

## Contradicting the stereotype

October 22, 2006

by **Lynndi Lockenour**

Being gay is hard. Being black and gay is even harder.

**In a 2000 study conducted by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF), one-half of the 2,645 participants reported that racism was a problem in the white GLBT community.**

Anthony Johnson Jr. agrees.

A junior majoring in opera and biology at IU, Johnson said he has faced more racial discrimination inside the white gay community than outside of it.

"I have to be more careful as a black, gay person," he said. "I get more attention drawn to myself simply because of the color of my skin."

A native of Indianapolis, Johnson said there is definitely a difference in the way he is treated in Bloomington versus back home.

"Indy was different because I surrounded myself with other black, gay people," he said.

But in Bloomington this cannot be the case, since the population of blacks is considerably lower than whites.

"Being in a predominately white gay community like Bloomington makes me realize even more that I am a black man," he said. "People look at me differently here. I don't get treated as a gay person. I get treated as the black gay guy to which most people are afraid to speak."

Since coming to Bloomington, Johnson said, he's acquired many friends who are white, gay men. He said it took some of them a while to adjust to him because he's black. But in the process, it opened their minds.

"I don't want them to think all black men are like me," he said. "There are many types of black people out there, but I'm just one type of black person."

\*\*\*

Discrimination also occurs in the black community, but in a different form. According to the same NGLTF study in 2000, two-thirds of respondents reported that homophobia was a problem within the black community.

Johnson said he thinks that at least for black men, this homophobia is driven by a desire for masculinity.

“I think black men as a whole feel like they have something to prove, so they use hyper-masculinity as a means for that,” he said. “Being gay automatically calls my masculinity into play, which in the black community is a bad thing.”

Clothing, said Johnson, plays a larger role than some realize. He considers his dress to be more metrosexual, but others within the black community would call it “gay.”

“If you put the clothes I wear on a white man, it would be okay,” he said. “But because I’m black, it is somehow interpreted as gay since black men are supposed to be more masculine.”

\*\*\*

Being a black, gay man is tough, but Johnson said being a black lesbian is even tougher.

A woman we’ll call Tammy agrees. Being black, bisexual and Muslim, Tammy feels she must conceal her identity as she is not out to most people within her church.

Tammy said that being a lesbian in black culture is difficult because it contradicts the image of what the stereotype says a black woman should be.

“We are ‘supposed’ to be caring and nurturing,” she said. “But if people know you are a lesbian, they automatically think you can’t have those qualities.”

A non-traditional student at IU, Tammy was married right out of high school to a man within the Muslim faith. Though she considers herself bisexual, Tammy said she prefers women. However, for the time being, she has chosen to remain celibate.

No matter what, Tammy said she will always stand out.

“You just don’t see black Muslim women walking around that often,” she said. “For that reason, I think people notice even more.”

Tammy compared being gay in the black community to the plague.

“They make it seem like if you are gay, then you can’t tell anyone,” she said.

In addition to being black, Tammy said her affiliation with the Muslim faith also makes her situation more difficult.

“I have to hide a part of myself from the world,” she said.

Inside Islam, Tammy said there is pressure for women her age to be married, but she doesn’t want that again.

“Even if it were legal for me to marry a woman, I don’t think I would,” she said. “There’s just something about the institution of marriage that I don’t care to take part in again.”

Many people tell Tammy she can’t be both Muslim and bisexual, but she thinks otherwise.

“My religion is between me and God, not the rest of the world,” she said.

\*\*\*

Both Johnson and Tammy are involved with Blacks Like Us (BLU), a campus organization dedicated to fostering connections between GLBT black and biracial people. The group is open to students and citizens throughout Bloomington.

BLU is a safe space. And each member is asked to respect the privacy of others by signing a confidentiality agreement prior to taking part in discussion.

Johnson said groups like BLU are great support for black individuals who are gay.

“It is important for people to know that we do exist and we are here to stay,” he said.

Tammy calls the group a support system that allows others to be themselves.

“If I had a choice to change who I am, I would be the same,” she said. “But I’d change the way the rest of the world sees people like me.”