

Nonconformity suits him fine

By Keith Forrest

As casual-dress days spread and the necktie becomes less common, its role as a symbol of conformity may be changing.

It used to be that once you tied that little knot around your neck, the world thought that all feistiness was drained from your veins. But for me, the necktie always has been a symbol of dissent.

The first time I wore a tie I did it as a display of my individual identity. Most grade-school children wore dungarees made to stand up to recess.

When I was 7, I began occasionally wearing neckwear. I eschewed the traditional choice for people in my age group, the clip-on, and insisted on learning how to knot the real thing.

Since my family was hardly wealthy, my getup was more record-shop employee than prep-school brat.

My tie was affixed to a blue button-down shirt from the Sears catalog. No pint-size sport coat accompanied it. Rather, it shared my torso with one of those 1970s hooded sweatshirts, the closest article of clothing I had to a blazer.

As a result, my outfit had a mixed metaphor



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quality to it.

People weren't sure what statement I was trying to make. But they knew that kids my age usually wore ties only under threat of punishment.

The absence of a clip-on was the part that always seemed to create a kind of perverse adulation among adults. They were amused and tormented at the same time.

During my high school years, in Cape May, members of the popular crowd abused me as they sought to enforce a teenage dress code. Ripped jeans and concert T-shirts were the only acceptable garments.

The more cruelty I received, the more often I wore a tie. I guess it was my way of flipping off the power structure.

In college, at Rowan University, I was elected student government president. The next day, my ties were unceremoniously discarded into a Dumpster.

The college administration had expected me to wear the appropriate neckwear as a student leader. So I made a point of sporting my rattiest T-shirt for meetings with the college president. He had a begrudging respect for my fashion protest.

A few years later, I worked as media relations manager at a university in the Philadelphia suburbs. My boss' boss decreed that all male

employees in our division would arrive at work pristine, pressed and displaying the proper corporate tie around their necks.

This again brought out the dissident side of my personality.

I made my statement by wearing ties with cartoon characters and bizarre color patterns and letting my ties dangle as if I had driven full speed ahead in a convertible on a windy day.

Now as a communication professor at Atlantic Cape Community College, I am in an environment where there is no particular dress code.

As a result, the necktie has returned to my good graces.

My students tell me that they "can't imagine me in jeans." I am an unorthodox professor, and the tie serves as a counterpoint to some of my less conventional methods.

As it has always been, my tie-wearing continues to be a topic of conversation at school.

This has left an impression on my two young sons.

My 5-year-old, Kameron, has discovered the symbolism of the neck accessory. He sometimes dresses up his own collared shirts with a power-red clip-on. He has thus far expressed no interest in learning to tie the real thing. His younger brother, Josh, also will wear a tie on random occasions.

One day I switched to Socratic mode and asked, "What does the tie mean to you boys?"

Kameron thought carefully and said, "I like pretending that I am wearing it to work like you do."

As he answered, I envisioned a new generation of necktie protesters, with Kameron leading the rebellion.

Wouldn't my sons rather wear something less inflammatory, like a pair of ripped jeans and a concert T-shirt?

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