



HUMAN
RIGHTS
CAMPAIGN
FOUNDATIONTM

A RESOURCE GUIDE TO
**COMING
OUT FOR
AFRICAN
AMERICANS**



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HOW DO YOU KNOW?

Coming out can be one of the most challenging events in your life, but also one of the most rewarding. Being attracted to someone of the same sex or understanding that your gender identity is different from your biological sex can be frightening. Some African Americans feel pressure to prioritize their different identities.

“PERHAPS THE MOST MADDENING QUESTION ANYONE CAN ASK ME IS, ‘WHICH DO YOU PUT FIRST: BEING BLACK OR BEING A WOMAN, BEING BLACK OR BEING GAY?’”

wrote Barbara Smith in her essay, “Blacks and Gays: Healing the Great Divide.”

“The underlying assumption,” she says, “is that I should prioritize one of my identities because one of them is actually more important than the rest or that I must arbitrarily choose one of them over the others for the sake of acceptance in one particular community.”

Yet, more than a decade later, people still must face this challenge. We must find a way to show our peers that you don’t have to just pick one identity — we can be both black and gay and be successful members of society. We have to be honest with ourselves and embrace all the parts of ourselves, because that’s when we’re at our strongest.

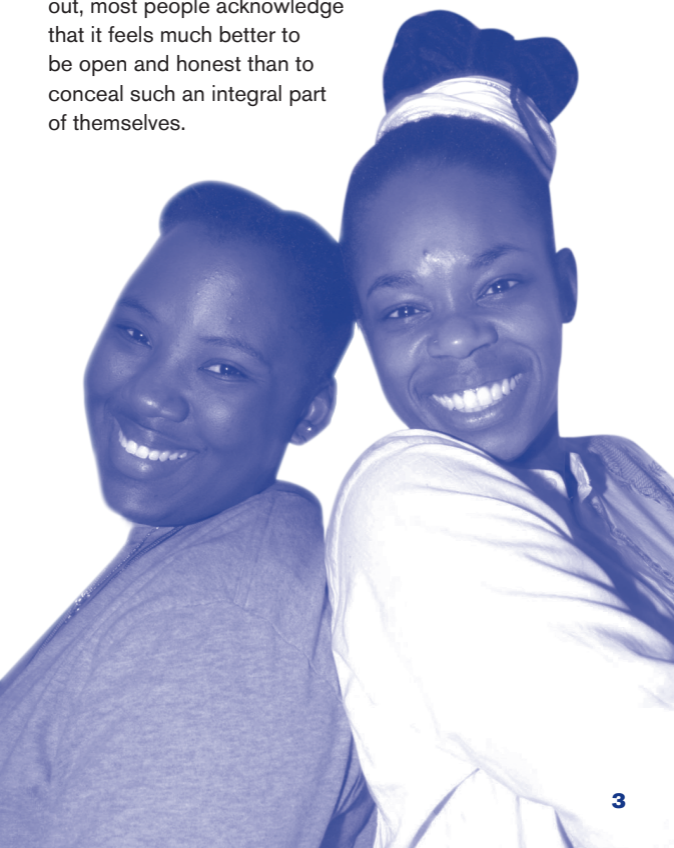
BEING LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER IS NATURAL

You've probably heard some people say that men are "meant" to be with women, and women are "meant" to be with men — or that you should be a "real" man or be more "feminine." They may say that unless you are straight, you are going against nature and morality. But if being lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender is unnatural, why would it occur, generation after generation, despite some cultures' strong prohibitions? The fact is, same-sex love and gender variance have occurred throughout history, in every nation and culture. They are natural variations among humans, and may have occurred somewhere in your own family's history. When people say being LGBT is unnatural, they mean it is against their preconceived idea of, or conditioned assumptions about, what is natural or normal.

BE HONEST WITH YOURSELF

To come out is to identify as LGBT. The first person you have to reveal this to is yourself. After that, you can deal with friends and family.

For many people, the coming out process is difficult. But most people come out because, sooner or later, they can't stand hiding who they are any more. Once they've come out, most people acknowledge that it feels much better to be open and honest than to conceal such an integral part of themselves.



Many people identify as lesbian or gay because their primary attractions — both emotional and physical — are to members of the same sex. Many people who are attracted to both men and women identify as bisexual. Some transgender people say they have felt like they were trapped in the wrong body for as long as they can remember. And sometimes people don't feel comfortable with any of these labels, or they choose a mix of them. The most important thing is to be honest with yourself and — when you choose to — be honest with others about who you are and to whom you are attracted.

Figuring out who you are can be difficult — and it takes time. Remember, however, that most of those negative stereotypes of LGBT people you may have heard are based on erroneous information and people's fear of what they don't understand. What you need are the facts.

SAME-GENDER LOVING

People of different sexual orientations and gender identities refer to themselves in a variety of ways. For instance, some African Americans use the term “same-gender loving.” Others use lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender — LGBT. In this document, you will see the letters “LGBT” used. This is in no way meant to discredit those who prefer “same-gender loving.”

AM I BISEXUAL?

Bisexual people are attracted to people of more than one sex and/or gender. A bisexual person may not be equally attracted to both sexes, however, and the degree of attraction can vary over time as one's sexual identity develops. No “test” exists to determine whether you are bisexual. Some people acknowledge their bisexuality after a period of identifying as a gay or lesbian. At first, you may not know what to call your sexual feelings or whether you feel sufficiently attracted to both sexes to consider yourself bisexual. But there's no measuring stick to determine what amount of attraction to others' sex and/or gender is necessary to identify as bisexual.

You may also hear some of the common myths about bisexual people — that they can't make up their minds or can't commit to long-term relationships. Don't listen. And don't feel you need to hurry into a decision. Coming out — whether you are lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender — is a precious journey.

“WHEN YOU TELL PEOPLE THAT YOU ARE BISEXUAL, THEY ASSUME THAT YOU ARE IMMORAL, FREAKY, INDECISIVE AND GREEDY. YOU BECOME OSTRACIZED BY BOTH HETEROSEXUAL AND HOMOSEXUAL PEOPLE. ...I AM AN EQUAL-OPPORTUNITY LOVER; I FALL IN LOVE WITH SOMEONE DESPITE THEIR SEX.”

— **Shari McDonald, graduate,
Bennett College for Women**



THE FACTS ABOUT SEXUALITY AND GENDER IDENTITY

No one knows how many people are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. The most reputable estimates are skewed by the fact that many people are afraid to identify as LGBT, even when assured of anonymity.

Whatever the numbers, the facts are the same:
YOUR SEXUALITY OR
GENDER IDENTITY IS NOT
A CHOICE. IT CHOOSES YOU.

Some people say that sexuality or gender identity is a choice, to discourage you from gay or lesbian relationships or from being comfortable with expressing your gender in the way that feels right to you. But think about it for a minute: Did you choose to have feelings of same-sex attraction? Did you choose your sex at birth? Sexuality and gender identity are not choices, any more than being left-handed or having brown eyes or being heterosexual are choices. They are a part of who you are. The choice is in deciding how to live your life.

IT'S OK TO BE YOURSELF

In the 1970s, the American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association revised their positions on homosexuality. Both determined that homosexuality is not a mental disorder. In 1994, the American Medical Association released a statement concluding, “Most of the emotional disturbance experienced by gay men and lesbians around their sexual identity is not based on physiological causes but rather due more to a sense of alienation in an unaccepting environment.”

Nonetheless, some people might try to tell you that you're sick and that you need professional help to “change.” No scientifically valid evidence exists that shows people can change their sexual orientation, although some people do repress it.

Additionally, the American Psychiatric Association, the American Medical Association and the World Professional Association for Transgender Health have all affirmed that transgender and gender non-conforming people are deserving of rights, dignity and respect. These organizations have also endorsed transition-related healthcare — such as gender confirmation surgery or hormone therapy — as a medical and psychological necessity for many transgender individuals.

Most importantly, remember the problems people have in dealing with their sexuality and gender identity come from society and its treatment of LGBT people — not actually from being LGBT. As with any other significant step in your life, it's OK to seek help in dealing with the confusing feelings you may have about your sexual orientation or your gender identity. Understanding and being honest with yourself, as well as coming out, are critical milestones in life. Just remember: The anxiety you are feeling is primarily the result of family or social prejudice against LGBT people.

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— American Medical Association

WHAT DOES TRANSGENDER MEAN?

Few of us were told that we might have a gender identity that differs from the body into which we were born or that we might feel compelled to express our gender in ways that aren't traditionally associated with the gender we were assigned at birth.

While gender is traditionally presented to us as either male or female — mutually exclusive and unchangeable opposites — the truth is that gender is a rich, broad spectrum that comes in as many forms as there are people.

For those whose gender identity or innate sense of their own gender doesn't match with the one assigned to them at birth, unraveling and expressing it can be complex and difficult.

Many of these individuals come to identify as “transgender,” an umbrella term that describes a wide range of people who experience or express their gender in different, sometimes non-traditional, ways.

KYLAR BROADUS

Associate Professor of Business, Lincoln University + Senior Public Policy Counsel at the Transgender Civil Rights Project of the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force

Coming Out as Transgender

I was born as the second of two children in Fayette, Mo., a small rural farming community. As a young female-bodied person, I always knew that I was in the wrong body. I spent endless nights praying for God to fix me and put me in the right body. My sister and father got that I felt I was in the wrong body, because it made sense to them. I felt male always. It was just who I was, and so my extended family accepted this as part of me. My mother had a difficult time, though, and it took her a while. It didn't help that I came out as lesbian several years earlier.

I actually didn't come out as lesbian for a long time because I didn't feel like a lesbian. It seemed to fit only because of my attraction to women as the world saw it. I didn't feel connected to a lesbian identity in any way. I was male! After a lot of research, I came out as transsexual almost immediately. It fit! I began my transition from female to male. I was excited to get on with my life. I didn't really expect the hate and lack of understanding from people in general but especially lesbian, gay and bisexual people. I believed that the fight for equality was about the freedom to be ourselves. However, I was now criticized and ostracized by a community that I had been a part of and worked in so diligently for the rights of others. It just didn't make sense.

Even more devastating, after almost eight years as an employee at a major financial institution, I informed my supervisor of my

Transitioning does not always involve medical treatment. By dressing in preferred-gender clothing, changing their bodies through exercise, adjusting mannerisms and speech patterns or requesting that friends and family address them with preferred names and pronouns, transgender people can use non-medical options to live their gender identities or expressions.

Others undergoing a transition can pursue medical counseling — hormone therapy, surgery or both — to align their bodies with the gender they know themselves to be.

For many, expressing gender is unconscious. It's as simple as styling your hair or tying a tie. It causes no angst or uncertainty.

No resource can be fully applicable to every member of the LGBT community. The Human Rights Campaign Foundation has published a resource on transgender issues, the *Transgender Visibility Guide*, that offers a more comprehensive look at the many issues faced by transgender Americans.

decision to transition from female to male. As I proceeded through my transition, I was cautioned about my masculine dress and hairstyle. I was even called in by Human Resources and my supervisor. I was told that women didn't change their names to initials, which I used during my transition. The lack of understanding and ignorance was beyond belief.

Needless to say, my hopes of advancement opportunities were halted, and my career came to a screeching halt. I eventually was forced out of the company and filed a lawsuit. I did not win the case, because there were no employment protections. I couldn't believe it! I keep my performances reviews, to this day, in my garage. They were all outstanding — my work hadn't changed! I eventually started practicing law and began teaching at a historically black college.

Although I realize it is very difficult to come out as a black transsexual, it can be done. Our people have been through many struggles, and this is just another. Our ancestors were enslaved and abused just because of their skin color. There was no road for them — they created it. This is why I have created my own path. Never give up hope.



AFRICAN AMERICANS COMING OUT

RELIGION AND COMING OUT

The church has traditionally informed, influenced and guided the day-to-day lives of many African Americans. “The black church is not just a place of spirituality and enlightenment, but a place of empowerment for African Americans,” says Dr. Sylvia Rhue, director of research and academic initiatives for the National Black Justice Coalition. Bishop Kwabena Rainey Cheeks of Inner Light Ministries in Washington, D.C., agrees.

“SPIRITUALITY IS ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO SEPARATE FROM BLACK LIFE”, SAYS BISHOP CHEEKS. “THE CHURCH IS A STABILIZING FORCE AND A PLACE TO CONNECT, NOT JUST TO GOD, BUT TO COMMUNITY.”

Yet some in those churches have been unwelcoming to people with a different sexual orientation or gender identity. “The black church, the oldest institution and pillar of the black community, has historically dictated the community’s stance on homosexuality: Either you don’t talk about it, or you condemn it,” says Lynne d Johnson, former online editor of *Vibe* magazine and adjunct professor at Metropolitan College of New York. It is daunting to come out, only to face the fear and misunderstanding of society in general. Unfortunately, many LGBT African Americans must face that ignorance within the very institution that has for so many been the centerpiece of their community. Although most African American denominations have not issued a public statement outlining their position on homosexuality, the stances of individual churches and ministers are revealed on Sundays.

“The motto of the black church seems to be ‘Don’t name it, don’t claim it,’” says Mandy Carter, a founder of the progressive organization Southerners on New Ground. This informal church dictum has led many LGBT African Americans to find and create other places to exercise their spirituality. “I would rather sit in a tree and talk to God than go to a church that doesn’t affirm me as a gay man,” says Bishop Cheeks, who has worked hard to ensure that his church, Inner Light Ministries, is a diverse and inclusive church for LGBT worshippers.

Some gay-affirming churches, such as the United Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, are ethnically and racially inclusive.

Over the past few decades, new churches also have been established specifically to welcome and affirm LGBT people of color. One is the Unity Fellowship Church Movement, founded in 1982 by Archbishop Carl Bean and other gay and lesbian African Americans. The church now has more than 16 locations across the country.

Some long-established black churches also have made progress toward being more welcoming. The Fellowship, which was founded in 2000 by Bishop Yvette Flunder of San Francisco, offers support to religious teachers and laity in moving toward a theology of radical inclusivity. This, by its very nature, requires an equally radical social ministry, reaching to the furthest margins of society to serve all in need without prejudice and discrimination. The coalition of Christian churches and ministries that make up the Fellowship recognize the need for networking, accountability, fellowship and resource facilitation. Bishop Flunder explains: “We are a trans-denominational fellowship that is in voluntary cooperation, and is self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating.”

Individual pastors also are making a difference. “I hope I’m doing some sharing of faith that recognizes all human beings as God’s creation,” says Rev. Timothy McDonald III, the founding pastor of the First Iconium Baptist Church in Atlanta. “The pastor sets the tone. If the pastor is scared and homophobic and sends out negative signals about gays and lesbians, it’s going to spread throughout the congregation.”

As more churches open their doors to LGBT parishioners and more leaders publicly recognize those of different sexual orientations and gender identities, fewer LGBT African Americans will be forced to choose between their identities and their faiths. To find a welcome and affirming place of worship near you, contact the LGBT religious organizations listed in the back of this guide.

FAMILY AND COMING OUT

Coming out to family is often one of the most difficult experiences for an LGBT person. And for African Americans, it may be particularly challenging, says Sean Carmago, former senior adviser on diversity and communities of color at Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, a national group based in Washington, D.C.

“The black family unit is a very strong one,” says PFLAG’s Carmago. “In a world where racism is still far too prevalent, the family is a haven, a stronghold of support.” For many, there is no place in this fortress of strength for a “weakness,” as homosexuality is often viewed. Parents sometimes think that having an LGBT child is detrimental and damaging to the black family and will negatively affect the whole African American community.

“Within black communities, where racism is a living reality, differences among us often seem dangerous and suspect,” according to the late African American lesbian author Audre Lorde. “The need for unity is often misnamed as a need for homogeneity,” Lorde wrote in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Poems*.

Despite the challenges that coming out in the black family presents, many LGBT African Americans choose to share their orientation or identity with their relatives. Being honest with your family is an important step in getting all parts of your life to fit together. One of the most important things is to give family members time to process the information.

“My mom thought at first I could no longer be the torchbearer and political leader in the community that she expected me to be,” recalls Donna Payne, associate director of field outreach for the Human Rights Campaign. “But as she came to accept and understand who I was, she was able to see that my role as torchbearer was still just as important.”

LGBT PEOPLE CONSTITUTE FAMILIES

Some people talk as if there are two options in life: You can marry someone of the opposite sex and become a family, or you can be LGBT and be excluded from the definition of family. This is patently untrue. Further, it is a position perpetuated by religious political extremists who have a stake in portraying LGBT people as outside the mainstream. The fact is that LGBT people make up families, just as other people do.

Unfortunately, LGBT families often are not protected under law like married couples. Thus, there are special considerations for you to make when you decide to have a child or when you and your partner commit to one another. If you are coming out as transgender or transsexual and you already have children, there are additional considerations. If you want to learn more about the documents LGBT families need to protect their families, visit www.hrc.org/family.

“COMING OUT HAS BEEN A CONTINUAL PROCESS FOR ME IN WHICH I’VE BECOME INCREASINGLY COMMITTED TO ACHIEVING FULL EQUALITY, INCLUDING MARRIAGE. I DON’T SIMPLY WANT TO BE TOLERATED OR ACCEPTED, I WANT TO BE TREATED WITH THE SAME DIGNITY AND RESPECT AS EVERY OTHER HUMAN BEING.”

— **Sultan Shakir,**
Director of Youth and Campus
Engagement
HRC Foundation



Certainly being LGBT in addition to being a person of color makes life more challenging. You will be required to develop the courage to honor your own experience of love and self-identification above anyone else's judgments about it. But you can do it. And, when you are ready, you can take the next step — you can come out.

For many African Americans, coming out involves additional cultural factors that make the process more challenging, but no less rewarding. It includes having to deal with homophobic churches, strong family foundations that emphasize heterosexuality, homophobia in the black community and racism in the broader LGBT community. However, thanks to brave LGBT African American activists and their allies working toward change in the church and the community, there is more support and acceptance than ever before.

LEE DANIELS

CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED FILMMAKER ON COMING OUT AND FAMILY

Openly gay Lee Daniels — who lives with his family in New York — was born and raised in West Philadelphia, the oldest of five. His father, a police officer who often bullied him, was killed during a robbery when Daniels was a teen. Eventually, Daniels became a casting agent and talent manager, and then became a producer and director.

Daniels has won top prizes at the Golden Globe Awards and the Academy Awards. Daniels was also nominated by his fellow filmmakers for a Directors Guild of America award — the first African American to get the DGA's nod. His films, *Monster's Ball* and *Precious*, have shaken Hollywood and the entire country. The actors in his films — Halle Berry, Mo'Nique, Mariah Carey, Lenny Kravitz and others — do work even they didn't think was possible.

Daniels' life has not always been one of glamour. In an interview with HRC's *Equality* magazine, he talked about his coming out: At the age of 5 or 6, he remembers walking down the stairs, in his mother's red high heels. His dad was playing poker with his cop friends, who were white. "That was a big deal in the '60s, having white guys over at the house. Everything had to be perfect.



LBGT AFRICAN AMERICANS IN AMERICA

Many people see the LGBT community as a microcosm of society in that it faces the same economic, racial, domestic and class issues as the rest of the American public. It is understandable, then, that similar challenges with social issues exist. Some African Americans don't feel comfortable or welcome in the broader LGBT community or movement, which many view as historically white-focused. "Whether it's intentional or not, when LGBT organizations are predominately white, it discourages people of color. They look at the faces, don't see anyone like themselves and think, 'I have no place here,'" says Mandy Carter, African American lesbian activist.

Carter points to the growth of black pride celebrations as evidence that African Americans need to see other people like themselves. "Some people think that having black pride

And here is his son, walking down the stairs wearing heels. ... [H]e got really mad, and that began a series of beatings," Daniels related.

When asked how his mom handled the news of his coming out, Daniels says, "My mom was fabulous. She was concerned, but she has come a long way. I was 18 when I came out. She cried when she found out. She was crying because she knew what was in store for me. I said, 'Ma, I'm never going to be not OK, because I love myself. That's all that matters.' It was a really emotional time for her, because she [knew she had] taught me how to do that. Everything I do has been for people that don't have a voice."

Daniels says he wears his "gayness as a badge" in the same way he wears his "color" as a badge. Both are equally a part of him. In his own words, he "loathe[s] dishonesty," so it is only natural that he is so honest with his audience about himself. Though he is open about his orientation, he acknowledges it wasn't an easy task, especially as an African American. He points out, "As an African American, it's so easy to be in the closet, in the work arena and in life."

Daniels has adopted two children, whom he is raising with his partner. The children, now teens, were adopted at 3-years-old from Daniels' brother and his brother's girlfriend. Daniels says parenthood has taught him a lot: "When I adopted them, I thought I was doing them a favor, but I didn't realize they were doing me the biggest favor. It changed me. It's a magical experience that I think everyone should experience. My boy recently asked me, 'Dad, is it OK that I like girls?' It split my heart open, because he was so honest — but he doesn't know any other world except being raised by two men. That's the message he sends to the community. That is the beauty for me. It breaks down walls of prejudice at its root."

is somehow divisive, but I see it as another way to affirm the still too-frequent invisibility of same-gender loving blacks.”

LGBT African Americans have been virtually invisible in history. Without civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, for example, there would have been no 1963 March on Washington for Civil Rights. But most history books rarely mention Rustin, and they almost never acknowledge that he was gay. Meanwhile, the names of deceased singer Ma Rainey, pro baseball player Glenn Burke and the late Rep. Barbara Jordan, D-Texas, might be found in history books — but their sexual orientation is not. Telling their stories is a powerful way to educate others and inspire young African Americans who are coming to terms with their sexual orientation.

During the coming out process, it’s important to know you are not the only one, and for many African Americans, this is a challenge. Images of LGBT people in the media or entertainment world, after all, rarely show LGBT people of color. “The LGBT images we see in entertainment are overwhelmingly white males — and this only makes LGBT people of color feel more invisible,” says Rashad Robinson, former media director for the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation.

These invisibilities underscore the importance of African American LGBT role models — whether they are local heroes or national figures — in the coming out process. Ken Reeves, an openly gay African American and the former mayor of Cambridge, Mass., often calls attention to the lack of visibility of openly gay black men.

“IT IS REMARKABLE THAT WE ARE STILL IN THE SHADOWS,” REEVES SAID. “WE ARE A PEOPLE WHO MUST STAND UP AND SAY WHO WE ARE. WE HAVE TO GROW. YOU HAVE TO COME OUT AND TELL THIS STORY. YOU CANNOT TELL IT IN DARKNESS!”

BLACK,
GREEK...
AND
GAY



ROSALYN TAYLOR O'NEALE

Principal Consultant, Cook Ross, Inc.
Author, "7 Keys 2 Success: Unlocking the
Passion Diversity"

BLACK, GREEK AND GAY: THAT'S ACTUALLY THE WAY IT HAPPENED

I was born black, middle class and Southern, and an Alpha Kappa Alpha legacy.

My grandfather was one of the original Alpha men. My mother was an active AKA all of her life — her final wish was a pink and green send-off, which she had. I was an AKA legacy from as early as I can remember.

I became Greek — I crossed the burning sands with my mother as my undergraduate adviser (there's nothing worse than living with a big sister who is also your mother!). I participated in Greek events — but as a "straight" Greek.

I fell in love with a woman a year after becoming an AKA. Being a lesbian made being a Greek seem less important — I was with white women who didn't understand what it meant to be black or Greek.

Today I'm an African American, lesbian AKA. I joined the national, but not regional, chapter. My gay and lesbian Greek friends are trying to find each other and a voice. This is the next frontier: To be authentically black, Greek and gay.

DWAYNE JENKINS

Brothers United Coordinator,
Nashville Cares

TRUE BLUE: ONE MAN'S JOURNEY INTO GREEKDOM



As a well-recognized, award-winning HIV educator and LGBT advocate, I have always included my fraternity in my bio and acceptance speeches because I'm proud to be a Sigma man. Like others before me, I am honored to wear my letters, and never want anything I say or do to hurt the organization. *But*, before I was that person, I was a sophomore in college, who in 1985 decided to apply for membership into Phi Beta Sigma.

Since I had the grades, kept a low profile, and only hung around with my two female friends, I thought the interview process was going to be easy. Little did I know that one of the questions asked would have to do with my sexuality! One question from a Sigma brother was framed about my being perceived gay because my two close friends were girls! He blurted out: "So maybe you are gay?" All of the other Sigma brothers in the room immediately yelled, "Don't answer that!" But being the outspoken Bronx fellow that I was, I said, "I don't think that is any of your business and don't appreciate your tone! If your perception of me is going to be a problem, then maybe this is the wrong organization for me." It was as if time stopped. I was pissed and just knew I had completely blown it! I had never claimed a preference at this point in my life.

Once I was initiated, the Sigma brother that originally asked me if I was gay during the interview pulled me to the side and said that after my reaction, he knew I was going to be a good brother because I stood up for myself and looked as if I could care less what happened at that moment. It was one of those defining moments for me. He was one of the main guys that gave everyone on line a hard time. Having his respect after all of that madness we went through was an unexpected surprise.

There will be moments in your life that will define who you are. It won't always be easy. For that reason alone, I try to be a source of inspiration to others in their process of coming out.



JAY MORROW

Campus Advisor,
Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.
University of D.C.

A DRESS DOES NOT DEFINE ME!

My name is Jay E. Morrow, and my coming out story was awkward and eye opening.

I am a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., and I pledged at North Carolina Central University. I identify as an aggressive/dominant lesbian. I was outed by my line sister via an email response to my entire chapter.

I think that is when the questions, support and whatever else they could think to say to me came. This past homecoming, we celebrated our 15th year anniversary, and it was the first time they had to deal with the more masculine part of me. They wanted to buy baby doll tees, and I had to object to the fact that I would not wear that. And my supportive line sisters said, "We understand," etc. Needless to say, we ended up with generic long-sleeve t-shirts representing our line. One line sister sent me an email afterwards, saying that they supported me in my transition, but it is still taking them a while to get used to calling me "Jay" instead of "Janelle." I had to explain to her I wasn't transitioning, but that this was just me. I think it is a constant learning process for everyone; they aren't sure to address me as "he" or "she." They do understand, though, that I am the same person that crossed the burning sands with them; it is just the way I dress.

A major speed bump I have run into is the need to have a "dress." I have been invited to pinning ceremonies, and I don't feel comfortable going because of the need for me to wear a dress. I have tried to find every loophole to get out of wearing a dress but can't get a Delta to agree with me. This is the biggest challenge I have now with being in my sorority. I want to do the work, but can't understand why I have to concede to the dress code. I did it to cross [the sands], but I don't have to to do the work. The organization has taught us to be strong black women, believing in who we are and our purpose in our society. The dress shouldn't represent who I am.

TIFFANY LINDSAY

J.D. Candidate, Class of 2011,
Howard University School of Law

MY JOURNEY TO FINDING ME



I remember the night clearly. I was sitting in a room and one of my Big Sisters asked everyone, “Who’s gay?” I thought to myself, I’m not saying anything. I knew they knew. The whole school knew. I maintained my silence. I wasn’t ready at the age of 19 to be the “gay line sister.” I just wanted to be a Delta. I wanted to do community service and help people. I did not want to be labeled.

Five years later, I regretted not saying something that night. I often wondered what would have happened if we initiated a conversation on being gay and Greek. Would we have been embraced? Rejected? I will never know.

What I do know is that since I’ve come out to my sisters individually, I’ve learned a great deal about my sexuality and myself. It is impossible to come out or identify as being a lesbian with a group of people before you come out to yourself. The expectation when you become a member of a sorority in the Black community is that you have it together. Meaning: great career, great family, community oriented — the list is endless. A part of me feared that if everyone knew I was a lesbian, I wouldn’t belong. I joined my sorority as part of a need to belong on my campus community. I wanted to be a part of the women who were all-around awesome campus and service leaders.

With time, I realized denying who I am and who I love was leaving out a large part of me. I remember how I would talk on the phone, whispering with my partner. I would tell my sisters I was talking to a guy from “back home,” when I was really speaking with my girlfriend who lived down the street! Sitting at the table keeping secrets about my sexuality was wrong. It is not easy being “out” in any setting. Some days, there are sisters who embrace my sexuality with no issues, and sometimes, the opposite happens. The important thing is that I am being authentic now. I realize there is no prototype to being a successful black woman. We come in many different forms. My mold of success includes being a lesbian, a Delta, a community advocate. I am not one-dimensional.

COMING OUT: A LIFELONG JOURNEY

Coming out to yourself, your friends and your family is a huge part of the journey toward being honest about your sexual orientation. But coming out is more than just telling those close to you. It is a challenging process that continues throughout your life and across all of its facets, as the following sections indicate. Many opportunities will arise where you will need to choose whether to come out as a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender person — whether it's on the job, at a church picnic, while having a conversation on the bus or when filling out a form in your doctor's office.

ALMOST DAILY, YOU WILL HAVE TO MAKE DECISIONS ABOUT WHEN AND WHERE TO COME OUT.

But remember, take as much time as you need — this is your journey. And be sure to find help through local support groups or online contacts.

LGBT AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE WORKPLACE

One of the biggest risks you may face is coming out on the job. It's a decision that has the potential to affect your livelihood, because there is no federal law that protects you from being fired merely because you're LGBT. Some employers have policies against such discrimination — but most do not. It's important to know the law in your state or city, and know your employer's policy before coming out at work. For more information, visit www.hrc.org/workplace.

It's not always easy to come out on the job — even if you've already come out to your family and friends. When Linda

Villarosa went to work at *Essence* magazine, she was afraid to come out to her boss and colleagues, even though she had come out in college a few years earlier. But, once again, she found she couldn't stand hiding any more, and she took the chance. "My boss and I were in her car coming back from a weekend editorial retreat, and she was saying something about fixing me up with her brother-in-law. And I just blurted out, 'I'm a lesbian.' She was embarrassed about the brother-in-law and very kind. And that Monday, I came out to just about everybody else at work, and everyone was fine," Villarosa recalls.

While some workplaces can be supportive, it's important to remember that, as of 2014, only 21 states and the District of Columbia have laws protecting you from workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation. Additionally, 18 states and the District of Columbia have statutes, and more than 100 cities and counties have laws, that protect you from discrimination based on your gender identity and expression.

COMING OUT TO YOUR HEALTHCARE PROVIDER

Being honest about your sexual orientation or gender identity can be a matter of life and death — or, at a minimum, essential to getting effective care and treatment.

Some of the people who may most need to know the truth about your orientation or identity are your healthcare providers. Coming out to them can be hard, however, because inaccurate information exists across the medical community about the treatment of LGBT patients.

A number of healthcare providers still mistakenly presume all patients are heterosexual. As a result, it can be awkward when a doctor or nurse asks whether you are sexually active and what kind of birth control you use.

Their ignorance encourages many LGBT people to delay or avoid getting the care they need. And it keeps many from talking with their providers about promoting good health and preventing disease in an informed, open way.

If you are not ready to come out to your own healthcare provider, perhaps you would feel more comfortable talking with an LGBT-friendly one. Your local LGBT community center may be able to help you.

In addition, feel free to contact LGBT health organizations, such as the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association, that are willing to educate physicians and protect your anonymity at the same time.

Similarly, if you have a therapist, make sure he or she is knowledgeable about issues facing LGBT people. A number of providers remain ill-informed, particularly about transgender issues — and could give inaccurate or damaging advice. You can find information on LGBT-friendly therapists and counselors from the provider directory on www.aglp.org.

COMING OUT IN THE MILITARY

The “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” repeal, which reversed the federal ban on gay, lesbian and bisexual people serving openly in the U.S. military, took effect Sept. 20, 2011. Now, servicemen and women can serve openly without the threat of dishonorable discharge or court-martials. Members of the LGB community have come out in each of the military branches since the repeal. If serving in the military, it is up to you if you choose to disclose your sexual orientation. For gender identity, however, there is still a lot of work to be done. See OutServe-SLDN for more at www.sldn.org.

Transgender individuals are barred from serving openly in the military. Transgender service is prohibited by a complex system of military regulations, issuances and directives that are not related to “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” and are not altered by any new policy of open service that occurs as the result of repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.”

KARINE JEAN-PIERRE

White House Office of Political Affairs, Former Aide

My story is a story not often told, but it unfortunately is all too familiar

to a significant percentage of the youth population. I was raised in New York, but both of my parents are Haitian natives, and I was raised like most West Indian children: in the church! I think I always knew I was a lesbian, but being that young, I didn’t know how to make sense of it all or what it meant to be attracted to other girls.

I was 16 when I came out — well, more like “forced” into coming out. I was out with some friends one night and came home a little late. When I got home, my mother confronted me and started accusing me of several things, most of which included things involving men. As a result of the argument, I was forced to “come out” and tell her I was a lesbian. When I told my mother I was a lesbian, her response was, “What’s a lesbian?” As I explained to her what it meant to be a lesbian, her immediate conclusion was that I was on drugs, because at that point, being on drugs was better than me being a lesbian. I was subsequently forced back into the closet for another seven years.

Since being out wasn’t an option for me, I began befriending older, out LGBT people and lived the life I was forced to

If you're a service member and considering transitioning, it's in your best interest to get professional advice about how transitioning will affect your military career. Contact information for the OutServe-SLDN can be found at the back of this book.

CONCLUSION

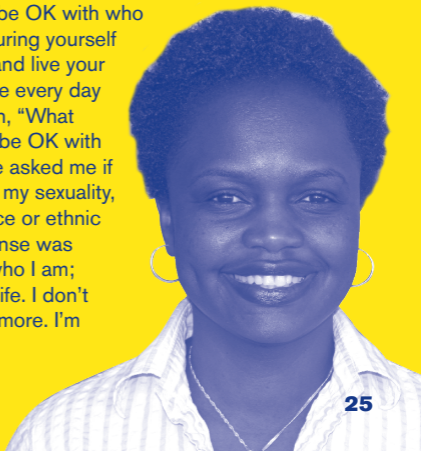
Being African American and coming out as LGBT — or same-gender loving — may be an extremely challenging experience, but many find that it is unexpectedly rewarding. You not only free yourself from the confinement of the closet, but you also free others from their ignorance about issues related to sexual orientation or gender identity.

The presence of open LGBT African Americans in the church and within the family is key to changing the homophobic atmosphere in those institutions. "If we are going to change things, we have to become visible," says HRC's Payne. Coming out is not a one-time event, but rather a lifelong journey. Browse some resources to help take you, your friends and your family on that important path.

conceal through them. So I got to be gay, without actually admitting it and upsetting my mother and others that didn't approve. My father was supportive in a way. All he cared about was my happiness; my relationships had no bearing on him.

At 25, while in grad school, I had my first girlfriend and essentially came out again. It's an amazing feeling to be out and to have people positively acknowledge your relationship. The people I work with are supportive of my relationship with my partner and ask about her frequently. Like most people who work together talk about their families, the people I work with are the same way.

I think the hardest part of my coming-out journey is the need to be OK with who I am, kind of like reassuring yourself that it's OK to be out and live your life without shame. I live every day answering the question, "What does it mean to me to be OK with being 'out'?" Someone asked me if I feel the need to wear my sexuality, like one wears their race or ethnic background. My response was simple: "It's a part of who I am; it's integrated into my life. I don't even think about it anymore. I'm just me."



ARE YOU AN ALLY?

COMING OUT AS A SUPPORTER

An ally is someone who is not lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, but personally advocates for LGBT equal rights and fair treatment. Allies are some of the most effective and powerful advocates for the LGBT movement. These allies have proven invaluable personally and politically, and are increasingly important in the fight for LGBT equality. Indeed, their voices often have been heard while those of LGBT people have been ignored.

JULIAN BOND

Civil Rights Activist, Former NAACP Board Chairman

Gay and lesbian rights are not

“special” rights in any way. It isn't “special” to be free from discrimination — it is an ordinary, universal entitlement of citizenship. The right not to be discriminated against is a commonplace claim we all expect to enjoy under our laws and our founding document, the Constitution. That many had to struggle to gain those rights makes them precious — but it does not make them “special,” and it does not reserve them only for me or restrict them from others.

When others gain these rights, my rights are not diminished in any way. My rights are not diluted when my neighbor enjoys protection from discrimination — he or she becomes my ally in defending the rights we all share.

For some, comparisons between the African American civil rights movement and the movement for gay and lesbian rights seem to diminish the long black historical struggle, with all its suffering, sacrifices and endless toil. However, people of color ought to be flattered that our movement has provided so much inspiration for others, that it has been so widely imitated, and that our tactics, methods, heroes and heroines, and even our songs, have been appropriated or served as models for others.

Coming out as an ally may be an extremely challenging experience, but many find that it is unexpectedly rewarding. In the African American community, allies have reminded us over and over that the African American LGBT community is part of the family! We are all connected. As one ally, Ben Jealous, former executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, put it while discussing his gay brother: “When [my brother] has been beaten up by the cops,” says Jealous, “it’s been very clear that it’s both because he’s black and gay.” This relationship has given Jealous a glimpse into the interchangeable struggles around identity of gays and African Americans.

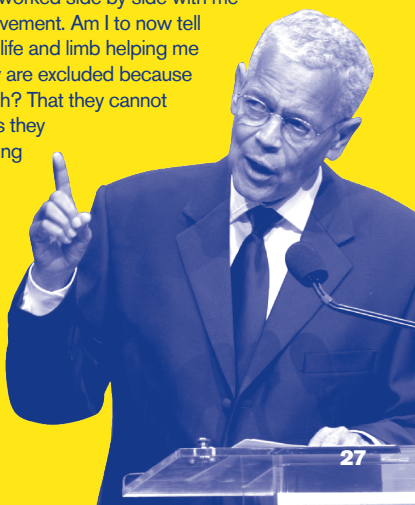
Like LGBT people, allies will find that coming out is not a one-time event, but rather a lifelong journey. Many of our African American supporters have been questioned for years about their support, and they continue to stand up for justice.

No parallel between movements is exact. African Americans are the only Americans who were enslaved for more than two centuries, and people of color carry the badge of who we are on our faces. But we are far from the only people suffering discrimination — sadly, so do many others. They deserve the law’s protections and civil rights, too.

Sexual disposition parallels race — I was born black and had no choice. I could not, and would not, change it if I could. Like race, our sexuality isn’t a preference — is it immutable and unchangeable, and the Constitution protects us all against prejudices and discrimination based on immutable differences.

Many lesbians and gays worked side by side with me in the '60s civil rights movement. Am I to now tell them “thanks” for risking life and limb helping me win my rights — but they are excluded because of a condition of their birth? That they cannot share now in the victories they helped to win? That, having accepted and embraced them as partners in a common struggle, I can now turn my back on them and deny them the rights they helped me win, that I enjoy because of them?

Not a chance.



“THE UNIVERSE
DOES NOT MAKE
ANY MISTAKES.
EVERYONE HAS
A PURPOSE. BE
WHO YOU ARE,
HONEY!” — Mo’nique



RESOURCES

RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

Affirmation (Mormon)

www.affirmation.org
contact@affirmation.org

Affirmation (United Methodist)

847-733-9590
www.umaffirm.org

Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists

240-242-9220
www.awab.org

Brethren Mennonite Council for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Interests

612-343-2060
www.bmclgbt.org
bmc@bmclgbt.org

Dignity USA (Catholic)

202-861-0017
www.dignityusa.org
info@dignityusa.org

Emergence International (Christian Scientist)

1-800-280-6653
www.emergence-international.org
info@emergence-international.org

The Fellowship

415-861-6130
www.radicallyinclusive.com

Fellowship of Reconciling Pentecostals International

219-871-1033
www.rpifellowship.com
rpifellowship@aol.com

Gay Buddhist Fellowship

415-974-9878
www.gaybuddhist.org
inquiry@gaybuddhist.org

The Gay Christian Network

919-786-0000
www.gaychristian.net

Integrity USA (Episcopalian)

1-800-462-9498
www.integrityusa.org
info@integrityusa.org

Metropolitan Community Churches

310-360-8640
www.mccchurch.org
info@mccchurch.net

More Light Presbyterians

www.mlp.org
info@mlp.org

Muslim Alliance for Sexual and Gender Diversity

www.muslimalliance.org
info@muslimalliance.org

Office of LGBT Concerns for Unitarian Universalists Association

617-742-2100
www.uua.org/obgltc
info@uua.org

Rainbow Baptists

www.rainbowbaptists.org
info@rainbowbaptists.org

Reconciling Ministries Network (Methodist)

773-736-5526
www.rmnetwork.org

Reconciling Works (Lutheran)

651-665-0861
www.reconcilingworks.org
info@reconcilingworks.org

Seventh-Day Adventist Kinship International

866-732-5677
www.sdakinship.org
info@sdakinship.org

Unity Fellowship Church Movement (African American)

323-938-8322
www.unityfellowshipchurch.org

World Congress of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Jews

202-452-7424
www.glbtejews.org
coordinator@glbtjews.org

NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Advocates for Youth

202.419.3420
www.advocatesforyouth.org

African Ancestral Lesbians United for Social Change, Inc.

212-620-7130
www.facebook.com/AALUSC1974
aalusc1974@gmail.com

RESOURCES

American Veterans for Equal Rights

718.849.5665
www.aver.org

Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice

212-529-8021
www.astraeafoundation.org
info@astraeafoundation.org

Bisexual Resource Center

617-424-9595
www.biresource.net
brc@biresource.net

CenterLink: The Community of LGBT Centers

954-765-6024
www.lgbtcenters.org
CenterLink@lgbtcenters.org

Gay and Lesbian Medical Association

202-600-8037
www.glma.org
info@glma.org

Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network

212-727-0135
www.glsen.org
glsen@glsen.org

Immigration Equality

212-741-2904
www.immigrationequality.org

Lambda Legal

212-809-8585
www.lambdalegal.org

Matthew Shepard Foundation

303-830-7400
www.matthewshepard.org

National Black Justice Coalition

202-319-1552
www.nbjc.org

National Center for Lesbian Rights

415.392.6257
www.nclrights.org
info@nclrights.org

National Center for Transgender Equality

202-903-0112
www.transequality.org
ncte@transequality.org

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force

202-393-5177
TTY: 202-332-6219
www.thetaskforce.org
info@thetaskforce.org

National Minority AIDS Council

202-483-6622
www.nmac.org
communications@nmac.org

OutServe-SLDN

202-328-3244
www.sldn.org
admin@outserve-sldn.org

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (Families of Color Network)

202-467-8180
www.pflag.org
info@pflag.org

The Trevor Project

212.695.8650
www.thetrevorproject.org
info@thetrevorproject.org

Zuna Institute

916-207-1037
www.zunainstitute.org
info@zunainstitute.org

BLACK PRIDE CELEBRATIONS

Each year, there are Black Pride celebrations in cities across the country, including the following:

Atlanta, GA
Austin, TX
Baltimore, MD
Birmingham, AL
Boston, MA
Buffalo, NY
Charlotte, NC
Columbia, SC
Chicago, IL
Cleveland, OH
Dallas, TX
Detroit, MI
Indianapolis, IN
Houston, TX
Jacksonville, FL
Little Rock, AK
Los Angeles, CA
London, UK
Jackson, MS
Memphis, TN
Nashville, TN

Newark, NJ
New Orleans, LA
New York, NY
Oakland, CA
Oklahoma City, OK
Philadelphia, PA
Pittsburgh, PA
Portland, OR
Raleigh-Durham, NC
Shreveport, LA
St. Louis, MO
Miami, FL
Tampa, FL
Washington, DC

Note: New Black Pride celebrations are started frequently—check with one of your local LGBTQ organizations if you don't see a city listed near you.

HOTLINES

Gay and Lesbian National Hotline

1-888-843-4564

<http://www.glnh.org/>

Available M-F 1pm-9pm PST, Sat
9am-2pm PST

National AIDS Hotline (CDC)

1-800-CDC-INFO

(1-800-232-4636)

TTY: 1-888-232-6348

Available 24/7

Suicide Hotline

1-800-SUICIDE

(1-800-784-2433)

Available 24/7

The Trevor Helpline

1-866-488-7386

Available 24/7

“I’M GLAD I CHOSE TO COME OUT SOONER ...

...FEAR CAN BE PARALYZING AND CAN OFTEN TRAP YOU IN SILENCE. IT’S THE FEAR OF GOING AGAINST OUR RELIGIOUS UPBRINGING, OF LOSING FRIENDS AND FAMILIES, AND OF SHATTERING THE DREAM THAT MOST PARENTS HAVE FOR US AS CHILDREN.

BUT I HAVE FOUND THAT COMING OUT HAS NOT ONLY STRENGTHENED THE BONDS I HAVE WITH THE PEOPLE IN MY CLOSEST CIRCLE, BUT HAS ALSO MADE ME FEEL WHOLE AND COMPLETE AS A PERSON.

THE DAY I CHOSE TO LIVE WITHOUT REGRET OR SHAME WAS THE DAY I CHOSE TO REALLY LIVE.”

— **Amari Ice, Howard University alumni**

The Human Rights Campaign Foundation helps lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people come out and start living openly. HRCF also helps LGBT people and their allies talk about their support for equality at home, at work and in their communities each and every day. HRCF aims to bring about an open and respectful dialogue about the lives of LGBT Americans, their families and their friends.



HUMAN
RIGHTS
CAMPAIGN
FOUNDATION™

HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN FOUNDATION

1640 Rhode Island Ave., N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20036

800-777-4723

TTY: 202-216-1572

For more copies of this guide, see www.hrc.org.