

Perspectives

Seeing LGBT+ life through
different eyes

Tony Faraway and
James 'JP' Pearson

24 February 2023



National Ambulance LGBT+ Network



Celebrating the sexual orientations
and gender identities of all our
patients, staff and communities

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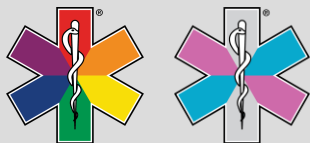
This 15 Minute Read

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Contributors to this 15 Minute Read
are Tony Faraway and
James 'JP' Pearson.

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LGBT+ Network Information

The National Ambulance LGBT+
Network exists to provide support to
LGBT+ staff within UK ambulance
services and ensure LGBT+ patients
receive the right care.

The national committee is made up
from two members from each NHS
ambulance service and additional
members with specialist roles. The
committee meets four times a year.

Further information about the
network, copies of our resources, link
to our online shop and a calendar of
events can be found on our website.

Information about LGBT+ networks in
each NHS Trust, including contacts,
can also be found on our website.

You can also contact members of the
committee using the *Contacts* feature
on our website.

[ambulanceLGBT.org](https://www.ambulanceLGBT.org)

Follow us on social media:



National Ambulance LGBT+
Network



@NatAmbLGBTUK

Getting Involved

15 Minute Reads

If you have an idea for a 15 Minute
Read, or you'd like to author an
edition, please get in touch with our
Editorial Team using the *Contacts*
feature on our website.

Author guidance information and a
style guide are available to support
aspiring authors.

Local Networks

All of our local networks are always
looking for people to get involved.
Have a look at the *Networks* feature
on our website for contact
information.

National committee members are
appointed by local networks.

Events

We publish a calendar of events
that you can get involved with, which
includes our annual conference.
Special events happen in LGBT+
History Month (February) and
throughout the Pride season (June to
August each year).

It is always worth contacting your
local network to see if they are
planning any additional events.



Dedication to Brianna Ghey

We are deeply saddened to hear about the murder of transgender girl Brianna Ghey in Culcheth Park, Warrington on 11 February 2023.

For those people who question why LGBT+ Networks exist and we participate in Pride events, it is because we still have a long way to go to make our world safe for everyone.

The Ambulance Staff Crisis Phonenumber

This dedicated telephone line is available 24-hours a day, seven days a week and is operated by trained personnel. The number to call is 0300 373 0898.

The service is available to all ambulance personnel.

Setting the Scene



All gay people think the same and have the same experience, right? If you are laughing at the stupidity of this statement, we'd encourage you to think again about this one. There are a staggering number of examples where people hear one viewpoint and assume this to be representative of a whole community. It's not uncommon for identities within LGBTTTQQIAAP – possibly because of lack of representation – to suffer from this phenomenon.

There are a number of variables that can impact on people's experience, and for LGBT+ people this list is longer than you might expect. Experience can be impacted by where you live, vibrancy of LGBT+ facilities in the area you live, how old you are and even your own confidence when interacting with people. These factors are very rarely discussed when we talk about people's experiences and therefore poorly understood by those seeking to support.

Of course, sharing an identity can have a bonding experience and there can be large areas of commonality. There are very few lesbian, gay or bisexual people, for example, that don't share the experience of anxiety about coming out to others. There are very few trans people who haven't experienced crippling long waits to access gender reassignments clinics and suffered as a result.

In this 15 Minute Read we will be exploring the perspectives of two people of different ages and from different parts of the country to see what their perspectives are. As you'll see, the idea for this 15 Minute Read came about during our Task and Finish event in August 2022. What became clear is that sharing an identity such as 'gay' doesn't mean we should stop looking at different perspectives, particularly when it links to improving experience and looking after people.



Introductions



In the summer of 2022, the National Ambulance LGBT+ Network Committee met at a Task and Finish event in Sheffield. Amongst other tasks, each participant started work on their own 15 Minute Read. Tony and JP agreed to have an open and frank conversation about their identities, coming out, and the similarities and differences of their stories. They recorded their conversation and later each wrote up notes on everything they had talked about. The several themes that emerged have formed the structure of this piece of writing.

This has formed the basis of this 15 Minute Read, and we have colour-coded each person's quotes to help you follow the story. Before that though, let's introduce both of them.

Tony Faraway **TF**

Tony is 50 years old and later this year will pass the '20 years in the ambulance service' mark in Sussex and later South East Coast Ambulance

Service. He started in the control room (Call Handler, Dispatcher, Duty Manager) before going 'dual role' for a couple of years as a Technician before going full-time on the road. He progressed then to become a Paramedic and briefly an Operational Team Leader. Tony is currently abstracted and performing a union role. He was also elected as Chair of Pride in SECamb in August 2019 and re-elected again in March 2022.

James Pearson **JP**

James, or 'JP', is 33 years old and has worked within South Western Ambulance Service for just over six years. He started out as a Call Handler before moving on to the road as an Emergency Care Assistant. He is currently a Student Paramedic, working in Devon and since May 2022 has also been the LGBT+ Lead for his service.



The Idea



TF One night in the summer of 2019 I walked in on a conversation in the communal student kitchen where we were staying as part of the National Ambulance LGBT+ Network conference in Manchester.



It was between three others who were perhaps all about half my age and was on the subject of relationships. It was one of those deep and meaningful conversations that seldom happen anywhere other than in a kitchen between friends in the early hours of the morning after a good night out.

I was smiling to myself thinking how very different times were now compared to when I was their age. And then the words, 'Ah, well, when I was your age', left my lips and I immediately felt very old indeed. But, to my great surprise, rather than being 'put back in my box' as expected, a genuine

interest arose in hearing the stories of my youth.

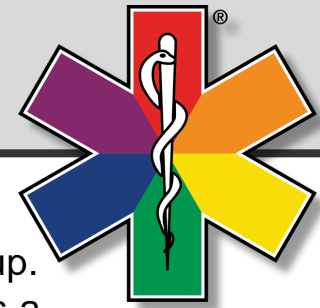
I had never talked about much of this before. Until now I had never seen anywhere in the picture for the jigsaw pieces I held to be placed. I'm certain that we all learnt a lot from each other.

Additionally, I gained a sense of belonging that I'd never previously experienced.

My interest in people sharing their own LGBT+ stories had been sparked. Whilst there is most definitely a huge value in celebrating the (hi)stories of our LGBT+ icons, there is likewise huge value in sharing our own (hi)stories. One person's narrative is that much more compelling when it is compared and contrasted with that of another person. That was the starting point for the conversation between JP and myself that forms the basis of this 15 Minute Read.



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First Inklings

'So, when did you first realise you were gay?' (for 'gay' insert any other appropriate sexual or gender identity).

It's a common question asked of LGBT+ people, and one that causes many of us to roll our eyes! Perhaps this is because it tends to overlook the fact that forming our identities is a process of gradual development. There is seldom a 'Eureka!' moment when you wake up one morning knowing exactly 'who' and 'how' you are. Nonetheless, here is how JP and Tony explored that question...

JP When I was 13 years old, I noticed I was becoming attracted to 'boys' and not 'girls', this was extremely confusing and scary. There was 'this thing' that just didn't feel right'.

He went on to describe how he did not seem to be 'looking at' those of the opposite sex in the same

way as other boys in his age group. On the same subject, Tony recalls a moment where he noted a difference from his peers.

TF In my first year at secondary school a small amount of sex education was taught in some science lessons. I struggled to answer one of the questions set for homework: 'what do you find attractive about the secondary sexual characteristics of the opposite sex?' I remember thinking that secondary sexual characteristics made the opposite sex appear less rather than more attractive.

I went to see the teacher, who told me, after overcoming his surprise that I of all people should be struggling with homework questions, to ignore the question. Both the question and the teacher's reaction puzzled me. Perhaps he had recognised that I was gay before I'd recognised it myself?



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Sex Education

Our duo reflected on their sex education at school.

JP They did not make any mention of LGBT+ relationships. In fact, to my memory, there was no reference or acknowledgment of LGBT+ people even existing. Being a young teenager is a confusing enough time for most people, trying to establish in your own mind what is going on. When there is little to no education around this, it makes you feel isolated and as if you have something wrong with you.

This isolating experience is something with which Tony was also very familiar. He remembers how the taboo around sexuality in general was almost complete when it came to LGBT+ people. The reluctance that this caused to talk about the subject of course extended to teachers. At about the time that he had almost gained the courage to broach

the subject, what has previously been a taboo was encapsulated in law. Section 28 of the Local Government Act (1988) came into force whilst he was sitting his GCSEs.

TF It was clear that being gay was considered 'so bad' that teachers could be sacked for promoting the acceptance of homosexuality. Even if any teachers in my school had wanted to be supportive, for example, by combatting homophobic bullying, it seemed the legislation prevented them from doing so.

It is worth remembering that the average age for people realising they may be LGBT+ is 12 years old (Pew Research, 2013) when considering the impact of the silence on sexuality. Thankfully this appears to be something that is changing, and education of LGBT+ people now appears in English schools following new regulations passed in 2019 (Stonewall, 2022).



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Fears for Being Gay

JP and Tony discussed the context of the time in which they were coming to realise their sexuality.

JP While gay people were in the media, I had never knowingly met one and wasn't really sure what it was to be gay.

TF There was a pathological view of homosexuality at the time – it was considered a psychiatric condition. This generated a fear of being 'found out' and then, presumably, locked away in a psychiatric institution. In the popular imagination, institutionalisation was the inevitable result of mental illness back then.

But it was not only a pathological issue, but a legal one, too. Tony continues...

TF When I was aged 16 the gay age of consent was 21. Therefore, if I were to become sexually

active as appeared common amongst my peers, I would have become a criminal. This generated a fear of prosecution if I were to become sexually active, and reinforced the already strong message that being gay was wrong.

Added to this was the public messaging around the start of the AIDS crisis.

TF It made me feel like from just being gay, I was likely to contract a fatal disease about which there was huge media and public hysteria.

Whilst there had certainly been some social improvement at a similar time in JPs life, it was not without fear.

JP Despite having an open and accepting family, I still had a genuine fear of coming out to them. I'd known friends who had been kicked out of their homes and effectively disowned by those who



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should have loved them the most because they identified as LGBT+.

A Whole New World

Both JP and Tony mention how invisible LGBT+ people were to them earlier in their lives. The combined awkwardness and joy of attending Sydney Gay Mardi Gras before coming out was a deciding factor for Tony's choice of university after his gap year.

TF I remember thinking that it had to be somewhere big and urban where I would 'be anonymous'.

One friend outed both he and another mutual friend when he commented on a flyer funded by the university LGB Society: 'That's what they are spending our money on!' These friends therefore became the first people I knew who were gay. It was the first time I had knowingly encountered

another gay person. I was 23. Within a week I joined the LGB Society and went along to their meeting. I found myself in a room with eight or nine other LGB people – an experience that was quite overwhelming.

The following week I joined them on an informal 'gay tour of London' which ended up at Heaven nightclub. Being in a whole nightclub of LGBT+ people was, for me, totally mind-blowing!

Tony tells of how being gay was generally kept a well-guarded secret – the only ways of recognising or meeting others was through gay venues such as pubs or university societies. Or, he added: 'Being suspicious of someone looking at you in a certain way in public toilets!'

TF Alternatively, in local newspapers, amongst the classified ads was often a 'personals' section which might contain a section entitled 'Men seeking men'.



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Coming Out to Family

JP first came out to his sister.

JP She is younger than me, but we've always been close. I was 18, and I remember being in her bedroom and talking to her about my feelings. When I eventually plucked up the courage to tell her, she seemed undramatically okay with it. I said I was bisexual as I felt it would be less of a shock.

Having had such a positive experience speaking to my sister I felt able to explore this new world which, to this point, I hadn't taken part in. Being able to express who you are, with those you love the most is one of the most life-affirming things I feel you can do.

This, combined with his experience at college in his late teenage years, gave JP the confidence to come out to his mother and father when he was 21.

JP I had moved to Devon and had been in a casual relationship with my first boyfriend. At the time my mother thought I was dating a girl, so she was slightly surprised when I told her his name was actually Dom. She said that I had always liked boys and girls and then went on to talk about safe sex, typical nurse! Years later, she revealed she had only said that as she had no idea what else to say but wanted to be supportive.

When I told my father he just stated that my coming out wouldn't negate me buying the next round!

Tony compares his experience to that of JP.

TF Sex and relationships were a taboo subject at home. I came out by letter to my mum as I knew it would otherwise never happen.



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Both parents were supportive, but I now recognise that some prejudice, albeit well-intentioned, remained. For example, my dad strongly advised me not to let anyone know, especially at work. It is fair to say that I certainly didn't always continue to follow that advice! Following the discussion in the day or two after my coming out to them, the subject was never again brought up and the former taboo maintained.

JP is keen to stress how important the support of his family has been (see photos to the right).

JP Support is so vitally important in my home life and role working within the ambulance service.

One of the biggest ways in which my accepting parents helped shape my development was by providing me with a safe and supportive environment in which I could be vulnerable and open about my thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

He was exposed to a diverse range of perspectives and experiences and says his parents were: 'Always open to discussing different viewpoints and actively encouraging me to explore and learn about the world around me'.

JP describes how this has helped him develop a strong sense of self-worth and self-acceptance and a deep sense of empathy and understanding for others.

JP This has been invaluable in helping me navigate the sometimes difficult and challenging world we live in and has been essential in my work as a Student Paramedic and role as a LGBT+ Lead.



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Trying to Conform

In looking at their comparative experience of 'growing up gay' it was clear what a central role the expected narrative of their lives played. They both were shown prescribed paths of goals and accomplishments which ill-fitted their developing identities. It required them to a certain extent to be 'living outside the rules' due to living within a heteronormative society.

TF It takes a lot to challenge what is expected of you, but it also takes a lot to keep on trying to conform where you know that this is not true to your authentic self.

JP describes how, like most young gay people he has met, he, 'attempted to conform to societal norms, having a few girlfriends through my school years while all the time knowing it wasn't for me'.

JP It's quite funny looking back, the girlfriends that I

did have, have since 'come out' and identified as LGBT+ so maybe we knew on an unconscious level?

Aged 16, JP describes how there was quite a culture of 'virgin shaming' amongst his peers.

JP It brought me to a point where I got very drunk and having told myself that I was going to, I had consensual sex with a friend of mine. To this day she is the only girl I have ever slept with. I sometimes think I should thank her for helping me accept my true self. There was an immense social pressure to have sex before starting college, which I feel was the ultimate reason I conformed.

TF Anything sexual tore me in two different directions – the feelings associated with 'it's wrong/shameful/pathological/illegal' as opposed to the feelings associated with 'it's right/pride-worthy/healthy/norm legal'. Alcohol quietened the



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‘negative voices’ in this battle.

JP confirmed alcohol played a similar role earlier in his life. They both wondered how common this experience is amongst other LGBT+ people. The sense of shame that is central to internalised homophobia makes it difficult for someone to see how sex can form part of a loving relationship between two people of the same sex. Tony states it like this: ‘How can gay sex, if valued as something bad, be a part of a loving relationship which is valued as something good?’ Is this connected with the increased level of alcohol use in LGBT+ people? And also the all-too-common transitory nature of many gay sexual encounters? As JP put it: ‘Afterwards, shame pushes people away from each other’.

JP and Tony talked about how different dangers were associated with gay dating. Before effective prevention and treatment for HIV.

TF Sex was like Russian Roulette – it all came with a risk of death.

Nowadays meeting strangers via apps poses perhaps greater risk. Shame, fear, and sexual desire can become confusingly intertwined, having a negative impact on psychosexual health and building trust within relationships – something necessary in ensuring being comfortable and relaxed (often of particular importance in gay sex).

JP and Tony discussed how they learnt to exclude certain parts of themselves from a very young age – an act of silencing rather than of prejudice. They both learned not to talk, engage or ‘be’ in certain ways, creating a ‘second self’ and to code-switching as a means of survival.

This process is marked by a continual stream of self-directed microaggressions and is a form of



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psychological self-harm. Addressing this learnt process of self-editing takes active intention and attention. It requires us to ask: 'Who am I?' We may reply: 'I have been someone else for so long that I don't now know who I am!' Such existential uncertainty surely cannot come without profound emotional and psychological consequences.

TF We both recognised that it took, and continues to take, effort and intent to meet other LGBT+ people – which inevitably takes its toll on us all. We also both recognised the parallels in our journeys from shame, through acceptance towards pride.

Enabling people to become proud to be themselves rather than continuing to carry the shame instilled in them by the society and culture within which they grew up, is a central goal of the Pride movement – from which, of course, it also takes its name.

JP We are still on this journey and are now somewhere between 'acceptance' and 'pride'. If I

had a partner we would not feel comfortable holding hands with them in the street other than in exceptional circumstances such as being in a particularly gay-friendly urban environment or during a Pride event.

TF I am now feeling relatively comfortable holding my partner's hand walking down the street – although there remain many cues for us to readily stop doing so.



Tony (left) and JP with colleagues.



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Identity and Self-Reinvention

Both JP and Tony recognised self-realisation took each of them quite some time and that they both went through a form of 're-invention' to become closer to their 'real selves'. JP explains how after the summer holidays when he started college, having come out to his sister, he: **'Established a new identity and became known as JP. If people asked, I'd tell them that I was gay'**.

Tony described how not feeling comfortable with himself led to low self-esteem and having a low threshold for saying 'yes' to someone seeking a relationship.

TF That same low self-esteem prevented me from ending what over time became a toxic relationship. Work became an escape. I became sort of emotionally anaesthetised.

He says that learning of the high LGBT+ suicide

rate at the National Ambulance LGBT+ Network conference in Manchester in 2018 was his wake-up call.

TF I realised I had something I might be able, and wanted, to contribute. This led me to start regaining self-esteem, tackling long-standing issues and moving on in my life. Friends describe what happened as my 'second coming out', which is fairly accurate!



With colleagues. Tony (left) and JP (above). We love the ears, Tony!



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Choosing Our Battles Wisely

TF Whilst being 'out and proud' is liberating and saves you the effort of pretending to be someone you are not, this is not the whole of our identities.

JP gives a good example of why sometimes he finds it better not to reveal the LGBT+ part of his identity. He sometimes guards himself against some patients by: 'deflecting questions about the rainbow badge that I proudly wear every day if I feel the patient will not understand or react negatively towards it'.

JP It's a delicate balance, being an out gay cis man, I feel it's my responsibility to represent people who may not yet have a voice, but fully understand that our priority as an emergency ambulance is to treat and care for our patients, regardless of their views. However, the rainbow badge has benefited patient care far more times than it has potentially caused distress or anger as LGBT+ people

recognise it and treat us as a safe space to be fully open and honest with us'.

Tony agrees.

TF Sometimes the pragmatic decision 'not to fly the flag' is to everyone's benefit – but it does come with a personal cost of 'hiding'. At other times, of course, the trans and rainbow star-of-life badges are powerful creators of the important 'safe space' that JP describes.

As a Student Paramedic, JP has found that one of the most important aspects of his job is the ability to connect with patients on a human level and to show them care and compassion. He admits that this can sometimes be difficult as not everyone accepts LGBT+ people.

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Becoming Proud

Besides JP and Tony, it looks like many people in the UK are feeling more comfortable being their 'true self'. Just look at The Office for National Statistics figures for the percentage of the UK population identifying as lesbian, gay, bi-sexual:

- 1.7% in 2015
- 6.4% in 2020

(Office for National Statistics, 2016 & 2021)

Though more difficult to interpret due to a changed question set, latest census results suggest 10.6% of the UK population identifies as other than straight or heterosexual (Office for National Statistics, 2022).

Finally, JP and Tony were asked the question 'What are you most proud of?' – they both said that it was not a question they were expecting!

TF I am most proud of being able to turn around and be kind to myself such that I can make a positive difference in the world. It would have been both easy and tragic to have continued not to be kind. But now, although it will always be a work in progress, I have learnt to be happy and to love.

JP I feel like a rounded individual that has achieved what I feel I need to achieve within myself. I'm really proud to be able to give back so other people can experience that feeling of self-worth so that they can potentially pass that on to others in the future.

The similarities in their answers is striking – the way in which 'self-work' can lead to 'giving-work'. It also struck us that this is surely the underlying central purpose of a network!





National Ambulance
LGBT+ Network



National Ambulance LGBT+ Network Conference 15 & 16 June 2023

Brooks Building, Manchester Metropolitan University



The conference will include learning activities held in partnership with the National Ambulance BME Forum and National Ambulance Disability Network



ASSOCIATION OF
AMBULANCE
CHIEF EXECUTIVES

Conference 2023



Plans for our conference in Manchester on 15 and 16 June are really shaping up. Registration for the conference will begin on 1 March. Each NHS Ambulance Trust will have 15 delegate places to fill and it is up to each Trust to decide on a selection process. If you would like to attend we suggest you contact your LGBT+ network team.

The first day of the conference will take the form of a traditional conference with keynote speakers and breakout workshops. The second day aims to be more informal and will provide a wide range of different learning experiences with which to engage. We will be announcing the full programme and speakers in the coming months.

The two main themes of this conference will be intersectionality and how best the ambulance service can meet the needs of people with multiple protected characteristics as well as demystifying the LGBTTTQQIAAP acronym. If all that sounds

ambitious we will also look at the role of allies in supporting the development of services and creating supporting environments for staff. It is for that reason we are looking for each Ambulance Trust to identify delegates from three specific groups to attend the conference. These are:

- LGBT+ staff
- People of influence
- Aspiring allies

We are partnering with *Marketing Manchester* to offer a range of accommodation close to the conference venue.

Full information about the conference and links to the accommodation booking site are available on our website.

ambulanceLGBT.org

INTERSECTIONALITY+

National Ambulance LGBT+ Network
Conference: 15 & 16 June 2023

Photo View



The stars of this month's 15 Minute Read are JP (left) and Tony, seen here during our Task and Finish event in Sheffield in August 2022.

