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### One Very Special Episode

*Glee's* "Preggers" (season one, episode four) was a pivotal moment for LGBTQ+ representation on broadcast television. "Preggers" was aired during a time when sexuality was a volatile conversation in the US. One year after Proposition Eight was passed to legally define marriage as between a man and woman, and public opinion surveys were showing the majority of the population to have a less than favorable view of gay people, "Preggers" was a shining light. Through Kurt's nontraumatic coming out story, Ryan Murphy created one of the first positive representations of gayness on network television.

*Glee* was aired on the Fox network from 2009 to 2015. Cocreated by executive producer Ryan Murphy and producers Brad Falchuk and Ian Brennan, the American comedy followed an Ohio high school glee club, the New Directions, through their coming-of-age trials and tribulations. The New Directions sought to bring together kids from all social groups on campus – jocks, nerds, and theatre kids alike – through the power of song and dance.

Rachel Berry, the uber-talented theatre diva, Kurt Hummel, the stylish and effeminate gay kid, Mercedes Jones, the soul-sing powerhouse, Artie Abrams, the shy and sweet paraplegic, and Finn Hudson, the quarterback, bring together what a 9.77 million average viewership (season one) came to know and love as the glee club. The central storyline follows these teens through relationships, drama, social issues, and much more, but the most overarching plot is the group's journey to regionals and nationals.

*Glee* never shied away from tackling the hot-button topics of the time. There was a conversation about death after actor Cory Monteith (Finn) passed away, discussions of teen pregnancy in the first season, and almost constant talks about sexuality throughout the entire show. *Glee*'s representation of sexuality is what makes season one's "Preggers" a very special episode.

In the episode's opening sequence, the audience is greeted with a dance scene. Kurt, Brittney, and Tina are dressed in black leotards and are doing a rendition of the dance from Beyonce's "Single Ladies." The song had hardly begun when Kurt's dad (Burt) came to shut the music off. At 0:54, the audience gets a short glimpse of Kurt's startled face before the camera pans back to Burt, who is visibly angry at the whole situation. Murphy has set up the audience to believe that Burt is angry that Kurt is participating in a "girly" activity.

It's important to remember that this episode came out in 2009. At this point, there were only three states that had legalized gay marriage: Vermont, Maine, and New Hampshire (Pew Research). In May of 2009, Gallup reporter Jeffrey M. Jones reported that most Americans were still in opposition to gay marriage – about 57%. Ron Becker's essay, "Prime-Time Television in the Gay Nineties," states that in the nineties, there were more gay plot lines happening in prime-time television because big broadcasting networks realized that the gay and lesbian communities were extremely marketable. "Ultimately, however, both networks and sponsors will only target gays and lesbians if they think doing so would be worth their while" (Becker). This marketing mindset bled into the early 2000's. LGBTQ+ representation was (and to some extent still is) all about money. The media's representation was surface-level and insincere. Gay people weren't popping up in shows more because networks wanted LGBTQ+ people to feel seen; it was all a money game. "If a new social context made the gay market viable, the emergence of

new gay magazines, advertising agencies, and research firms made it attractive” (Becker). More often than not, gay characters were the butt of the joke and at the time that “Preggers” was produced, people would have expected Kurt’s gayness to be a joke at his high school. Instead, it’s something that’s hardly talked about, and really, it’s not what Kurt is known for. This episode felt like the first time a gay person was nonchalantly living their life on network television.

At 37:10, the audience is shown Kurt doing his nightly skincare routine after scoring the winning kick at his first football game. Kurt, trying to make something ‘normal’ out of a boy doing a skincare routine, tells his dad it’s an important part of his “post-game ritual.” Burt proceeds to tell Kurt that he’s really proud of him and that his mom would be proud of him, too. At this point, the audience understands that Kurt and Burt have little in common. The costume directors have dressed Burt as a typical blue-collar worker – trucker hat, blue jeans, flannel shirt, and work boots. Burt also lacks emotion in his voice and facial expressions. The writers make him out to be a very traditional, brooding father figure. It’s safe to assume that the audience wouldn’t expect Burt to be the most accepting of Kurt’s sexuality. At 38:00, Kurt tells his dad he’s glad he’s proud of him, but he doesn’t want to lie anymore. It takes Kurt a few seconds to get the words “I’m gay” out, but when he does, the audience sees him brace for the impact of his dad’s reaction. “I know,” is Burt’s response. Kurt is in shock, but his dad carries on like this is any other conversation. At the end of the scene, they embrace each other in a somewhat uncomfortable hug, but it’s a happy ending overall. The length of time that Kurt’s coming out story was told seems short compared to what audiences were accustomed to seeing. There was no drama. The scene takes place from 37:10-39:19 – a whopping two minutes. Yet, this scene had a major audience impact.

Executive producer Ryan Murphy wrote Kurt's character into the show specifically for Chris Colfer. In an interview with the Los Angeles Times, Murphy said he wanted "[someone] that contained more than a bit of himself" (Fernandez). He describes how he asked his dad for a Vogue subscription when he was five and would perform songs in his mirror while singing into a hairbrush. Murphy came out to his dad when he was 15 and based Kurt's coming out story on his own. Fernandez wrote, "During the powerful episode scheduled to air on Sept. 23, Kurt comes out to his father (Mike O'Malley) in a scene that Murphy took verbatim from his life." Murphy wanted to show that not all coming-out stories end in tragedy. More often than not, audiences are used to seeing traumatic portrayals of gayness. "The show is about happy endings and optimism and the power of your personal journey and making you feel that the weird thing about me is the great thing about me," Murphy said during his interview (qtd. in Fernandez). "Preggers" showed audiences that there could be normalcy in coming out of the closet.

"Preggers" had an impact on Chris Colfer's personal coming-out journey. Colfer was not out personally at the time of the episode's airing. Colfer divulges that he was afraid to play Kurt because he didn't want to be ousted by the community he grew up in: a very small, ultra-conservative area in California. He recounts being made fun of in high school and having a feeling that people weren't going to be surprised he's playing a gay character because that's always how he was perceived. Fernandez's article from 2009 said, "Kurt may become a role model for teens who have been in Kurt's shoes." Colfer's final quote in the article stands out. "Characters like Kurt affect so many people and touch so many lives and there really hasn't been someone quite like him on TV yet. I'm happy to do what I can but I hope I don't become the next Ellen," (qtd. in Fernandez). Shortly after Colfer's interview with the LA Times, he did another with USA Today. Audiences were able to see the way he was shifting how he felt about

his character. There was less fear. “The show struck a chord with audiences that never had anything to relate to before. I know personally, because I am that audience, I’m one of those kids,” (qtd. in Freydkin). In this USA Today article, Colfer refuses to address his own sexuality, stating that he wants to “keep up a mystery” and that he wants to be private about his personal life. By December 2009, Colfer had come out publicly in an interview with Chelsea Handler.

On November 17, 2022, Colfer joined his co-stars Kevin McHale (Artie) and Jenna Ushkowitz (Tina) on an episode of their podcast “And That’s What You REALLY Missed.” During this episode, Colfer opened up about what it was really like playing a gay character before he was out himself. He said he was “terrified” because in the place where he grew up, it was “dangerous to be out,” (qtd. in Villegas). Kurt forced Colfer onto a “path of honesty” with himself (qtd. in Villegas). Colfer’s path to honesty with himself helped to change public perception of gay people throughout the US.

In 2013, Angela Watercutter wrote an article in WIRED called “How Pop Culture Changed the Face of the Same-Sex Marriage Debate.” She talks about how gay relationships had begun to become more mainstream since the 90s. She references a survey that the Gay and Lesbian Alliance did Against Defamation (GLAAD) and a research team from Harris Interactive. This survey polled more than 2,000 adults on their feelings about LGBTQ+ people. The survey found that two in every ten people changed their views on gay and lesbian people over the past five years to a more favorable one. 34% of them said that their views were influenced by seeing a gay or lesbian person on TV, and 29% said their views were influenced by seeing them in film. Though this data was collected in 2008, one year before the pilot episode of *Glee* aired, it’s proof that positive representations of LGBTQ+ characters on network TV matter.

Kurt's coming out story was nothing to write home about because there were no tears, no drama, no screaming or fighting. Just a dad and his son having a short conversation that didn't change much about the rest of the show. And that's why "Preggers" was a very special episode. The conversation of Kurt's sexuality was a concise portion of the episode making it feel as though it was just another day in the life for him. I believe Ryan Murphy and his writing room were successful in making "Preggers" very special. I remember being a young, queer teen, and Kurt helping me feel like I wasn't the odd one out. And I'm not the only one who felt that way. For many years, people have been singing praises for the show. In his 2019 article "*Glee* at 10: How the TV musical comedy ushered in an era of inclusivity," Louis Staples, a journalist for the UK's Independent, said, "coming out at similar times wasn't the only similarity between Kurt and me. Both of us faced hostility growing up because we were visibly effeminate and different. Both of us, because of this, felt that our best years were to come, beyond the heteronormative confines of high school." Staples felt that Kurt was both "flawed and funny – without his gayness being the butt of every joke." Staples said that *Glee* "ushered in an era of greater inclusivity for mainstream American television." In 2011, Cara Dickason wrote "*Glee* paves way for serious representation of gay characters," for the Daily Trojan. Dickason said, "one of the youngest gay characters ever to appear on television, Kurt was praised for 'changing hearts, minds, and Hollywood' in a recent Entertainment Weekly cover story regarding gay teens on TV." Ryan Murphy helped to change the way gay people and their stories were perceived by the masses that tuned into his show each week – all by making Kurt just another high schooler.

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