

THE **CrossFit** JOURNAL

# AND PRIDE PUSH-UPS

Adam Gonzales talks about finding acceptance in a CrossFit gym, where effort is the only thing that matters.

BY BRITTNEY SALINE





On Sunday, June 12, Omar Mateen opened fire in Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, killing 49 people and injuring three others in what the New York Times has **described** as the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history. Though the sudden devastation came as a shock to the world, many in the lesbian/gay/transsexual/bisexual/queer (LGTBQ) community saw it as a terrifyingly real expression of the challenges they face each day.

“It’s a daily reality for so many of us,” said Adam Gonzales, a 27-year-old gay man living in Amarillo, Texas.

Months before the shooting, Gonzales lay on the floor at CrossFit Amarillo, his chest heaving and head spinning in the aftermath of Open Workout 16.5. His boyfriend looked on from the sideline, pride etched on his face as high fives and fist bumps were passed all around. The final workout of Gonzales’ third CrossFit Games Open was cause for celebration. But first, Gonzales required a costume change.

Taking care that he didn’t match his boyfriend’s outfit too closely, Gonzales swapped his bright-purple plastic-rimmed glasses for a more conservative black pair. At the restaurant, the couple took care to leave several inches between them. In Texas, there are **no statewide protections** against employer discrimination based on sexual orientation, and as a teacher in a school district that has allegedly fired employees for their homosexuality, Gonzales’ partner needs to stay under the radar.

“If word got back to his employer, he’d lose his job,” Gonzales said.

## Finding Himself

Gonzales is an articulate speaker with a flair for comedy, cracking jokes at his own expense in an interview in late June. A CrossFit athlete of four years, he loves cleans—his max is 275 lb.—and hates sumo deadlift high pulls. His warm-up of choice is a quick dance to Beyoncé.

He’s known he was gay since age 8.

“Where most of my peers were starting to notice girls more, I was noticing boys,” he said. “There was sort of like this innocent attraction. I wanted to be around guys.”

But raised in a conservative Catholic household, Gonzales never spoke of his attraction.

“We just didn’t talk about things in my family,” he said. “We went to church, but we didn’t talk about church at home. Sometimes I feel like I was raised more by a television than by actual people.”



Adam Gonzales lives in Texas, a state in which no laws ban discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Angie Amphay



Angie Amphay



That was one of the reasons he never told his family that an older boy from church sexually abused him intermittently from age 5 to 15.

“Victims—” he started, “—there are so many things that go through our minds, and people these days think, ‘Why didn’t they say something?’ But to a child, when there’s a manipulation of power, they are left absolutely powerless and absolutely voiceless. We look back and think, ‘Surely there was someone he could have talked to,’ and in my life, there just really wasn’t. It was also just the fear of thinking, ‘I know this is bad, and I don’t want people to think I like this.’”

Growing up, school was his safe haven. A straight-A student, Gonzales threw himself into his studies and the school choir and theatre club.

“Being on stage was a lot of fun because I got to be someone else,” he said.

“I wanted to be the Captain America of charity. I wanted to make a difference.”  
—Adam Gonzales

After high school, he continued to bury his fears and feelings, consuming himself with the pursuit of the priesthood. A deep desire to do good in the world led to a mission to become a priest, and he worked with homeless and disadvantaged youth during his four years in seminary.

“I love helping people,” he said, “and there (are) so many hurting people and so many people needing help. I wanted to be the Captain America of charity. I wanted to make a difference.”

While in seminary, he kept his sexuality a secret.

“At the time, I thought, ‘Hey, I could live this lifestyle. I think I can be gay and just live a celibate lifestyle, and rather than have a partner to spend my life with, I’ll devote myself to others through the church and through charity ... and rather than have children, the people of the church will be my flock and the people I look after and give my life to,’” he recounted.

Four years later, the deal seemed a bit raw. After graduating from seminary in 2013, he spent a few months as a postulate

and then a novice in the monastery before calling it quits.

“I thought, ‘This isn’t right,’” he remembered. “‘This isn’t right to deny something that is such an integral part of myself and to pretend ... . There’s no way I can become the cookie-cutter person they want and maintain my own sense of dignity.’ So I left.”

## Done Hiding

It was a year and a half before Gonzales publicly came out, as many of his church friends were intolerant of homosexuals. He recalled an evening out to dinner in which table talk turned to gay bashing.

“I would sit there and think, ‘What if I was to come out to them right now, right here, right this moment? How many of these people would accept me? And how many people could I affect if they were able to put a face to these people they were spending so much energy hating?’” he said.

Unwilling to hide any longer, Gonzales came out in April 2015.

“There were people out there fighting for me, and they didn’t even know they’re fighting for me,” he said. “I was denying being a part of them, and what good was that doing? Late one night I just decided, ‘I’m done. I’m done with hiding. I’m done with denying. I’m done with pretending. I’m just done.’”

Though some of his friends were supportive, others stopped calling. His mother told him she could not support his “lifestyle choice,” and his biological father—recently released from prison, where he served a decades-long sentence for murder—said Gonzales must be possessed by demons. Just a few months ago, Gonzales was uninvited to his aunt’s wedding.

“We don’t want to have an embarrassment on our big day,” Gonzales quoted the text message. “That was an aunt I had always gotten along with, who had always been very loving and fun to be around, and to get that from her was kind of a slap in the face.”

But the biggest shock was yet to come. As a child, Gonzales had been afraid to report the sexual abuse he suffered for fear authorities would blame him. A few months after he came out, his fears were confirmed by an old seminary friend: After Gonzales reported the abuse in his early seminary years, the council of priests overseeing seminary students—including his abuser—dismissed Gonzales’ case.

“Some of them in their ignorance or stupidity said, ‘Well, Adam never took it to court, so it’s not official,’ even though I did have a restitution meeting with my (abuser) with my therapist present



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Courtesy of Adam Gonzales



“With CrossFit, it doesn’t matter if you’re male, female, black, white, gay (or) straight; at the end of the day, it’s like, ‘OK, how did you better yourself today?’ ”

—Adam Gonzales

and his therapist present ... and he admitted that he knew what he was doing and he knew what to say to control me.”

In the council’s eyes, his being gay, Gonzales said, meant no harm had been done.

“Someone on the council said, ‘Well, we’re pretty sure Adam’s gay, so it doesn’t matter anyway,’” Gonzales reported. “Which is essentially saying, ‘We’re pretty sure Adam’s gay, so he liked it, so it wasn’t actually abuse,’ even though there was an age disparity between (us).”

Receiving more judgment than empathy from his family, Gonzales severed ties with his mother and father, first blocking their text messages and then getting a new number. A few months after coming out, he met his now-boyfriend, a man at a gay bar who preferred deep conversation to hook-up culture vernacular.

“I sat there and talked with him for two hours and not once did he try to take me home,” Gonzales said. “He’s just very sweet. Not judgmental or egotistical ... he very much just takes me as I am.”

The pair hit it off from the start, making weekend trips to Dallas to visit friends and binge-watching Netflix shows on lazy Sunday afternoons—in short, the same things many heterosexual couples enjoy. But Gonzales and his partner are cautious in public.

“I still find myself at times censoring myself, not acting too gay,” Gonzales said. “There’s no locking arms, there’s no holding hands, there’s no having a little romantic peck on the cheek. ... And I can’t brag about him. I can’t be like, ‘Oh, my boyfriend’s the best’; I can’t do that and I can’t share this part of my life that is the best, happiest part of my life with the world.”

## “A Real Person”

It’s a different story within CrossFit walls.

A former runner, bicyclist and boxer, Gonzales began CrossFit in 2012. It fit his competitive nature perfectly, and he loved the

concept of pursuing well-rounded fitness. He remembered observing a fellow athlete at the 10-a.m. class he frequented when he first started CrossFit.

“He was a really buff guy, 6 foot 3, a beefy guy. He would lift all this crazy weight, and I’m over here trying to clean 65 lb. and trying to look macho doing it, but then when we would take off on the run, I would smoke him,” Gonzales said. “And I thought, ‘OK, I could beat (him) if I would just get a little stronger.’”

But for Gonzales, CrossFit was more than a fitness program. Before he came out, it was his escape. After, it was his safe haven.

“It’s such an equal playing field because with CrossFit it doesn’t matter if you’re male, female, black, white, gay (or) straight; at the end of the day, it’s like, ‘OK, how did you better yourself today?’” he said. “Or if you’re the competitive type, numbers don’t lie. What score went up on the whiteboard? The numbers are blind to gender or sexuality or race.”

It wasn’t just about the workouts. At the gym, Gonzales said, he and his boyfriend were free to be themselves. Though his boyfriend does not do CrossFit, Gonzales said fellow athletes often inquire after him, asking how the couple is doing and whether they’ve traveled anywhere interesting lately.

“It’s so powerful to feel that kind of support,” Gonzales said. “It makes me feel like a real person. In so many ways, our society sort of dehumanizes the LGTB community. People are allowed to just break down our lifestyle and degrade us and just make us feel subhuman, like second-class citizens. For people to ... speak to us like we’re normal people—it’s difficult to describe.”

Matthew Jackson is Gonzales’ friend and another gay athlete at CrossFit Amarillo. He’s been out for about 15 years.

“Since then, it’s just been a hiding game from not only perfect strangers but some members of my family, as well. ... Since I’ve started going to CrossFit, I can leave things like that at the door. ... (CrossFit) is one of the few places I can go where it’s completely judgment-free. Well, aside from the coach correcting form,” he joked.



At CrossFit gyms, judgment should be reserved to squat depth, lockout and other points of performance.

Angie Amphay





In Seattle, members of CrossFit Felix joined the annual Pride Parade to show their support for the LGBTQ community.

“(Matthew) and I, we’re like soul sisters,” Gonzales said. “We’re boisterous and loud and proud. We’ll joke around and slap each other on the butt and just kinda be campy. (CrossFit) is the place where we can joke around and dance to Katy Perry and sing out loud to (Lady) Gaga, and nobody judges us.”

CrossFit, Gonzales said, also serves as a platform for him to reach out to members of the LGBTQ community and break down stereotypes.

“I grew up being that sissy boy,” he said. “I grew up being joked about and made fun of as the effeminate kid, the choir queer and the tennis pansy. I was never considered one of the macho guys ... and so in the gym, it was interesting at times to go to local competitions and to come in third or fourth place, ahead of these guys.”

Recently, Gonzales deadlifted 445 lb. in a local competition while wearing a belt bedazzled with multi-colored faux jewels.

“I’d be out there with my bright purple CrossFit short shorts and my glitter headband, and come ‘3, 2, 1, go,’ none of that mat-

ters,” he said. “It doesn’t matter who you are, where you come from, who you love. It’s about what you do.”

## Fear of the Unknown

Previous persecution isn’t required for CrossFit athletes to understand what LGBTQ community members face each day, Gonzales said, speaking of the popular description of CrossFit as a cult filled with kippling Kool-Aid drinkers retching their breakfasts after each workout.

“It boils down to fear of the unknown. ... Many CrossFitters know what it feels like to be on the outside, what it feels like to be judged and mislabeled and misrepresented and misunderstood. And no matter how much we try to explain it to (others), they don’t get it, and no matter how many times we invite them to a community workout, they won’t go,” Gonzales said.

He continued: “It’s the same way in the LGTB community. No matter how many times we tell them not all of us listen to ABBA, they won’t believe us. No matter how many times we tell them we don’t bathe in glitter and not all gay men are drag queens,

no matter how many times we invite them to the gay bar just to have a drink, they won’t go. And so I invite people to remember what that’s like. Remember what it means to be misunderstood and misrepresented, and remember what it means to try to share a part of you that you love and gives you life with other people.”

A few days after the CrossFit Journal interview, Gonzales and his partner packed their bags and squeezed into Gonzales’ white Jetta and headed to Albuquerque, New Mexico, to catch a flight to Seattle, Washington, where the pair would celebrate Pridefest in the Emerald City and visit Gonzales’ partner’s family. As Amarillo disappeared behind them, Gonzales’ phone lit up with a text message from the owner of Tornado Alley CrossFit, a new affiliate set to open within the week. The owner wanted Gonzales—who has coached at and managed CrossFit affiliates on and off since 2014—to be director and general manager.

“I’m so excited,” Gonzales said.

After all, he’s always wanted to be the Captain America of helping people, and at Tornado Alley CrossFit, he’ll have the chance to sculpt his own safe haven: a place where all will be welcome, no matter what language they speak or gender they love.

“Remember what it means to be misunderstood and misrepresented, and remember what it means to try to share a part of you that you love.”

—Adam Gonzales

“One of the most important things for me in this role (will be) to ensure that it is a safe place and it is a welcoming place,” he said.

Gonzales paused, reflecting.

“I’m one of the lucky ones,” he said. “There were times in my life where I thought, ‘I’m done. I can’t take it anymore. If anything else gets thrown at me, I’m just gonna end it all.’ And fortunately there were people who were put in my path and there were avenues like CrossFit that kind of helped me work through all of the BS.

“But I know not everyone has a story like that. There are so many people who’ve lost their lives to suicide (or) to drugs, people who’ve been beaten and raped and killed, all because of the way they were.

“And if one person reads this story and is a person who may be in a gym where they feel alone because they may be the only gay person but they see that in the greater CrossFit community there are other people like them—gosh, that would make my day. That would make it all worth it.” ■

## About the Author

Brittney Saline is a freelance writer contributing to the CrossFit Journal and the CrossFit Games website. She trains at [CrossFit St. Paul](#). To contact her, visit [brittneysaline.com](#).