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- Photos: Gay Rights Around the World
- Q&A: Growing Up Gay in Jamaica

'I Have Not Been Accepted By My Family'

What it's like to grow up gay in Jamaica, where bigotry is widespread.

WEB EXCLUSIVE

By Patrick Falby
 Newsweek International
 Updated: 11:49 a.m. CT Sept 8, 2007

Sept. 8, 2007 - Gay rights may be spreading in many countries, but not in Jamaica. Violence against gay men is high, and police often look the other way, say activists. When Brian Williamson, Jamaica's leading gay rights activist, was murdered in June 2004, a crowd gathered outside the crime scene to celebrate. NEWSWEEK's Patrick Falby spoke with Devon, a 30-year-old homosexual who was granted asylum in the United States three years ago, about growing up gay in Jamaica. Devon, who lives in New York and attends a Seventh-day Adventist church, didn't want his last name used for fear of being thrown out of the congregation. Excerpts:

[Story continues below ↓](#)

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- Jamaica: Still Bigoted Towards Gays
- Growing Up Gay In Jamaica
- Q&A: Sir Ian McKellen on Fighting Bigotry

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Falby: What's it like being a homosexual in Jamaica?

Devon: Wow. Terrible. Ridiculous. I have not been accepted by my family. My sister kicked me out of her house, and I was dis-fellowshipped by my church. At church I was an usher, and I used to sing in the choir.

When did you realize you were a homosexual?

When I was born; ever since then I've felt that way. I used to wear my mother's shoes on the road sometimes, and my family used to kick me with the shoes and tell me to not put them on. Because I had four sisters I played girls' games like bandy shandy. I even used to play cricket with the girls. They used to say that I'm not a man, that I'm a woman because I play women's games. They used to call me "battyman," which means gay in Jamaica. I tried to keep a low profile, though, because people used to get beaten for being gay.

How did people find out?

A friend of mine came over to the house to give me guidance one day when I was 18, and one of my sisters saw him. From there on my sister said that she didn't want me near her because I'm whatever and whatever. When my sister went to work, I used to make sure her kids were properly dressed, bathed, had something to eat, got them off to school and picked them up. I was her helper. When she said that about me it was surprising. My brother, when he found out, he told me he was going to kill me because he didn't want somebody in the family like me. I couldn't really believe my own family would do that, until it happened to me. I was surprised because back home I used to do anything they asked. If they called me and told me they needed anything and I had it, I'd give it to them.

You are no longer in contact with your family?

Once in a blue moon I'll call them to say hi, and when there was a hurricane I called to find out if everyone was okay. I mostly talk to my niece and nephew, because they're small kids and you cannot hold anything against a child. I

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also call my mom. She doesn't approve of [being gay], but you know a mother will always be a mother no matter what. She will always show me a good face, but behind it she's maybe not with me. Now that I'm in America, she might figure that I have money to send to Jamaica or something.

How were other homosexuals and lesbians treated?

Horrible. Terrible. I used to have a roommate, and when I left to come here she was killed at our place. Some men beat and cut up her and her lover.

Why is homophobia is so strong in Jamaica?

People are not tolerant with the lifestyle. Even married men, they go hide and they do their stuff, and at the end of the day they go back with their wives. If it was more accepted, people would be free and do things that they wanted. It's also because people tend to lean on the church's side, and say it's not accepted by God and stuff like that. In church, when I hear them talk about it, I put up blind ears, like I don't hear what they say. Even now, because I still go to a Seventh-day Adventist church here [in New York]. When they talk about it, I put up blind ears about it. [In Jamaica] and here [in New York], because of the church lifestyle, nobody's going to come out.

How did you end up applying for asylum in the United States?

I just decided I really couldn't take it anymore in Jamaica. So I went to the embassy and applied for a visiting visa and I decided I'm not going back, I'm going to apply for asylum. And here I am.

I'm not going to work now, but I'm going to college at the present, and I'm in the process of looking for jobs. I've been in America for three years. I also volunteer for Gay Men's Health Crisis, a nonprofit organization in New York.

Do you think you'll ever return to Jamaica?

The only way I'll ever want to go back is if something changes so that people can live their lives and be free. They need to put something in place to protect people who are living this lifestyle in Jamaica. They have nothing in place; the police beat them, the members of the community beat them. And I hope and pray that [the new prime minister] can put something in place so that people like me, who lived the lifestyle in Jamaica, can live their lives.

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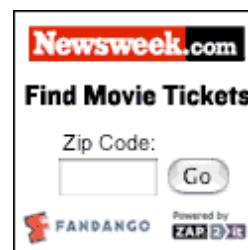


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