

ARTICLE

Seeing ALL Identities of LGBTQ Youth of Color

Giovanni Blair McKenzie gave this speech about supporting LGBTQ youth of color and “interlocking forms of discrimination” at the 2015 Human Rights Campaign’s Time to THRIVE conference.

By Giovanni Blair McKenzie | May 6, 2015



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Giovanni Blair McKenzie is the founder and executive director of Queer Intersections Portland and a Human Rights Campaign (HRC) Foundation youth ambassador. McKenzie gave this poignant speech about supporting LGBTQ youth of color at the 2015 HRC’s Time to THRIVE conference, which a number of TT staff attended. Giovanni’s insights blew us away. In their speech, Giovanni described growing up as an LGBTQ youth of color, moving from Jamaica to the United States at the age of 16, navigating “interlocking forms of discrimination,” and realizing how schools often fail to adequately protect and welcome LGBTQ youth.



This article contains a multimedia feature that is available at the web address above.

Is it Time—to—THRIVE, people?!

Welcome to Portland, or, the city I now call home.

As a young, black, LGBTQ immigrant, I am so honored to be speaking here at this conference. I say that because I do not see many young, black and LGBT people being represented in this country. Our lives matter, don't they?

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This past fall, I found myself hanging out with a group of black, gay men here in Portland. It was a small gathering at one of their homes, and I was invited. I was talking to Alex, who's around 35, black, bisexual and has lived in Portland for about 18 years after leaving the Midwest.

I asked him how he knew the host, Thomas. He said to me, "I know Thomas because he taught me how to love myself as a black man."

Being the social person I am, I nodded as though I understood what he meant. Deep down inside, I did not.

Two weeks later I was picking up medication for my grandmother at her pharmacy. As I was walking through the parking lot, I saw a gentleman staring at me. Like anyone would be, I was confused. Bear in mind, this man was about 6' 2", white and looked around 55. He held his keys in his hands and just stared at me, looking disgusted.

He then picked up his arm, shaped his hand into a gun, pointed it at me and shouted, "BANG BANG!"

In that moment, I was in shock. My heart stopped. The names and faces of all the young black men who have been killed recently ran through my mind. I took a deep breath and slowly walked away terrified, wondering what had just happened and why had it happened to me.

A week later, I was sitting around a fire pit with a racially diverse group of friends. At some point during the many conversations we were having, I found myself sharing the experience I had with the white man in the parking lot. Naturally, they all looked horrified. Then something struck me as the group got silent.

Living in Portland, a very progressive city for LGBTQ rights, I've learned to love myself as a queer person. But Portland isn't very racially diverse or progressive. I am not VALUED here as a black man.

As in the rest of the country, I am seen as DANGEROUS, as a CRIMINAL—when I have committed no crimes. Although Portland may be progressive in some ways, I still experience daily reminders that there are many people in this city who think I am dirty, unattractive, unintelligent and inferior. I am tokenized, then criminalized and ultimately treated like I have no value.

I don't know how to love myself as a young, black, queer person, when the world tells me that I am not someone who deserves to be loved. Yet, I cannot stop being black any more than I can stop being gay, or gender-queer, or Jamaican, nor can I designate one of those identities as more important than the other.

In the LGBTQ community here in Portland, I have found so much love and support for my queer identity—so much determination to fight against homophobia and transphobia. Let's not forget the T—cuz it ain't silent.

But these are not the only forms of discrimination that LGBTQ youth encounter. We endure discrimination based on our race, our disabilities, our economic status, our gender expression, our immigration status, our HIV status. These are problems that WE as a COMMUNITY must talk about if we are truly going to meet the needs of *all* LGBTQ youth.

The term “intersectionality” describes the ways that different kinds of discrimination overlap and work together to keep people from their full and authentic selves.

Think of it this way—intersectionality describes how a person like myself can be deeply affected by my multiple marginalized identities. I am a black, Hispanic, East Indian, gay and gender-queer immigrant from Jamaica. Mouthful, huh? Well, I spend each day battling the overlapping systems of discrimination that come with each of those identities.

For me, my race and my sexuality and my gender expression are the main places where I—and many other LGBTQ people of color—experience discrimination.

We experience racism, homophobia and transphobia from the world at large, but we also endure homophobia and transphobia among other people of color and racism among white LGBTQ people and in white society as a whole.

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These interlocking forms of discrimination are real, and they are affecting the lives of LGBTQ youth *right now!*

According to a report by the GSA Network, “LGBTQ youth of color face persistent and frequent harassment and bias-based bullying from peers and school staff as well as increased surveillance and policing.” The report further notes, “[LGBTQ youth of color] also face consistent blame FOR THEIR OWN VICTIMIZATION.”

Trust me when I say I'm not making this up.

We're bullied in school, not just by our peers, but often by the teachers and the staff who should be protecting us. Think for a second how damaging that is.

And that's before we leave the walls of our schools and venture out into the rest of society where we now FEAR FOR OUR LIVES.

When I moved to the U.S. in 2010, I was diagnosed with depression, anxiety and PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). My trauma came from my childhood in Jamaica. I was bullied a lot in school. And gender-based bullying looks quite different there. It's physical and constant, and adults participate in it too. Jamaica is said to be the most unsafe place to be an LGBTQ person in the Western hemisphere. So whether you are an LGBTQ person or just perceived to be, the harassment and trauma follows you everywhere.

I spent the first half of my first year in an American high school trying to put on a deep voice and dress like I thought a straight person would, hoping I wouldn't have to relive the trauma I experienced in Jamaica. I soon learned Portland had an openly gay mayor.

I discovered SMYRC that year, which stands for the Sexual Minority & Gender Youth Resource Center. I found a family there. The first day was very weird though. I've never seen so many rainbows in my life! It was quite overwhelming at first.

I used to tell my family I was going to the Boys & Girls Club when I was REALLY going to the gay one that was down the street from it. That was convenient!

A year later, something happened. I had my first boyfriend.

He was the boyfriend that I, the newly American teen, addicted to the *Twilight Saga* and Taylor Swift had *PRAYED* for. It was like a mash-up of Taylor Swift's "You Belong With Me" and Katy Perry's "Teenage Dream." He was the school genius AND the track star.

We came out on Facebook as a couple. It was high school, and relationship statuses on Facebook were the core of our existence. Do you guys remember those days?

That night, I was probably as nervous as Beyoncé the night she dropped her self-titled album. Except she was releasing some secret album, and I was just telling the world I was dating a guy a year after leaving Jamaica on social media. But like Beyoncé's album I was the talk of the town.

But it wasn't all good talk. My uncle, who'd played a significant role in my life since I didn't know my dad, blocked me from all communications and to this day we still don't talk. My mother had cut ties with me as well. I was devastated.

One night I found myself bawling my eyes out and I made my way into my grandmother's room. Her assurance was everything I needed. She said to me (and

I'll never forget this), "I knew you were gay since the day you came off the plane. And I am so proud to call you my grandson."

She told me to be strong and that if we believed in ourselves, we can get through anything.

A couple months later, my mother called. I'll never forget the day. She called to tell me she was living in a house with...a gay man and a trans woman. When she said that, I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

My mother had surprised me that day. She said to me, "I don't care if you wish to wear skirts or just date men, I love you either way." And thanks to the HRC Foundation, I got to see her in New York last October for the 2nd Annual State of Out Youth. Seeing my mother there was a moment I'll never forget. And watching her happily meet HRC and The Trevor Project staff members made the evening even more special. The Jamaican mom who couldn't accept her son being gay just over a year ago was now the proudest person in the room.

With the support of my mother, my grandmother and the queer and trans family I've built, I am slowly learning to love myself not only as a gender-queer and gay person, but also as a person of color.

I'm pleading you today to consider ALL of the identities of the youth you work with.

The recent deaths of Mike Brown, Eric Garner, Jessica Hernandez and this week Penny Proud has had so much effect on LGBTQ youth of color.

How many times must we say, "OUR LIVES MATTER"?

At first we saw a trend of young black men being killed by the hands of law enforcement, now we see trans women of color being shot. It's the second week of February and five....yes, FIVE, trans women of color has been killed in their own communities.

As you work with LGBT youth, think of ALL their identities, not just their sexual orientation and gender identities. Each LGBTQ young person is different. One size does not fit us all. Each LGBTQ young person you work with may be struggling with forms of discrimination based on their race, gender expression, immigration status, religion, HIV status, income level and more.

An intersectional approach to LGBTQ youth advocacy means taking young people like me as WHOLE people—with numerous identities, all of which need to be VALIDATED and SUPPORTED.

It is TIME for *all* LGBTQ youth of color to THRIVE!

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McKenzie is the founder and executive director of Queer Intersections Force and serves as a youth ambassador for the Human Rights Campaign Foundation.



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