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## TUA'S SONG

Esera Tuaolo reflects on a rocky childhood, the loss of his brother to AIDS, and a future filled with music.

BY CHIP ALFRED / A&U, SEPTEMBER 2009



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# Esera Tuaolo

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by His Brother

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ROCKY CHILDHOOD,  
THE LOSS OF HIS  
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& A FUTURE FILLED  
WITH MUSIC  
by Chip Alfred

PHOTOS BY AARON THOMPSON

It was January 31, 1999—the day of the most anticipated sporting event of the year. A billion people watched the Denver Broncos take on the Atlanta Falcons in Super Bowl XXXIII. Falcons' defensive lineman Esera Tuaolo made the final tackle of the game. The Broncos won 34 to 19.

Even though the Falcons lost the Super Bowl, Esera's NFL dream had come true—making it to football's world championship game. It should have been the happiest day of his life. Instead, he was stricken with panic—crippled with fear that someone watching would reveal his secret and end his career forever.

For nine years in the NFL and until he was thirty-four years-old, Esera lived a double life. In public, he was a macho professional athlete. In private, he was a closet-

ed gay man.

In 2002, three years after retiring from the NFL, Esera shared his story for the first time on *Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel*. He talked about being gay and what he endured to stay in the closet and stay in the NFL. "I had lived like a prisoner in my own skin," he admitted. With those words, he was finally set free.

The day the *Real Sports* interview aired, Esera appeared on *Good Morning America* with Diane Sawyer. "A huge burden has been lifted," he told Sawyer. "I feel light as a feather, but this morning I still weighed three hundred and thirty pounds."

So how did a gay Hawaiian raised in poverty make it to the NFL, and what sacrifices did he make along the way?

Esera Tuaolo (pronounced Ess-uh-ruh

Too-ah-oh-low) grew up on a banana farm near Honolulu in Waimanalo, on the island of Oahu. He was the youngest of eight siblings. The family lived in a thatched hut their father built from tree-trunk poles and coconut leaves.

Esera's parents emigrated from Samoa to find a better life in Hawaii. In a tropical paradise known for its stunning beauty and welcoming people, Esera experienced ugliness and hatred at an early age.

The Tuaolo family was devoutly religious. Every Sunday, they worshipped together at a Pentecostal Assembly of God church. "I remember a pastor preaching about homosexuality, saying it was an abomination to God," Esera recalls.

"I would run home, get on my knees and pray to God He would take away this curse,"



he says. "Eventually I would figure out that God loved me the way I am, but as a child I would lie awake at night, terrified that God was going to cast me into the lake of fire."

At the age of six, Esera witnessed his aunt's murder by neighbors who hated Samoans living on their block. That same year, Esera became the victim of sexual abuse at the hands of a family member. His parents trusted Esera's Uncle Fafawia to take care of the boy when they were out. Uncle Fafawia molested and assaulted Esera repeatedly for years, and raped him when he was eight years-old.

As many molested children tend to do, Esera felt guilty about the abuse. "I was robbed of my innocence, but for the longest time I thought it was my fault." He believes the trauma of the abuse destroyed his ability to experience intimacy for years to come. "I didn't learn how to love the normal way."

The abuse didn't stop until Uncle Fafawia was beaten to death—another anti-Samoan hate crime committed by the same men who shot Esera's aunt. The killers were brought to justice, but Esera felt relieved that Uncle Fafawia was gone. "The pain was not going to happen again. I no longer had to live in fear of him. I could start living my life again," he thought.

The sexual abuse was over, but Esera would soon learn that his classmates could be hurtful in a different way. Seeing little boys bullied, beaten and called "mahu" (Hawaiian for "faggot"), Esera knew he could end up being another victim. "That's the day I took that child within me and I threw him in the closet," he says. "I had to be bigger and faster and stronger so that no one would know Esera Tuaolo was gay."

So Esera chose football, or as he says, "I think football chose me. I was one of the big kids. People expected me to play football or some kind of sports." Esera received a football scholarship to Oregon State University, where he was honored with the Morris Trophy, the highest honor for a defensive lineman in the NCAA Pacific-10 Conference.

In 1991, the NFL came calling. Esera Tuaolo was the thirty-fifth pick in the NFL draft for the Green Bay Packers. He says he will never forget the moment when he heard his name (badly mispronounced, of course) for the first time on ESPN. "My heart jumped. I was joining the NFL—the

number one form of entertainment in the world, playing before the greatest fans on earth!"

But the thrill of being drafted by one of the most storied teams in football was quickly overcome by depression, anxiety attacks and the fear of being outed. With success came even greater paranoia. The more Esera had to lose, the worse it became.

While Esera was training with the Packers, he received a phone call from his older brother Tua in Hawaii. "He told me he had AIDS," Esera says. "I could hear the fear in his voice. I said I'm on my way."

Tua replied, "I will wait for you."

On the flight to Hawaii, Esera couldn't stop thinking about Tua—the man everybody loved and respected. "He took care of me," Esera says. "After my dad passed away when I was ten, Tua was the closest thing to a father I had."

When Esera arrived at his brother's hospital bed, Tua had been heavily sedated and fell into a coma. Esera rubbed Tua's limp hand. He knew his brother felt his presence.

"You promised," Esera cried. "You said you would wait for me."

At the age of twenty-nine, Tua died the next day. He was laid to rest on Esera's twenty-fourth birthday. "No one spoke about AIDS at the funeral. People thought Tua died of pneumonia," Esera remembers.

Tua's death was devastating for Esera. "I felt a void. It's still there," Esera says. "Never in a million years did I think my brother, someone so young, would die."

At Tua's funeral, Esera sang these words:

*If you ever stumble, I'll be there to carry you.*

*I'll bear your burden, until you're as strong as before.*

*Whatever you do, I'll be there for you until your strength is restored.*

*Cause after all, that's what a brother's for.*

Esera returned to Green Bay, and eventually played for four more NFL teams—the Minnesota Vikings, the Jacksonville Jaguars, the Atlanta Falcons, and the Carolina Panthers. Despite a few serious injuries (a cracked sternum from a weightlifting accident, a shredded Achilles tendon), Esera played pro football for nine years, three



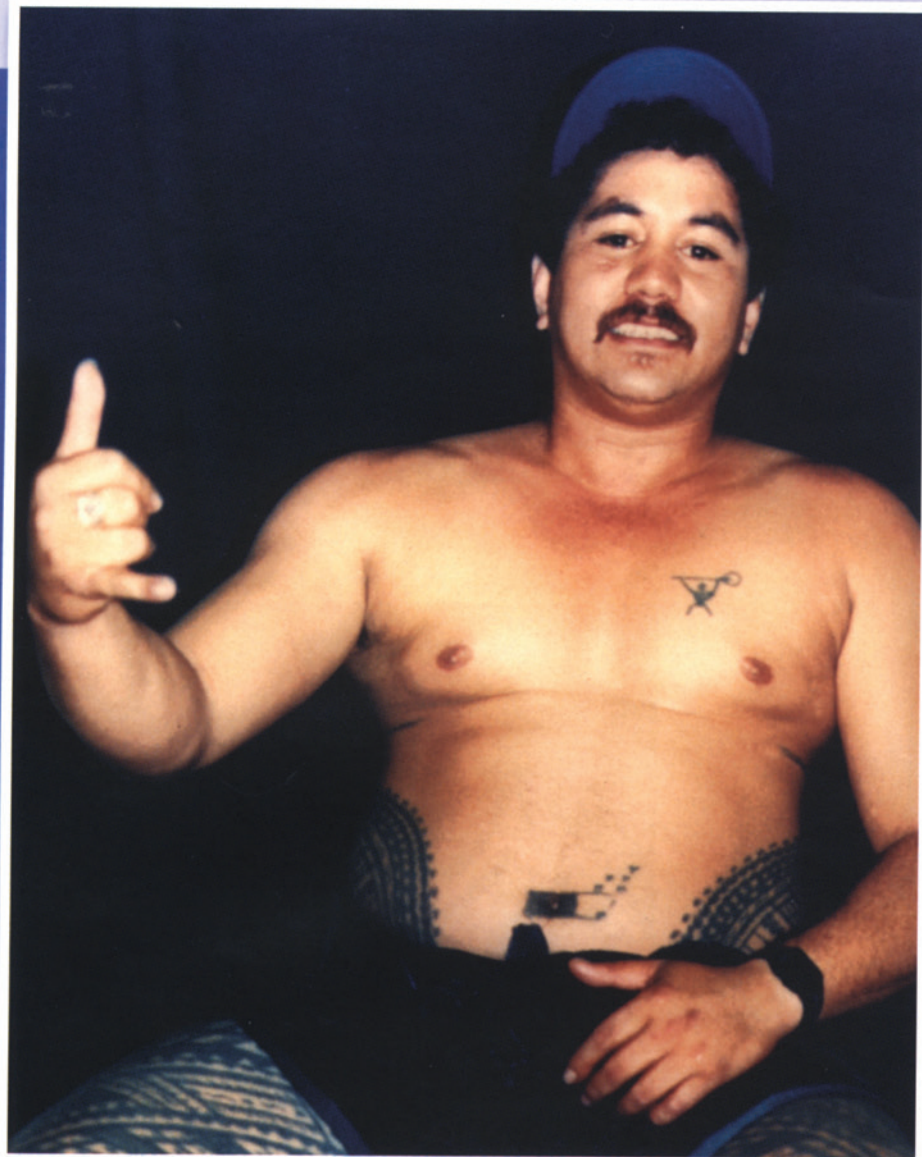
times as long as the average NFL player.

Like many of his teammates, Esera felt tremendous pressure to stay in the game. "I played for the money," he says. "I knew without football, I would go back to nothing."

Each year in the NFL grew tougher on Esera's body and on his emotional state. He was lonely and depressed. "I wanted to commit suicide," he says. One night he contemplated jumping out the window of his fifteenth-story Minneapolis apartment.

In 1996, on a trip home to Hawaii, a





Left: Esera's brother, Tua

Opposite page: Esera and his former partner Mitchell Wherley, with their children Mitchell, Jr., and Michelle

friend gave Esera a book that would save his life. It was *The David Kopay Story*. Like Esera, David Kopay played for five teams in the NFL for about a decade. Kopay retired in 1972, and four years later was the first former NFL player to speak publicly about being gay.

Kopay's book gave Esera hope. "Someone else had gone through what I was going through," he says. "His book let me know that it might be possible for me to find that special someone."

The following year, at a radio station promotion in Minneapolis, Esera met that "special someone." His name was Mitchell Wherley. Esera and Mitchell were partners for ten years.

In 2001, Esera adopted newborn twins—a boy and a girl. Mitchell later co-adopted the children, named Michelle and Mitchell, Jr. Minnesota is one of only a handful of states where same-sex couples can legally

adopt. Esera ("Big Daddy") and Mitchell ("Little Daddy") separated in 2007 and share custody of the twins.

After retiring from football, Esera turned to public speaking, enlightening students, athletes, FORTUNE 500 companies—even the National Football League—about the dangers of homophobia. "I talk about creating a safe environment I never had in the NFL," he says. "It's such a blessing that I am able to go into these places where they would never have a gay person talk."

In October, Equality Forum will honor Esera Tuaolo as one of its GLBT History Month 2009 Icons. Each day in October, a different Icon is recognized on-line at [gltbHistoryMonth.com](http://gltbHistoryMonth.com) with a video, biography, bibliography, downloadable images and other resources. Icons are selected for being national heroes, outstanding in their chosen field, or activists for gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender civil rights.

"I'm doing the things that I'm supposed to be doing," Esera says. "When you have the opportunity to give back to your community or to your culture, it's a given. It would be a shame if I would not say a word."

In honor of his brother's memory, Esera is a dedicated AIDS activist. "We've all been affected by AIDS in one way or another," he says. "We've all lost someone from this horrible disease."

Esera served on the board of the Minnesota AIDS Project (MAP). In 2004, he was photographed with Mitchell and the twins for MAP's campaign promoting the Minnesota AIDS Walk. The headline above their family portrait read, "We walk so our children may know a world free of HIV."

Esera, along with a number of Asian and Pacific Islander celebrities, (Joan Chen, James Kyson Lee, Dr. Sanjay Gupta) recorded a series of TV public service





announcements for the Banyan Tree Project, a national campaign to stop HIV/AIDS related stigma in Asian and Pacific Islander communities.

According to the National Institutes of Health, only thirty percent of adult Asians and Pacific Islanders have ever been tested for HIV—a lower percentage than any other U.S. ethnic or racial group. About thirty percent of HIV-infected Asians and Pacific Islanders aren't even aware they are infected.

The HIV infection rate among Asians and Pacific Islanders in the U. S. is rising steadily. The Banyan Tree Project focuses on stopping the silence and shame, asking questions, and getting tested. "Knowledge is power, and educating people is the key," says Esera.

Esera has lent his support and his voice to fundraisers for Minnesota's One Heartland, a place that provides summer camp experiences for children and families impacted by HIV/AIDS, among other services. He also donated a portion of the proceeds from his 2004 recording artist debut, "First Christmas," to One Heartland. "It's

an amazing place for kids," he says.

In 2006, after receiving thousands of e-mails from people around the world inspired by his story, Esera released his memoir, *Alone in the Trenches: My Life as a Gay Man in the NFL*.

"It's definitely the hardest thing I've ever done," Esera says about writing the book, baring his soul and disclosing the often painful details of his past. He was motivated to pen the book so his children would know their true father.

"I want my children to have a better life because of me and create a world for them where they can reach their full potential—no matter who they love. My goal now is to educate people to make that possible." He prays that when people read his book they will realize "there is hope and that hate in any form is wrong."

For now, "Mr. Aloha" (his nickname in the NFL) is focused on his music career. Singing since he was a child, Esera was the first NFL starting player to sing the national anthem before a nationally televised game.

He formed his own production company and recently released his first full-length

album, simply titled *Esera*, an eclectic mix of the music and experiences that define him. One of the songs on the album is "God Bless My Daddy," the first one Esera learned as a child. When he was five years old, he remembers singing these lyrics to the man he described as his "best friend."

*God bless my daddy, who's over there  
Said a little tiny boy in his little prayer...  
Wait for me, Mama, I'll be home real soon.  
I never knew how much you meant to me,  
Now that I'm so many miles across the sea....*

Esera is currently enjoying spending time in Minnesota with his children and his boyfriend of nearly two years, Aaron Thompson, a semi-pro baseball player.

"You can't take anything for granted," he says. "I'm living life to the fullest."

For more information about Esera Tuaolo, visit [www.eseraonline.com](http://www.eseraonline.com).

Chip Alfred is a freelance writer and president of the Philadelphia chapter of the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association.