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# the Stranger



## QUEER ISSUE

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# the Stranger

Volume 25, Issue Number 43  
June 22-28, 2016



## COVER ART

Christopher of CHEER Seattle by **KELLY O**  
Thanks to Christopher, Pearl (above), and CHEER Seattle. See them in the 2016 Pride Parade. More info at [cheerseattle.org](http://cheerseattle.org).

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## queer issue



Max Cameron

MATT BAUME

## The Straight Guy Who Teaches Queer Folks How to Have Wild Sex

Max Cameron, Proprietor of Max's Bondage Lessons, Isn't Queer in the Romantic Sense—But He Considers Himself Politically, Socially, and Morally Queer

By Matt Baume

**O**n the slope of a leafy Seattle hillside sits a handsome 1904 home in which a portrait of a human skeleton hangs over the mantel. It's an X-ray of a woman who has a ribbon of metal screws driven into her spinal column like railroad spikes.

"That's a former partner of mine," says Max Cameron. He's giving me a tour of the first floor of the home, which is immaculate. There's an antique wooden rocking horse in a reading room, a thriving green garden outside the kitchen window, and a metal cage just large enough for a person next to the fireplace. "She had scoliosis," he explains of the portrait.

Max gives public workshops and personalized instruction through Max's Bondage Lessons ([bondagelessons.com](http://bondagelessons.com)). The first time I ever saw him, he was tying up someone at the Cuff. Today, he is dressed in a black T-shirt tucked into belted jeans, and with his gray beard and crinkly-eyed smile, he looks like a dad on the verge of deploying terrible jokes to the dozen or so guests who've assembled at his home. It's a Thursday night. "There's a bathroom here, but there's no lock, so just yank it open if you want to make a new friend," he calls out and then gestures to the brightly lit basement. "Shall we?"

Downstairs smells musty, bricky, the familiar scent

of every basement in the world. A large wooden grid wrapped with rope has been moved out of the way next to some bamboo rods and heavy chains, making room for folding chairs and a card table with cups of water. As the guests find their seats, a woman in a cute striped dress explains that with the proper hypnotic suggestion, she can convince her partner that she's opened a gash in his body to eat his organs.

I'm here to attend a lesson in erotic hypnosis, one of many kinky classes Max offers at his home and at sex-education facilities around the city. Sometimes he teaches, sometimes he coaches couples one-on-one, and sometimes he brings in guests, as tonight.

Max is straight, but his clientele predominantly identifies as queer—as does he. More on that in a minute.

"I'm super-aware of power," he told me over beers a few days prior to class. "There's power everywhere in the world. In which of us buys a drink. When a cop pulls you over. In personal relationships."

He paused at that last observation, as if he hadn't meant to say it, and then chooses his words carefully.

"I had a long relationship with a gal who became my wife," he said. "I was her daddy. It appealed to me, and it was helpful for her to get the support she needed to go through med school." This was in the late 1980s, and

neither Max nor his wife had given any thought to power dynamics or kink at the time. He supported her through school, but then once she became a doctor, "she walked through the world differently. And our dynamic changed in ways we didn't expect. She wanted a peer, not a daddy," he said. They divorced sometime around 1990.

After that, Max found himself longing for a relationship in which he was explicitly in control. "I began understanding I was kinky," he said, then chuckled. "Floggers. Everybody had a flogger back then."

But in the early '90s, he had no idea where to explore power and control. On a business trip to Portland, Max saw a flyer for a kinky group called OregASM (the Oregon Association of SM) and tore off a slip from the fringe of phone numbers at the bottom. His heart was pounding as he slipped it into his wallet. "I was sure there was nothing on the piece of paper but the phone number," he said. He carried it with him for months before working up the nerve to call, and when he did, it was from a phone booth—as if he needed to prevent the call being traced back to him.

The number had been disconnected at some point in the intervening months. His search for kink had reached a dead end, he thought.

But then he was vacationing in Vancouver, BC, with ▶

◀ a girlfriend when he spotted a group of people dressed in leather and goth apparel slipping through an unmarked door in the Gastown district. “I bet that’s a kinky party,” he said, and they both rushed back to their hotel to grab the bondage gear that they’d packed just in case.

Hurrying back to the doorway, they knocked and startled the shit out of the kinksters inside, who thought they’d managed to keep their gathering secret. Once explanations were made, one organizer said, “Oh, you’re Yanks. You must know that group in Seattle.”

“What group in Seattle?” said Max. He was given a PO box address, and when he returned to the city, he composed a letter: A few days later, Allena Gabosch called. She was the co-owner of the Beyond the Edge Cafe, and to this day remains a leader in the local kink scene. Allena interviewed him to make sure he wasn’t a creep and then welcomed him into the scene.

“I knew I liked the D and S,” he said, meaning dominance and submission. But he had no idea what he was doing. “How do I be in charge?” he’d ask himself. “There must be rules. In porn, there are rules.”

He did his best at first, attending mixed-gender parties and experimenting with submissives both male and female. Allena invited him to a “protocol dinner” at Beyond the Edge—essentially a meetup where everyone is following very precise instructions. “Girl,” Max told his partner, “here’s what I want you to do tonight. I don’t want you to make eye contact. I want you to keep your eyes lowered.” It was a protocol he’d seen other doms use, and he figured it would work.

But it didn’t. Though his partner was having a great time, throughout the dinner her lowered eyes only made him feel as though she was angry. Finally, he cracked. “For the love of God, stop doing that,” he finally told her.

From that point on, “the notion that I could pick up someone else’s rules and use them was gone.” He started to wonder, “If I have somebody willing to give me what I want, what DO I want?... It felt really terrifying. How am I supposed to do this? Where are the instructions?”

He leaned back. “How do I hit guys’ balls with a paddle and then snuggle with them on a couch?”

Still, Max absorbed what skills he could: how to tie knots, which angle of paddling produces the most satisfying thud, how to secure a handcuff in a way that the keyhole isn’t obstructed. At one point, a reigning Ms. Leather noticed that he was particularly adept at the technical skills and asked if he’d like to teach a rope class in Florida. He had a great time teaching and noticed that the students in the class were heavily queer: half gay men, a quarter dykes.

That was in the late 1990s, and Max began offering more classes on hard skills like rope, leather, hoods, sleep sacks, and whips. But despite gaining acceptance as an instructor, he still felt out of place as a straight man in a gay world, and as a kinky man in the straight world.

BDSM carried risks—to this day, it’s still murky whether practitioners are vulnerable to charges of assault. Being found out as kinky can complicate child custody cases, or employment, or housing. Former partners have accused Max of disregarding their consent, a potentially ruinous charge that he disputes.

As a freelance IT consultant, Max was particularly vulnerable to the consequences of being found out. On the advice of queer friends who knew a thing or two about closets, he came out as kinky and polyamorous only on the rare occasions when it was absolutely safe to do so.

That changed one night in Columbia City. Years ago, a group of leathermen who lived a few blocks apart in the suburbs would throw huge parties. Seventy or so people showed up on Friday nights and partied continuously until the crescendo of a Sunday brunch. “They had these big dungeons, and it was a big deal,” Max recalled. But because almost

everyone there was gay, “I felt weird doing scenes. I felt like I was intruding and disrespectful. I felt like I was being a cock tease.”

Eventually, he expressed his concerns to an organizer, who simply rolled his eyes. “Max, we know you’re straight,” the leatherman said, and then he evoked a chant of queer liberation: “Get over it.”

Max was thunderstruck. “I play with lots of women I don’t fuck,” he realized. “Of course I can go to a party and play with men and not fuck them... Those parties were the end of my discomfort in queer space.”

From that point on, Max began to take ownership of his own heterosexual queerness.

“I consider myself quite queer,” he said. Not sexually, but “politically, socially, morally queer.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“It just doesn’t fucking matter. Just do what you’re attracted to.”

That’s an attitude he hopes to impart to his students. At this point in his career, he said, “most of what I do is not technical. It’s how to build a scene. Or relationship. How to push the parameters and throw away the rules.”

He now offers group classes and private coaching, with most of his clientele focused on same-sex relationships. Some of his skills are fairly simple, by his standards, like plain old whips and chains. Others are more elaborate, such as when he threads piercings through his chest, attaches them to something solid, and then leans away to feel the tug deep inside his skin.

Two recent clients came to him for help with some animal role-play. One was a cowboy in real life, having done cattle roping, and brought a large dark crystalline hunk of rosin. Rosin is a sticky abrasive, generally used to improve the grip of rodeo rope, and under Max’s coaching, the dom ground it into his submissive partner’s skin.

“It was brutally rough,” said Max. “A lot of hitting and punching. And the language was brutal.”

But it was what they both wanted, though they’d been afraid to say so before coming to him. It was a fear that reminded Max of an early experience whipping a woman. He’d been holding back, and then she glanced back at him with a dismissive glare that said, “Is that all?”

“In ways I hadn’t realized,” he said, “I was afraid of hurting her too much. Not physical injury. Anger, resentment, relationship damage. Being a bad person.”

“Those are reasonable things to worry about when you’re whipping someone,” I said. “Without having those worries, you’re an asshole!” he agreed. “You don’t hit people. You don’t act mean to people.” He lowered his voice. “Except sometimes you do.”

With that gay couple and their animal play, he said, he had few hard skills to teach them. Instead, he taught them to listen. “At the end of the day, I gave them permission to do it. I led a discussion where they could say they both wanted to do this thing. I facilitated them hearing each other’s permission.”

And that’s the shape that his lessons often take. Not just how to tie knots, but also how to open up. Not just threading piercings through the flesh of a person’s back like a corset, but thinking about why a person would want that. “Communication and trust and how to express what you want,” he said. “How to trust your partner when they tell you what they want.”

These days, Max has one primary relationship, and a few smaller ones that come and go. His current partner is highly service-oriented, and every night he ties her up and sleeps on the end of the rope so she has to wake him to get out of bed.

She used to make him coffee every morning, but lately that’s had to taper off due to her hectic schedule. She’s currently a student, and Max is doing what he can to support her education.

“At the end of the day, it’s a relationship,” he said. “All the other stuff is built on top.” ■

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