

COMMUNITIES WITHIN COMMUNITIES

Portland's gay men of color are between a homophobic rock and a racist hard place

by Rafael M. Diaz and Colleen Hoff

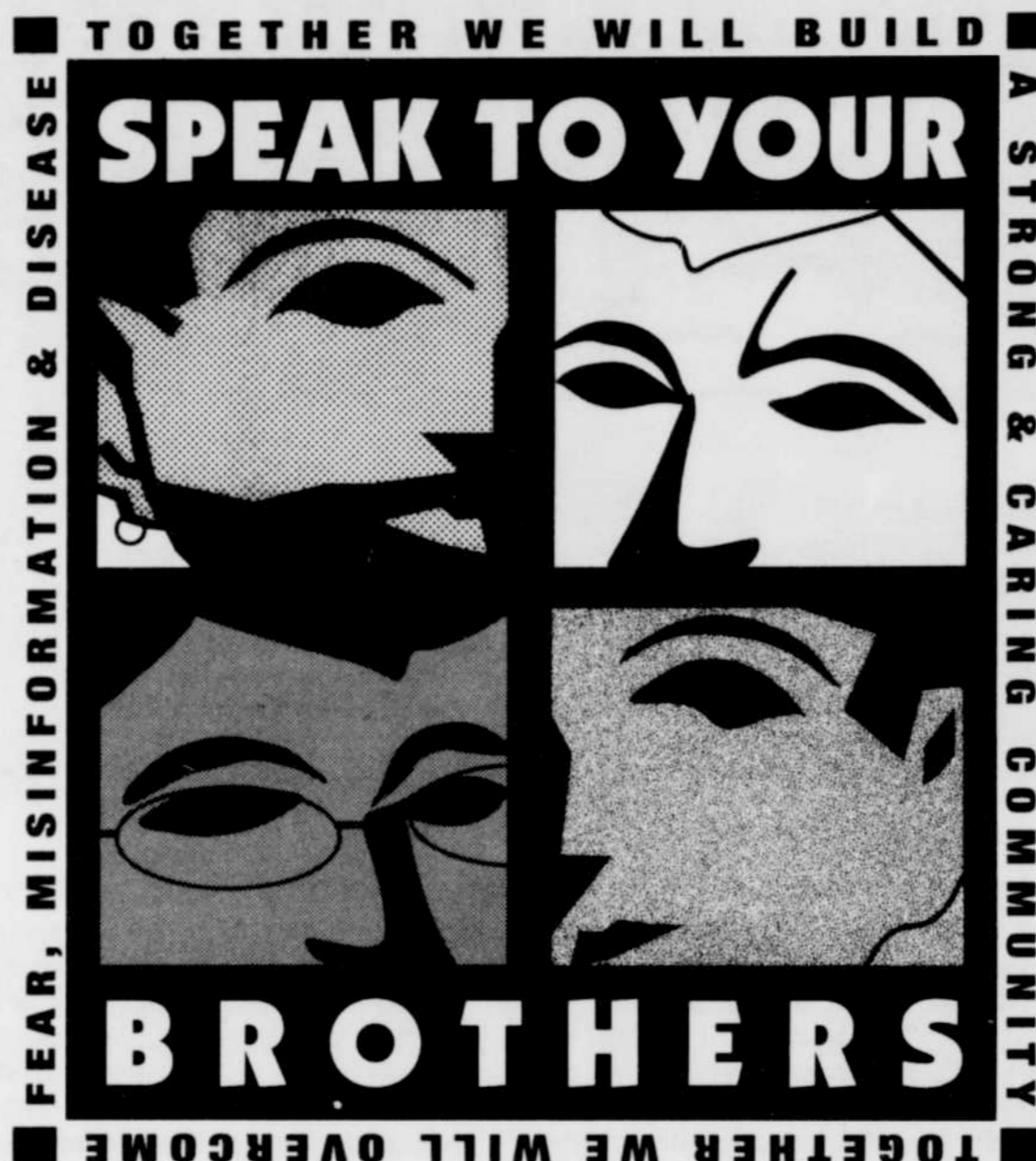
Committed to building gay community and to opening new avenues of communication among gay and bisexual men in Portland, the staff of Cascade AIDS Project's Speak to Your Brothers Project is eager to hear the views and experiences of men who might feel "on the fringes"—outsiders among their own gay brothers. During the early stages of the program, its designers spent a great deal of time talking to gay men of color in Portland. They sought out Asians and Pacific Islanders, Native Americans, African Americans, and Latinos—all colors of the gay rainbow community. Above all, the project organizers wanted to understand the experiences gay men of color have with the potential barriers to full participation in the greater gay community. This article addresses some concerns gay men of color have and suggests means to help create pathways towards an all-inclusive gay and bisexual men's community.

The majority of gay men of color interviewed voiced the perception that Portland's gay community is torn along race, class, and ethnic boundaries. More often than not, men of color talked about the gay community as "them" rather than "us." They recounted multiple instances of exclusion, rejection, stereotyping, tokenism, and blatant racism, experienced as they tried to find themselves and their community as gay men of color. Many of them felt a deeper sense of welcome and belonging within their own nongay ethnic communities. Unfortunately, many also felt forced to lead closeted lives, for the sake of respect and inclusion within their communities of origin. Personal stories of gay men of color reveal a life between a homophobic rock (community of origin) and a racist hard place (gay community).

It is naive and unrealistic to think that the larger gay community, by virtue of its queerness, is exempt from the prejudices and racism of the wider society in which we live. Thus, the task is not to condemn, criticize, and yell "racism," but rather to examine personal attitudes. By recognizing and analyzing the patterns that oppress and isolate people, the larger gay and bisexual men's communities may be able to open healing pathways towards greater communication, inclusion, and celebration. The more European American gay men work through and take action against the legacy of (institutionalized and sometimes unconscious) racism in our country, the more brotherhood and diversity will shine in the gay community.

How do gay men of color experience racism in the larger gay community?

Beyond blatant and open acts of racial discrimination, that unfortunately still occur within the gay community, racism is experienced in four



indirect yet harmful and divisive ways:

Objectification. Gay and bisexual men of color expressed the concern that often they are not seen as individual persons, but rather as generalized members of a minority or ethnic group. When they are approached by European American men who eroticize ethnicity as "passionate, dark and exotic," gay men of color feel they are treated as objects, rather than as equal partners for friendship, intimacy and fun.

Misunderstanding. Bisexual and gay men of color said that very few men from the European American gay men's community seem to understand their experiences of racism. Things are often forgotten or misunderstood by European American men who simply want men of color to "join in and party." The white gay community often forgets, overlooks, or does not understand that the experience of gay men of color includes:

- An identity development as members of both racial and sexual minority groups;
- A close relationship to family and an adherence to culturally valued practices;
- Social and financial risks taken by coming out

within an ethnic community;

• Daily struggles associated with racial or ethnic minority status such as violence, substance abuse, joblessness, immigration and or language barriers, to name a few.

Invisibility and exclusion. Gay and bisexual men of color often feel excluded from actual input and participation in political and social organizations within the larger gay community. Their concerns are rarely voiced in the mainstream queer press. Their faces and values are seldom represented in media images of successful, attractive, "in" gay men.

Tokenism. Even worse than denial of participation is the experience of being the "token" gay or bisexual man of color in gay groups, events or organizations. Gay men of color are often placed in such positions by well-intentioned but unaware groups and organizations. Rather than seriously examining the personal and institutional barriers to participation within their organization, predominantly white groups often try to solve their exclusionary problems by including a token person of color.

What can be done about this racism and discrimination?

Recognizing that the issues of racism and discrimination are deeply rooted in the fabric of our society and within our political and economic structures, here are a few suggestions of possible concrete pathways for greater inclusion within the gay men's community.

Personal and institutional self-observation. Individuals and institutions must examine themselves and ask how racism has affected them. Each person must ask, "How does racism operate in my views of the world? In my business practices? My cruising activities? My interpersonal relations?" Awareness is not sufficient, but it is certainly a necessary first step. Read, share, and discuss this article with your friends and members of organizations to which you belong.

Speak with—and listen to—your gay and bisexual brothers of color. Take time to listen, in reading and in conversations, to the experiences of gay men of color. If you do not know a gay man of color in your community with whom you can have a serious conversation about these issues, you might be actively participating in the problem.

Promote and support organizations for bisexual and gay men of color. For gay men of color, a first step towards further inclusion might be the opportunity to talk to one another, to share common experiences. This will help gay men of color support one another in facing dual struggles against homophobia and racism in the coming out process. Opportunities for gay and bisexual men of color to communicate and organize around goals and specific needs are very important.

Inclusion for the benefit of all. Efforts to integrate gay men of color based on the idea "The gay white community has a good thing and gay men of color should have it too" do not work! This attitude fosters a sense of superiority that is condescending and insulting to gay men of color. Rather, further efforts for inclusion must be based on the conviction that diversity means enrichment for the whole community. Without the perspectives, values, experiences, beauty and talents of gay men of color, the entire gay community would be poorer and duller. If sincerely embraced, this type of inclusion will bring gay and bisexual men of color closer in an equal and respectful brotherhood.

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KEYS TO SURVIVAL

Continued from previous page

with experimental substances.

When examining data on HIV disease progression, or when looking at the continuing toll of AIDS, one should put this information in the perspective of access to treatment. To give an idea of how little of the potentially useful therapies have been accessed to date, consider the following:

Chinese medical treatment of HIV (herbs and acupuncture) has been generally available for the past five years in the United States. It is estimated that today only about 6,000 HIV-infected individuals participate in any substan-

tial Chinese medical program (0.6 percent of those infected) and many (if not most) of these individuals utilize a minimal treatment program (e.g., only herbs or only acupuncture, low-dosage therapy, or infrequent treatments). In the state of Oregon, where ITM's work with Chinese medical therapy has had a major impact, it is estimated that only 3 percent of those with HIV infection are receiving substantial Chinese medical care.

Recent studies strongly suggest that nutritional substances, such as beta carotene and L-carnitine, are helpful in enhancing immune functions and countering some symptoms of HIV infection (such as weight loss), yet this fact is virtually unknown by the majority of medical doctors and such substances are used by very few

individuals.

Since a large portion of the one million infected individuals do not know they are infected, they are not pursuing any treatment. Many others do not know how—or are otherwise unable—to access potentially useful treatments, whether drug therapies or alternatives, because of lack of education, insufficient financial resources, or because they live in an area where services are not provided.

In direct consequence to the situation that has existed and persists, many individuals become unduly depressed about their condition. Depression is a stress that can negatively impact both the immune system and survival, as well as reducing the impetus to pursue effective treatment. When the long-term survivors of the group infected by

HIV early in the epidemic (and thus most at risk) were asked about their ability to overcome the debilitating aspects of the disease, the first thing mentioned was almost always "a positive attitude." Having a positive view about their ability to survive has led these individuals to seek out and get the help they need, and to pursue healthful activities. This remains the key to staying healthy with HIV.

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