

Gay in Da Hood

By Jeremiyah Spears

1. **B**ecause I'm 6'6" and hefty, people often think I should be a ball player of some sort. But once you get to know me, you'll know I'm no ball player.

In my old neighborhood, guys would always call me out of my house to play basketball, knowing that was not what I liked to do. When I missed a shot they would ridicule me and call me a f-ggot.

It's true, I'm gay, and though I look like your ordinary clean-cut Polo boy, I act a little feminine. When I'm happy, I like to buy shoes. I also like to read romances and family-oriented books. My favorite book is *Mama*, by Terry McMillan. It's about a divorced black woman with five kids who's having problems being accepted into society.

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2. Different From Day One

In fact, I've been different my whole life. I first realized I was homosexual at an early age, because when I was around 5 or 6 years old, I would see boys and think, "How cute." Besides, I was labeled as different by many people. I never liked to play ball or get sweaty. My favorite toy was Christmastime Barbie. When the boys used to ruffhouz and try to do it to me, I'd tell them to leave me alone. I would never do any typical boy stuff, such as sports, play fighting, or rapping.

I could never understand why anyone would want to harass me for that. I used to think, "So what if I'm gay? So what if I'm different? Accept me or don't accept me at all, honey, because I'm just me." I couldn't understand why the boys wanted to bother me and fight me when they didn't know a damn thing about me. But they did.

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The boys in my neighborhood were rough-necked, ball-playing, weed-smoking boys who picked on people to prove their machismo to their friends. I think those boys did

what they did because of their own insecurities, because they wanted to prove they were manly men.

3. Halloween Humiliation

There were about nine or 10 of them and they lived in or around my neighborhood. Wherever I went I always ran into them, and often they would torture me for being gay. One Halloween night, I went alone to catch the bus to go to a party. I was wearing a pair of dark jeans and a matching jacket and a black sweater with my initials on it. My mother had spent a lot for the outfit. She had spent \$132 on the jacket alone.

While I was walking toward the bus, I saw a group of boys on bikes passing by. I recognized some of the guys. The first thought

I had was, “Oh no, they’re going to start trouble with me.” I kept walking.

All of a sudden a partially opened bottle of urine hit me and got all over me. Some straight guys think doing something like that to a gay guy is kind of creative. They all hurried away and I screamed and cried because of all the money my mom spent on the outfit.

Then I felt the same as always—puzzled as to why I had to be their victim. I thought these guys would never understand me. They wanted to change me. They wanted to make me someone I wasn’t.

4. **I Got Revenge**

For three weeks after Halloween, I had the incident on my mind. At first my brothers were trying to get me to let them beat the boys up. But I thought that would not make the situation better. It would probably just wild up the problem more.

Finally I decided that I’d show them I wouldn’t stand for it anymore and I began to fight—with my pen. I wrote them gruesome letters with fake blood (ketchup) smeared on to let them know I was going to get them back and that I’d get the last laugh. Ha!

Usually, when the guys harassed me, I would say, “F--- you,” and “Go straight to hell, because I’m going to be me and there will be no changes until I feel that my life needs a change.” And I would get revenge. I would make fun of them trying to talk to girls and getting turned down. Sometimes we’d end up fighting.

5. **Never Any Peace**

When we fought, often my brothers or my female friends would be there to help me—some of my female friends were known for beating guys down. And once I even whacked a guy with a plank. While I was fighting, I’d think blood and more blood, because of the traumatic experiences I’d been through. I wanted so much revenge on the boys who created trouble for me. Because of the fights, the cops were always at my house.

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Even though it made me feel better for a short while to get revenge, I felt as if I was never going to succeed in having peace of mind. And after the fights were all over, I wouldn't feel much better. Often I felt as if I'd never belonged, and that no one would ever socialize with me because I was gay. I thought the world was so against me and that no one cared.

6. Props From Friends

Still, there were people around who helped me and supported me, like my brothers and my friends. Looking back, I can see how much of a difference they made, even when times were at their hardest.

When I was living in my old neighborhood, my best friend was Lauryne. Beauty was her name, and we would go to the movies, the mall, or just hang in the park and talk about everything, from boys and love to clothes, shoes, and jewelry.

Sometimes we would cut school for days at a time, but we always got good grades in everything we did except for physical education, in which we had to beg for good grades, because we never showed up.

Like a lot of my other girl friends, Lauryne didn't really care that I was gay. As a matter of fact, she praised me for

having the nerve to be able to come out at an early age to my parents and siblings and not really worry what they were going to think of me. She said things like, "You're brave," "You're courageous," and that she was lucky to have a friend like me.

It made me feel wonderful to know I had friends who honestly cared about me. It made me strong and gave me courage to be even more open about my sexuality, and to encourage other kids to come into the light and pay the price. It made me believe

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there would always be people to support me.

7. **My Grandma Taught Me the Golden Rule**

Another person who really helped me survive everything was my grandma, who raised me. From my grandma I learned strength, courage, patience, love, compassion, and to treat all people the same. My grandma taught me to learn new things from people who try to reach out and teach you. She taught me the golden rule: Do unto others as you want others to do unto you.

My grandma was born in 1919. She grew up on a farm and was born in a time when blacks weren't accepted and women weren't allowed to vote. She saw so much—the

Great Depression, both World Wars, prohibition, segregation, lynchings, the civil rights movement. She would tell me about the marches, about the violence, and how once when she was in Jackson, Mississippi, she saw two boys who'd been hung from a tree.

She told me, "My dear, you haven't seen the harshness life can give you."

Sometimes people who have lived through hard times grow closed and mean and bigoted against people who are different from them. But my grandma had a strong sense of herself, and that made her open-minded to the different things in life. She always said, "People must know themselves before they try to learn from another person," and that's exactly what she did.

8. **'Don't Let No One Turn You Around'**

As for my grandmother trying to change me, like so many other people in the world have seemed to want to, it never happened. Instead, she encouraged me to do what I thought was right and what would make me happy. My grandma often told me that she'd always love me no matter who I was.

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Three months after I came into foster care, when I was no longer living with my grandma because she was ill, I received a call from my aunt saying my grandma wanted to speak to me. When she got on the phone, she said, "I love you dear, and don't let no one turn you around." Then she hung up the phone because she had gotten short-winded. Shortly after that conversation, she died. I love her dearly and I miss her.

I now live in a group home in a different part of the city. As for the boys in my neighborhood, they no longer bother me, because I don't go around there very often. When I do think back on things, sometimes I can laugh, but other times I'm still angry that those nobodies had so much control over my life.

Still, I think I have come to be OK being myself every day. Despite all the hassles I went through, the people who supported me made me feel that I didn't have to change myself for anyone. I know that my life would only get harder trying to change for other people's satisfaction. I know that I just need to satisfy myself.

Jeremiyah was 17 when he wrote this story.