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Gay Mormon gets real on 'Survivor'

Talk of the Morning: Utah's Prime-Time Connection

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In a television reality show based on deception and trickery, a self-described "gay, Mormon, Ivy League grad, wilderness guide" who was born in Salt Lake City is leading this season's "Survivor."

Rafe Judkins, a Brown University graduate who now lives in Providence, R.I., is one of six remaining players to "outwit, outplay and outlast" in the jungles of Guatemala on the hit CBS series, which airs tonight at 7 p.m. on KUTV Channel 2. And in the face of the show's typically backstabbing, conniving gameplay, Judkins is "surviving" with honesty, sincerity and a positive outlook, traits he has in part attributed to his faith.

But his announcement in last week's episode about his sexuality and faith has led many fans of the top-10 show to wonder: Can someone be gay and Mormon?

"Is Rafe setting himself up for discipline from his local temple when he describes himself as a gay Mormon?" asked one fan on message forums for Television- WithoutPity.com, a TV fan site.

In Judkins' case, the answer is no because he was never baptized in the church, although he was raised in a large family of active Mormons in Utah, including more than 50 cousins and some 20 aunts and uncles who still live in the state.

Nevertheless, the 22-year-old considers himself a member of the Mormon faith.

"I would call myself a gay Mormon. They [the church] would not call me a Mormon. But it's a part of who I am. I grew up with my family, we eat scalloped potatoes at funerals, we have Jell-O all the time like we're Mormon," he joked in an interview with CBS.com (contestants are not allowed to talk to news media during the show's run.)

"Mormons are so focused on family and caring for other people, and there are so many things about the Mormon religion that I want to bring to my life," he added. "When I have a husband and kids, I want us to have Family Home Evening on Monday nights, and I'll get together and play board games or do whatever. I think the Mormon church has so much good that you can take from it."

Judkins has been one of the few contestants in the show's 11 seasons to play the game with little or no deceit, instead choosing to be genuine and loyal to alliances with tribe mates. In one episode, he was near tears over the way one of his teammates taunted a rival contestant during a challenge.

"[His personality] is a combination of who he is and his religious views," said his mother, Lani Lee, a former artist who helps run Judkins' father's invention business in Pittsburgh. "He went to seminary in high school. He's a Mormon in heritage."

Judkins and his family moved from Salt Lake City to Pittsburgh when he was about 5. He has degrees in anthropology and biology but wants to be a Hollywood screenwriter.

Though his sexuality has been known to his immediate family for some time, his extended relatives in Utah were not aware of it until this last summer.

"It wasn't a shock to me, but I'm sure it was to other people," Lee said of her son's homosexuality. "[The relatives] said, 'This is a shock, but we're drawing the wagons around you.'"

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, like Catholics and Baptists, believes engaging in homosexuality is a sin. In the LDS Church, such behavior leads to excommunication.

"We cannot stand idle if they indulge in immoral activity, if they try to uphold and defend and live in a so-called same-sex marriage situation," wrote LDS President Gordon B. Hinkley in 1998. "To permit such would be to make light of the very serious and sacred foundation of God-sanctioned marriage and its very purpose, the rearing of families."

Rafe's rising popularity on "Survivor" has made him "an icon of sorts" in the gay and lesbian community, said Michael Aaron, executive editor of *Salt Lake Metro*, a Utah gay and lesbian biweekly newspaper that featured Judkins on the cover in September.

"The stereotype of the gay man is that he always goes to the bars and does alcohol and drugs and sex," Aaron said. "And it turns out we have a person who is the flagship gay boy who doesn't smoke or drink and has had a partner of so many years. To show that side of the community is new and unusual."

"They [other gays] can see that there's somebody more like them that doesn't speak with a lisp or the stereotype that they internalize themselves," he added. "They can relate better to him than to Jack on 'Will & Grace' or what goes on in the 'Queer as Folk' shows."

Russ Gorringer, president of Reconciliation, a Utah-based gay and lesbian group that still embraces the Mormon faith, agrees Judkins is good for the image of gays who do not want to shed their Mormonism.

"They come out of the closet to be a whole person, to be who they are. But often, by coming out of the closet, they put their faith in the closet and bolt the doors," Gorringer said. "And that is sad because there is a place for us at the table of Christ."