

I was once married to a man – but found true happiness with my wife

WHEN I heard the news that Chris Tarrant's daughter, Fia, had found love with a woman, I was absolutely thrilled for her. Fia, who is 37, has followed her father's career into radio broadcasting, working as a presenter for Heart FM. Previously married to a man, she has an eight-year-old son, Haris.

Her love life is nobody's business and she had every right to keep her dating partners under wraps, but I'm just so pleased she chose to announce her new love with a declaration on social media.

It can't have been an easy decision – and I should know. In my early 20s I got engaged to my long-term boyfriend. There had never been any question of me being gay and I'd never found myself remotely attracted to women. But, completely unexpectedly, I fell head over heels in love with another straight woman while studying for my Masters. The feelings – for both of us – came out of nowhere.

I still loved my fiance – he was my first proper relationship – but this new love was very different and I was very confused about what these new, intense feelings meant.

My family was horrified when I tried to call off the wedding. They were furious and, more than anything else, deeply concerned about what people would think.

I was told this was 'just a phase', that I couldn't be gay because I 'didn't look like a lesbian' and I was to 'get a grip of myself' and focus on making a 'normal' life with my soon-to-be-husband. He agreed.

I was so young. I listened to them, severing all ties with the woman, and I tried to carry on as if nothing had ever happened, just to keep the peace.

Had I fallen for a man, I am sure things would have been very different.

That was 25 years ago, and back then, the only openly gay role models I knew about were Elton John, Freddie Mercury and Kenneth Williams. Country singer k. d. lang was the only woman, but not someone I could relate to. I certainly couldn't think of any gay women in the public eye who looked like me.

MY MARRIAGE inevitably ended after just 18 months. We'd had a wonderful decade together and I thank my husband for all he taught me, but of course the marriage should never have happened – it was strained from the start.

I slowly realised I wanted to date women exclusively and each time I was in a relationship, I became more and more confident about openly talking about my female partner both in my private and professional life.

I have been fortunate that, in the circles I move in, I have always been accepted wholly for who I really am.

However, I appreciate this sadly isn't the case for everyone.

I met my partner, Sharon, when we were both invited to be judges



Reaching out: Emma, right, and Sharon – blissfully happy on their wedding day in 2016

by Emma Heathcote-James

at a business event. She was another business leader who, like me, had been previously married to a man but who also happened to be gay.

We instantly clicked and knew this was something special, and we very quickly knew we wanted to become a family unit together. We married in 2016, with Sharon's

son Jake as best man. I'm now 46, Sharon is 54 and Jake is 19, and we couldn't be happier.

Living with and loving another woman means there are no gender roles – one of us has to fix the gate, sort the car, put the bins out, mow the lawn. It's pretty liberating because you naturally let go of societal constructs and etch out your own dynamic together. For me, the connection is so much more intense – women get women, and men get men.

It is interesting, too, that many gay women keep in touch with our female exes; when a previous relationship ends, we don't seem to

sever that emotional intimacy. Some of my closest friends began as romantic relationships. It seems wonderfully civilised, and this is a common theme with many gay women.

Sadly, we haven't had an easy time with our families.

For some people – even now – same-sex relationships are simply 'not normal'. It's partly, I believe, because there are still so few positive stereotypes in the public eye to normalise the situation.

Fia Tarrant's mum Ingrid seems to be supportive of her new relationship, reportedly saying: 'The main thing is that people

are happy.' I'm so glad. Fia is very lucky.

One in five young people in the UK now identify as gay or bisexual. So Fia's revelation shouldn't be shocking any more.

She posted on Instagram a lovely picture of her hand-in-hand with her new partner, with the line: 'Time to open up that closet door!'

I know she's just using an old phrase, but it frustrates me to think the idea of a closet still exists. No one would be batting an eyelid if Fia was announcing a new relationship with a man. But this kind of thing still raises eyebrows – even if the reaction is sometimes positive.

Last year I posted one of my wedding pictures on the social media platform LinkedIn because I decided it might be good for more women to have visibly gay role models like us.

There are so many gay couples out there, happily getting on with life, successful and surrounded by loving family and friends, who just don't feel the need to shout about their sexuality.

YOU wouldn't necessarily know they were gay. But it struck me that, sadly, perhaps we do need to show how OK it is. I wanted other professionals to look at me and my wife and see that you don't have to pretend to be straight to be successful.

I hope my revelation makes life – at home or at work – easier for other women.

It's just a simple photo of me standing beside Sharon, on our wedding day, both in our beautiful ivory wedding gowns, each clutching a bouquet of white flowers. We look so blissfully happy together – and that's because we are.

I was astounded by the response. That picture has been shared and reposted around the world and has been viewed by more than 2.5 million people and I've been inundated with thousands of wonderful comments and messages.

One woman messaged me to say her teenage daughter had recently told her she was gay and she had immediately thought of me and said hearing my story had made her less worried about the situation.

I do feel as though it's done some good.

Like Fia's announcement, it all helps to 'normalise' the idea of same-sex relationships among those remaining pockets of the population who still find it unusual or unconventional.

No one should have to hide who they are, nor pretend they are someone they're not. I wish her all the best in her new relationship. Welcome to the sisterhood, Fia, and thank you.

■ **EMMA HEATHCOTE-JAMES** is founder and CEO of the Little Soap Company. As told to **LOUISE ATKINSON**

DESIGN DOUBLES

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Styling: EMMA MESQUITA

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