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### **Guest: When Jason Collins and my father coming out will no longer matter**

My father, six years ago, did what NBA player Jason Collins did, writes guest columnist Gregory Martin.

By Gregory Martin

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AFTER one of my readings last week for Seattle Reads, at Seattle Central Community College, a young man came up to me in the book-signing line and said, “It just happened on Monday.” I waited a moment, and then asked, “What happened?” He was quiet for a while. Then he told me that his father had come out of the closet only three days before. It was hard to talk about. He was hoping it might help just to say this to someone who knew how he felt. I told him I did.

My father, six years ago, did what NBA player Jason Collins did. He didn’t do it on the cover of Sports Illustrated, like Collins did. My father first survived a suicide attempt. He could not imagine a future where the people who loved him would ever love him again, now that his secret was no longer hidden.

In a future we can almost see, the story of a male professional athlete coming out as gay will not be news. My father’s coming out wouldn’t turn into a book. But we’re not there yet.

At Seattle Central, a young international student told me that it had been difficult for her to be a lesbian in Taiwan.

That night, at the Capitol Hill branch of the Seattle Public Library, a middle-aged woman told me her husband had come out to her

several years before; then she turned and introduced me to him. The elderly man next in line came out to his daughters when he was 70. They still weren’t talking to him. He had tears in his eyes. He’d sent them my book, hoping it might start the conversation.

“Stories for Boys,” my book about my relationship with my father, was the 2013 selection for Seattle Reads, the one-city, one-book reading project of the Seattle Public Library. Now in its 15th year, the program has been emulated by cities all over the country and internationally. Over five

days in May, I read and talked with readers at more than a dozen events all over Seattle.

At North Seattle Community College, two sisters told me their father had come out in the past year. Beside me, the man who was selling my book to the people in line said, "I came out in 1972." He said this almost offhandedly, the way anyone would want to say this. "1972!" I said. He smiled. He so clearly had the kind of peace that I wanted for my father, who came out in 2007, after 39 years of marriage, after my mother discovered his secret life and he swallowed every pill in the medicine cabinet. It's not something my father can talk about easily, much less to a stranger. But he's getting better at it.

The bookseller's name was Michael Coy; he is the manager of Ravenna's Third Place Books. He was the co-founder and co-owner of Bailey/Coy books on Broadway in Capitol Hill, from 1982 to 1989, at the height of the AIDS crisis. He then co-founded M Coy books with his partner Michael Brasky, on Pine, between First and Second Avenue. Two Seattle independent bookstore institutions, founded by the same man, connecting books and readers in Seattle for a combined total of 44 years. Both stores are now closed.

A couple days later, I saw Coy again and met his partner. The two Michaels — as everyone in the Seattle book world knows them. They'd been together 38 years. It had been, they said, a long engagement.

I didn't get the chance to tell Michael that dozens of books on my bookshelf in Albuquerque still have the Bailey/Coy bookmark. Bailey/Coy was *my* bookstore when I lived on 12th and Mercer on Capitol Hill. I loved that Bailey/Coy was an open, safe place for gay and lesbian literature, for gay and lesbian readers, as well as an open, inviting place for me — straight, married, a young father and lover of "Leaves of Grass."

Seattle was the kind of city — *the* city — I wanted to live in, and Bailey/Coy was its literary embodiment. But as David Schmader pointed out in *The Stranger* when Bailey/Coy closed, more and more mainstream bookstores now have a wide-ranging selection of gay and lesbian literature. Schmader wrote: "It gives me no pleasure to point out that the ultimate goal of Bailey/Coy's utopian mission was to make itself obsolete."

My hope is that stories about tragic heroes like my father will some day become obsolete. As a country, we're accelerating in that direction. It's exhilarating.

The support for Jason Collins, in the world of sports, and all over the country, has been overwhelmingly positive and important. The president called him. The Boston Red Sox invited him to throw out the first pitch. Amen.

Collins wrote in *Sports Illustrated*, "I'm glad I'm coming out in 2013 rather than 2003." Coy came out in 1972. He has been a bookseller for most of the years since, and he has helped pioneer and build an inclusive literary community in Seattle, and in publishing itself, which helped make the writing and publication of my book, and its selection by Seattle Reads, possible.

When Collins writes his memoir and comes to Seattle, I wouldn't be surprised if he meets Coy the same way I did — unassuming, doing his daily heroic work of putting books into the hands of readers.

*Gregory Martin is the author of "Stories for Boys," the Seattle Reads selection for 2013. Martin's first book, "Mountain City," received a Washington State Book Award. He lives in Albuquerque.*