



Sharing our experience

by Sue O'Connell
co-publisher

White gay men and black men have more in common than they think

Pedophile. Pervert. Promiscuous sex-fiend. Pornographer. AIDS spreader. Crazy.

Gang-banger. Thug. Rapist. Suspicious man. Thief. Criminal.

Gay men, and the rest of the LGBTQ community, know a thing or two about being profiled. We know how young black men feel when they are judged. LGBT people have also been harassed, beaten, and killed for simply being. Last month, here in Massachusetts—the home of marriage equality—two Quincy men beat a man at South Station in homophobic rage.

As recently as twenty years ago, the majority of the public felt gay men were too dangerous to work with children, be parents, serve in the military, and a variety of other basic societal roles. Historically, gay white men

from Frank Kameny's playbook? In 1957 Kameny was fired from his job as an astronomer for the U.S. Army because he was gay. He appealed his firing and in 1961 he appeared before the U.S. Supreme Court. They denied his petition, but his claim became the first based on sexual orientations.

Kameny became an aggressive activist for gay rights. A famous early tactic was picketing. Kameny founded the Mattachine Society and, with other "homophile" organizations protested anti-gay discrimination across the nation. Kameny and his group picketed the White House in 1965, carrying signs that said, "Homosexuals should be judged as individuals"

Here's the kicker—protesters were required to follow strict dress codes. Ties for men, skirts for women. Kameny said the goal was to show homosexuals were "presentable and 'employable'".

The effort to let the straights see how average we are continues. The Welcoming Committee, also known as Boston Guerrilla Queer Bar, has been informally orga-

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have been the emblem of gayness. (The conventional wisdom of the past two centuries being that women were incapable of having sexual relations without men, transgender folk were considered gay, and bisexuals just didn't exist.)

Today, gay men in most of America can do all of those things, and more.

How did the majority of the public go from disgust, fear and hatred of gay men to tolerance, at the least, and full acceptance, at the most?

One factor is that the LGBTQ community and organizations understood that image—how America perceived us—was part of the problem. The most extreme of the community, feminine men and masculine women, got the most press because they were the most interesting—but also the "scariest". They were also most likely to be the victims of crime. Some activists realized that a way to find common ground with America was to show just how much we were like the straight community. The message went out to "come out", let the press and the public see the accountants, the parents, the boring gays. At the same time, it was important not to diminish or judge the "extreme" parts of our community, so a delicate balance was required.

Not only did people need to come out, but gays needed to go to the gay meccas to be seen—that's where the press would be. So church groups, teachers, doctors marched in gay Pride parades, started affinity groups, became public people.

What would happen if young black men took a page

nizing groups of gays to visit "typically straight places". Called "takeovers", their website describes the effort as "The act of a whole bunch of gay people getting together and making a space theirs...for one time only. Is it aggressive? No. Is it awesome? Yes."

In time, and with much sacrifice, effort and bravery, these pioneers slowly changed minds.

Am I suggesting that young black men are part of the problem? No. Just as drag queens, butch dykes, and sex-positive queers are not responsible for the violence done to them, young black men are not responsible either.

Am I suggesting that an image problem is an element of the racial profiling young black men experience? Yes. I am suggesting that, from my experience as a woman and lesbian, successful self-determination and identification requires buy-in from the community at large.

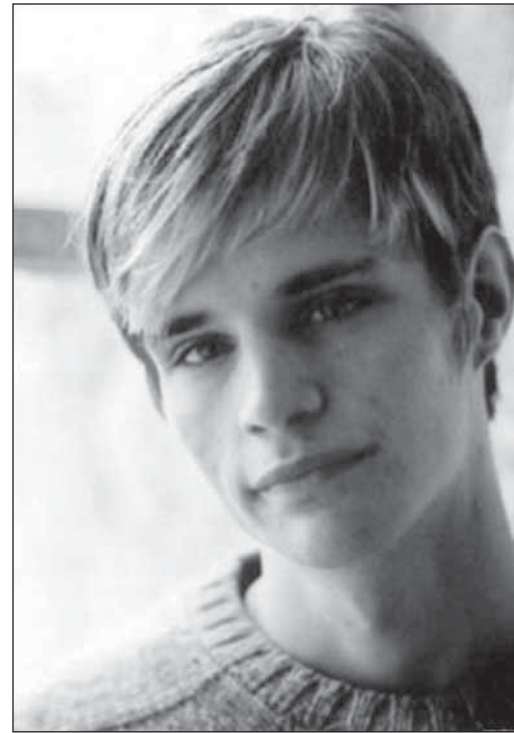
Of course, the challenges facing our young black men are not just about image. The crisis of joblessness, incarceration, and violence is something that needs to be changed and addressed—but simultaneously.

Throughout America's history, African Americans and LGBTQ people have risked our lives for the right to define ourselves. Both communities have been painted as threats. Each member of our communities has struggled to be judged as an individual, not as a stereotype.

Some LGBTQ folk have had cover—the curse of the closet has also allowed gay people (mostly white and mostly male) to attain the high positions in American



Trayvon Martin



Matthew Shepard

business and politics. It has also allowed families to meet gays at the dinner table, through the bravery of sons and daughters who were open and honest about their sexual orientation. In short, we passed as straight, at great personal cost.

African Americans have not had the cover of a closet, but have had a long history of self-definition. Our communities have often been separated by differences. And racism is, unfortunately, alive and well in the LGBTQ world. But we have a shared experience.

As a white lesbian, I'm not going to give advice. But as an American concerned about our future, I will. Let's put our shared history of discrimination and victory to use to make America a nation who invests in the future and safety of our young men. LGBTQ groups should reach out to minority groups and minority groups should reach back. LGBTQ groups need to deal with their racism in a transparent manner.

And let's rip a page from the civil rights era and travel together to mostly white enclaves and towns. Let's "takeover" downtown Sandwich for a day of shopping. Let's have lunch in Weston.

We have much to fear in America today, but young black men in hoodies and two men holding hands shouldn't be on the list. We are as normal as the rest of the nation. It's time we showed them.

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