



## Army LGBT Forum Diverse Families Lead



### BLOGSPOT March 2021

#### "What are your options for dinner? Eat it or go hungry!"

Picture the scene, it's Sunday, all the housework and gardening has been done, the clothes and uniforms for Monday are washed, ironed and hanging up ready to go for the morning. You're about to start preparing the Sunday Roast and so you start mentally going through the checklist in your head "Do I have all the ingredients?"

I have two versions of a Roast, a full roast where I have a whole piece of meat. A whole chicken, a joint of beef, a side of pork or a shoulder of lamb. Roast potatoes, cauliflower cheese, parsnips, peas, carrots, mashed swede and the obligatory Yorkshire Puddings! Or, if I don't have much in at the end of the week I make what I call a mini roast; chicken breasts, roast potatoes, mixed veg and yorkies.

But then there are other considerations... My boyfriend is turning vegetarian so will not eat meat (occasionally chicken but nothing else) so stuffing is substituted for him (and yes he will eat a whole packet of stuffing to himself!) One of the daughters doesn't like the cauliflower cheese from the freezer (it's been a busy weekend, don't judge me) so if she is over I have to make it from scratch. My son will make an excellent critic, now he just needs to step up and actually cook himself. If anything doesn't turn out right or doesn't look wholly appetising, there will be a comment or snarky remark (apparently it's frowned upon to throw the dinner in his face). My current Yorkshire Pudding game is woefully down. As the favourite part of the meal for all, the bag of Aunt Bessies (other brands are available... but are never as nice) tend to go quickly so I revert to making my own. In the past four weeks the results have been: Burnt, flat, rock cakes and something that could have been used in public order training! I don't know where I'm going wrong?

What are the alternatives? Well the boyfriend could cook, but he gets very experimental and whilst it all tastes amazing, then there's the obligatory hour of sulking because it didn't turn out how he wanted it to. My son could cook... I could then spend the final several hours of my Sunday washing up every dish in the house that seemingly has been used for a small meal and wondering how on earth the fat from the roast potatoes ended up in the cutlery drawer??? Similar with my daughters, the difference being is they are amazing cooks so I can justify the mess, just they aren't here when I need them to be. Perseverance! I will continue in the face of adversity and keep trying in the hopes one day I can win the lottery and fly mum over every weekend to cook a roast. In the interim, I'll wait for the lockdown to end so we can go to a carvery every Sunday!

At the beginning of March I had my first lockdown birthday. Last year we just managed to get away for the weekend and back before the lockdown happened. On the day I was spoiled rotten and had an amazing day rounded up with a video call and family quiz with all of my children. We spoke about how things had changed over the past few years and I realised how quickly life can happen. I moved to my current posting in September 2019 as a single parent. In the past year and a half I have met a partner, he has put up with me this long, I have had my first grandchild, my second is due within the next few blogs and.... **A third** grandchild will be here before the end of the year!!! My only concern is that my lockdown hair is showing off my ever increasing clusters of grey hairs this all brings and I still have two more daughters to start their adult lives and families! If anyone has a spare zimmer frame, send it my way please!

Life changes very quickly sometimes. I am truly grateful for what I have and what is coming. Families are our greatest legacy, either our biological ones or the ones we make ourselves.

### Q&A

If you have any questions you would like answering on ANYTHING parenting, family, policy, the Army or the Networks, send me a question [alistair.smith-weston854@mod.gov.uk](mailto:alistair.smith-weston854@mod.gov.uk)



## INTERVIEW CORNER

In this month's Interview corner, we are speaking to Karen and Elaine O'Hara-Styles, both serving Warrant Officers with the AGC and mothers to three children; Kallum, Izzy and Jimmy. We will look at how they are one of our amazing diverse families and how they both feel about being step-parents to each other's children.

**Diverse Families Blog:** Hey there you two, thank you very much for taking part this month, it's lovely to speak to you both, how have you been over the lockdown at the start of this year?

**Karen:** We have been well thank you – we have become ninja's at home schooling – Fractions are now our best friend. It has been difficult at times though, the children definitely changed over the last lockdown, they were definitely missing their friends and the social interaction with them & having 2 mummies at home constantly was I think a hindrance to them but we have muddled through and come out the other side shining bright.

**Elaine:** This year has been a massive eye opener for all of us and made us appreciate the routines that we all used to have. It is important that all of us as adults and children have our work time, family time and personal time to allow our different characters to come out. Working from home in lockdown whilst homeschooling brought all these parts of our lives crashing together and it has been a massive learning curve for all of us, adults and children alike. Allowing the children free time to be silly and mess up the house with arts and crafts lessons has been just as important as English and Math, we have all needed our outlets.

**DFB:** That's great to hear, I'm glad you've managed to keep your sanity throughout. So tell us a bit about yourselves and your backgrounds and what makes you a diverse family?

**K:** I was about 35 at the time I came out and by this time I was already mum to Kallum. He was about 10 at the time. I told him that I was dating a lady and he didn't even bat an eyelid – he is my no 1 advocate of all time. I have brought up Kallum ever since he was 3 yrs old so we are very close. We have moved from assignment to assignment together and he has seen me raise through the ranks to WO1. I met Lainie through our passion of Orienteering. I would see her flash by me in a streak of red and yellow (her unit colours) in a wood somewhere in the south of England on a Wednesday afternoon and my interest was piqued. We attended training camps in the Lake District in 2018 and in Scotland in 2019. We became close in Scotland and a couple in that same summer 2019. I met Izzy and Jimmy quite quickly and they took to me immediately. I was worried that 2 babies wouldn't accept another mummy but I needn't have worried at all. The children were then introduced to Kallum and it was like ducks to water, on both sides. To see my 20 year old son 100% immediately accept 2 small children was magical – any worries that Lainie or I had were immediately diminished.

**E:** I was around 21 when I came out to my family during my long weekend in Phase 1 training, having previously spent 3 years away at University and then joined the Army shortly afterward I had plenty of time away from home to establish who I was before confiding in my family. I have always been open with my sexuality within the Army as I joined after the lifting on the ban in 2000. I met my first wife in 2008 and we were in a civil partnership for almost 9 years before separating in 2018. During that time, we had IVF treatment to have Izzy and Jimmy, we were the first within our circle of friends to have children. Having known each other before we started dating, Karen and I were fully aware of each other's past and that there were children on both sides so this was quite a seamless transition for us. I think that what makes us a diverse family is that my ex wife and her new partner are very much part of our family and we often spend time together as a big family bubble. We are hopefully showing all the children that it is fine to have multiple mixed parents and complex families as long as you all treat each other with respect and kindness.

**DFB:** Last year, despite all the chaos and restrictions, you finally got to get married. People watching online from all over the world (I was in Australia watching). How was that day for you all?

**K:** It was magical (but hectic too). We had originally planned to be married in May 2020 but that was right in the middle of lockdown number 1 so we had to reschedule. October was the earliest date we were offered, but still under restrictions. We were permitted 30 guests so you can imagine that wouldn't cover all of our family and friends so we decided to Zoom the ceremony so that everyone could join in. Yes we had people from all over the world joining on, I think you were the furthest in Australia, we did have a friend in Thailand watching too. It was sad though not to have family members there but they (and us too) understood the travel restrictions they were under. But roll on Oct 2021 – our first wedding anniversary and the wedding reception of a life-time. We will have our wedding bands blessed on this day so that we can have the whole day as if it was our wedding day all over again.

**E:** As Karen mentioned we were due to marry in May 2020 so to acknowledge that date we had a virtual pre-wedding commitment ceremony to mark the date that would have been our original day. To finally get to the wedding day was very special and emotional for all attending (physically and virtually). Although small, the ceremony was very intimate and allowed Karen and I to chat with all our guests and enjoy the day without being pulled left, right and center.

**DFB:** And how have all the children taken it all? Karen, your son is older and a big advocate, Elaine, your two are younger, how have they been with everything?

**K:** Like I said before – like ducks to water. Izzy and Jimmy are happy that they have a big brother and Kallum is now like the protective big brother. Being an only child he has never had any siblings in his life but he has taken on this role with gusto and without question.

**E:** The children had only ever known a family with 2 mummies, so when Karen and I started our relationship and Karen became mummy number 3, they didn't bat an eyelid. Karen was just another mummy to look after them and love them and they were over the moon at having a big brother to torment.

**DFB:** And how have you found it becoming step parents to other children? Karen, is it a remind and revise to dealing with young ones again?

**K:** Oh it certainly was. When Kallum grew up and left home (well sort of off!!) I'd had 20 yrs of just him and now I have set the rewind button a decade and a half to do it all again. Some say I am mad (laughter) but I say I have been given another opportunity to be a parent again. It is hard though, what I did 15 yrs ago is not what you do now !! I have had to change my ways quite a bit but in my eyes it's all for the better. I am on new ground though with Izzy as I have never had a daughter and certainly one that I am at home with 24/7. Kallum was in boarding school by the age of 8 so I never saw any of his little attitudes at school – this is what parenting is all about and I am loving it all.

**DFB:** And Elaine, how has it been for you? Taking on a young adult as a step son, there's a big gap between your eldest and Karen's son?

**E:** Yes, this was a big eye opener for me. I had been used to toilet training and bedtime stories and all of a sudden a young man is in the house leaving his size 10 shoes in the corridors and asking for a beer, but this is a journey for all 5 of us to work out together as a new family. Spending time with Kallum alone and as a family has been invaluable being able to get to know him better and too share new memories together. Being able to watch Kallum go through and pass out of Basic Training was a very proud moment and I can now share his Army career from day 1 and offer support alongside Karen as he progresses.

**DFB:** So as you are both warrant officers and have a long service behind you both, how have you seen the Army change over the years to support you as diverse families? Either for yourselves as parents or for the children.

**K:** Oh massively – the introduction of the different networks available for families is great, whether you are a single parent or a family of 2.4 you have the same support. It has been great seeing policies now do not discriminate between different types of families. I am really impressed on how the Army have evolved over the years.

**E:** Until I met Karen I had little involvement and minimal knowledge of the Networks and Forums across Defence. I have been very fortunate in my career and always had supportive line managers and co-workers who accepted my family for who we were, and I felt that I didn't need any wider support. Looking back and now seeing what the various Networks and Forums offer personnel today I may have been quite narrow minded as I was only concerned about what the Forum could do for me but now I see that I should have been looking for what I could do for the Forum and those less fortunate and less supported than I was. As a single parent I was offered amazing support when it came to unplanned child care issues but I was still expected to deploy on exercise in the UK and overseas and/or courses relevant to my career, I was not treated any more or less favorably than anyone else in my workplace due to my personal circumstances which gained me huge respect from my unit and Line Managers.

**DFB:** What support or facilities have you seen over the past few years that you wouldn't have expected back in the old days when we all joined?

**K:** The Networks are the main change I have seen since I joined. There was absolutely nothing except the UWO or SSAFA 20 years ago

**E:** I think the Flexible Service, Flexible Working and Shared Parental Leave schemes have had a very positive impact and have allowed personnel to maximize their potential as serving personnel and as parents.

**DFB:** And finally, as a step parent myself and knowing how much family dynamics change, what advice would you give to any other people as step parents or about to become step parents?

**K:** Be yourself, do not try and push an agenda with any children and let them come to you and accept you in their own time. It may not be an immediate connection (I was soooooo lucky with Izzy and Jimmy) but it will happen. Relationships can become stronger knowing that everything is being taken in its stride. But if it takes time, let it.

**E:** I would say take the time to invest in the thoughts and feelings of the child(ren) to understand their background and relationship with their "other" parent and never try to replace that parent but be a new figure in their life. Let the child(ren) see that they are safe with you and that you just simply love their parent and want to love them and care for them as well.

**DFB:** Thank you so much to both of you for talking to us this month. It's been great catching up with you both and best of wishes for later this year when you get the chance to celebrate your wedding with all your family and friends in person.

#### About the Author

Sergeant Alastair Smith-Weston (Smudge) has served with the Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment for 22 years and with the Army LGBT+ Network in varying roles since 2013. Smudge has been married to both a woman and a man and was the first Soldier to have a same sex "marriage" on a Military base, officiated over by a member of the Armed Forces. Smudge has four children and their partners; Jasmin, Bethanie, Kieran and Hannah, Shannon and Nick. Smudge is also a grandfather to Esmee, Olivia and grandchild number three due in October 2021.