

“Hedwig” parents are tearing down a wall

Devout pair commit to the long-haul struggle between their beliefs and their unwavering love for their son.



Joan Cameron Mitchell and her husband, retired Army Maj. Gen. John H. Mitchell, will attend Friday's Colorado Springs opening of "Hedwig and the Angry Inch," written by their son John (in frame). Photo by Helen Richardson, The Denver Post

By John Moore, The Denver Post

Colorado Springs - Denver Catholic Archbishop Charles Chaput's picture hangs in honor next to a watercolor of Jesus Christ in the prayer room that artist Joan Cameron Mitchell had carved into the basement of her custom home.

Upstairs on the coffee table rest two books: Chaput's "Living the Catholic Faith" and Army Gen. Tommy Franks' "American Soldier."

The latter belongs to her husband of 44 years, retired Army Maj. Gen. John H. Mitchell. He was in charge of all U.S. military forces in West Germany and stood behind Ronald Reagan in 1987 as the president famously implored, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"

Joan, who attends Mass daily, has been asked how she reconciles her church's position on homosexuality.

She ponders her answer near a prized photograph of the Mitchells being blessed by Pope John

Paul II on their 25th wedding anniversary. The walls also show them with Princess Diana, Queen Elizabeth, Nancy Reagan, Malcolm Forbes and many more. In the

window hangs the Cameron family crest, which translated from Gaelic means "unite."

"I adore Archbishop Chaput," Joan says thoughtfully, wearing a look of trepidation and smiling mischief befitting her Scottish heritage. "... but he does not have a son."

The Mitchells have a son.

He is 41-year-old film director and Broadway actor John Cameron Mitchell, whose iconic stage and screen cult hit "Hedwig and the Angry Inch" was inspired by visits to his parents' home in Cold War Berlin.

"That's pretty good," their son later said by phone from Greenwich Village upon hearing of his mother's response.

Joan and John Mitchell are devout Catholics, conservative Republicans and a proud military couple to the core. And they are incongruous lovebirds. He served in the army for 32 years, including stints in Korea and Vietnam. She is a world-class watercolor artist whose portrait subjects have included actor Kirk Douglas, former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop and Pakistan Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto.

At 71, the Mitchells remain as sentimental as first-love schoolkids. The only reason they retired to Colorado Springs 16 years ago is because it's where they met in 1957 after a bingo game at Fort Carson, and close to the Pauline Chapel where they were

married three years later.

What makes them so remarkable is not the 20 moves they have made together. It's the perilous

emotional journey they have undertaken to accept and understand their son's homosexuality without betraying the fundamental Catholic beliefs that define them.

They can no more outright condemn their son than they can bless his lifestyle. As an artist, Joan cannot see the world in black and white. When she teaches watercolor, the first thing she asks of new students is to paint three skies - in any color other than blue.

"I struggle with it, but in the end I really do think everyone in the world should have somebody," she said.

"It was difficult then, and it's still difficult," the general added. "John knows we don't disapprove of his homosexuality but rather his practicing of his homosexuality. The most important thing is that we love him, and we do not ever want to become alienated from him. We want the interaction between us to continue."

Proud of their "Johnny"

The Mitchells are talking about life with their "Johnny" because they are so proud his career-defining "Hedwig" will be performed for the first time in Colorado Springs beginning Friday at a club called Darkside.

"Hedwig" is the glam-rock musical cabaret John wrote, directed and starred in for stage and screen. It features an "internationally ignored song stylist" who as an effeminate East Berlin boy dreamed of finding his other half. He had a botched sex-change operation to marry an American GI and escaped with him to a Kansas trailer, only to be abandoned.

"It is an honest-to-God, heartwrenching and liberating exploration into being a lost soul trapped within the human race," said TheatreWorks' Hedwig, Brian Upton.

Johnny has high hopes for "Hedwig" in Colorado Springs, home to Amendment 2, Focus on the Family and one of the nation's strictest archdioceses.

"The gay bar in Colorado Springs is called the Hide and Seek Complex, which says something about the area," John said. "But like anywhere, there are good, interesting and open-minded people there. You just have to have some kind of constructive engage-

ment. There will be people there who will be a little bit thrown. But then, maybe their minds will be slightly opened."

Joan is among the show's biggest fans. "I know every bit of it," said Joan, who saw it twice in New York, and in Germany and London.

"It didn't work so well in London because the theater was too opulent. You need a really seedy place."

She'll be at Friday's opening to check out just how seedy Darkside is, because, "Well, I have to be there, don't I?"

Joan thinks her son's performance was always excellent, but she most loves the hard-rocking, ear-splitting music by Stephen Trask.

Seriously - but the ballads especially.

"My mother, a rocker?" her son said with a laugh. "Well, let's just say she had shown no indications of that in the past."

The general remembers "being sort of torn and confused by the whole thing the first time," he said. "It was clearly a great show, but let's just say I would not have sought that show out on my own."

The greater good of the experience, Joan said, "is that a lot of people have said Hedwig's story helped them. A lot of gay people are alienated, and don't feel they are worthwhile. But this is an upbeat story, and I'm glad it makes them feel good."

John attended kindergarten in Colorado at Stratton Elementary while his father served in Vietnam, though all he remembers of that year is breaking his collarbone in a car accident. But no matter how many times the family moved, John often told his parents, "We always have a home. We just don't have a house to put it in."

Joan had five sons but lost one in childbirth and another, Samuel, to a heart defect at age 4. "That was very hard for all the boys, losing a little brother," Joan said. "Johnny put it all inside."

Two decades later, brother Colin started a company called Little

Brother Sam Productions.

When John told his parents he was gay at age 20, it threatened to split the family in two, in the same way the great wall had separated Germany. In the same way John's percolating protagonist Hedwig was two sides of one undiscovered whole: Any two pieces not unified, Joan said, are two sides broken in half.

"Johnny got the idea of two halves from east and west Berlin," Joan said. "It's about two sides of a person that aren't happy until they come together."

The Mitchells learned of John's homosexuality after Joan sent letters to sons John, Chris and Colin. "In each one I said, 'Don't tell your brothers I said this, but dad and I have always loved you the best,' she remembers with a laugh. "And then I went through all the good things about each one of them. Well, John thought this was magnificent. So it gave him the courage to tell us."

But his parents were devastated by what he had to say.

"My first thought was, 'There won't be any more Johnnys,'" she said.

Joan does not condemn homosexuality, is not afraid of it and does not believe homosexuals can or should be changed. "Sexuality, whatever yours happens to be, is a gift from God," she said. "Maybe you don't want the gift you get, but you have it."

Because the church condemns the sin but not the sinner, she believes true homosexual Catholics should offer that gift back to God in the form of lifelong abstinence.

"The church doesn't change with the world," she said. "It moves the world, and it has for 2,000 years. I just wish the church would talk about homosexuality with more compassion. After all, it takes all kinds of wonderful people to fill this world."

"My parents are pretty great," John responded. "They have severe limitations when it comes to sex, but I appreciate that they are trying to remain open-minded."

The 2004 election was a bump in their journeys. John was devastated by the re-election of George

W. Bush and the gay-marriage bans in 11 states.

"We have a disagreement in this area," said Joan, who favors civil unions.

"Johnny told me, 'There are two sides to all of us, and we have to come together to be happy.' And I said to him, 'You are quoting St. Augustine!' - 'We are restless until we find rest in thee.' Our other side is God."

Her son disagrees, but he believes there were lessons to be gleaned from growing up in the military's transitory lifestyle.

"No matter how conservative your politics are, or what flag or bumper sticker you put on your car, if you are in this world, you are traveling through it," said John. "And if you are seeing the differences in the human condition, you can't help but see there's variety to it."

"I loved that we grew up in a racially mixed environment, and because sexual orientation is really just another kind of variety, I believe the military could actually be an instrument of open-mindedness in this area," he said. "Take the British. The navy there is now advertising in gay magazines to up their recruitment."

"There is so much to see and to know in the world, and if you just sit inside your little town, that's when xenophobia comes in. That's when you get scared that someone is going to hurt you from outside, and that's when you get the politics of fear overriding

your best instincts of generosity and openness. Anytime you make a decision based on fear alone, it's a bad decision."

The family's disagreement over the election and gay marriage was enough for John not to come home for Christmas. So Joan called John and said, "All right then, we are coming to you."

"So we met in Chicago," she said. "We were split, like 'Hedwig,' and we met, literally, halfway. You understand?"