



Roberts, Thomas (b. 1972)

by Claude J. Summers

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2011 glbtq, Inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Handsome, intelligent, and articulate, Thomas Roberts is one of only a few openly gay anchors on national television news. After some 15 years as a television news reporter, and a stint as an anchor on CNN, in 2010 he was named a full-time anchor on MSNBC. In addition to anchoring his own news show, he frequently served as substitute newsreader or host on such shows as NBC's *Today* as well as on several MSNBC programs. In January 2014, he moved to early morning as host of *Way Too Early* and as a regular on *Morning Joe*, but in March 2015 he was tapped to host a two-hour afternoon show.

A major talent in American television news, Roberts has also emerged as a visible symbol of new opportunities for openly gay people in society generally, as well as in journalism in particular. In an industry that has not been welcoming to openly gay men and women, Roberts has earned a place in the upper echelons of journalism by dint of hard work and persistence.

He has resisted the temptation to hide his sexuality as a tactic to assure career advancement or out of some misguided journalistic tenet that being open would somehow compromise his objectivity in reporting the news.

Although Roberts does not hesitate to allude to his homosexuality in his news broadcasts when it is relevant, he remains thoroughly professional when reporting on glbtq issues. Refreshingly, however, his professionalism does not preclude a certain level of activism, especially through his participation in the National Lesbian & Gay Journalism Association and his contribution of a heartfelt video to the "It Gets Better" campaign.

Early Life and Education

Roberts was born into a Roman Catholic family in Towson, Maryland on October 5, 1972. He attended Catholic schools in Towson and nearby Baltimore. The security he felt as a child was shattered when he reached his teen years.

When he was a teenager, Roberts' parents divorced. While a student at Calvert College High School in Baltimore, he was molested by the school chaplain, Jerome F. Toohey, Jr., a Roman Catholic priest. The combination of his family's disruption and the shame he felt at the sexual abuse he experienced led to a suicide attempt when he was 15.

As he told interviewer Steve Pep in 2011, "The weight of all that shame felt unbearable and I thought suicide was the only way to freedom from what my day to day life had become. I wasn't mature enough to understand what was happening to me wasn't my fault and I didn't think anyone would believe me if I told the truth about the abuse. I was always afraid, like a cat on a hot tin roof."

Fortunately, Roberts' suicide attempt was foiled by his sister, who found him and saved his life. As he recalled in 2011, "My family worked hard to get me back to a better mental place. I had such a sense of

hopelessness. However, the pain that I saw I caused my family, I knew I could never put them through that again and living was the only way to move forward."

Roberts attended college at Western Maryland College (now McDaniel College), where he graduated in 1994, with a major in communications and a minor in journalism.

Early Career and Coming Out

After graduating, Roberts took a job as a news reporter with a cable television station in Westminster, Maryland. He soon received an offer from NBC affiliate KNSD in San Diego, where he worked as a writer and field producer; from San Diego, he moved to Lincoln, Nebraska, where he worked as a reporter for ABC affiliate KLKN-TV.

Roberts subsequently took jobs as a news anchor and investigative reporter for stations in Fort Myers, Florida and Portsmouth, Virginia.

During his early years as a television reporter, Roberts was deeply closeted. "I didn't know how best to deal with [being open] professionally or personally for that matter," he told *The Advocate's* Sean Kennedy. "I thought [being open] would be a roadblock—or a brick wall—to advancement." When he would arrive at a new job, "I would automatically date a girl and have everyone at the station see it. We'd date for a little while and then I'd break up with them or do something to make them break up with me."

Roberts claims that he did not make his first gay friend until he was 25 years old and working at WFTX in Fort Myers. "He knew that I wasn't out and he made no big deal about it. . . . He respected the fact that I wasn't in a place emotionally or psychologically" to come out.

However, at his next job, at Portsmouth's WAVY, he met the man who would become his partner and eventually husband, Patrick Abner. He came out to his family in 1999 and then to his colleagues, and finally to his former colleagues. He says everyone loved Patrick and "I never lost a friend."

Move to Atlanta

Roberts' big break into the national news scene came in December 2001, when he joined CNN and he and Abner moved to Atlanta. He served as a weekday anchor on CNN's Headline News channel and also appeared on the network's other channels.

In 2002, Roberts received an Emmy Award nomination for his investigative reporting on an Atlanta puppy mill. He also co-anchored CNN's coverage of the 2003 Columbia Space Shuttle disaster and reported from New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005.

In 2005, Roberts, after years of silence, came forward to accuse his former chaplain Jerome F. Toohey, Jr. of sexual abuse. Toohey had been accused before by a former student, but he had denied the allegation and had been supported by his superiors. This time Toohey pled guilty. The evidence from the previous accusation was used to obtain a longer sentence for the priest, who was subsequently defrocked. However, Toohey, who was sentenced to five years in prison, actually wound up serving only ten months in prison and eight months in home detention.

Toohey's light punishment disappointed both Roberts and his fellow accuser, Michael Goles. The latter issued a statement expressing dismay at the lenient sentence, pointing out that "Thomas and I don't get early release. We're stuck with life sentences for what we suffered." Roberts compared his regret at being let down by the justice system to having been let down "by a trusted system (the Roman Catholic church)

years ago."

Roberts discussed the abuse he suffered in a special segment of CNN's *Anderson Cooper 360* called "Sins of the Father," which aired on March 12, 2007.

In 2005, after Roberts was named one of the "50 Most Beautiful Atlantans" by *Jezebel* magazine, *People* magazine offered to include him among the publication's "50 Sexiest Bachelors." He turned down the offer: "I'm not a bachelor," he later explained. "I thought it would be false advertising. . . . and I didn't think it would be the right venue to talk about it."

Soon, however, Roberts would be discussing his homosexuality publicly. In 2005, he joined the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association. When he appeared as a member of a panel entitled "Off Camera: The Challenge of LGBT TV Anchors" at the association's September 2006 meeting in Miami, his homosexuality became public knowledge. A reporter from the *Boston Globe* wrote about the panel on his blog; the information was picked up by gay media and then by mainstream media.

Roberts expressed relief at being out, and he quickly became a gay celebrity. But with that status came, in addition to adulation and appreciation for his accomplishments, a great deal of innuendo and gossip. For example, when Roberts left CNN in 2007, some people speculated that he had been fired.

Roberts recalls his years at CNN as very happy ones, and adamantly denies that he was fired. In his six years at CNN, he says, "I never dealt with anything but respect and kindness." He left CNN because Abner had a work offer that required him to relocate from Atlanta to Washington, D. C. His bosses at CNN attempted to dissuade him from leaving.

Soon after leaving CNN, Roberts accepted a job with CBS. He reported for the network's entertainment news programs, *Entertainment Tonight* and *The Insider*.

He was soon offered a position as co-host of *The Insider*. Although the program was originally based in Los Angeles, it was relocating to New York, and that made the offer attractive to Roberts. However, Roberts was assigned to report from Los Angeles and the fit between him and the program turned out not to be a good one. Although the executives who hired Roberts knew that he was gay, they seemed embarrassed that he was openly gay and did not want him speaking of his sexuality.

Roberts' career was imperiled when, soon after his first segments for *The Insider* aired in September 2007, a blogger posted nude pictures purportedly of Roberts that had appeared on the gay dating site Manhunt.

Of the mini-scandal that erupted when a story about the pictures appeared in the *New York Post*, Roberts told Kennedy, "I never put inappropriate pictures of myself on a public website. For me it was really hurtful, for Patrick and I it was terribly painful, . . . what happened was something that we needed to deal with on a personal level. And we've dealt with it—we've closed the chapter on that issue and moved on."

Although Roberts' bosses at *The Insider* publicly defended him when the mini-scandal over the pictures broke, issuing a statement describing the event as "a malicious personal attack," they nevertheless declined to renew his contract, citing budgetary considerations and a desire for a "new direction" for the show.

After being let go by *The Insider*, Roberts returned to traditional news reporting, working as a correspondent for CBS News until his contract with the network expired.

Roberts at MSNBC

In April 2010, Roberts joined MSNBC as a freelance anchor. In December, he was named a full-time anchor.

Until 2014, Roberts primarily anchored his own daytime show on MSNBC, but also frequently substituted as a weekend anchor and overnight news anchor on MSNBC as well as on programs such as NBC's *Early Today* and *Today* shows and MSNBC's *First Look*. He also substituted for Keith Olbermann on MSNBC's *Countdown* when Olbermann was suspended for making campaign contributions to candidates in the 2010 elections.

However, in January 2014, Roberts moved to early morning television. He became host of MSNBC's *Way Too Early* and a regular on *Morning Joe*.

In March 2015, Roberts was tapped to host a two-hour afternoon show as part of an effort to bolster MSNBC's sagging ratings in the afternoon.

Roberts has an unusually effective presence as a news anchor, one that inspires confidence and trust in the viewer. He always seems informed and on top of the stories that he reports.

He excels as an interviewer, asking questions that are probing and that are designed to yield new information or that place issues in context. He treats his guests, even those with whom he disagrees, with respect and consideration.

Roberts has not been shy about alluding to his homosexuality. For example, when he was conducting an interview about the prospects for marriage equality in Maryland in 2011, he volunteered that he would like to be able to marry in his home state.

(Soon after New York passed legislation authorizing same-sex marriage in the Empire State on the night of June 24, 2011, Roberts tweeted that he and Abner were engaged to be married. On September 29, 2012, they married in New York City, where they live. Roberts thus became the first American national news anchor in a same-sex marriage.)

In the fall of 2010, Roberts was moved by the rash of young gay men committing suicide as a result of bullying and harassment. Not only did he contribute a moving video to Dan Savage's "It Gets Better" project, but he also interviewed Fort Worth City Councilman Joel Burns, who had spoken out against the bullying at a city council meeting and who like Roberts had attempted suicide as a teenager.

But perhaps the most significant contribution that Roberts makes to the movement for equal rights has little to do with direct advocacy. His presence as an openly gay man in the higher echelon of journalism itself makes a powerful statement about the progress that glbtq people have made in American society. His openness not only signals his own acceptance and ease with his sexuality, but it also bespeaks possibilities to other aspiring journalists even as it humanizes and personalizes issues that sometimes seem remote to television viewers.

Roberts' presence as an openly gay man also influences to some extent the way his network treats glbtq news stories. Roberts undoubtedly has some discretion in the stories he chooses to report and he no doubt influences choices made by the network as a whole. In addition, his participation in on air discussions of issues such as marriage equality or Don't Ask, Don't Tell or the Defense of Marriage Act also means that the perspective of an openly gay man is incorporated into the coverage. While Roberts' reporting is scrupulously fair, it is also necessarily informed by the totality of his experience.

In 2014, Roberts launched a video series called *Out There with Thomas Roberts* that reviews the top glbtq news stories each week.

It is no accident that MSNBC, which boasts not only Roberts but also out lesbian Rachel Maddow as

prominent members of its news staff, is widely regarded as the network that covers glbtq issues most fairly and thoroughly.

Roberts has established himself as a leading television journalist. His future is likely to be very bright.

Bibliography

Hernandez, Greg. "Gay CNN Anchor Thomas Roberts Clears the Air." *Out in Hollywood* (September 15, 2006): <http://blogs.dailynews.com/outinhollywood/2006/09/cnns-thompson.html>

Keith, Christie. "Life as an Openly Gay Journalist: CNN's Thomas Roberts." *AfterElton.com* (September 15, 2006): <http://www.afterelton.com/people/2006/9/roberts.html?page=0%2C0>

Kennedy, Sean. "The Insider Is Out." *The Advocate* (June-July 2008): <http://www.advocate.com/article.aspx?id=22550>

Pep, Steve. "Towleroad Interview: Thomas Roberts." *Towleroad.com* (May 5, 2011): <http://www.towleroad.com/2011/05/towleroad-interview-thomas-roberts.html>

"Priest Who Abused CNN's Thomas Roberts Given Lighter Sentence." *Towleroad* (December 12, 2006): http://www.towleroad.com/2006/12/cnn_anchor_thom.html#ixzz1SVFK68ci

About the Author

Claude J. Summers is William E. Stirton Professor Emeritus in the Humanities and Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. He has published widely on seventeenth- and twentieth-century English literature, including book-length studies of E. M. Forster and Christopher Isherwood, as well as *Gay Fictions: Wilde to Stonewall* and *Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment England: Literary Representations in Historical Context*. He is General Editor of www.glbtq.com. In 2008, he received a Monette-Horwitz Trust Award for his efforts in combatting homophobia.