

Out in the Open

A black man talks about being gay and proud.

By Eric

Clarence Haynes, who used to be an editor here at Youth Communication, talked with me about coming out and being gay. Clarence seems so happy and confident about who he is that I was surprised when he told me he had struggled with accepting his sexual identity as a gay black man.

I could relate to what he went through coming out as gay. Like me, he grew up in an area where people didn't accept him for who he is. He had a tough time dealing with people who were homophobic, meaning they thought that being gay is a bad thing. Talking to him helped me learn to be the way I am without worrying as much about what people will say. It also showed me how important it is for me to be in an environment that is good for me and to have friends who accept me for who I am.

After the interview with Clarence, I decided that I am gay. I used to be unsure about it. I used to be very depressed and confused. After talking to Clarence, I feel more confident than I was before. That feeling has stayed with me.

Q: How did you realize you were gay?

A: I didn't admit to myself that I was for a long time because I didn't feel that others would accept me if I was gay. So I did everything from acting out to being really difficult with my mom to having an obsessive-compulsive disorder, which is a disorder provoked by anxiety. In my case I had it because I was really anxious and upset about my sexuality and I couldn't deal with it. I acted out by washing my hands a lot and being obsessed with cleanliness.

I went to college and since I wasn't dealing with my sexuality I broke down and had to take time off. Once I returned to college and started making friends and accepting myself I started to accept my sexuality.

A pivotal moment was on the subway when I just said to myself, "I'm gay." Once I said it to myself I started to tell other people. Within a few months of realizing that I was gay I told pretty much everybody.

At first I told people that I was bisexual, but gradually I thought, "No, not really. I'm gay." Within a few weeks I told everyone I was close to.

I was relieved to be able to say it. But I was upset that it took me so long before I could admit to myself that I was gay.

Q: How did people react when you came out?

A: The very first time, I told my cousin. I told her that I thought I might be attracted to guys. She said, "Well, you need to stop worrying because people are going to accept you no matter who you are."

My mother said I needed to go see a counselor and get hormone treatments to make me straight. It's been nearly ten years since I came out to her and she still thinks I should try to be straight.

My grandmother, who helped raise me, said, "Yeah, another cousin thought you might be gay because of how you hold your wrists." So she wasn't surprised. But she was concerned that someone might try to hurt me for being gay because a lot of people don't like gay folks.

I have an uncle who, before I came out, told me "don't do this and don't do that" and it added to my anxieties. I can say now he had no right to tell me that. I wasn't hurting anybody by being gay. And now I can say there are many ways to be a man, there's no right or wrong way to be a man.

I spent so much time thinking, 'No one will accept me if I admit I'm gay,' and at the end of the day just about everyone who I told was fine with it.

And once I knew I was gay, I was very clear that when I was making a new friend I was just going to put it out there: "I'm gay. Are you cool with that?"

Now my two best friends are also gay and we have a lot in common. We really care for each other.

Q: Is there anything you regret about coming out?

A: The years I spent not being able to admit it to myself. I regret not being able to discover my identity with my head held high. Instead, I was filled with a lot of shame and doubt.

I think I would have been much healthier and happier if I had not been so repressed and so self-hating. But when I was a teenager I didn't have any idea that there were gay and lesbian centers for people like me. I was just a boy from the Bronx who had no idea it was normal to be attracted to other guys. There was nothing for me to look at and say, "Hey, wow, I see myself in that," until I was in college.

So I always thought I would just marry a woman and try to have sex with her and pretend I was happy. I never would've guessed that I would be out and happy about it.

Q: What was the best thing about coming out?

A: The best thing was being able to date, to be with guys and do what I should've been doing a long time ago. (Even though dating is sometimes the worst thing, too, but that's another story.)

Q: Have you ever experienced discrimination or harassment because of your sexuality?

A: I can't say I've ever felt discriminated against in terms of an opportunity, but I have experienced it in comments from people in the street. When I was younger, I was very feminine so I got called a "fag" and I definitely didn't feel good about it. At this point I try to let it go. I just say to myself, "They can say what they say and I'm not going to worry about it."

But I'm still very cautious when I'm around a whole bunch of brothers. I have a network of people who are extremely supportive and that helps.

Q: Why do you think some people discriminate against gay people?

A: I think the reasons are different for different people. I think some people are told that being gay is wrong. Religion is another factor. Sometimes religious people believe it's wrong to be gay. There's also ignorance. When people haven't been exposed to gay people, they might discriminate against them because they don't understand.

Even as an out gay man, I still have homophobic thoughts because my family and the people around me didn't know gay folks. When they did mention homosexuality it was in a negative way so I still have that in my head.

For me, it's a continuing process to feel confident about being gay. Even now sometimes I have thoughts like, "Oh, do I look too gay?" I'm at a far better place than I was years ago but it's still something that I work on. I try to be in situations and with people that affirm who I am and what I'm doing both as a gay person and as an editor and writer, which is my job.