

BOWTIE FRIDAYS

jack jackson and savoy howe fight
trans phobia with bowties and love.

WORDS JENNIFER PERKIN

Bowtie maker Jack Jackson's story is the kind where one decision can change your life. In 2011, following a bad break-up, and having lived their whole life on the small British island of Guernsey, Jack decided to sell the house, quit the job, pack up and embark on a "big gay tour of the world". Says Jack: "I thought - I'm 38. What's stopping me?"

But things didn't quite go to plan (in the best possible way). Three days into the trip, on a lesbian cruise off the coast of Mexico, Jack met their now partner Lisa. Six months later - and after a short rendezvous in San Francisco - Jack and Lisa were married and living in Canada.

And that was just the beginning. After relocating to Toronto, Jack decided to drop a career in finance to follow new pursuits - including making bowties. "My job was OK, I just knew I didn't want to do it anymore. I didn't want to wear a suit, I didn't want to feel awkward. I just didn't want to feel uncomfortable again, like I had done for so long." A self-described "androgynous genderqueer punk", Jack is gender non-conforming and prefers the pronoun 'they'. Not necessarily the best fit for Guernsey, which Jack describes as a "really small island; really conservative, really well-to-do, really straight, really white". Clearly the remoteness wasn't just geographical. "Feeling that isolation in Guernsey... it was so difficult, honestly."

Happily, Jack seems to have found their place since leaving the island. "When I arrived in San Francisco, for the first time in my life I just felt normal." Of Toronto, Jack says, "Everything about this place, I love. Everything is about including trans people. For example, when I went to the gym, a completely normal gym,

the woman at the front desk said to me, 'Just go into whichever changing room you feel you want to.' No big issue, nothing."

During a long and frustrating recovery from an illness that left Jack physically weak and looking for something to do, the bowties happened. They had bought one during a trip to Montreal, and a visiting friend picked it up and said, 'You could make these.' So Alljackedup was born. The company featured at World Pride in Toronto last year, showing off not just beautifully crafted bowties for humans, but also the matching ones that Jack makes for dogs.

It was another serendipitous suggestion from a friend that led to the Bowtie Fridays movement. That friend, Savoy Howe, is more than just the owner of Canada's first all-female and trans-positive boxing club; she is also something of a community organiser and overall get-shit-done type of person. In addition to running her gym, the Toronto Newsgirls, she also organises food banks, a bicycle and book exchange, sewing classes, and Shape Your Life: a free boxing program for women and trans people who self-identify as survivors of violence. Over the past seven years more than 800 women, girls and trans people have been through the classes. In Savoy's words: "I run a recreational program for people who don't want to get punched in the head."

Savoy has her own story about how she came to boxing, after arriving in Toronto from a small town in New Brunswick, in Canada's south-east. "I moved to the city, and at this time there was a lot of gay bashing. So I thought, 'I'm going to need something.' I saw a picture of a woman wearing boxing gloves in a newspaper; I had never seen those two images together. I did not know it was an option. So I walked into a club called the Toronto



Newsboys, and that was the start. It was 23 years ago. In my fourth year I started teaching as a way to have food on the table. I put up pictures on telephone poles saying 'Boxing for Women'. And within three months, I had 40 women."

Kindred boxing spirits Jack and Savoy have since become good friends ("I love people with different accents, especially when they don't mind me copying them," Savoy says) and seem to have met at a fortuitous time. "When I met Jack it was around the time I was thinking – how are we going to support the trans people?" Savoy remembers.

Over the past year or so, the issues facing transgender people have been more present than usual in the North American media. There was the December 2014 suicide of Leelah Alcorn, an Ohio teenager whose parents refused to accept her female gender identity and sent her to conversion therapy. Around 41 per cent of transgender people have attempted suicide compared to 1.6 per cent of the general population [exact figures depend on region] – a staggering statistic that Leelah highlighted in her suicide note in a final plea for people to take action. And they did: a petition to ban conversion therapy has gained enormous traction, plus presidential support from Barack Obama. There's been Jeffrey Tambor in *Transparent*; the release of a high-profile Louis Theroux documentary about trans children; and even reality TV has produced the very public revelation that *Kardashians* alum Bruce Jenner identifies as a woman.

Jack explains: "I don't know about you, but when I see all this stuff I just think, 'Well, what can I do?'" Enter Savoy and the idea of collaborating for Bowtie Fridays, a community "movement of

love" built around the act of wearing a bowtie every Friday to show support and solidarity for the trans community. "It's kind of like a take on Casual Friday," Savoy says. "Wouldn't it be cool if on a Casual Friday you wore a bowtie, and it's a way of opening up discussion. Because every time I wear a bowtie, two or three times someone will say, 'That's really nice', to which I'll then say, 'Well, let me tell you why I'm wearing it.'"

Bowtie Fridays runs regular competitions through its facebook page, and encourages members to post photos of themselves and their dogs wearing bowties, and to share their stories. "Once you start to hang out with the trans community, you start to hear stories of how hard their life is, especially trans women," Savoy says. "I know that when I came out, I sort of lost my family and those were the hardest years of my life. And that was coming out as a gay person. But, you know, it comes around, for the most part. But for trans people, a lot of people I talk to, they have no hope of having their families back. When you lose your family it's terrible."

Savoy's gym has a trans inclusion policy in place that was drafted by a university professor and approved by organisations within the trans community. "If anyone is new I give them my intro spiel, and in my spiel I talk about the trans community and the fact we have a mixed community here. And that we don't put up with any shit."

In regards to whether Toronto has improved since she first moved there and turned to boxing as a defence to gay bashing, Savoy says sadly: "It should be fixed now." As momentum and support is gathering for Bowtie Fridays, both Jack and Savoy are busy and bursting with ideas for the future and how we can start to do just that: fix it. Maybe a bowtie is a good place to start. ❁