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Rippon spreads message of inclusion, acceptance

First-time Olympian wants to be example for young kids afraid to come out

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Competing at the Olympics has afforded Adam Rippon the opportunity to get his message out to a mass audience -- and he's taking full advantage of it. -Getty Images

Adam Rippon has a message for anyone who is thinking about coming out but may be scared to do so: It's OK.

Just look at him. He's here, at his first Olympics, at age 28, and he is the toast of the town. He's become one of the biggest -- if not *the* biggest -- breakout stars for Team USA at these Winter Games, and he is not hiding who he is for anyone.

And he wants it known that no one else should have to either.

"I really want to take full advantage of [this opportunity]," Rippon told the gathered media at a press conference Tuesday at the Main Press Center in PyeongChang. "Using my voice has given my skating a

greater purpose than just something I want to do. I've gotten so many messages from young kids all over the country that my story's resonated with them. It's powerful, this platform you can have at the Olympic Games."

Rippon wasn't always this confident, this candid, this outspoken. For years, he was scared to reveal his true self to the world, even to those he was close to.

But when he eventually found the courage to come out in 2015, it was like a new person had been born, and he could finally be the real Adam, the person who he kept bottled up all those years.

"I know what it's like to be a young kid and feel out of place, to want to share your ideas and feel like people might not like them," Rippon said. "I spent a lot of time worrying what people thought of me, and soon as I was able to let go of those doubts, that's when I was able to find my voice. I hope that in the process of me sharing who I am with everyone that they can find their voice, too."

He said he has gotten countless messages from young kids who are afraid to disclose their sexuality to their family for fear of being rejected or, worse, thrown out of their home. They have told him his words have given them strength.

Even his teammates have expressed their admiration for him, for the message he's spreading.

"His kind of confidence is something that can help the younger people when they're unsure of themselves," said Vincent Zhou, who sat next to Rippon at the press conference and who will make his Olympic debut in the men's short program Friday. "He's had some times when he's been worried about what other people think of him or not (being) confident in himself. He's gotten over that, and that's something I can definitely take from him."

Not everyone is happy that Rippon is using his platform to serve as an advocate for gay rights. He said that in addition to the encouraging and hopeful messages he's received, he's also heard from a fair share of people who want him to pipe down, who want him to fail.

Rippon said he has no intention of doing either.

"I can't tone it down," he said. "I'm being me, I'm being myself, and I'd be doing myself an injustice, and I'd be doing an injustice to those kids who don't feel comfortable being themselves."

As the oldest of six kids who was raised by a single mother, Rippon is keenly aware of the sacrifices that have been made to allow him to pursue his dream. The lessons he learned from her, as well as from his humble upbringing in Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania -- a suburb of the blue-collar city of Scranton -- is something he carries with him every time he goes out on the ice to compete.

"Life isn't worth living if you don't have passion. I have passion for what I do," Rippon said. "Along with having passion for being an Olympic athlete, I have passion for talking with people, for telling my story. Being here at the Games, I have an opportunity to share my story."

That story doesn't have an ending yet. Rippon still has to compete in the individual men's event, and while his chances of winning a medal are slim, it does give him the chance to let his voice be heard on amateur sports' grandest stage for a little longer.

He said, "I've always sort of been unabashedly myself, always. I've always spoken my mind and from the heart. You know what? I think America's just catching on."



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