Living the Life
By Claire Melton

My dads. Microsoft Word doesn’t accept that the singular pronoun “my” can be connected to the plural pronoun “dad” without any qualifying statements. Neither can most people. A person will ask about my dad, not feeling the need to distinguish which father they’re referring to. After all, most children only have one. This can lead to misunderstandings, and get very confusing, as you might imagine, and I almost always have to follow up any question about my dads with, “Which one?”

We went to Iowa for the wedding. The church was a classic whitewashed wooden building, with a bell tower in the middle, and a manicured lawn. Nothing special, but still beautiful. There were nine of us in the room: Me, my brother, three relatives and one friend as witnesses, and my dad and soon-to-be stepfather, who were wearing almost-but-not-quite matching ties. The female pastor was wearing white robes with a rainbow stole. All of us, with the exception of the pastor, were dressed in a way that almost seemed overly formal, were it not for the feeling of importance that my father and his partner were displaying. I can count the times I’ve seen my dad cry on one hand, and this occasion is the most prominent in my memory. Seeing him cry triggered my own tears, and I held the bouquet closer to my face to hide my suddenly runny nose. Later that night at the reception, my new stepdad taught me how to properly eat escargot, and later the next day, my dads went to the courthouse to get an official Iowa marriage certificate. In a wonderful twist of irony, their license was signed by the Honorable Joseph Smith.

One day, a few months after the wedding, we were driving in the car with the oldies station playing sixties and seventies hits. My stepdad suddenly broke the silence to ask me if it was okay to introduce me as his daughter. He asked as though requesting that someone pass the salt, with the radio still playing at full volume. My heart soared as I replied, in the same tone, “Yeah, sure, if you want to.”

Living with my dads’ Lifestyle can be exhausting. To an extent, I was privy to the Lifestyle long before my dad came out. He’s always loved Broadway musicals, and I’d memorized the Mama Mia soundtrack by the time I was eight. In spite of that, being the daughter of two gay men was akin to culture shock. My whole life had been pretty quiet up until that point, and I doubt I could have coped if I hadn’t had the possibility of escaping to the relative sanity of my mother’s house every once in a while. I’d never experienced huge parties or crowded rooms filled with strangers, so I was thoroughly unprepared for the changes that came with gay dads. I was thrown into a world of hostesses, wine, and polite conversation with people whose names I couldn’t remember no matter how hard I tried. I had to develop a whole new vocabulary, but I am proud to say that I now know the name of any item of silverware, from mustache spoons to individual asparagus tongs (of which we have twelve).

The Lifestyle would never be complete without the Dinner Party. My favorites, the traditional version, are usually only brought to my attention when I wake up to a flurry of cooking, cleaning, wine selection, and occasional redecorating. The table is set with silver, linens, glassware and china. All of these must complement each other as well as the season, and are laid out just so. Floral arrangements are in crystal, silver, or Roseville vases, with two or four candelabras or candlesticks complementing the vision. The layout of our table rivals a Royal Family’s holiday spread, or at least warrants a page in Architectural Digest.
When guests arrive, I play hostess, accepting whatever food or wine they have brought and answering routine questions about the progress of my education and any romantic relationships. Cocktails and wine are served to tide us over until dinner. My stepdad prepares the salads individually—greens, toppings, and dressing artfully arranged on chilled plates. The bread is then served in a wooden bowl alongside the salad. The main course usually includes a roast, some kind of vegetable, and a potato dish. The food must be passed counterclockwise. There is rarely dessert, unless provided by a guest. Leftovers are used for lunches the next week, after which the cycle begins again.

Remember, the Gay Lifestyle is a serious condition and must be dealt with appropriately. In addition to Dinner Parties, symptoms may include:

An excessive quantity of antiques and art

A pressing need to critique the fashion choices of the popular media and, a sexual attraction to people of the same gender.

If you do find yourself with these symptoms, recognize that you might as well go with it, because repressing it is just plain boring and will eventually lead to serious complications if you are in a heterosexual relationship.

Find support among your friends, family and community groups. A standard combination consists of three or more same sex couples, the obligatory Sassy Gay Friend, and multiple straight friends. Experts suggest that one of these people own a pickup truck for those times when you just have to bring home that fabulous Early American oak china cabinet.

Track your progress in public and among your supporters. You will know you’ve started to Embrace the Gay when you say “gaily forward” instead of “straight,” and you’ve signed on to email lists for antique shows and estate sales. Track your progress by adopting a few little old ladies and take food to them every other week or so.

Take responsibility for your Lifestyle. Wine will be spilled on antique tablecloths. You will run out of wall space, even if you double-hang. Your liquor budget will expand dramatically.

You must make amends to those you have hurt along the way to embracing the Gay Lifestyle. This is important. Be very certain that when you tell someone their clothes are tacky, they know you have their best interests at heart, and that it hurts you when you see them wearing such an unfortunate combination of heels and cargo pants.

And finally, when embracing your Lifestyle, you must be aware of common side effects:

Full social schedules

Money loss due to ballet, symphony and theater tickets

A following of doting elderly women, and

Being constantly asked fashion advice from your daughter.

In the end, though, you must face that this is your life. Remember, the Gay Lifestyle can be exhausting, but you are only as flamboyant or stereotypical as you want to be.