

# CHELY WRIGHT REDEFINING COUNTRY

Popular country singer-songwriter Chely Wright's LGBT rights journey is not unlike America's own. Missouri-born, Kansas-raised, church-going, socially-conservative country sensation Chely presented as every bit the archetypal southern belle so associated with the genre. In reality, though, Chely is, and always was, gay.

**W**hen, in 2010, she revealed her secret to the world she became the first country star ever to do so. Today Chely is married to long-time girlfriend Lauren Blitzer and in May this year gave birth to the couple's first children, twin boys George and Everett. Chely's decision to come out has brought her happiness, peace and closure but it was a tough decision to make.

## CHILDHOOD

Born Richell Rene Wright, in Kansas City, 1970, Chely spent her early years in Wellsville, Kansas, deep in America's heartland. With a population just over 1,800, Wellsville prides itself on its 'midwest values and small town charm' namely, faith, family and country.

A model student, Chely scored consistently high grades. At Wellsville High School she was elected class president of the school band and, throughout her teenage years, performed at the funerals of veterans in the town. On Sundays she attended church with her family.

From an early age, Chely's first passion was for country music. Enthralled by stars such as Loretta Lynn and Connie

Smith, as a child, she would read the liner notes of albums "much like a kid would read fairy tales out of storybooks". Before Chely had even began school, she had started to learn the piano. According to her autobiography, *Like Me*, Chely decided upon a career as a country music performer by the time she was four.

If music was Chely's first passion, though, God was a close second. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey in 2010, Chely revealed that, as a child, she prayed every day for God to change her, to make her straight. So began 20 years of what the singer describes as 'compartmentalization,' during which she led two separate lives.

## SINGLE WHITE FEMALE

At 19, Chely left Wellsville for Nashville, Tennessee, in search of greater freedom. Here, in her chosen genre's spiritual home, she supplemented her song writing with industry internships until, in 1993, Chely landed her first recording contract with major-label Mercury. Her debut album, *Woman in the Moon*, followed a year later and won Chely an industry award for Best New Female Vocalist.

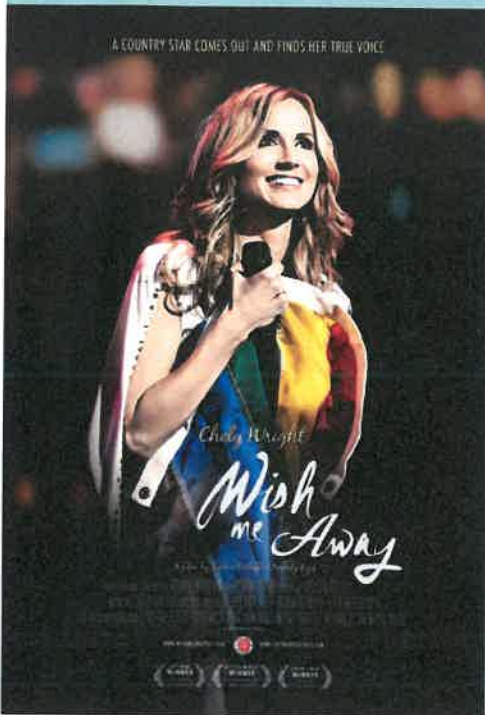




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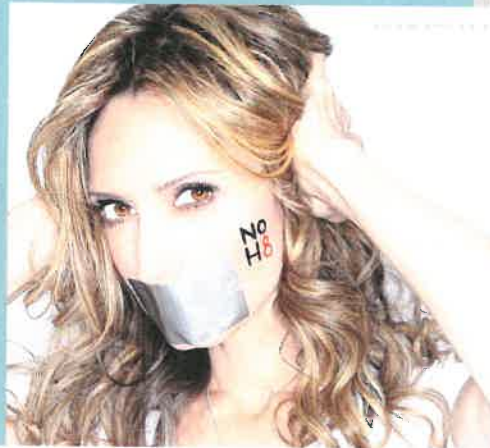




Chely's coming out documentary 'Wish Me Away' has garnered 12 film festival awards and has recently been nominated for an Emmy Award. Chely was also one of a number of famous faces to back The NOH8 Campaign, a charitable organization using photographic silent protests against the now overturned Proposition 8 same-sex marriage ban in California.



Chely married LGBT rights advocate Lauren Blitzer in 2011 and gave birth to identical twin boys on May 18, 2013.



» Her professional success continued apace. In 1997, with her third album *Let Me In*, Chely secured her first top 20 hit in the song 'Shut Up and Drive', whilst her next album, 1999's *Single White Female*, was her first to go Gold, selling more than 100,000 copies. In addition, she had by that time penned songs for several other best-selling country stars.

However, whilst Chely found success in Nashville, she didn't find the freedom she wanted. As her success increased she found it more difficult to acknowledge her sexuality.

Country music deals primarily with the most fundamental of American sensibilities: love of God, love of family, love of flag. Within the genre, the principle of love is strictly heterosexual and country fans expect their stars to act accordingly. Any divergence from these norms is risky business for a country act, as the Texas-based Dixie Chicks found to their cost in 2003, after criticising then President George W. Bush in the run-up to the Iraq War. When the bands' comments hit the news it resulted in a widespread country radio boycott, loss of sponsors, the ceremonial crushing of former fans' Dixie Chicks CDs, and even death threats.

Consequently, despite having made what she describes as 'a deal with God' to come clean when she made it big, Chely increasingly resigned herself to remaining closeted.

## **REVELATION**

Chely's life remained compartmentalised for more than twenty years. Between 1993 and 2004, Chely maintained a secret relationship with a similarly closeted woman named Julia. In their last few years together, the couple even shared a home in Nashville, despite Chely's public relationships with male country stars Brad Paisley and Vince Gill during this period.

Chely reasoned that she needed to do all she could to avoid inadvertently revealing her secret, going as far as to enter relationships with men she had no attraction to or romantic

affection for. Discussing the matter with Oprah Winfrey in 2010, Chely explained that, whatever her professional accomplishments, she was "never able to fully absorb the joy ..." and that "... with each rung of the ladder I climbed, people wanted to know more".

However, these short, very public relationships never worked out. In private, the pressures of leading a double life, coupled with a hectic touring schedule led Chely to separate from Julia. By 2006, Chely found herself isolated, depressed and full of self-loathing, both for her sexual orientation and her inability to be open about it. Chely believed that she would never fit the largest pieces of her life together: successful country star and gay woman. She was also tired of trying. After several days shut away from the world, alone in her bedroom, she placed the barrel of her 9mm handgun in her mouth.

Chely didn't pull the trigger and she took that as a sign. Instead, that night, she made a conscious decision to come out.

## **LIFTED OFF THE GROUND**

Chely felt the public announcement of her coming out deserved something more sophisticated than a press release. It was a decision she had wrestled with for two decades and it could have ended her career. Instead, she set about coming out by writing an album: 2010's *Lifted Off The Ground*. She also began work on her autobiography, *Like Me*, which became the subject of a multi award-winning documentary, *Wish Me Away*, released in 2011.

Her decision to come out was big news. In the US, country music is a hundred-million dollar industry. There are more radio stations dedicated to country music and its derivatives than any other genre and these stations are routinely amongst the most-listened to in America. Similarly, whilst overall music sales have slumped, sales of country albums continue to grow.

Reaction was mixed. Chely estimates that, as a consequence of coming out, she lost as much as two-thirds of her existing audience, and, although she received many kind words in private,



just three other artists made public their support at the time.

Nevertheless, Chely's story broke down barriers. Not only did she provide encouragement to other gay men and women growing up her proactive approach to discussing the treatment of homosexuality in the country music industry and wider culture won Chely many more supporters. In 2010, the US-based Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network, which partners with schools to assist teachers in creating positive environments for gay young people, made Chely its national spokesperson, whilst *Out Magazine* named Chely amongst its 100 People of The Year 2010.

### PERSONAL LIFE AND DONOR CONCEPTION


Chely's personal life was, however, transformed by her decision to come out. In 2011, at an LGBT rights event, Chely met Lauren Blitzer, a music executive and gay rights activist. Less than a year later the two were married at a private ceremony in Connecticut.

In January 2013, the couple confirmed publicly that Chely had conceived twins with the help of a sperm donor. In June this year, George Samuel and Everett Joseph (taking the names of their great-grandfathers) were born in New York City.

Donor conception, as Chely and Lauren have found, can provide a successful family building solution. Although celebrities like Chely can make it look easy, it pays to do the groundwork and this includes expert management of the relevant legal issues. If the legal aspects are overlooked, this can cause all manner of unwanted legal and practical problems further down the line, particularly if it involves donor conception with a known donor, the prospective parents have complex personal circumstances or anonymous donation (which is common in the US and other parts of the world unlike the UK where donors are now identifiable) is not ultimately a good fit for the overall character and nature of the family unit.

The legacy of donor conception (legally and practically) will not begin to crystallize for another decade or so, when donor conceived children and families will reach critical mass and maturity. Law and policy governing donor conception continues to evolve and it continues to raise challenging issues across the world. As such, celebrities like Chely could use their status and profile to promote greater awareness and debate surrounding these important issues, which ultimately affect them as much as many others around the world who use assisted reproductive technology to have their own much wanted families.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

Chely has undoubtedly been an inspiration to many other gay young people by coming out, and as Chely explains it, 'coming-together'. Perhaps she can continue to be so as a parent of donor conceived children and a proponent of the important legal and practical issues surrounding donor conception. 

*Louisa Ghevaert is a leading expert in UK fertility, surrogacy, parenting and family law, a prominent author and media commentator and a passionate supporter of parents, children and families. She is a partner with Porter Dodson LLP [www.porterdodsonfertility.com](http://www.porterdodsonfertility.com).*

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