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ENTERTAINMENT

# LOUD & PROUD: Oscar Winner Dustin Lance Black On His Journey From Despair To Inspiration

The Oscar winner grew up being taught that homosexuality was akin to murder.



By Caroline Frost



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[Dustin Lance Black](#) may be a Hollywood writer and producer with an Oscar for Best Original Screenplay to his name, he may be the totally loved-up fiancé of Olympic diving favourite Tom Daley but, as he tells HuffPostUK in this exclusive interview for our [Loud and Proud](#) series, as a younger man he experienced a time of great fear, sadness and self-loathing that caused him to have suicidal thoughts, and it is this that now propels him to share his stories on screen of inspiration and hope with as many people as possible.

Black tells HuffPostUK how his strict Mormon upbringing within a military family in Texas instilled in him a sense of almost superstition about his sexuality as he lived out his teenage years in San Francisco. He tells us:

“I was about 15 years old when I moved to the Bay area. At that point, for eight or nine years, all I'd had were negative messages from the church about going to hell. From the military environment, it'd been made clear that I was definitely somebody to be excluded and, being from the South, that I would bring shame to my family if any body found out.



Dustin Lance Black won an Oscar for his screenplay for the film 'Milk', about the activist and politician Harvey Milk, whose story he says "saved his life" LAWRENCE K. HO VIA GETTY IMAGES

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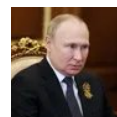
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“So I thought if I fell in love, I would go to hell, bring shame to my family, be bashed or be killed. That removes the possibility of love from someone’s entire life and replaces it with shame. As a young kid, you start to contemplate solutions for making this living thing shorter, I certainly did, and I know I’m not alone.

“If you look to the LGBT organisations, they’ll tell you that LGBT young people are four times more likely to attempt suicide, and nine times more likely if they come from an unaccepting environment.

“There were just no hopeful messages.”



For *Black*, it was slowly immersing himself in the theatre world of San Francisco, starting to mix with openly gay men that opened his mind to the prospect of a happier life, and finally hearing the story of gay politician and activist Harvey Milk that inspired him to live the life he wanted.



Sean Penn (right) played Harvey Milk in the film penned by Dustin Lance Black FOCUS

“I’d heard about this guy creating a world where it was possible to be gay. All of a sudden, I realised I’d never heard one thing like that in my entire upbringing,” he remembers.

“That wasn’t an idea that had existed in Texas in the 1980s. I’d never heard that, I’d just seen Rock Hudson on a stretcher, with the message that being gay will make you sick like this.”

With the story of Harvey Milk, the gay activist turned politician, Black started to see a way out of the misery.

He says: “You start to put hope in a place where shame has lived for a long time, and it’s life-changing. Life-saving, I’d go so far as to say.

“I was very lucky to hear the story of Harvey Milk, it was life-saving for me. I

wanted to share it in case it helped others, but the story of one gay man isn't going to do it.

"Until recently, Hollywood wasn't there to support a production of easily accessible hero journeys for LGBT people. I think it's incredibly important for young people who, as they come of age and might start hearing negative messages about who they are, that they also have a history of their forefathers and foremothers that they can draw inspiration from.

"There are many more stories we need to tell."

For our Loud and Proud series, we've asked many people what their first memory of gay culture was, and for some it was the Brookside kiss, others it was 'Will and Grace'. However, for Dustin Lance Black in his Mormon community in Texas, it was a very different situation.

"We had hardly any TV or film back then," he remembers. "The first time culturally I thought about anything gay was when they beamed in the Mormon prophet by screen on special Sundays in church.

"I was about six years old, and he started talking about homosexuality, and it was very scary, the tone in the room became sombre, people were uncomfortable, and he equated homosexuality with murder.

"I already knew what the words meant, because I grew up in Texas, where people were using the words all the time as pejoratives. I knew what he was talking about, and I already knew I had a crush on my brother's best friend, so I'm thinking he's talking about me, he thinks I'm equivalent to a murderer.

"It wasn't mass culture, it wasn't TV or film, because we weren't getting that in a military Mormon household in Texas, and so all I knew was what the bearded Mormon prophet told me by satellite.

"I loved my family, so I thought I'd better keep it quiet, and not let anybody know, or let that into the house."



**Dustin is now engaged to British diver Tom Daley** JUSTIN TALLIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

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Ironically, it was his Mormon upbringing that led to Black getting his first big career break, as a writer on HBO series 'Big Love', about a polygamous Mormon family. For many years, he was moved to tell the story of Harvey Milk, for which he wrote a script that Gus Van Sant went on to direct. In 2009, Black received

the Academy Award for his screenplay, wearing a white knot on his tie in support of LGBT rights.

He says now of that breakthrough: "'Milk' had to be a financial success, following the success of 'Brokeback Mountain'. It had to make money so studios would develop other LGBT projects. I don't mind helping them make their money. Now I make commercials with Coca-Cola and they're only after my gay dollar (the US trade term for the hugely lucrative gay market), but if they help me get my message out to markets like Uganda and Russia..." he smiles "I will make you a gay commercial."

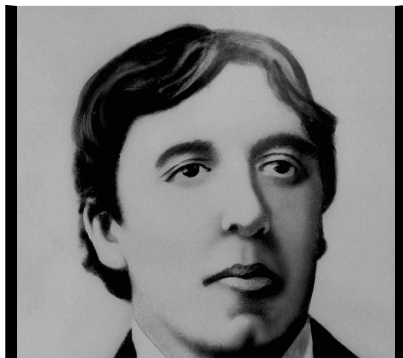
Besides all this, Black is a tireless activist, serving on the board of the American Foundation for Equal Rights. So is he a storyteller with good material, or a campaigner finding his way to people's hearts through prose?

"It depends on the day," he responds. "I didn't start by telling gay stories, it was Mormon stories, but it's always 'write what you know', that's what I teach. I say to my pupils, 'You can pitch me any thing you've got, but tell me why you're the only person who can write it in the world. Keep digging...' By that same principle, 'gay' is one of the things I have in my toolbox, there's a lot more."

Indeed there is. Now, with his Oscar on the shelf, a blooming personal life and so many battles won, the fear and self-loathing that accompanied his childhood must seem a lifetime ago. However, it is clear that, not only does Dustin Lance Black remember them keenly, the epiphany is what inspires him still...

"All of a sudden, I wasn't thinking, how can I hide, how can I survive? I realised I could move to LA, and start telling stories.

"You start to have purpose and hope, it's so simple, and yet it could so easily have slipped through my grip."



**Loud&Proud:  
Pioneers Who  
Paved The Way**

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***HuffPost UK is turning Loud & Proud. Over the next fortnight, we'll be celebrating how gay culture has influenced and, in turn, been embraced by all fields of entertainment, inspiring cinema-goers, TV audiences, music-lovers and wider society with its wit, creativity and power of expression.***

***Through features, video and blogs, we'll be championing those brave pioneers who paved the way, exploring the broad range of gay culture in British film, TV and music and asking - what is left to be done? If you'd like to blog on our platform around these topics, please [emailukblogteam@huffingtonpost.com](mailto:emailukblogteam@huffingtonpost.com) with a summary of who you are and what you'd like to blog about***





Caroline Frost Entertainment Editor, HuffPost UK

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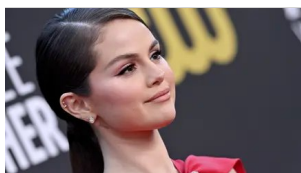
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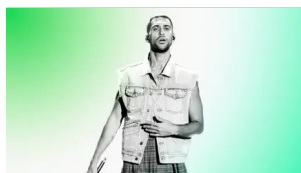
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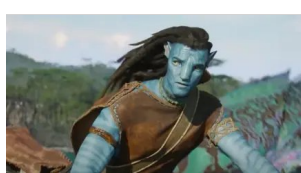
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