AQ ASKS

Karin Digbyana Baten Riquiac

With which actor do you most identify?
Mario Moreno Cantinflas. He was a marvelous actor who made me laugh as a child. His films always integrated something that tried to change our attitudes toward others.

What is your most valued possession?
A small mud figurine head found buried near my house, an archelogocial heritage artifact that I believe comes from my Maya K´iche ancestors.

the long civil war in my country. The stories told to me by the elderly, and in particular by women, brought tears to their eyes and mine. The women spoke to me about watching their children being killed before them, or being raped and forced from their homes. That experience persuaded me to begin training community leaders in civic participation and human rights, among other issues. I came to believe that when a community knows its rights, it can fight for the changes it needs. The need was further underlined when I traveled to several communities in the department of Chichicastenango to give a talk to 80 community leaders, accompanied by two young Italian researchers. One of the researchers asked me how I felt—as a woman—having so many men respect and listen to me. They also asked why so few women were in positions of leadership. Prodded by their questions, for which I had no easy answers, I went to work for an indigenous women´s association called *Ixmukené* (named after a Mayan goddess) in the department of Quiche in northern Guatemala in an effort to increase female participation in civil society.

But beyond gender issues, it is clear that for both men and women in indigenous communities, the central problem is the lack of tools available to develop their full potential and become full members of society—something created by the inequity of educational opportunities. This is a problem that extends beyond our borders. A young, non-indigenous man from El Salvador told me tearfully that he was forced to look for work in other countries in order to give his two young sons the opportunities to advance themselves that he never had.

We cannot make the changes we need alone. So I am trying to reach out across the gap that divides my own generation in Guatemala and ask them not to "hide behind their iPods." We need to join together in creating a better country. For indigenous communities in particular, this means creating more opportunities for education and skills training. But even small actions count. Being conscious of how much water or energy we use, recycling and many other things help the planet. We have forgotten how to live as a community. I believe we must become involved in community action.

Of course not all of us hide behind our iPods. Many of us are already active in civil society. Some work to get kids off drugs; others work in programs aimed at helping young people stay in school. One organization in particular, *Líderes del Presente*, has been a leader in this movement.

Such developments are encouraging. They signal that people are beginning to awaken and become active. But given the history and extent of the divisions in my country, the movement must grow further. As my Mayan K'ich'e' ancestors used to say: *chelb´a lo ri q´ij, chasaqiroq, chelb´a lo ri saqarib´al,* "May the sun rise, may dawn arrive." ■

THE ADVOCATE

Jaevion Nelson

b.
9 FEBRUARY 1986
CLARENDON, JAMAICA

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IN JAMAICA, a country known as one of the most homophobic places in the world, young people are challenging the status quo of intolerance. A young man from a conservative family in rural Jamaica recently confided to me that five of his close friends are gay. He observed that although he did not share their sexual preferences, he understood that their sexual orientation didn't define them. "They are more than gay," he told me. "They are smart, eloquent and very good friends. There is a lot I can learn from them."

Many young people in Jamaica hold similar views. And while they are not often involved in activism, they maintain a good rela-

tionship with their gay peers. It is also common for youth leaders in schools and communities to discreetly promote acceptance of sexual diversity. You will rarely hear them playing gay-bashing music, even though such music is common in Jamaica.

It is mainly because of such youth tolerance that a vibrant gay community flourishes on our island. Scores of homosexual men and women bask in the opportunity to live "freely"—important indicators that our island of sun, sea and sand might someday fully allow people to live as they choose without prejudice or discrimination.

But in order for that to happen, much more needs to be done. And I am proud to be deeply involved in my generation's efforts to win cultural and legal acceptance for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. In 2007, I joined the Jamaica Youth Advocacy Network (JYAN), a youth-led leadership and advocacy organization that seeks to develop youth activists' capacities to lobby for change by promoting positive behavior, teaching advocacy techniques and advising and guiding policies that affect us.

No one denies that we have a long way to go. I have seen on many occasions the hostility of people toward those who are gay, calling them "fish" (Jamaican slang for gay) when I go out with friends. Other gay men I know are badly hurt and confused by the climate of homophobia they encounter in their communities, churches, schools, and even their own families. Others have left to live abroad.

My own journey toward becoming a gay-rights activist was probably inevitable. I grew up questioning the nonsensical cultural dictate that if you dress, talk, act, or walk "a certain way," you are gay. I was outraged by the reports of vicious attacks meted out to several Jamaicans who may have been gay or openly supported gay rights. Luckily, no one I know has suffered from such brutality, but I detested the idea of living in a country where the law appears to provide no protection against sexuality-oriented violence. As I developed my career in international development, and my knowledge of issues relating to HIV/AIDS and sexual minorities increased, it became more apparent that I must become an advocate for this issue.

At the Jamaica Youth Advocacy Network, we have focused first on our policy and legal sys-

JATI LINDSAY

Nelson speaking at a conference on HIV and human rights in Washington, DC.

As youth, we have been doing what we can to design the society we want to live in.

AQ ASKS

Jaevion Nelson

What countries have you visited?
U.S., U.K., Switzerland, Martinique, Barbados, Dominican Republic, Canada, Antigua, and Nicaragua.

Where do you imagine yourself in 20 years?
Heading an international NGO or inter-governmental agency and working to protect human rights. A few steps closer to Ban Ki-Moon's current position in the UN, perhaps.

What is your most valued possession?
My laptop.

tem. Laws against "buggery" that criminalize consensual relations between men are still on the books in Jamaica. And while Jamaican law establishes penalties for sexual offenses such as rape, incest and carnal abuse, those laws—including the Sexual Offences Bill and the Offences Against the Person Act—do not recognize that men can equally be victims of rape and harassment by men.

Similarly, there are great gaps in our country's educational system. School textbooks tell children about family structures, roles and responsibilities. This is, of course, important, but when some educators discovered that the home economics textbook for high school students mentioned the existence of same-sex families, the Ministry of Education withdrew its approval.

It is up to my generation to change this. We desire (and rightly so) to understand the differences in our peers, whether they are sexual, mental or economic, and how to accept and appreciate them without stigma and discrimination. But most young people have nowhere to turn to find this information. As a result, the dominant heterosexual culture continues to breed intolerance, revealed in inadequate public policies to our schools and churches.

And this has had consequences for Jamaica's LGBT community. Members of the community have been victims of hate crimes. Stacey-Ann Chin, a Jamaican-born lesbian who is a popular LGBT poet and spoken-word artist in the United States, was raped by a group of boys when she came out in Jamaica several years ago. They told police later that she needed to know what "real" sex was.

As youth, we have been doing what we can to design the society we want to live in. Young people greatly contributed to the electoral victory of the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) in 2007. While there has been no public discourse on homosexuality, we have been advocating the importance of raising the issue as a linchpin of our democracy. And we have taken our campaign abroad. In September 2009, I participated in a forum on "HIV, Human Rights and Men Who Have Sex with Men" on Capitol Hill in Washington DC. I was joined by Ambassador Eric Goosby, the United States global AIDS coordinator; Michele Sidibe, the executive director for UNAIDS; Tudor Kovacs from Populations Services International, Romania; and Dr. Cheikh Traore of the United Nations Development Programme.

Subsequently, my colleague from the JYAN, Nekeisha Lewis, was invited to a Pan American Health Organization-sponsored meeting on "Access of Most-at-Risk Populations to HIV Prevention, Treatment and Care Health Services in the Caribbean," held in the Dominican Republic.

Changing the climate toward gays should be a national goal. It will not only end discrimination but help all sectors of society. Why is this so important? In 2007, the prevalence rate for HIV was between 25 and 30 percent among Jamaican men who have sex with men. More than 80 percent of people sampled were between ages 15 and 29. This is cause for concern: society makes it very difficult for homosexual men to access HIV prevention or treatment services. Many young gay people are afraid to purchase condoms or visit a doctor, so they resort to their own "protective" mechanisms. Even the conversations we have with each other have been warped by homophobia. Men no longer want to say "two" or eat "fish" because of their homosexual connotations.

The fact is, as other societies have already acknowledged, homophobia and the consequent pressure to live furtively promote promiscuity, leaving gays marginalized by their community. The constant struggle to live within the confines of the hetero-normative society prevents the LGBT community from fully developing its potential.

But this cannot happen without changing current law and public policy.

The place to begin is the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, which was introduced in the Jamaican Parliament in 2009. It now has special relevance for us. The Charter should serve as the launchpad for a debate in Parliament. While the government's commitment to constitutional reform is laudable, our political leaders, starting with the prime minister and reaching all the way to our media, teachers and community NGOs, must work toward including gay rights in our Charter.

Contrary to what some of our politicians may think, decriminalizing homosexuality or advocating rights for all people will not create homosexuals. Constitutional reform that identifies the need to protect the rights of the LGBT community will not change the social and culture norms that govern the ideologies of our society in one go; it will only signify our maturity as a country by demonsrating our willingness to accept those who are different from the majority. Our generation, which represents tomorrow's policymakers, senators and parliamentarians, must be at the forefront of changing this situation. ■

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