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Finding Your Leather Tribe

I remember Axe Leito, a Black Belgian leatherman, who showed me what was possible. Today, I hope my story can do the same for someone else.

Growing up as the youngest of five kids in a strict Pentecostal household in Brooklyn, New York, I learned early how to hide the parts of myself that didn't fit. My father was a minister. My home was full of love, but also of expectations and warnings—none of which left much space for the messy authenticity I'd come to crave. Escaping to college felt like a first breath of freedom, and over time, I forged bonds with queer elders and peers that nourished what my upbringing tried so hard to repress.

But even after I came out as gay, I still yearned for something more—something that felt risky and liberating all at once. I found that spark the night my friend David launched a new party, Swoon, at a Brooklyn bar called Sugarland. Through some persuasion, I managed to get The Leather Man to donate a bulldog harness for us to raffle off. Someone needed to show it off—so I put it on, feeling immediately powerful, sexy, and transformed. That harness became my armor in those early explorations: late nights, afterparties, every queer gathering where I sometimes felt invisible or out of place. In leather, I felt seen.

Moving to Pittsburgh in my early thirties was a new chapter altogether. Pittsburgh had this legacy of leather clubs and runs—whole spaces dedicated to people like me, embracing kink as an act of pleasure and defiance. Martel, a previous local title holder, pushed me to compete and show up, steadying my nerves with encouragement and even gifting me my first real pieces of leather. Marvin and Kurt, elders in

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the scene, handed down their gear piece by piece, helping me sew together not just an outfit, but a sense of belonging.

The first time I truly came out as a leatherman was at the 2019 Mr. Pittsburgh Leather Fetish Competition. My collection of leather was modest, and I didn't place, but it wasn't about winning. It was about standing up and saying—publicly, even if nervously—that this was my tribe. My family and friends had a range of reactions, some more humorous than I expected. My mom, seeing my new Apple ID in full cowhide glory, complimented the “suave look.” My cousin started forwarding leather vendor links. My partner, less sure about the time and money I'd plunge into this, grew a little anxious, but didn't withdraw their love.

Being a leatherman isn't just about the gear or the sex—though both are wonderful, complicated joys. For me, it is a continual process of healing and growth as an Afro-Caribbean American who grew up steeped in religious rigidity. It's rebellion, yes, but it's also acceptance: of my desires, my body, and my community. The first time I was at a Mid Atlantic Leather event surrounded by Black leathermen of Onyx, I felt a visibility I had longed for but rarely found. I realised then that my presence could be a beacon for others like me, showing that Black leathermen belong everywhere.

Of course, there are challenges. My partner isn't always up for these events, so I've learned to balance my time—giving space to both my leather family and my love at home. Leather, with all its rituals and risks, taught me the value of consent and the necessity of communication. Sometimes people treat the lifestyle as a ticket for physical access, but I see my role as an advocate, constantly setting boundaries and educating.

Competitions came and went—Mr. Pittsburgh Leather Fetish, Mr. Mid Atlantic Leather, ultimately International Mr.

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Leather. At every step, my chosen family was there to lift me up, whether cheering from the crowd, or helping me change between performances, or hauling gear from gig to gig. I organise events, perform at bars, and work every day in HIV healthcare. These strands of activism, pleasure, and kinship are all part of what leather means to me: embracing all of who I am and helping others find their courage too.

Looking back, coming out as a leatherman has felt much less fraught than coming out as gay—at least now, as someone older and surer of himself. It was a casual, powerful evolution. It's given me new ways to serve my community, to challenge old wounds, and to find joy at every edge.

If anyone out there feels called to leather or kink, my advice is simple: ask questions, seek community, and trust your hunger for growth. There is no one way to be a leatherperson, and every shade of desire matters. Lead with your heart, not your ego.

There are still days I remember the photos of Axe Leito, a Black Belgian Leatherman, who showed me what was possible. Today, I hope my story can do the same for someone else. I see the community growing, becoming more inclusive, and my hope is that leather remains a defiant, healing force for everyone who finds themselves at its threshold. Embrace every part of yourself—because that is where the real freedom begins.

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This excerpt is from ***Finding Your Leather Tribe: Leathermen Speak Out on Authenticity, Self-acceptance and Brotherhood***, a collection of 22 true stories by leathermen from around the world, edited by Graham Clark.

From quiet revelations to life-changing encounters, these men share how leather helped them find their people and their power.

For more information, go to:

www.findingyourleathertribe.com

