cop, **Katie Potter** encounters many people who are bankrupt of self-esteem, courage and a sense of responsibility. She credits her parents, and the support they have given her through the years, with her possession of those traits.

Carol Landesman, a Gresham clinical psychologist specializing in gender identity, agrees. “Something right,” she says, “happened in that family.”

All children, Landesman says, need parents to accept and support them and guide them. A child with a sexuality conflict needs parental support even more than other children; it's key to their feeling confident and good about themselves. And children with self-esteem grow into adults who function well in personal relationships, at work and in the community.

Many parents of gay children, says Landesman, have a problem embracing them. “But Chief **Potter** is actually in her corner; he doesn't have any prejudice at all about her. And not only does he support her to her face, but out in public as a person in a powerful position and in a position that's traditionally seen as very conservative: law and order, and right and wrong. And homosexuality is ‘wrong.’”

**Tom Potter** must be a strong person, conjectures the psychologist, not to worry that people will think he's a weirdo who raised a daughter who ended up gay. Nor is he keeping mum, fearing she'll jeopardize his position in the bureau. “Instead,” Landesman says, “he's out there saying there's something wrong in society, and we need to try and open people's minds. And that's unusual.”

- Police chief backs gay rights

When **Tom Potter** put on his blue police uniform, pinned on his chief's badge and rode with his daughter in a red convertible at the gay-pride rally a week ago Saturday, he didn't do so to please **Katie**. It was to show the gay and lesbian community that he, as chief of police, is concerned that they enjoy the same rights guaranteed other citizens. It was to demonstrate that people in the straight world support them. It was to act on a belief he voiced during an in-service training class

he taught in the spring: It's important that both society and the police are free of sexism, racism and homophobia.

“The role of police,” says **Potter** simply, “is to see people are treated equally and fairly and that their rights are provided them.”

**Potter's** 25 years as a cop have shown him that poverty, poor education, a lack of job opportunities and unhealthy families are society's pressing problems. Their symptoms are crime, drugs and gangs. Homosexuality is a problem only when a homosexual happens to break the law.

“Some of the nicest people in this city are gays and lesbians,” says **Potter**, who testified at an informal hearing in mid-June in favor of Senate Bill 708. The bill, now dead, would have guaranteed civil rights to gay men and lesbians. “They're concerned about crime; they want to help make things better. I hear people say they're perverts. How stupid. How ignorant.”

The chief's embracing of diversity was not a sudden conversion born of his daughter's sexual orientation. Before **Katie** was born, he stretched the rigid notions with which he was raised (see sidebar, page L7). Having a lesbian daughter simply solidified his longtime convictions.

As a teen-ager, **Katie Potter** struggled with the reality of her attraction to females. In high school, she was sexually drawn to a series of girls and women. **Katie** hasn't forgotten her thoughts during one particular instance: “I have a crush on another girl; what should I do, what can I do; why is this happening to me?” And, “God, why do I feel this? I don't want to feel this. This is hard.”

As she dealt with such conflicts, **Katie** picked up signals that her father would understand. She keenly remembers riding with him and her sister Kim, two years older than she, on an errand to pick up napkins for Kim's wedding. **Katie** was 15. The three were chattering about wedding preparations when, out of the blue, Kim shifted the conversation. “What is it,” she asked in a puzzled voice, “about homosexuals? How can they be that way?”

Panic squeezed **Katie** during the moment before her father answered. She hadn't come to grips with her lesbianism, but she knew she liked girls in a way that her childhood religion taught was sinful. Would her father's answer make her feel like dying? Or would it make her feel OK?

His answer resounds as if she heard it just a heartbeat ago. “You know, Kimmy,” **Tom Potter** said, pulling into a parking spot, “they're just like everybody else.”

- Her father knew first

**Tom Potter** realized his daughter was a lesbian before she did herself. “Know what it was?” he asks, fork aloft. He answers himself with a single word and a deadpan expression. “Jeans.” Kim liked wearing dresses, but **Katie** couldn't be kept in a skirt. No sooner would the family arrive home from church than **Katie** was out of her Sunday clothes and back into her denims.

“I looked at **Katie** and thought, ‘That's different,’” remembers her father. “Not different bad. Just different.” Other little differences continued surfacing, **Potter** took note, and ultimately he thought, “It is possible that **Katie** is a lesbian.”

**Potter** and his wife separated in 1979, when **Katie** was 14, and divorced in 1981. **Katie** lived with her mother and, she says, hated her father for a year or two. She considered the split his doing, and she didn't like it.

For his part, **Potter** kept faith that, with time and life experiences, all the children eventually would appreciate that his and **Ginger's** philosophies had become too different for them to live together. When **Katie** and the other children vented their anger, he did his best to listen and talk it through.

The family had always been tight-knit, though the stitches were stressed after the divorce. "I went through my bitter, 'I-want-to-kill-you' stage," says **Ginger Potter-Hall**. "But you can't go through life like that. We have too much together with the children."

So on holidays and birthdays, the families gather together for festivities: **Ginger** and her husband, **Fred Hall**; **Tom Potter** and the woman significant to him; the three married **Potter** children and their families; **Katie** and her 40-year-old female partner; stray friends.

"It's a celebration," says 33-year-old **Carol Daiberl**, a family friend who says mixing with the **Potters** always means fun. "Their tendency is to bring out the best in people."

In the future, **Katie** hopes to bring children of her own to the parties. When the time in her life is right, she plans to undergo artificial insemination, then raise children within a committed gay relationship. **Katie** and her partner would tap into male influences from the ranks of friends and family.

"I understand it takes a man and it takes a woman, but . . ." -- she lightly pounds the table with a fist and grins, brown eyes snapping -- "thank God for technology."

**Ginger Potter-Hall** had long told **Katie** she would make a great mother. **Katie** aims to prove her mother right.

Such acceptance from her family has given **Katie Potter** a confidence that allows her to take more risks and work for higher goals than she would have otherwise, **Daiberl** believes. Part of **Katie's** drive comes from a desire to earn her father's pride, the family friend surmises.

At the same time, **Tom Potter** steadily works supporting subcultures outside of the mainstream. When the Parents and Friends of Gays and Lesbians group needed a meeting space in 1986, he offered the 15th floor of the Justice Center. Last year, when the bureau minority recruiter's request to run a recruitment ad in *Just Out* was turned down by higher-ups, the chief intervened, and the ad ran last August. He accepted a rainbow-striped gay flag at a reception at *Hobo's Inn*, held by Portland's gay and lesbian community after his swearing-in, and keeps it in his office. In May, **Potter** fielded questions at a meeting of the Portland Gender Society, a group of cross-dressers and transsexuals.

At most such functions, he wears his police uniform, because **Potter** feels it's important that the community identify him with the cop on the street. Cops, he notes, are a minority who often suffer blanket discrimination, too.

**Potter** and his daughter are both police officers, and in that way they share a special bond. **Katie** revels in the mutual understanding. Without great explanation, her father knows exactly what she's talking about.

**Potter** appreciates the paths each of his children has taken; but in his younger daughter, he sees his own determination, drive and fair-mindedness reborn. He's comfortable with himself, and he's pleased that **Katie**, too, is comfortable in her own skin.

He forgives the quirk with the tomatoes. It only goes so far.

“Our biggest similarity is Heinz ketchup. Not Del Monte,” he says with a definitive shake of his silver-tipped head. “Not Brand X. We love Heinz.” When his children were young, **Potter** would line up different brands of ketchup for blind tastings, testing if the kids could pick out Heinz. “And **Katie**,” he says proudly, “always could.”

Copyright (c) 1991 Oregonian Publishing Co.