


Plus

BREAKING

# Williams: Pride and prejudice in Richmond's LGBTQ community is focus of forum

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SHELBY LUM / TIMES-

DISPATCH

Perry

In 1961, José Julio Sarria became the first openly gay candidate to seek political office in the United States, running unsuccessfully for the San Francisco Board of Supervisors — 16 years before Harvey Milk made history by winning a seat on that board.

In the wee hours of June 28, 1969, two drag queens — one black (Marsha P. Johnson), the other Latina (Sylvia Rivera) — were among the leaders of the Stonewall Riots, a defining moment in the gay rights movement.

My history lesson came compliments of Ravi Perry, chair of the political science department at Virginia Commonwealth University, who said such achievements have been largely erased from memory.

“We are less aware of the nonwhite context of the LGBT experience,” he said.

This sort of airbrushing extends to nonwhites in Richmond’s LGBTQ community, who find themselves underrepresented in leadership positions as they experience the same biases endured by larger communities of color — and then some.

In “The Souls of Black Folk,” W.E.B. Du Bois famously spoke of a double consciousness: “One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

Society tends to pile on another layer of unreconciled strivings for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer individuals of color.

“In some sense, the idea is that these individuals within our community have a double-minority status,” said Justin Ayars, editor of Q Magazine. “And discrimination is amplified because of that.”

Diversity Richmond will tackle the issue of racial bias within the LGBTQ community during a forum Tuesday evening.

“The LGBTQ community is not immune to the painful reality that racism persists throughout our society,” said Jonathan Zur, president and CEO of the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities, who will co-facilitate the forum.

"Locally, examples include clear segregation and reported acts of bias in social settings and dating. Racism also shows up institutionally in terms of who is selected for positions of leadership, which organizations and events receive greater attention and funding, and which members of the LGBTQ community are most often served through available resources," Zur said.

"Because of the intersections of identities, I do think bias can be experienced differently within the LGBTQ community. There are some white LGBTQ people who naively believe that they are somehow immune from holding bias because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. My hope is that next week's conversation is one step in naming, learning about and identifying ways to address and overcome racism in the LGBTQ community and beyond."

Ayars notes with irony the historical bullying of gay people.

"Those who have been bullied are now doing the bullying themselves. And I think the only way for a community to move forward is to acknowledge the problem, listen to each other, and listen to the people who have been marginalized and excluded in our community," said Ayars, who describes himself as "a recovering attorney turned entrepreneur."

Yes, he said, it's good to acknowledge gay community political successes in post-marriage equality America. But the LGBTQ community must acknowledge that certain voices are not being heard.

"It's a very challenging process. And it is a process. There is no silver bullet. There is no one answer that will make this issue go away," he said. But he adds that the community needs to be able to communicate openly and effectively in safe spaces, challenging each other "to move forward and understand and stand in the shoes of our brothers and sisters, rather than stand on top of them.

"It's just going to take time," Ayars said. "This event on Tuesday is a very important step."

Is Richmond any better or worse as far as bias in the LGBTQ community is concerned?

"A lot of people would point to Richmond's unique history regarding slavery and say it's worse than other places," he said. But Ayars — a Las Vegas native who has lived in London — said these biases are pervasive and global.

Having said that, Ayars — who moved here from Washington in 2009 — lauded Mayor Levar Stoney, the city of Richmond, and Richmond Region Tourism for promoting diversity and inclusion within the LGBTQ community. And Perry, for his part, noted the productive relationship between the city's LGBTQ community and the Richmond and VCU police departments.

Perry suggests that a citywide survey of the LGBTQ population would be a worthwhile endeavor for a local organization or university. "I do think that would be quite beneficial in understanding the new Richmond, so to speak," he said.

But the anecdotal experiences of Perry and others suggest a divide. The framing of the LGBTQ narrative in Richmond has been not only "largely homogeneous" from a racial perspective, he said, but "limited to the lesbian and gay experience" to the exclusion of bisexual and transgender individuals and people who fit in other categories."

But Richmond is not without positives.

The city has a sizable and visible black LGBTQ population, one that recently held its first Black Gay Pride event. Perry notes that Diversity Richmond started the Black and Bold awards two years ago to honor black LGBTQ contributions in the community — the first collaboration between the LGBTQ community and the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia. And Diversity Richmond is working on an oral history of the black LGBTQ community statewide, said Perry, a member of that nonprofit's board.

"All of that is an indication that even mainstream LGBT organizations in the city of Richmond are recognizing the need to extend" their outreach into the black LGBTQ community, he said.

But people of color, who tend to possess less wealth, do not necessarily share the priorities of their white counterparts. While marriage equality was the primary concern of white gays and lesbians, black individuals in the LGBTQ community were more preoccupied with economic security, the lack of state-sanctioned safeguards against job discrimination, and the targeting of black transgender individuals for violence, Perry said.

Those issues and others require a focus and resolve equal to that of the marriage issue, Perry said. And there's no more appropriate place to tackle them than in Virginia, the birthplace of codified racial discrimination in the U.S., and in Richmond, a place with an extraordinary number of LGBTQ-focused organizations for a medium-sized city.

"In order for us to solve these problems and these issues, we've got to view them as American problems and American issues," to be addressed on the local, state and federal level, Perry said.

"This is why having a conversation on racial bias really matters. For one, we have to acknowledge it exists."

If you go

**What:** Diversity Richmond Community Conversation

**When:** 6 p.m. on Tuesday

**Where:** Diversity Richmond, 1407 Sherwood Ave.

**Facilitators:** Jonathan Zur, president and CEO of the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities; and Archana Pathak, assistant professor in the Department of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University

**Panelists:** Justin Ayars, editor of Q Magazine; community activists Afton Bradley and Yessica Gonzalez-Hernandez; Zakia McKensy, executive director of Nationz Foundation; Ravi Perry, chair of the Department of Political Science at VCU; and Bobbie Weinstock, Richmond Lesbian Feminists