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An ambassador for her communities

*First as an African-American, second as a woman
and third as a lesbian*



PHOTO BY ELLEN HANSEN

by Floreid Walker

An interesting question: Moving in and out of various communities—the straight business world as well as my own ethnic community—how do I relate to each one? For me the answer lies in one's self-identity and those experiences as such.

My self-identity has a lot to do with how I perceive myself, how others perceive me, and my reaction to their perception. My perception becomes my reality and is translated into how I carry myself on a day-to-day basis—as a professional in the workplace or just relaxing and kickin' it with friends.

We, as African-Americans, have had to learn to survive in a very hostile world which often times gives us the skills needed to survive in a world unfriendly to gays and lesbians. We have already experienced the name calling, the job and housing discrimination, and the physical and verbal abuse and harassment. I am not saying that I have all the skills needed to survive, but hatred and discrimination are nothing new to me. I personally have faced more bias and hatred committed against me because I am an African-American than I have because I am a woman or a lesbian.

I constantly remind myself and, at the same time, am reminded by others, that I am an African-American. Hateful discriminatory experiences remind me that I am first and foremost an African-American.

The fact that I am a lesbian is just one piece of me, one variable of my life.

When I walk into a room or group, I feel that I am most obviously a person of color and then a woman. I don't wear a badge or a pink triangle which makes it easy for my audience to identify quickly what my sexual orientation is. (I do this with an air of smugness. I make people work for that information and at times they need to earn the privilege for that piece of self-disclosure.) I do not believe that other people need to know what my sexual orientation is. What does it matter? How germane is it to what we are talking about? It matters more to me what I do for and with my other sisters and brothers than whether I wear a sign saying "I'm a lesbian." I am pleased to be an ambassador for my communities, but it is not

without risks, consequences and backlash.

My challenges are as an African-American. My experience has been that nine times out of 10 those same people who will accept me as an African-American woman will also accept me as a lesbian.

I have had prospective heterosexual clients who find the urge to ask whether I am an African-American or lesbian to be far too irresistible. They ask "Are you African-American?" "Are you a lesbian?" My canned response is "What has that got to do with anything? When I feel that it is important for you to have that information, you'll be the first to know. In the meantime, let's proceed with what we were talking about."

It's always a surprise to other people when they learn that I am a lesbian. Why is that? Is it that others have a stereotype of what a lesbian ought to look and act like and I don't fit that image? Imagine their surprise. (Oh my, we are everywhere.)

For heterosexual, African-American sisters and brothers, the response to the fact that I am an out lesbian has been varied. Within the African-American community, non-traditional relationships are perceived as being wrong, ungodly and sinful. Some of my African-American sisters seem to be threatened by my sexuality and want to avoid or deny my existence or are very curious about why I would lead a nontraditional life style. My sexual orientation seems to be better accepted by my African-American brothers because many of the barriers in traditional men/women relationships are removed.

Regardless of my sexual orientation, I try to lead my life as an example to my other African-American brothers and sisters whether gay, lesbian or heterosexual. I have shared job opportunities and academic mentor experiences with younger people of color—whether gay, lesbian or heterosexual.

As an African-American woman who happens to be a lesbian, I have two options: to live in fear or to seize every opportunity to succeed. I have obviously chosen the latter. My father taught me when I was just a little Floreid, "Go out and get all the education the man has got to give. And when you have done that go back and get some more."