

# Los Angeles Times

## Chris Colfer's journey from small town to "Glee"

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*"Glee" creator and executive producer Ryan Murphy "discovered" Chris Colfer, but don't tell the young actor that. It makes him "feel like a continent." A good continent, though. Colfer, 19, plays Kurt Hummel in "Glee," which premieres tomorrow at 9 p.m. He's part of the musical comedy's talented ensemble, but his triple-threat performance is already being singled out by TV critics. The following is a longer version of a feature about Colfer that will be published in the Los Angeles Times tomorrow.*

The then-18-year-old high school graduate with the big blue eyes and pale skin nervously walked into the audition room to sing and dance in front of his idol.

"Why do I have the feeling you've been Ralph on 'The Sound of Music' before?" the executive producer asked [Chris Colfer](#), giving the young actor his signature Ryan Murphy once-over. The creator of "[Nip/Tuck](#)" was casting roles for his new Fox series, "[Glee](#)," which premieres Wednesday at 9 p.m.

"I know I have Von Trapp written all over me," Colfer replied. "I actually was Kurt in 'The Sound of Music' a long time ago."

Colfer, a community theater actor from Clovis, Calif., wasn't just looking for his first professional job. He was face-to-face with the television writer he most admired — standing in his office, surrounded by “Nip/Tuck” props and photographs, and all he wanted to do was ask him for spoilers for the next season. Instead, he dropped his script pages, scattering them everywhere.

“I was thinking, ‘I can't do this. I can't sing and dance in front of this man. I idolize him so much,’” said Colfer, now 19. “So I immediately peed a little. I'm horrible at auditions anyway. Maybe that's why I never got anything. It's my Achilles' heel. Is that who it was — Achilles? Just checking. It could be Aries or Hercules and some scholar's gonna write me a letter.”

The young countertenor, who had been performing since he was 9 but who knew he wanted to act “since I was an embryo,” was trying out for the role of Arty, a guitar-playing geek in a wheelchair who is part of a high school show choir at the heart of the [musical comedy](#). He belted out “Mr. Cellophane” from the musical “Chicago,” which he had rehearsed with his grandmother.

“He's never been formally trained and I just thought he was so talented and gifted and unusual,” Murphy recalled. “I've never seen anyone who looks like him or acts like him or sounds like him. You'd think he'd been at Juilliard for six years but he hasn't.”

Still, Colfer didn't get the part. Not *that* part anyway. Murphy recognized something else in the unknown performer, something that inspired him to invent a new character: a bit of himself.

Growing up in Indianapolis, Murphy sang in his church choir and immersed himself in musicals in high school and college. His mother was a beauty queen; his father was a semi-pro hockey player who was baffled by a son who requested a “Vogue” subscription when he was 5 years old, started ironing his own clothes at 7, and performed in his bedroom, holding a hairbrush for a microphone in front of a mirror.

“My dad would look at me and go, ‘What the hell? I don't know who you are. How did you come out of me?’ He would say things like that,” Murphy said. He may not have understood his son, but he accepted him, even when Murphy revealed to him that he is gay when he was 15 years old.

“Having a dad that loves you as a young man is a very powerful thing that you carry into the world,” Murphy said. “Because no matter what you do, in some weird, unconscious way, if you're a guy, you always try to please your dad. I think it's a great thing to put on television. You've seen the gay character that gets kicked out of the house or is beaten up. You haven't seen the gay character that is teased a little bit, but wins and triumphs.”



That character, as drawn by Murphy for Colfer, is Kurt Hummel, the “fashionable soprano” and sixth member of the glee club. The first name is a tribute to Colfer’s turn as Kurt Von Trapp. The last name comes from the Hummel figurines “with rosy cheeks” that Murphy’s mother collected when he was a child.

“So Kurt from my ‘Sound of Music’ experience and Hummel because I look like a porcelain doll,” Colfer said wryly.

Although Kurt Hummel is coming to terms with being gay, his essence lies more in his strong sense of identity and self-worth than his sexual orientation.

“When we started auditioning, I thought it was kind of ridiculous that we’re doing a musical about kids and expression and we don’t have the gay point of view,” Murphy said. “I thought it was important, but I would never want Chris to feel weird. More than the gay thing, he understood the thing about being an outsider because he felt that way in high school and I told him we’re going to tap into that.”

The witty, mature and self-possessed Colfer is not one to be at a loss for words. But even after production wrapped last month, he was still

grappling with the notion that the man who invented the show he used to watch against his mother’s wishes has created a part for him that everyone, from TV critics to co-star Jane Lynch, is betting will break out.

“Everything that’s happened I can understand except for that part,” Colfer said. “That part is completely mind-blowing. Every time I think of it my eyes get wide and I just can’t believe it. It means the world to me because I want to do what Ryan does someday. For him to see me in him, I can’t even describe it.”

His admiration of Murphy aside, Colfer’s first response to learning that his character is gay was fear. He grew up in the San Joaquin Valley, in a small town where many people wear cowboy hats, farm and “no one has a sense of humor but they all drive trucks,” he said. On a recent visit home, Colfer noticed there were still many “Yes on 8” signs on lawns.

“At first, I was absolutely terrified because I’m from a very conservative anti-gay town,” Colfer said. “And then people started saying, ‘Wow, your character is a lot like how Ryan Murphy would be,’ and I

didn't know I was and that was good because that would also be terrifying. In the original script, they were leaning on him being overly flamboyant and I didn't want to do that because it's so overdone. So I made him more internal and superior."

A graduate of Clovis East High School, Colfer was a three-time speech and debate champion, president of the writer's club, and wrote and directed a musical spoof of "Sweeney Todd" called "Shirley Todd." His closest friends in school were the "lunch room ladies" because he preferred to stay home to write than to go out with friends. He also took care of his 14-year-old sister, Hannah, who was born with a critical illness that has kept her in and out of hospitals all of her life.

"I was made fun of a lot in high school because of the way I sound and the way I was," Colfer said. "I was a lone duck in a swan-filled pond who criticized everyone. So I think everyone might be going, 'Oh, he's playing the gay character. Figures.' Just because that's how they perceived me."

Between the ages of nine and 14, Colfer performed in local plays four nights a week. Five years ago, he landed a Hollywood agent and began traveling eight hours roundtrip to Los Angeles for auditions with his mother. He tried out for about 30 roles before he was cast on "Glee."

Karyn Colfer remembers watching her son in his first role, playing Snoopy, when he was 8, and "I saw a light go on in my son that has never turned off."

"We had this child, Christopher, who was extremely gifted in all areas," she added. "He was very smart academically. He was very mature for his age because of his sister's illness. And this was his outlet. It was a way for him to have something that was his very own, and his father and I committed to making sure that he went after this."

Now that the word is out in Clovis about Colfer's big break, Karyn Colfer has heard from friends who have asked how she'll feel if people watch "Glee" and assume that her son is gay.

"I always say, 'What if he is?' To put it bluntly, I don't know if my son is gay or not," she said. "It's not a conversation we've had with him. But if it ever came out that he is, he would still have his dad and myself and our support and love in everything he does in life. That would not change. Ever. You can't stop loving someone for his sexual orientation. He's my kid! I'm completely comfortable with whoever Christopher wants to be."

More and more, broadcast television is depicting homosexuality in non-stereotypical ways, showing characters that embrace who they are ("Ugly Betty") and are in loving, fulfilling relationships ("Brothers & Sisters" and "Desperate Housewives"). In this way, Kurt is bound to become a role model for teens in the midst of discovering who they are and also for adults who have been in Kurt's shoes.

"That would be the biggest compliment because that would mean the community he represents on the show accepts him," Chris Colfer said. "I don't personally feel a responsibility to be a role model, but as the actor, I do. I'm happy to do what I can, but I hope I don't become the next Ellen."

But he could just become the next Beyonce. During the powerful episode that is scheduled to air Sept. 23, Kurt comes out to his father (Mike O'Malley) in a scene that Murphy took verbatim from his life. The one difference is that Murphy's conversation with his dad didn't involve the football team or hilarious "Single Ladies" dance routine, which Colfer says required "three choreographers and two therapists" to nail.

"The [show](#) is about making you feel good in the end," Murphy said. "It's about happy endings and optimism and the power of your personal journey and making you feel that the weird thing about me is the great thing about me. I've done other shows with gay characters, and I will say that in many of those cases, the gay characters didn't have a happy ending. And I thought you know what? Enough."

Kurt would agree, and so does Colfer, who says that he can especially relate to how different Kurt is from his surroundings. But Kurt is one to say things like, "My body is like a rum chocolate soufflé. If I don't warm it up right, it doesn't rise," and Colfer's confidence doesn't (yet) match that.

"There's probably more of Kurt in me than I'm willing to admit, but I really wish I could be more like Kurt," Colfer said. "I wish I could walk into a room and have that Ryan Murphy air of superiority about me."

--Maria Elena Fernandez

*Photo: (Top) Chris Colfer. Credit: Los Angeles Times / Ken Hively; (Bottom) Colfer on set of "Glee."  
Credit: Los Angeles Times / Al Seib*