

In hopes of a healthy forum . . .



by Rupert Kinnard

"Future features [will] include articles about older gays, gays involved in heterosexual marriages, gays and alcoholism, physically challenged gays, gays in prisons and unlearning racism."

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This quotation appeared in the editorial of JUST OUT's premiere issue. Already in the first four issues there have been articles about being married and gay, being gay in small rural towns, and alcoholism. In this issue Black Lesbians and Gays United (BLGU) join the efforts of JUST OUT by tackling a host of topics which relate various struggles to each other, in the form of a monthly column. In this first column I can only attempt to give my perspective as to why there is a need for the exchange which will hopefully take place in this space each month. There is support from other members of BLGU on many of the views expressed in this article and we will also submit future articles either expanding on subjects discussed here or introducing other concerns of the black lesbian and gay community.

Our first few editorials and articles have set the stage for dialogue and a healthy exchange of information. It will continue to be a challenge for this paper to spark controversy, but the gay community can benefit greatly from the different perspectives of lesbians and gays of color and other minorities. Naturally, one could assume the community would be interested in BLGU's perspectives on racism.

For many people racism is an ugly word. It is no wonder that when confronted with the possibility of being labeled a 'racist' people react negatively. Most of the discomfort stems from not only being unaware of what the word means but more importantly not understanding the many various ways racism manifests itself in an individual and our society. Not many white people experience a need to understand the subtle (and many times not so subtle) nuances and shadings of institutionalized racism. Most black people are not afforded that particular luxury. These facts are very real to people of color, but when insensitivity, ignorance and a condescending attitude prevails when a white person is confronted with his or her racism, it becomes extremely frustrating.

There is a statement by the National Education Association which reads: "WHO IS RACIST? All white individuals in our society are racists. Even if a white is totally free from all conscious racial prejudices, he [she] remains a racist for he [she] receives benefits distributed by a white racist society through its institutions. Our institutional and

cultural processes are so arranged as to automatically benefit whites, just because they are white. It is essential for whites to recognize that they receive most of these racist benefits automatically, unconsciously and unintentionally."

I can imagine that such a statement would be hard for a lot of people to read and understand. As a male in a male-dominated society, I believe such a statement could also be applied to sexism in our society — a difficult pill to swallow. But it takes a strong will to be open enough to learn before one can ever reach an understanding of how racism can be automatic, unconscious and unintentional.

Many people are aware of the exchange which took place in the letters column of another local gay newspaper concerning the incident of a white, gay male dressed in black face as Aunt Jemima during Lesbian & Gay Pride this past summer. The letters in defense of the 'drag' were prime examples of unenlightened attitudes; one dared to go so far as to refer to black people as 'negroes' and not only supported the image of Aunt Jemima, but the image of Beulah and singing black slaves as well. The attitudes revealed in the subsequent letter columns could not help but illustrate the need for education and awareness in this community . . . particularly if the community is sincere about wanting the input of black people.

A similar but lesser publicized controversy appeared within the pages of the Seattle gay newspaper LIGHTS, when a woman pointed out what she considered to be a racist passage in a recently published gay guide. The exchange which took place in the letters column of the next three or four issues contrasted with the Portland exchange. Persons involved were willing to admit to bad judgment in allowing the statement to be printed and more importantly, they were willing to listen, learn and try to understand, without becoming defensive. The letters became part of a healthy exchange, in which readers could examine their own views.

The single most important aspect of being confronted with racist attitudes is to realize IT DOES NOT HAVE TO BE PERCEIVED AS A PERSONAL ATTACK! How can anyone come to grips with racist and sexist attitudes if we're too defensive to open up and accept the perceptions of our harboring such destructive attitudes? In the case of the Seattle incident, the racism was pointed out in an attempt to calmly and rationally explain the paper's editorial responsibility to try and purge itself of its own racism, before perpetuating more racism throughout the community through its articles. The letters here in Portland denouncing the Aunt Jemima incident calmly and rationally explained why a white male dressed in black face as a derogatory stereotype (especially during a lesbian and gay pride rally) was not tolerable and IS racist. It was not an attempt to chastise but an attempt to educate. There should be a great need for people who would deny the racist ramifications (not the intent) to understand why it was so difficult to see the incident for what it was.

There are other concerns throughout the black lesbian and gay community. Given the reluctance to address its racism, what part do we as black people play (if any) in a gay liberation struggle? What are the ramifications of a gay club advertising a bartending job in a gay newspaper specifically asking for a GWM? There is a lot of work to be done. Let us hope for a healthy exchange within these pages — exchanges which can benefit us all.

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