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T.R. KNIGHT

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T.R. Knight is just a regular guy*

Photographed by Jim Wright exclusively for *The Advocate*



Shy, disarming, charming to a fault, sharp as a tack, and anything but a victim—emerging from the center of the storm, T.R. Knight lays down his armor **By Michael Giltz**



COVER STORY

"I'm not going to keep my mouth closed anymore," says T.R. Knight. After more than a week of conversations—in person, by phone, by e-mail—that's the defining statement from the actor who's at the center of the storm of controversy that for the last nine months has engulfed ABC's *Grey's Anatomy*.

From Knight, that's a lot. Speaking out doesn't come easily for him. Raised in Minnesota, he is naturally reserved and averse to talking about himself. "Don't get too big for your britches," he was warned as a boy, and he's always taken that to heart. Why would anyone care about him, much less what he thinks?



As Dr. George O'Malley, Knight has become a heartthrob to both men and women.

But if you saw Knight on TV at this year's GLAAD Media Awards in Los Angeles, you can't shake the memory of the warm applause that became a standing ovation, his abashed demeanor in the spotlight, and his simple moment of truth. "I'm angry," he said—and paused, caught up in emotion. "I'm very angry at the inequality we face every day."

That anger, it seems, is one reason the press-shy Knight decided to sit down with *The Advocate* to give his first in-depth interview since coming out October 19 in a statement released to *People* magazine.

My first meeting with T.R. is over sushi at a Los Angeles restaurant of his choosing. He's late but scores points for politeness when he calls to apologize. He eventually arrives, literally running around the corner. He's coming from a workout session, something he began in earnest this year. His hair is mussed, and he looks rumpled and disarming. His fame isn't the stalkerazzi kind: Although people sometimes glance at him from other tables, no one interrupts us.

Knight is clearly not accustomed to being interviewed. He is a charmingly awkward talker who pauses and frets over his words, stumbling over his sentences and backtracking repeatedly before apologizing for his verbal clumsiness. An innocuous question about what his parents do for a living results in a five-minute explanation of why he doesn't want to discuss that.

At first, his answers are vague and nonspecific (perhaps an unintended result of spending a good chunk of his life in the closet professionally). At times trying to get any specific, personal informa-

tion out of him feels like dealing with a skittish horse: Move too quickly and he might bolt. And soon he does—he excuses himself to go walk his dog, assuring me that he knows we aren't done talking yet. I hope he means it.

For a self-effacing guy, Knight has a job that's about as public as they come—he stars as Dr. George O'Malley in ABC's hit drama *Grey's Anatomy*, a show that's often the number 1-rated television drama and is set to spin off another series in the fall. From the outset, *Grey's* has won points as progressive television, not just for its color-blind casting but also for its attitudes toward women and other minorities. Like gays.

Knight wasn't at the GLAAD Awards in April just to collect applause. He was representing *Grey's*, nominated for Outstanding Individual Episode for "Where the Boys Are." (The episode won.) Ironically, it was during the filming of that episode—which touched on both gay and transgender issues—that cast member Isaiah Washington got into an argument with actor Patrick Dempsey and referred to an unnamed fellow actor as a "faggot." The blogosphere immediately began to speculate about whom Washington meant, but before rumors could spread in earnest, Knight ended the guessing game with this statement to *People*: "I guess there have been a few questions about my sexuality, and I'd like to quiet any unnecessary rumors that may be out there. While I prefer to keep my personal life private, I hope the fact that I'm gay isn't the most interesting part of me." Thus began Knight's roller-coaster ride.

Knight readily admits he'd had no intention of coming out professionally. People counseled him to keep quiet, and if he had, the 34-year-old believes, the questions would have died down as quickly as they arose. Still, he's clear that he doesn't feel he was outed. "I made the decision to make a statement," he says. "I could have not [spoken up]. I could have retreated. But I'm definitely happy I made the decision."

Though his friends were "beautifully supportive," other people told him, "Don't do it—don't do it *now*." To his own surprise, he kept moving forward.

"I remember saying to someone when I got one of those 'don't do it' [comments]—I just remember hearing my voice being very calm and saying, 'No, it's going to happen. It's going to happen. I'm just letting you know.'"

Knight was so unused to dealing with the press he wasn't even sure how to proceed. He called his publicist and said he wanted to come out, asking, "What do you do? Is there a phone call you make?"

After our initial meeting, Knight and I sit down for a second go at it, this time at the ►



"I was raised to be modest—that's where I focus, rather than being 'proud' of something."

Hollywood Forever Cemetery on Santa Monica Boulevard. It's not a haunt of his: He chose it because it would be easy for me to get to from my hotel room—once more proving what a gentleman he is. It's a lovely afternoon, the grounds are quiet, and we find a bench near the tombstone of a great-grandmother named Berta.

Walking the grounds, Knight is dressed casually again, this time in warm-up pants and a T-shirt. For a Minnesota boy, he's eager to talk—without making his job more difficult or blurting out too much personal information. At one point he stops to straighten a bunch of tipped-over flowers on a grave site.

"This is something that's bigger than [my career]," says Knight, trying to describe his feelings about coming out. "How selfish it would be to only think of myself and my life as an actor when you are weighing it against the severe homophobia that [coming out] addresses."

He's quick to add the humbling qualifiers. He doesn't deserve any special credit; this is not a sacrifice. But he does hope his action encourages others to follow suit. And there are people he'd like to help.

"I guess, specifically, it's younger gay people," he says. "I wish I'd had more people to look at—and I'm not talking about any sort of role models—just more people to look at, more

stories, more honesty, less hate."

He realizes there's no telling how it might affect his career. But after all, there have been rewards. For one, Rosie O'Donnell sent him a toaster. "It makes great toast," he laughs.

Theodore Raymond Knight is loath to talk about his family and friends. His reluctance is wrapped up in his struggle with being gay—or more specifically, struggles with how society treats people who are gay.

Some gay actors cite "privacy" as a convenient excuse not to come out professionally, even though they love to suck up the spotlight in all other aspects of their lives. Knight isn't like that. "The reason I act is—" he pauses, starts again. "You can disappear and not be yourself. You can get out of it for a while. You get away from *you*. That's what I liked about acting."

Maybe one thing Knight wants to get away from is the pain he felt growing up gay. At age 5 he was acting at Minneapolis's famed Guthrie Theater. His first role was Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol*. (Adorable, right?) While he realizes that any theater kid will get teased at school, the taunts he received were more severe.

In particular, T.R. remembers this: When he was in junior high, someone donated a wooden play set for the kids to use. Shortly after it arrived another student spray-painted it all over with slurs including T.R. KNIGHT IS A HOMOSEXUAL.

"Someone came up to me and said that there was something written about me, and I went out and looked at it," says Knight. "I didn't...I don't think I even really knew what it was about, but I knew it was not good. I knew it was wrong. I tried to scrub it off first, and it wasn't coming off, because it obviously was black paint on wood, and then I went asking [the janitors], and they took care of it."

To Knight, the most upsetting part wasn't the juvenile name-calling but that the people who were running the Catholic school did nothing. He was just expected to keep quiet.

He took refuge in his acting ambitions. He got serious about the craft in high school. At 25 he moved to New York City to try to make it as an actor. The first thing he learned was how to survive on \$20 a week. "I'd buy a bunch of broccoli, a can of Campbell's cream of mushroom soup, a box of noodles, and one or two cans of tuna, and you mix that all together, and that would last me three days, and that's what I'd eat. And you'd space it so it'd be like two meals a day."

Working in theater, Knight naturally was being asked out on dates by men. Friends asked if he was gay, and in time he was ready to come out in his private life. He lost some friends over that and walked away from others who said they had problems with his sexuality for religious reasons. ►



"I wish I had more [gay] people to look at when I was younger. More stories, more honesty, less hate."

It's likely that Knight also paid a personal price for coming out professionally. Though he's leery of mentioning other people in his life, even those with whom he's not friendly anymore, it's reasonable to assume that any friends who are closeted would fret about having been seen with Knight in public. Since he came out, even banal photos of him shopping at the mall with friends get posted on the Web.

All the drama is just so *not him*. His best friend on the set of *Grey's* is Katherine Heigl, who plays Dr. Izzie Stevens. Her description of how he came out to her sums up Knight perfectly. "He actually didn't just flat-out tell me," says Heigl. "There came a point where we were close enough friends that he would just talk about dates or about other guys. It was revealed in just a really natural way—a 'this is the way it is' way. I wasn't shocked or surprised, like, 'Oh, my God—you're really gay?' It was more just like, 'Oh, OK. Now I know why you don't want to go out with me.'"

Knight insists that his gay life isn't exactly headline material anyway. "Not that I've had the most successful dating experiences," he laughs. "I won't say [fears of being outed] didn't register with me at all, but it wasn't enough to keep me from going out. I have to live my life. It wasn't going to be some sort of, you know, cloak-and-dagger thing." He says he's currently single but won't

comment on whether he was dating anyone when he decided to come out last October.

Now that Knight's out to the world, the rules have changed. "It probably wouldn't be a good idea to date a closeted celebrity," he jokes. On the plus side, now that everyone knows he's gay, the reticent Knight could find himself fielding a lot more potential boyfriends. Asked to talk about whether he's noticed any changes, T.R. laughs and says he still assumes people aren't interested in him. Then comes his qualifier: "Too much aggression isn't a good thing either."

Despite some solid credits and the occasional commercial that kept him afloat financially, the 1990s were a struggle professionally. Then he hit rock bottom. Knight was fired from an off-Broadway show and lost his agent a few months later. If he'd looked like Brad Pitt, he was told, agents might have been able to sell him better. As for the show, a Restoration comedy, Knight was professional but just didn't click in the role for director Doug Hughes. Typically, Knight agonizes over mentioning Hughes (the director of *Doubt* and the current hit revival *Inherit the Wind*), although he's a great admirer of the director and doesn't harbor any ill feelings.

When he got an offer to star in *Amadeus* at the Guthrie back in Minneapolis, Knight decided he'd come full circle. He would do that final role and then move on from acting.

But he was urged repeatedly by supporters at the Roundabout Theatre Company to come back to New York and audition for a Broadway revival of the British farce *Noises Off*. Knight could barely afford the ticket, but he made the trip and won the role of frazzled stage manager Tim Allgood. Suddenly, he was being taken seriously. More roles quickly followed, capped by the soon-canceled sitcom *Charlie Lawrence* starring Nathan Lane. In 2005 came the big break, *Grey's Anatomy*.

Knight insists he doesn't see himself as hitting the lottery with *Grey's*, mostly because he's conditioned to expect the worst. Eventually the show will come to an end, who knows if he'll build a long-term career after this success, and so on. For now, he is on a hit show that has won critical acclaim. It's an actor's dream. At least it was.

With its utopian outlook on matters including race, it's ironic that *Grey's Anatomy* ended up at the center of a nasty controversy based on bigotry. At first it seemed to media observers that the show's creator, Shonda Rhimes, was more concerned about putting the episode behind her than dealing forthrightly with what happened and taking the proper steps. She said it was a brief incident and that everyone had moved on. When it was later suggested that another black actor might replace Washington, she took offense. ►

JIM WRIGHT FOR THE ADVOCATE; SHOOTING BY ROBIN GLASSER FOR CELESTINEAGENCY.COM; STYLING BY MIKI SARGENT FOR CELESTINEAGENCY.COM; SUIT BY PENGUIN; SHIRT BY J. LINDBERGH

COVER STORY

"I don't want to get into a word comparison, they are all soaked in blood. Whatever word it is, if it's the last one someone screams before you're killed, that's hate."

That seemed to be all until Washington stirred the pot again, lying to reporters at the Golden Globe awards by denying what he had said. Knight then went on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* (Ellen and T.R. share the same PR firm) and made it clear that Washington had indeed called him a faggot, a word he described ironically to Ellen as "awesome." Washington then issued another statement of apology, entered rehab or counseling, and is now reportedly planning a public service announcement for GLAAD.

But what about Knight? When asked if Washington had apologized to him personally, Knight initially responded, "Which time?" Then, when pressed, he said, "What a lovely blue sky." When queried about whether Rhimes had come to him and asked what he wanted to happen, he paused thoughtfully before saying, "I like blueberries. Do you like blueberries?"

Washington's publicist declined an interview request.

Rhimes also declined an interview. She did send *The Advocate* this statement: "T.R. is an incredible actor and an amazing person. From his ability to play comedic moments to his work in the episode where George's father dies, his range is a writer's dream. We are equally proud of his decision to come out. He is an inspiration."

That still doesn't tell us anything about what really happened. But this much is true: Whatever went down has inspired T.R. Knight to come out of his shell. Halting as he might be on some subjects, ask him about intolerance, and his words come out in a torrent. He's riled by the hypocrisy of certain religions that teach God loves everyone but then excludes gays (and other groups).

"You are taught you are wrong, that you are bad. [So] you don't do anything, and you wrap yourself in a little straitjacket, and you put yourself in your little room," says Knight. "Don't do it! Don't look at someone, don't touch them, don't kiss them, don't do anything!" Then maybe it's OK. I mean, sure, that plagued me all through childhood, you know, in so many ways, and that's stuff that's hard to get away from. But you have to, and eventually, you know, you do."

Another topic that gets him going is marriage equality. "I still get angry because we shouldn't even be having this conversation," he says. Yes, he sees signs of progress. "But we shouldn't be having this conversation *at all*. It disgusts me."

Back in TV land, Knight's character recently married Dr. Callie Torres (Sara Ramirez of Broadway's *Spamalot*). As of now his character has slept with his crush, Meredith Grey (Ellen Pompeo), as well as his best friend, Izzie (Katherine Heigl). That's quite a bit of "action" for a gay actor, and it should provide at least a bit of encouragement for other actors lurk-

ing in the closet in order to protect their status as romantic leads. But this season—which included the death of O'Malley's father—was overshadowed in real life by "the incident."

Luckily, Knight has good friends on the show. Heigl looks out for him. Tired of hearing him idly wish for a dog, she gave him one—a Lab mix he named Arrow—for his birthday this year. Finding the puppy in his downtown apartment is still a bit of a surprise for Knight.

"We're still looking at each other like, *Why are you here? I'm like, Don't cop an attitude. It's me. I was here first.* And she says, *I'm more important than you. And look at me when I look at you with my cute little eyes. Don't you feel sorry for me?*"

In other words, he's besotted. So Knight looks forward to going home every day. But does he look forward to going to work?

"I'm showing up and doing my job," says Knight flatly, after yet another thoughtful pause to choose his words. "I'm getting paid to play this role, and my job is to do it to the best of my ability, to pretend as best you can. You know, that's acting; that's why they hired me, and that's what I do."

Many have suggested that if the roles had been reversed—if Knight had directed a bigoted slur at Washington—it would have seemed obvious that Knight at least deserved to be fired. But Knight isn't interested in a debate over which word is worse than which.

"I don't want to get into a word comparison—this word versus that word," says Knight. "All those words are soaked in blood. Whatever word it is, if it's the last word that someone screams at you before you're killed—whether it's about your sexuality or your religion or your race—that's hate. That's all this is about. And if people need to learn that when it comes to sexual orientation, then they need to learn that."

"You can't say one word is worse than another unless you say one life is worth more than another. You need to keep on educating and educating the ignorant until they listen and hear. And understand. Not tolerate. But understand."

Knight is sure to be more politically active in the future. But getting him to talk about what he's proud of isn't easy, even if he is more willing to speak up than ever before. "I'm proud of a lot of things," says Knight. "I'm proud of some of my decisions this year. There are some I haven't been proud of, but I'm proud of the ones pertaining to being gay." He laughs. "I'm not happy with what I ate this morning." ■

Giltz is a regular contributor to several periodicals, including the New York Daily News.



Knight time

I loved the interview with T.R. Knight ["T.R. Knight Is Just a Regular Guy," June 19]. He has always been my favorite character on *Grey's Anatomy*, and it is great to find out what he is like as a real person. I was especially impressed with his statement "I don't want to get into a word comparison. ... All those words are soaked in blood. Whatever word it is, if it's the last word that someone screams at you before you're killed—whether it's about your sexuality or your religion or your race—that's hate." It seems hate is the great equalizer in terms of victimization, and T.R. has hit that nail on the head! I expect T.R. will continue to be an inspiration!

ANDREA L.T. PETERSON Woodbridge, Va.

Can't tell you how much I enjoyed the piece on T.R. Knight. The best part, for me, was that he named that adorable dog Arrow. I too have a dog named Arrow; he was named for the companion of Oblivion in Harry Nilsson's classic *The Point!* Although Mr. Knight is not old enough to know of *The Point!* when it was introduced, I hope he grew up hearing and seeing it and named this gorgeous puppy after the faithful Arrow. For a 60-year-old male partnered for 28 years, it was a pleasure to read.

HUGH CALLAHAN Beverly Hills, Fla.

It is strange that the cover of *The Advocate* declares T.R. Knight a "hero." The title of *hero* is awarded to those who go above and beyond to create a positive outcome for an individual or a group of individuals. Being called the *f* word does not

"I was impressed with T.R. Knight's statement 'Whatever word it is, if it's the last word that someone screams at you before you're killed, that's hate.' Hate is the great equalizer in terms of victimization, and T.R. has hit that nail on the head!"

—ANDREA L.T. PETERSON, Woodbridge, Va.

make you a hero, nor does having the media out you in response to being called the *f* word. Although the interviewer tries to set T.R. apart from the other gay actors who cite "privacy" as a convenient excuse not to come out professionally, we must remember that until Isaiah Washington called T.R. the *f* word, he actually *was* one of those actors who chose to hide his orientation professionally. While I have no doubt that T.R. will now do extraordinarily great things for the LGBT community, we must be careful whom we label a hero.

CHRIS WEBER San Jose, Calif.

The subhead for your June cover article on T.R. Knight is "T.R. Knight tells his story! How the *f* word launched a hero." If being called the *f* word is all it takes to be called a hero, we are all heroes, and no TV actor should be applauded for something that a great number of us do every day.

S.J. PETERSON San Francisco, Calif.

Sharpton rebuke

I nearly choked when I saw the headline for your story "Where's Our Sharpton?" [June 19]. I would think you could've come up with a more appropriate role model than this big-mouthed buffoon whose main purpose in life is to get in front of as many cameras and into as many news articles as he humanly can. Recall that he "convicted" the Duke lacrosse team well before the situation was really looked into and, when they were totally exonerated, didn't have the guts to apologize. Some role model.

RICHARD KINZ Atascadero, Calif.

Al Sharpton began his so-called advocacy career through slander and lies by perpetrating the Tawana Brawley hoax in the late 1980s. His income stems from dubious sources. He concentrates his outrage on racist-baiting white-on-black crime, while ignoring the outrageous black-on-black crime that plagues our inner cities and destroys the lives of young black men and women and their families every day. Who the hell wants a gay spokesperson like

that? Why don't you just call the North American Man/Boy Love Association representatives to the front of the line? Disgraceful.

PIETRO ALLAR New York, N.Y.

Smart reporting

I don't care how many vapid, straight, uninspired, and irrelevant-to-the-gay-world people you put on your covers—as long as you continue your recent trend of filling your pages with intelligent, interesting, out-of-the-box reporting like your stories on Daniel Tammet ["The Smartest Man in the World Is Gay," June 19], the gay autistic savant; and Christine Daniels ["Girl, Interrupted No More"], the transgender *Los Angeles Times* sports reporter.

TODD PICCUS Los Angeles, Calif.

It's nice to see *The Advocate* jumping on the autism awareness bandwagon without resorting to the rhetoric of characterizing autism as a terrible tragedy, as something that needs to be cured at any cost, or calling us a blight on society. As a gay autistic, I am equally as proud of my autism as I am of being gay, and I do not want to be cured of autism any more than I want to be cured of being gay. Unfortunately, the article made no mention of the current state of autism politics today, which is very similar to GLBT politics of decades ago. Like the GLBT community, many autistics have objected to the pathologizing of differences. We believe autism is a valid expression of human diversity and that we deserve full inclusion and acceptance—not to the degree to which we can appear normal or become nonautistic but as we are now.

CHARLES SMITH Carle Place, N.Y.

Daniel Tammet is not the smartest man in the world. If he lived in the U.S., he'd be a self-hating Log Cabin Republican. His obvious mistakes? He feels marriage should be reserved for straight couples, whereas those of us fighting for equality see marriage as a legal contract, not a religious, moral, or historical mandate. Tammet ►