

Gay Students at A&T Speak Out About Stereotypes

Contributed by Dexter Mullins -- Black College Wire
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"Miseducation" and religion contribute to continued prejudice, they say

The world has its share of cultural discrimination, but one very taboo form of this discrimination lies in the world of same sex relationships.

From religiously structured childhoods to radical ways of thinking, society has treated people involved in such relationships in less than equal ways.

Hate crimes and secondary citizenship has become a way of life for some members of the gay and lesbian community. For three students, the time for this discrimination has come to an end, and they are openly talking about the world they live in each day.

"I think the biggest problem for black gay people is the suppression and discrimination and not being able to be comfortable in their own skin," said North Carolina A&T sophomore chemistry major John Smith (not his real name). "It's not the social norm and people don't know how to accept it. It's amplified by the religious community."

In a community where discrimination and differential treatment are historical issues, Smith feels that there should be a little more understanding and tolerance of the issue. Knowing that black people are some of the most widely discriminated against, Smith says there are probably two reasons why black people treat homosexuality the way they do.

"One is to make the black community feel as though they are above at least someone," Smith said. "Also, everyone always uses the Bible as a reference and just like most people, black, white or whatever, they don't know how to deal with something that they don't understand, so instead of asking questions they attack it."

Smith isn't alone in his reasoning. Sophomore history professional & political science major William Roberts (not his real name) says that not only is religion a huge part of the issue, but miseducation is as well.

"We have stereotypes of the gay community, and that's all we see and want to know," Roberts said. "The stereotypes, such as gay men wear women's clothes and are overly flamboyant, are a huge problem. Although lots of the gay 'community' on this campus, and everywhere, fit this stereotype, people should understand that gay people just want the same respect as straight people.

"We're born black, which is already one strike. We're men in a white man's society, which is strike two. And we're gay? That's three strikes."

What's your view? {moshaloscan}Add to the list of stereotypes things like this: gay men are all looking for sex, or that gays and lesbians have more STD's, and you have on your hands discrimination waiting to happen.

Senior motorsports and NASCAR major Joshua Lewis says that same-sex relationships are not right. He says it's not so much the concept as it is the heritage of African Americans that make it wrong.

"Most black people are not raised that way. It goes back to heritage and background," Lewis said. "Our ancestors disapproved of it, so they disapprove of it. I think that it's a matter of personal opinion."

Things often get worse when gays and lesbians try to "come out" to their friends. They are often met with backlash and disgust. With so many things making their lifestyle a form of being an outcast, not having the support of love ones can be devastating.

"They think it's something you elect to do."

"For me it's always been that element of 'oh this is just something that you are going through for now,' " said sophomore biology major Michelle Dyson (not her real name).

" People think 'this is a phase and then you will grow out of it and marry a man.' I think it's because black people don't think that you can just be gay. They think it's something you elect to do as opposed to something that is in you. They are shocked by it."

Between lack of support, being cast out, and the violent hate crimes and mistreatment of homosexual people, Roberts and Smith feel these factors contribute the 30 percent of all teen and youth suicides, which are gay and lesbian

individuals, based on a study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

"A lot of times gay men feel like they have a standard to meet, and if they tell their fathers, the issue becomes a reality to the family that they are gay," Smith said. "They feel like they would be abandoned by their family once they tell them."

It is especially difficult for a male to tell his father figure, without enduring some type of shame.

"You always feel like you failed them in some kind of way," Roberts said. "Every father wants their son to be the athletic, strong, intelligent male. The provider. When people hear gay, they think weak, effeminate little faggot, which is just as controversial and insulting as the word nigger, so it should not be used."

If the playing field wasn't already uneven, it is more slanted for females than for males. For some reason, it seems to be more acceptable for a woman to be a lesbian than for a man to be gay.

"Straight men think that it is sexy for women to like women," Dyson said. "People that don't want to acknowledge that they know gay men or don't really want to get to know them. They just look at it as nasty."

The issue of secondary treatment is still very real. Roberts used the black church as an example when he started talking about the type of equality that gays have in the community.

"Is it equality or different types of equality?" Roberts asked. "Most black people like to separate the gay rights from the rights of other black people instead of seeing equality as a whole unit."

Black church is not helpful

Roberts also sees religion as a huge obstacle that must be overcome. With the church playing such a prominent role in the black community, the impact it can have is huge.

"The black church in general was at one point helping, through the civil rights movement," Roberts said. "But it seems the train has slowed down."

Smith also agrees that the church has a huge role to play in the way black people treat black gays. In Smith's mind, it's all in how we approach the situation, and the way people approach the issue these days often leads to the discrimination.

"I think churches are hindering the progress of equality because of how much people emphasize on how wrong homosexuality is, yet the bible states that all sins are supposed to be equal in the eyes of God," he said.

"Most sins, like smoking and drinking (destroying the temple or being a drunkard), are considered acceptable. We don't punish those people who cheat (commit adultery), but when it comes to homosexuality we deal with it by hatred and attack, which is what the church promotes."

Lewis however, sees things from another point of view.

"I disagree with same-sex relationships, because it's morally wrong," Lewis said. "In a biblical sense, it's just wrong. That's why God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Adam, or Eve and Eve."

And being gay in the church is no new topic. Roberts pointed out how often there will be gay people in the church choir or serving in some capacity for the church. Smith says he just cannot understand how anyone who was gay could possibly support the very church that does not support them.

"I think it is very contradictory because of how much churches emphasize homosexuality being a sin. They support the belief of the very thing that preaches that they as homosexual people be abolished.

"I don't support the idea. I believe in God, but I do not agree with everything in the Bible because I don't think God would preach hatred amongst each other. How can you preach hatred when we are supposed to love one another?"

With so much discrimination and hatred, getting away is the only outlet for many gay and lesbian students. Roberts says that being gay can almost completely sever the already endangered black family unit.

"You separate yourself from it (the family). You feel you have to emotionally detach," he said. "Going to college was one of the best things for me, because I don't have that awkward silence with my parents that is usually present when you are there."

Roberts, Smith and Dyson are just two of the many students on campus who are gay or lesbian. They are also some of the few who are willing to discuss the issue. Many students, Roberts says, live double lives just to get their day-to-day

activities done. He says that they don't feel as if they would get the same amount of respect if they were to just be themselves.

"We give 'boy' (acting straight) to get our day to day activities done," he said. "Our private lives are private, just like everyone else's. Everyone has secrets."

It's not just the males that have to wear the masks of different personalities. Dyson has also had to shelter her true person here on campus in order to function as any other student would.

"Some people talk about the issue, but some people just don't care," Lewis said. "I don't think it's a big problem because there are so many (same-sex relationships) on campus."

Dyson, however, says that a lot of people do care. They care so much that she has had to play dual roles frequently.

"I have had to hide myself on campus when I do presentations, when I was trying out for Gospel Choir and Perfect Harmony, but a lot of the boys in gospel choir are very open to alternative lifestyles," Dyson said.

"I'm lucky enough to be a 'pretty lesbian,' so if I want to dress like a boy I can, and I can look good as a girl. Some girls can only look good as a thug, and I feel bad for them. I feel like it should be my decision as to when I have to dress like a girl. I don't have a problem dressing like a girl, but I don't like when I am told to dress like a girl."

One thing that Smith and Roberts both agree on is that it is better to be yourself. They say pretending is only hurting you in the long run.

"What's the point of being yourself part time?" Smith said. "If you can't always be yourself than what's the point of being yourself at all?"

"It's either be the real person you are or be that fake person the rest of your life and be that unhappy being someone you aren't. It doesn't make sense for you to be unhappy being another person versus being happy with yourself and like the things you like."

Even though he disagreed on values, Lewis does agree that people should be themselves.

"I used to be really homophobic, but I'm not as bad as I used to be. I have gay friends. More or less, I think it's a choice, because everybody decides on what they want. If they are comfortable with themselves they don't have to hide anything."

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Dexter Mullins writes for The Register, the North Carolina A&T State University student newspaper, which originally published this article. The Register chose not to use the names of the gay students in the article because of concerns for their privacy and safety.