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My Story: The many identities of Brett Andrews



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Brett Andrews left his Pennsylvania hometown for stints in D.C., N.Y.C and L.A. before coming to San Francisco 18 years ago.

TODD JOHNSON | SAN FRANCISCO BUSINESS TIMES

By Brett Andrews – CEO, PRC
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Editor's note: As part of our Race & Equity sections this year, the Business Times is introducing a new feature, My Story, with Bay Area executives of color sharing their journeys in their own words, from the challenges of confronting stereotypes to the success in overcoming them. If you would like to share your story, email ktruong@bizjournals.com.

It turns out there's some wisdom in astrology.

That's a statement I never thought I'd make, let alone in a business publication. But as I reflected on what I wanted to share about my journey as the Black, gay CEO of a social impact organization here in San Francisco, it dawned on me that these three facets of my identity — my race, my orientation and my drive to excel (yes, I'm an unapologetic Virgo-Dragon) — exist in a perpetual balancing act.

In astrological terms, that's my moon, rising and sun signs, respectively. While all three have shaped my personal and professional growth, it's never been entirely clear to me which one I am first.

In this country, there's no escaping the fact that I am a Black man. Regardless of how I might feel internally, the world around me will see me first as Black. This was true through my childhood in Pennsylvania, where I was a nerd who preferred reading the encyclopedia to sports. My father died early, so I grew up as the baby of a family of women, where my mother, sister and a host of female figures created an environment of unconditional love.



The author in third grade, age 7

BRETT ANDREWS

I am also a gay man, something my mother knew years before I could name it. I knew that I nurtured something within me as a secret. It wasn't until I got to college at Penn State that I understood it — where a bigger, wider, diverse world of people invited me to find my tribe. I began to date men, and my curiosity blossomed. In addition to my psychology major, I dove deeply into student government, worked on the yearbook and engaged in forensics and debate.

In graduate school in Washington, D.C., I made the first adult friends I'd ever had outside of school. My social life evolved around a group of gay Black men from the choir at Metropolitan Baptist Church.

Amid this tight community I experienced the onset of the AIDS crisis in the late 1980s. These were dark, difficult days that felt existential. We would sing at three to five funerals each week, not knowing who we'd see from one Sunday to the next. We were grieving and doing all we could just to stay alive. The advent of antiviral therapies in the mid-1990s brought the promise of longer lives, but that period marked me.

I was drawn by the siren call of New York City and moved there armed with a master's degree in organizational psychology, my headshot, vocal training and a job in the HR department of a Wall Street investment firm. I modeled here and there, and my singing career never materialized. But I became involved as a volunteer with Kids N'U Inc., a nonprofit sponsored by designer Michael Kors serving disadvantaged inner-city youth — primarily kids of color. It opened my eyes to the idea that work and personal fulfillment could actually align. So when the executive director of Kids N'U stepped down, I stepped up. At 28 years old, I didn't know what I didn't know, but I came to love serving a community in need.



Brett Andrews modeled during his time in New York, but his singing career never soared.

BRETT ANDREWS

Working in youth service took me from New York to L.A., where, after five years, I decided to work directly with my LGBT community. A mentor warned me off, saying, “They eat their own.” But that actually appealed to my appetite for leadership. To eat or be eaten was a challenge I felt I could meet and emerge at the top of the food chain, all for the good.

And so I came to San Francisco to run Positive Resource Center, now PRC, an organization founded in 1987 to serve the HIV-AIDS community. In my 18 years here, we've expanded PRC's mission to serve the many San Franciscans struggling with mental health, substance use and socioeconomic challenges. At the intersection of these

challenges lie root causes that include racism and homophobia — two social constructs that have malignantly withstood the test of time.

Like no other, this role has required me to engage with all three facets of myself. I have led a team of nearly 300 people through PRC's program growth; I have served as an active voice in collaborating with our vibrant LGBTQ community; and I have committed to transforming the current dialogue around historic racism into healing our broken systems of care.

At the same time, the internal balancing act continues. I've come to see that there are some people in this world who get to be one thing. They can lean into that, and the world allows them to do so.

For those of us who are more than one thing, it's more complicated. I had the great privilege to grow up in a household that embraced and accepted all of me, even if I wasn't exactly sure what that comprised. The rest of my journey has been about recreating that environment and feeling for myself — and seeking to create it for others.

It is powerful to be seen. It is equally powerful to be a reflection for someone else. I seek to be that example.

ABOUT BRETT ANDREWS

- **Title:** CEO, PRC
- **Age:** 56
- **Education:** Master of arts, organizational psychology, George Washington University; Bachelor of arts, psychology, Penn State University
- **Residence:** Civic Center/Hayes Valley
- **Family:** Mom and Dad have passed; I have a sister, Shelly Taylor, and live with my dog Mad Max
- **Favorite quote:** “I have found that among its other benefits, giving liberates the soul of the giver.” — Maya Angelou
- **Favorite restaurant:** “My favorite restaurant is actually my home — I have a deep passion for cooking and entertaining.”
- **Fun fact:** For my birthday, my mom bought me six Matchbox cars until I was 23 years old

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Image: Brett Andrews

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His high school year book reveals his penchant for leadership started early in Pennsylvania.

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