

Fred Kogan: Art lessons, life lessons and three little words

by Suzi Nash

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FRED KOGAN Photo: Suzi Nash

PGN: What did you do in the fashion industry?

FK: I was a rep for Ralph Lauren.

PGN: [Laughs.] So can you get me a discount on a nice tweed jacket?

FK: I used to be able to!

PGN: Isn't Cleveland Drew Carey country?

FK: Oh yes, he's awesome. He was from the West Side. Drew and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame were our claims to fame.

PGN: What was life like growing up?

FK: Well, I have two older brothers. I'm the gay baby of the family, though I didn't come out to my family until I got to New York. It was a little harder on my mom but my dad was OK with it immediately. He's 88 years old and a big inspiration to me. Before he retired he ran a jewelry business and volunteered as a parole officer.

PGN: I didn't know that was a volunteer-type job?

FK: [Laughs.] I know, but he did it for years and loved it. He was a real people person, as am I.

PGN: What were you like?

FK: I was a nerdy, overweight kid all through middle school. I got bullied a lot. I remember being called "Faggot Freddy Kogan." I was always very artistic and blossomed a little in high school. But I still hide my bar mitzvah pictures: They were horrifying!

PGN: What was a refuge?

FK: I didn't like my high school but I was very involved in the Jewish community, youth groups, etc.

PGN: Is there a big Jewish community in Cleveland?

FK: You wouldn't believe it, but the east side of Cleveland has a very big, very strong tight-knit Jewish community. It reminds me of the gay community in Philadelphia: Everyone seems to know each other.

PGN: What was the best art project you made for your mom?

FK: It was a painting that I did, an outdoor landscape with big flowers in the front and a flowing river in the back, very beautiful. They still have it in their bedroom. Well, my mom passed away this summer, but it's still there.

PGN: What's your current title?

FK: I'm the Visual Arts Department Chair at Friends Select and I teach all the middle-school art, grades five through eight. That's an age for real developmental transition!

PGN: For us non-art people, can you explain artists like Cy Twombly? Most of us look at that type of work and say, "One of your fifth graders could have done this."

FK: [Laughs.] Yes, I get that a lot. My response is always to tell someone to back up and see how the person came to that point. A lot of those artists were actually trained very traditionally and then various factors led them up to the style of work that they feel expresses what they want to say. Like Robert Motherwell who had perhaps the best and most extensive formal education of all the New York School painters, and did very abstract, surreal work, though he didn't start that way. It's funny: The middle-school kids get it, they connect with it. It's the older kids who are like, "What's this about?"

PGN: I guess I'm one of the older kids! What are some of the ways you teach?

FK: As the chair of the department, I try to create outside connections for the kids like doing things with the fabric workshop and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. I'm really about using art to help them with the things going on in their lives — understanding and expressing their feelings. We deal with homophobia and hate, identity, things they're afraid of: We do a lot of work around that. When I went back to school, I choose to study art education over therapy, but the program at Parsons was a very process-oriented method, so we got a lot of therapy mixed in. At Friends, they really allowed me to expand the program. In fact, the director of the middle school always says that I create a psychological space for children to create ... that the kids make art that allows them to come out feeling good about themselves, which makes me feel good.

PGN: Have you ever had someone express something that made you concerned?

FK: Yes, a few times. Sometimes I'll look at a kid's painting and perhaps they'll be situated alone in the drawing or have a monster attacking, or something that makes me want to explore it further. The good thing is that the school psychologist is right around the corner and I can refer it to him to see if it's something to be looked into. We try to create an environment where the kids feel free to put down anything they feel. We might not always exhibit it, because of the range of ages at the school, but it's always encouraged. And when you teach art that way, something is going to come out, a child who feels alienated or is struggling with identity, or problems at home.

PGN: It must be rewarding to be able to use art to help someone.

FK: Yes, I think if we had an art program that just encouraged everyone to paint flowers, we wouldn't see that, but thankfully, we are free to do so much more.

PGN: Do you do "A Day With(out) Art," the AIDS awareness program?

FK: Yes, we participate in that and A Day of Silence. We're very proactive about gay issues. [Laughs.] I teach about every LGBT artist I can think of in my class. We talk about the fact that the AIDS virus hadn't happened, we would still have people like Keith Haring around still creating art. They listen and are concerned about things like that. I'm probably one of the most openly gay teachers you'll find. In fact my boyfriend, Craig Bierman, is a third-grade teacher at the school and all the kids know us as a couple. And the head of our school loves us as a couple, which is great. I always told myself I'd never work somewhere where I'd have to be in the closet.

PGN: When did you come out?

FK: I'm 48 and I came out to a few friends in college from the art department: I was in a Jewish fraternity and was not out there. But when I got to New York working at Saks, the entire store was pretty much out [laughs], so I came out fully at that point. I told my parents and then my brothers. I guess I was about 24 at the time.

PGN: Outside of art, what are your hobbies?

FK: I'm a social geek. I love hanging in coffee shops in the Gayborhood talking to people. I love dining out and going to movies. I'm a big people person.

PGN: I understand you run a gay Jewish group.

FK: Yes, I co-founded an LGBT minyan.

PGN: What is a minyan?

FK: A minyan in Judaism refers to a quorum of 10 Jewish adults required for certain religious obligations. Outside of a synagogue, it's a traveling prayer group. Warren Hoffman from the Gershwin Y and I felt that there was something missing in the Jewish LGBT community. There is a gay synagogue, but some people want something more casual, where you don't have to pay dues, etc. so we started a group called Heymish that's been going strong for about seven years. We're very informal, no rabbi, we do a potluck dinner and do the readings ourselves, which is nice for a lot of young people who may feel intimidated in a synagogue. There's a lot of singing and everyone is welcome!

PGN: Are there different challenges faced by Jewish members of the LGBT community?

FK: I think so. I dealt with a lot of anti-Semitism growing up. I remember people in college hearing that I was in the Jewish fraternity saying, "Oh, you're in the Hebe house." Or hearing people use phrases like "Let's Jew him down," which was actually said by a sorority president. An interesting thing: I went with my coworker Marissa Coulson to the People of Color Conference and they put us in different affinity groups. Another Jewish person — lesbian — and I were put in a group of Caucasians and we both agreed we didn't necessarily feel we belonged in that category. Do I have traditional white advantage? Yes to some extent, but I've also had to deal with prejudice on top of homophobia. Most of the other people in our group had not. I really liked going to POCC: It really got you thinking and discussing things.

PGN: How did you meet Craig?

FK: Well, we met during happy hour at Uncle Charlie's in the West Village in New York City. It's long gone now, but I saw him across the bar and thought, "That guy looks cute and sweet." We started to talk and 20 years later we haven't stopped talking!

PGN: Was he always a teacher?

FK: No, he's a Renaissance man. When I met him he was doing video production. We lived in New York for nine years and then moved to Philly so I could work at Friends. For a while, he commuted back and forth and then an alumni job opened up at Friends Select and he took it. He liked it and now he's there as a teacher.

PGN: Something fun you've done together?

FK: We took a month off and drove across the country, starting in New York City, across to Spokane, Wash., down to L.A. and back across. In each city we sought out the gay scene and it was fascinating to see how it changed from place to place, from Chicago to Oklahoma.

PGN: So you've made it through 20 years and a month together in a car. What's your secret?

FK: Honesty, giving each other space and saying I love you every day. Those three words are important. [Laughs.] People always tease us, "You've been together 20 years. Are you sure you're not lesbians?"

PGN: Tell me about the gay/straight alliance SAGA (sexuality and gender association). Do you ever run into resistance?

FK: It used to be just for the upper classes but after a while we invited the eighth grade to participate. Unlike the older kids, the eighth graders have to have parental permission to participate and, even though we're a very progressive school, on occasion you'll get a parent who perhaps isn't fully aware of our mission of diversity. We'll get that, "I don't know if my child's ready for that" or "We don't necessarily believe in that." [Laughs.] Which makes me want to say, "You don't believe in sexuality or gender? It's the gay/straight alliance, does that mean you don't believe in straight people?" It's funny, but it doesn't happen often.

PGN: Since we just went through the holidays, what's the best gift you've received?

FK: I got a cool gift this year. Our librarian, Sandi, had my name for our gift exchange. She gave me these little miniature statues of different artists — Picasso, Warhol, Dalí, etc. They were really on target for me.

PGN: Favorite family tradition?

FK: Passover. I like it because it's not in a synagogue: It's celebrated in the home. Everyone's around the table, eating and reading from the Haggadah, a mysterious little book, and there's lots of singing and talking.

PGN: Going to random questions. Which one of Snow White's dwarves would you be?

FK: I'm a big Disney fan, so I'd really want to be Snow White! But if I had to choose, I'd say Happy. It's my goal everyday.

PGN: Something you lost that you wish you could have back?

FK: I lost my sister-in-law, Arlene, my brother's first wife, to breast cancer 10 years ago and she was very special to me. And I just lost my mother, so I'd like to have the women in my life back.

PGN: When people look at me, they would never guess that I ...

FK: Dressed in drag as a Greek goddess in college! [Laughs.] Or maybe they would!

PGN: Other than a Greek goddess gown, what was your biggest fashion faux pas?

FK: DayGlo prepwork one day and punk the next. My punk outfit consisted of a skintight shirt with DayGlo record albums on the chest and I had a haircut with a tail in the back that was dyed white. What was I thinking?

PGN: What's your favorite piece of clothing?

FK: I'm a hat person. Like Bella Abzug, I love wearing hats.

PGN: Phrase that a parent used over and over?

FK: I'm thinking of my dad who said, "Whatever you decide to do in life, it shouldn't feel like work." That really stuck with me and I feel that I have achieved that through teaching. In the glamorous world of fashion, I didn't get that. Now, I love what I do!

PGN: What's in store for the future?

FK: In addition to expanding the GSA, I really want to create a safe space for LGBTQ kids to create art. The Fleisher Art Center has a teen lounge, but I'd like to have something specifically for LGBTQ kids to teach them new ways to express themselves. Oh, and a gay men's life drawing class!

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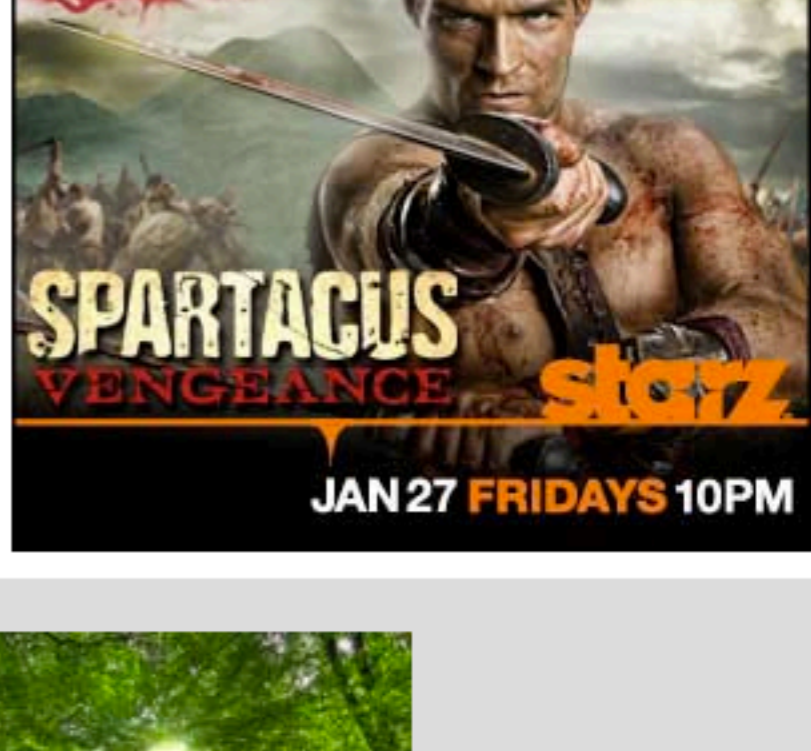
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