

Austin

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Finding Your Leather Tribe

Claiming my leather identity has been one of the proudest choices of my life, and it has changed me in ways that show up in the smallest details of my day.

When people ask how I came out, I usually have to answer twice: once as a gay man, and once as a leatherman. Both stories are mine, but it's the second one that made me feel like I was finally standing in my own skin.

I grew up near Houston, in a divorced family with one brother, knowing from an early age that something about me ran differently, even if I had no words for it yet. Walking through the underwear aisle, lining up for school physicals, or standing in a locker room, my pulse rushed in ways I didn't understand, and I learned to keep those feelings quiet. By fifteen, I stood in front of the bathroom mirror, looked myself in the eye, and whispered, "I am gay," feeling both terrified and relieved as the word finally fit the shape inside me.

Around the same time, there were other small clues I didn't know how to name. My uncle's motorcycle lived in the garage, surrounded by boots, oil, sweat, and that thick, metallic smell of heat and leather. When I finally rode on the back of his bike, arms wrapped around a man's body, I felt a jumble of fear, curiosity, and a tiny streak of joy that I buried as fast as it surfaced.

I didn't see leather and desire entwine until I was in college, walking past Houston's leather bar, The Ripcord, on a Friday night. In the shadows between two cars, I saw two hairy men locked in a blowjob, shoulder hair catching the bar light, and my feet stopped moving as my brain tried to catch up with my body's immediate, electric yes.

At twenty-one, I started bartending in Houston's gay bars, and eventually landed at the Houston Eagle, where

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jockstrap parties, cruise-y shifts, and after-work hookups became my private classroom in desire. For a long time, it was just me piecing things together alone—what turned me on, what scared me, and what felt like home, even if I didn't dare call it that out loud yet.

My first act of coming out to myself as a leatherman was small and entirely private. In the Eagle there was a tiny leather store, and one day I used my employee discount to buy a red-and-black collar. I took it to a pet store, ordered a tag engraved with “boy,” and slipped it into my underwear drawer at home, not hidden from shame, but kept with the things that touched my body most intimately.

On quiet days, or when I was horny, I'd close my bedroom door, fasten the collar around my neck, and look at myself in the mirror—no audience, no Dom, no scene, just me and this new reflection. I had bought something purely because it made me feel sexy and good, an investment in a version of myself I hadn't yet had the courage to introduce to the world.

What I couldn't do alone, my Houston Leather Family helped bring to life. Over time, I met people who saw past the flirtatious bartender and noticed the leatherman trying to emerge underneath. They invited me to weekly munches in gear, pulled me into bar nights, and nudged me toward community events and, eventually, a leather title run, all the while treating me as if I already belonged.

One close friend, now part of my chosen family, invited me over one Tuesday night to “raid” his leather closet, which held gear in multiple sizes for people to explore. That night he helped dress me in full cow for the first time, posed me, took photos, and radiated the kind of uncomplicated joy that told me I looked exactly how I was meant to look, leaving me with

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images I still revisit because they remind me my first time fully geared up happened in safety and love.

Looking back, I can see there had always been a leatherman inside me, leaving breadcrumbs in locker rooms, garage fumes, bar shadows, and bedroom mirrors. But I didn't fully embrace that identity until around twenty-nine, when a voice in my head grew too loud to ignore: I didn't want to go into my thirties still hiding parts of myself.

With my husband and my chosen family at my back, I made a choice: to step into the world as a leatherman, not just in private scenes or specific bars, but as a core part of who I am. It wasn't a single dramatic announcement so much as a series of deliberate yeses—showing up in gear, running for a title, letting people see me in full cow—and realising that the more leather I wore, the more nakedly honest I felt.

Those who truly mattered kept loving me. Some people drifted away or clung to a more sanitised version of me, and that taught me the difference between loving me and loving their idea of me. There was an adjustment period—learning acronyms, recognising elders, deciding how I wanted to present myself—that sometimes felt like being a teenager all over again, awkwardly trying on new clothes and new language.

But my friendships deepened. Friends started telling me I smiled more genuinely, looked happier, and felt more accessible, as if they had sensed all along that there were locked rooms in me they hadn't been allowed to enter. By inviting them into this truer version of my life, I grew closer to people I already loved and found new connections with others who recognised themselves in my leather.

Coming out as a leatherman meant stepping into a world that many people misunderstand. I've heard the stereotypes—that we're all mindless whores beating each

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other up for harm—and each time I encounter that, I make a choice. Instead of “calling out” with snark or shame, I try to “call in,” correcting the story, humanising the people behind the leather, and offering education rather than just outrage.

That doesn’t mean being passive in the face of hate; it means fighting back with compassion and clarity, believing that our community grows stronger when we meet ignorance with truth rather than just contempt. Leather, for me, is not only about sex or kink; it is about care, consent, and the courage to live visibly in a world that sometimes prefers us invisible.

One of my earliest “leather day” memories isn’t of sex at all, but of volunteering at a local pup night, watching over the mosh space while pups played. I set up a stool, guarded people’s belongings, made sure no one took photos without consent, and chatted with anyone who came by; it was simple, but it felt exactly right, a win-win where I could both serve and connect.

Over time, service has become one of the ways I root myself in this identity: brunch fundraisers, silent auctions, ONYX fashion shows, pet moshes, Walk to End HIV, bootblacking at bar nights. Our community has always been about showing up for one another when no one else would, and stepping into leather meant stepping into a legacy of people who turned grief and stigma into activism and care.

In 2012, I tested positive for HIV, and in those early days my case manager was the only person I really had to talk to. Years later, at Austin Kink Weekend, a friend pulled me into a hotel laundry room, shut the door, and told me he had just tested positive, and time seemed to fold as we sat on washing machines, cried, hugged, and shared the stories we both wished we’d had someone to hear.

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Standing there in a jockstrap, with laundry machines humming and tears drying on our faces, I realised how deeply leather had given me a place to belong—a space where HIV is part of our history, our present, and our fight for a better future, not a reason to be discarded. In that room, my status was not a scarlet letter; it was a bridge between two leathermen choosing to show up for each other.

For a long time, accepting myself as queer felt like a trade-off, as if acknowledging my sexuality meant sacrificing my masculinity. Leather gave that masculinity back to me, and then stretched it, letting me weave in femininity in a way that felt genuine rather than performative.

Leather, body hair, sweat, chains, role play, pain, pleasure, lust, love, and queer joy live side by side in my skin now. Some nights I lean hard into masculine energy—full cow, boots, maybe a cowboy hat—and other nights I let my feminine energy shine, maybe in a jockstrap, ball weight, or mesh thong, knowing that the power lies not in picking one but in owning the full range.

The most emotional piece of leather I own is a garrison cap a friend named Evan gifted me, passing on part of his own journey and history. It doesn't quite fit me the way a cap should, and that feels strangely perfect, because in my mind it already belongs, someday, to someone I haven't met yet.

Every so often I take it out, clean it, and daydream about whose head it will sit on next, how I'll explain that this isn't just a piece of gear but a story being passed down. Gifting leather is one way we keep our lineage alive, turning objects into threads that connect generations of leathermen across time and geography.

Today, I name myself as a queer, cis-gender, white, disabled leatherman in my thirties, with a stable job and living with HIV, and I know some of those identities carry privilege.

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As a white man, for instance, I'm statistically safer at protests or in encounters with police than many others in my community, which means I have a responsibility to use that safety in service of others rather than just my own comfort.

Stepping into my leather identity has been one of the proudest choices of my life, and it has changed me in ways that show up in the smallest details of my day. I love myself more honestly now; I move through the world with a confidence that comes from no longer negotiating which parts of me are allowed to be seen.

If there is a message at the heart of my story, it's this: find out who you are, and do it on purpose. Explore, stay curious, prioritise safety, and give yourself permission to follow the sparks that have always been there; when you finally step out in your leather, whatever that looks like for you, there's a whole community waiting to call you family.

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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

