

PORTRAITS

Justin Mendoza: Cheers, Fears and Queers

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by Suzi Nash

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Merriam-Webster's Thesaurus provides the following synonyms for the word [“intrinsic”](#): inherent, integral and essential.

Those words could also describe this week's Portrait, Justin Mendoza, and their company [Intrins Ing](#). The health and wellness boutique has a [mission and vision](#) that “aims to facilitate intentional healing spaces for authentic, conscious connection with source, self and community, and the integration of accessible solutions for sustainable growth and change.” Their practice focuses on psychotherapy and wellness coaching. We met at [PGN's 50th Anniversary Celebration](#) and had a chance to talk this week.

Are you originally from Philly?

I am from North Jersey originally. I grew up just across from New York City, across the Hudson River in the Jersey City area. We lived there in an apartment building until I was 10, and then we moved out to the suburbs.

I went from Newark, New Jersey to Radnor, Pennsylvania, which was a culture shock. What was a big change for you?

I think the biggest thing was diversity. Growing up in an urban environment, there were kids from all different backgrounds around me. When I moved to the suburbs, it was mostly just white culture. It's North Jersey, so there was still some diversity, but not like before.

I was in a gifted and talented program in Hudson County, and it was very stimulating. We would be bused together to one centralized school location where we learned Greek and mythology. The environment was just so rich, and it was like "Pee-wee's Playhouse."

When we moved to the suburbs and I was in the gifted program, it was mostly science and math. I think that being able to see those two worlds was pretty impactful on me.

What were some of the things that you were interested in as a kid?

I was always a creative kid. My father wanted to be an artist, so we would work on fun projects together on the weekends, like making a Voltron character out of a cardboard box. And my Halloween costumes were always a family project. Once I won best Halloween costume, that was the goal every year.

Living in an urban environment and in an apartment building, my family was a bit overprotective. I was kind of confined to the building, unless I went to friends' homes. So my room was my world. It was very bright with lots of toys and fun things to create my own little world in there.

Do you have siblings?

I had a younger sister. We were seven years apart. We lost her a couple years ago. She was a force of nature, and she and that loss have taught me so much about life.

Thank you for sharing that. Where did you go to college, and what did you study?

The summer before my senior year, I was debating between various creative fields. I dabbled in architecture, photography, graphic design and fashion. The Art Institute here had a summer program for fashion, and I decided that I wanted to be a fashion designer, and that's what brought me to Philadelphia.



Justin Mendoza with their sister.

My mom had worked in the industry and actually attempted to deter me, and also — thankfully — suggested I not go to school in New York, because, looking back, I probably wouldn't have finished. I came to Philadelphia College of Textiles and Science, which became Philadelphia University and then Jefferson. They had all those majors, so I could shift if I wanted to. So I completed my degree in fashion design, and that was my first career.

Did you have Clara Henry as a teacher by any chance? She was my next door neighbor for years.

I sure did! Oh, my goodness, I love those types of synchronicities. Yes, we were close, and she invited me to be a judge for the fashion show. Love her!

Did you play any sports at all?

I did. My aunt owned an advertising agency, and she had also been an art major. My father worked there. She became sort of the model of success in the family.

Being in that gifted and talented program, and enjoying praise that I got for being intelligent and high achieving, I'm a bit of a recovering perfectionist. In high school, I wanted to build my resume to get into a good college, (and to be well rounded) so I ran cross country and track. I still love running, and love being out in nature. I also was on the literary magazine and became editor-in-chief of the yearbook. So I was involved in quite a bit, including sports.

Something that I think pushed me into fashion was that, having experience with bullying, I became very expressive with the way I looked. This was a time when grunge and punk rock were popular, and that was my way of giving a middle finger to conformity and to my classmates who were bullies.

I think that shift in environments and my family being somewhat countercultural, I just always felt that I needed to be vocal about systems of control and oppression. There was a classic football jock who was picking on this quiet Asian boy, and I spoke up. So then I became a target. That empowering music that speaks against injustice was pretty influential for me.

I should also add that in elementary school, there was an older kid in my building who had spiky hair and listened to Big Audio Dynamite, and he was like a big brother that I emulated. I had spiky hair because of him, and when my second-grade teacher told me that it was too disruptive, my parents were like, “You go to public school, you can wear your hair any way you like.” So I carried that spirit forward.

Was there any particular piece of clothing that you remember?

Senior year, I went to the Art Institute. I found my art school people. One of them was Austin Scarlett, who was on “Project Runway.” We became friends and he went to my prom — not as my date.

So we’d go to New York all the time, to Patricia Field’s in [Greenwich] Village for club wear and Trash & Vaudeville in the East Village, and there was one piece in particular: clear plastic pants. At prom, it was just like our own fashion show. It was fun to figure out what was gonna stir people up. I was very David Bowie-inspired.

Fun times! I’m going to fast forward to ask what made you do the flip from the arts more into the work that you do now?

I’d say a couple things. When I graduated from undergrad — before I went to work in the industry — 9/11 happened, and that made me question New York. I was in my early 20s, wasn’t ready to adult yet, and had always wanted to live in California. So I did a cross-country trip and lived in San Diego for a year.

I was always interested in health and wellness, and was like, “What if I don’t do this fashion thing? What do I do? But also, I have this degree that I have to pay for. I think I should try that out.” So I worked in the industry and was head designer for a brand that I loved, but it was very different from when I was in high school and was into self-expression. It entailed sitting behind a desk and a computer and chasing trends. And the “Devil Wears Prada” stereotypes exist for a reason.

I was engaged at the time, and when that ended, I went on my own healing journey. I went to an open house for the Institute for Integrative Nutrition. I didn’t know what I was going to do with it, but I was like, “This is where I need to go.” And then I just kind of kept following my passion and the signs along the way. I was doing health coaching and focused on working with the queer community.

I took my first course on social work at Rutgers just as the Occupy Wall Street movement started. I was down there at least once a week, and I knew from experience that social work was right for me. They would have demonstrations, and I would go sometimes, just to experience the energy and to learn. I was on one of the queer committees, and it felt like it was part of who I am and what I needed to do.



Tell me a little bit about your business now.

I started in the treatment industry and got to start the IOP [Intensive Outpatient Program] at the Mazzoni Center. That was a dream: to work in substance use for the queer community.

And in 2020, just before the pandemic, I started my practice and started seeing my own clients. Four years ago, I quit my full-time job and went completely solo, which — for a risk-averse, anxiety-riddled person — was a leap of faith. But I've done it before, and now I am just so privileged that I get to do this work and get to work with my clients and support them. I am so happy to be doing this work. It doesn't feel like work, really.

What else should people know and who are the types of people who would use your services?

I have a pretty specific niche. I work with high-achieving, high-functioning creative folks, recovering perfectionists and people pleasers. I like to say I also work with empaths and entrepreneurs, and I work with folks primarily who have complex PTSD.

And with that is also anxiety, depression, substance use and OCD. I have a diverse clientele across socioeconomic status, age, sexuality, gender identity, etc., but I have primarily focused on LGBTQ+ experiences.

Now, let's talk about your other side. I understand you're also a queer horror fanatic.

Yes! So anything '90s — music or pop culture — but I especially had been drawn to the horror genre. I even hosted an event, [“Queering Fear”](#) about the horror genre and queer experience and some of the tropes that I feel like resonate for us.

Why do you think these characters resonate with the queer community and with gay men?

Well, they are survivors, right? Having experienced trauma personally, and in our community, I feel that the genre resonates. I love the Final Girl concept. Feminism and empowerment are something that I really enjoy.

Sidney Prescott in the “Scream” series and “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” are like a salve for my soul. And they have a sense of risk; they're targeted. And I think those are experiences that we can relate to. Plus, the ones that I really enjoy have an element of humor and camp!

So outside of the horror genre, what are some extracurricular things that you do?

I have been a runner. I tried a triathlon, but I'm not a swimmer, so that didn't happen. I did my first full marathon here in Philly a few years ago.

As I'm getting older, cardio and impact is something I have to be careful with, but I just love being out in nature — so hiking, cycling and taking my dog out for walks.

Tell me about the pup.

She is a rescue mutt, and her full name is [Donna Bella Pawsace](#) — just Bella for short.

OK, some totally random questions. What was your coming-out experience?

In high school, people would tell me what I was, and I didn't even know what I was yet. I think that's a pretty common experience for folks. When I came to Philly, that's when I was really able to feel free. We'd go to Woody's underage nights. So my coming out was here in Philly, out in the bars and clubs, and that was another reason for me to be passionate about the LGBTQ+ [community] and substance use.

If you were invisible for a day, what would you do?

Gosh, that's a hard one. I guess I would want to be a fly on the wall in places of power and just confirm all of my worst suspicions.

You might see those Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena that Nancy Mace talks about in government!

I mean, at this point, I feel like we might do better with the aliens...

For sure. Three things you're loving right now?

My recovery. Although I've been alcohol free for four years, I just celebrated one year in recovery and working steps. It has just been really healing, and even as a therapist, it's opened up different approaches that I didn't have access to.

I am also loving self-defense and exploring it in various, different ways. I'm a pacifist, but these days, it feels like self-defense is very necessary, and it is actually empowering. I had a recent experience where some trauma responses were triggered, and I didn't go into flight, fawn or freeze. I went into fight, and that felt really good.

And I would say I'm still very much in love with Philadelphia — the community here and the progressive cultural feel. I feel very fortunate to live in a city like Philadelphia, and I really appreciate all of the work that the different organizations do to keep it safe, welcoming and diverse.

Talking about defense, my next question is, what celebrity would you want on your side in a fight?

It's not gonna be the answer you would think, but Courtney Love. She is a survivor. She is a fighter. She is confident. She was someone I loved in high school. I love a strong, vocal woman who is unafraid to speak truth to power to anyone.

She's a scrappy gal. My last question: Do you have a favorite motto or quote?



Maybe it's trite, but "carpe diem" — pluck or seize the day — because today is all we really have. Living in the moment can be a really rich experience. I just try to wake up and do the best that I can every day.

Sounds good to me.

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