

EDITED BY KEITH BOYKIN

# FOR COLORED BOYS

WHO HAVE  
CONSIDERED  
SUICIDE  
WHEN THE  
RAINBOW  
IS STILL  
NOT ENOUGH

Coming of Age, Coming Out, and Coming Home



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### **Submission Review Editors**

La Marr Jurelle Bruce  
Clay Cane  
Mark Corece  
Frank Roberts

The last thing I see is him walking into the house with our grandmother as I continue to walk down the street. Our backs are both turned to the old, white house with the attic.

## **Mother to Son**

*Chaz Barracks*

My mother always seemed to have issues with masculinity, or rather with my apparent lack of it. Maybe it was because she felt guilty that I didn't have a father. Or maybe she had dreams of me becoming a macho sports star. Whatever the reason, for as far back as I can remember, she seemed to be obsessed with it. When I was little, there were continual comments like, "stop acting like a girl," "stop acting like a pussy," "stop acting like a lady."

As I got older, "faggot" became her word of choice. She used it in casual conversation: "Take out the garbage, faggot," she would say, as if faggot was simply my nickname. At other times, she would scream it at me in a rage. Anything could set her off. Something as simple as my asking, "Can A.J. sleep over this week?" And she would say, "No." I would argue back that I didn't understand why not. "Because I don't want any fucking gayness in my house; you are not bringing your little boyfriends here so you can play with their dicks under my roof. I will not have any faggot stuff in my house! Do you hear me, faggot?" I

didn't even understand why she was saying that. At this time, it wasn't sexual or anything. I was just asking to have a friend sleep over like the other kids.

It made me angry, but it also confused me. I didn't understand why my mother spoke to me like this and made me cry, because I knew she loved me, and our good times together proved that. When it got really bad, I would retreat to my sister's room. Although she usually regarded me as an annoying little brother, when I was hurting she never turned me away. I would walk in and she would know, and she would let me sit on the floor and watch TV with her. When my sister wasn't there, I would go into my own room, take the phone off the hook, turn off the lights and TV, and cry in the dark until I began to think about other stuff...like my grandmother. I used to call my grandmother late at night, and hearing her voice would take the pain away. When I would cry to her, she would tell me I was not a faggot and to ignore the comments. But it was hard to ignore; it hurt so bad.

For a while, I did try to ignore it. I would focus on the good times, but Mommy's mood could change on a dime. We could be watching a movie, and she would rail at me about how gay I was, then that same night we would go get ice cream as if nothing had happened. That was the way it was—every day was up and down with her, and it could shift in an instant. During the good moments I was always aware that anything might happen to set her off, and when a painful attack was coming my way, I would hold onto the thought that it would pass, it would get better. There would be ice cream and shopping and good times to come.

Then one day the routine changed. That car ride was one of the hardest experiences of my life. It was a Saturday morning. It was pouring rain. The night before, the house was completely silent. My sister stayed in her room, I stayed in my room, and Mommy was in her room with her boyfriend. No one was watching TV. It was like someone had died in the house, and nobody knew what to say. It was still like that in the morning,

completely silent, except for the sound of the rain. Mommy didn't pack anything, because, well, you don't bring anything for the type of trip we were taking. So we just brought her. No bags, just her and the clothes she had on, sweat pants and a T-shirt. Everybody was silent in the car. We stopped at a drive-thru and got breakfast, and for a brief moment, it felt like a family outing. But no one was speaking; there was just a deathly silence in the air.

Mommy's boyfriend, Tony, drove slowly in the rain and approached a really long driveway. My sister and I watched from the window in the back as we arrived at the correctional facility, which was out in the hills far away from everything. We entered a large crowded waiting room, where Mommy walked up to the window and checked in. They told her she had only a few minutes to say good-bye, which she did, one-by-one, but it didn't feel private or personal in the busy room. We gave her short hugs. She cried and apologized. Tony was first; I could see he was crying when he hugged her. My sister cried, too, when she gave Mommy a hug. Then it was my turn. Mommy was still crying uncontrollably; she told me how much she loved me and to be sure to behave for my sister. I gave her a hug, but I didn't cry. I had prepared myself for this day. I was twelve. And I was not going to cry.

The saddest part was that none of us looked back. In the movies, people always look back and wave in the good-bye scenes. We didn't do that; we just left. When she turned to go into lock-up, we turned and headed for the exit. We just walked out the door and got in the car, numb from the experience.

The car ride home was awkward. Now we were with her boyfriend. My sister in the front passenger seat wasn't crying, she was just staring straight ahead, stoic and seemingly without emotion. I sat in the back. We weren't even halfway down that long driveway, and it happened: I started to cry, and I couldn't stop. Tears were pouring down my cheeks. I tried to pretend I was asleep, so they wouldn't see. At one point, my sister turned

and asked if I was sleeping, but I didn't answer. It was all I could do to hide the flood of tears and silence the impulse to sob out loud. I wasn't crying because Mommy was gone. I think I was crying because I realized this was a breaking point for the family. I didn't know what was going to happen, and that scared me. I was crying because I officially had a mother in prison, and the thought of that stigma was hard to bear. I was crying because now I was not only a "faggot," I was a faggot with no mother and an uncertain future. And there was something inside I couldn't put into words.

When we got home, I went in my room. Tony went out and brought us back dinner. We ate in our rooms and watched TV, and that was it. My sister came into my room and said, "Are you okay?"

In two more weeks, school was over, and I went to my grandmother's for the summer. When I returned at the end of summer, Mommy came home. The first three months she was back, she was "under house arrest"—I actually saw them put the ankle bracelet on her—and she was nice to us. Maybe that was because she felt like a guest in her own home; by that point, my sister had taken charge of everything, and the house was in perfect order. Mommy joined in and did our laundry. It was almost idyllic, except that there was something about her that seemed so soft and broken. But, on the whole, everything was good for about a year.

She had difficulty getting a job; then she got one, but she was fired. I could tell there were problems. Whenever my mother stressed out, she aimed her frustration at me, and the faggot stuff would increase. And it increased dramatically. With the reality of my mother's incarceration, I began to put the pieces together. Even as a young child, I had been aware of the fake names. Magazines would come to our house in different people's names. The phone bill, light bill, and cable bill were in three different names, and none of them were my mother's name.

Mommy would always get pissed if I threw out mail. I thought it belonged to someone who used to live in our house, so I threw it out, and then she would rail on me, "Don't touch my fucking stuff!" I didn't know it was hers. My sister finally clued me in and explained that my mother was using different names and aliases. And once I understood, I automatically knew how to handle calls that came into the house for these various names: "Sarah Spooner? Yes, she lives here, but she isn't home right now. Do you want to leave a message?" "Ann Marie Browne? Yes, but she's out. Can I take a message?" At that point I didn't know about the bad checks or the credit card fraud. My sister, however, had noticed that something was amiss; when we would go shopping, it would always take a little longer than normal at the register. I didn't fully understand it as a child, but now as I was going on fourteen, I began to realize the extent of my mother's criminal activities: mail fraud, identity theft, forgery, and providing false statements.

With my mother back home on probation, the warning signs were gathering: there would be trouble ahead! She continued to struggle to find a job, my sister moved out, and Tony moved out. I was alone with my mother in the house. Then I noticed the cable bill arrived with a new alias, and I knew she was back at it. I was on the receiving end of more and more of those old verbal attacks. But now I had a better sense of what was going on, and I had some ammunition to fight back and defend myself. If she was going to attack me verbally, I was not going to ignore it anymore. I would confront her rather than retreating in silence. In a way that only self-righteous teenagers can, I was going to hold her to account. If she attacked me verbally, I would counter by pointing out her moral failings. When she started to go after me with the faggot stuff, I countered with a sharp verbal retort: "I may be a faggot, but I'm not a criminal; and I won't be going to prison." That hit a nerve. And that's when all hell broke loose. The arguments got worse, more violent, and sometimes she would kick me out of the house for days. In a year of what

seemed like ever-escalating confrontations, I did everything I could to avoid the conflict, and she did everything she could to keep me there: "You faggot! You are going to sit here and take this like a man! You better get used to it!" As if this barrage would somehow cure me or toughen me up.

When my grandmother bought me a car in the spring of 2005 that sent my mother over the edge. Now that I had wheels, I would leave whenever the arguments started. I was the one with the car and the job. But when I left for work, she would yell after me, "You're not going to work, you're going to your boyfriend's house!" Then she'd call the police and tell them I ran away from home. It was a crazy, ongoing battle, but I had stopped crying. I couldn't take it anymore. It wasn't even making me sad. I just wanted it to be over. And I don't really know which came first—that I stopped crying when I started fighting back, or that when I started fighting back, I stopped crying. But whichever it was, it was a fundamental game-changer. And although the tension escalated in the short run, in the long run the experience saved my life.

It reached the point where the arguments would occur in front of my friends. My mother, who had always been so careful about public impressions, didn't seem to care who saw our battles. She would taunt me in front of my friends: "Come on, faggot, I dare you to hit me!" She would toss my stuff out on the lawn and throw furniture at me. It was out of control. My friends who witnessed these incidents would tell their parents, and soon I had a network of friends and parents who were offering me a place to stay. It was at that point I realized two very important things: first, what was going on in my house was not acceptable; second, moving out was a viable option.

Finally I left. Three friends came to help run interference if things got ugly. And they did: Mommy came out of her room like a charging bull—yelling, slamming doors, and trying to block the way. But my friends helped to gather up my stuff, threw it all in the car, and we were off. I stayed at my friend Carrie's house

for the summer. Her parents were very generous, but it became clear this could not be a permanent arrangement, so in the fall, I moved into the unfinished basement of my sister's building. I slept on a futon mattress I had to hide everyday before I left so that no one would discover someone was living in her basement. I got through my last two years of high school by keeping busy; I worked four part-time jobs and ran track. My mother lost custody of me. She returned to prison and was eventually deported to Jamaica. Months passed and I would speak to her on the phone from time to time but I felt nothing because I knew I didn't need her.

I was on my own, and it was a mixed blessing. Although I was relieved, there was also a gnawing sense of loss. My mother would not be at my high school graduation or at my graduation from college nor any of the other milestones in my life. Still, I had grown strong and relatively self-sufficient, and I had friends and mentors in high school that defended me and loved me regardless of what I was or would become. Occasionally I was called gay or faggot throughout high school, but it never hurt. Once I overcame my issues with my mother, I didn't care what anyone else said. The rules were also different in school; once a boy even got suspended for calling me a faggot. Coming from a home where my mother called me a faggot every day and never got in trouble for it, I thought suspension was pretty harsh. But it reminded me not to tolerate verbal abuse.

I made it through high school and landed a scholarship for college. It was a fresh start, out of Connecticut and away from all the pain of my life. I didn't think bullying happened in college. I was wrong. In West Virginia it started immediately, and it was unexpectedly harsh.

I was assigned to a dorm occupied largely by athletes. The thought crossed my mind that it might present a problem, but I dismissed it. After all, I had a great roommate and a couple of good friends on campus. But one guy took the lead: Larken. He was not much taller than I was, but he was bigger, he played

baseball, and he always had a mean look on his face when he saw me.

Larken would walk past me in the hall and stare in my face and whisper “faggot,” as he walked past, his friends laughing from a distance. The guys on our floor always had their doors open, and they were always loud, running from room to room, throwing balls and playing video games. But whenever I appeared, they suddenly got quiet and would just stop and look at me. Then when I went into my room, I would hear an explosion of laughter in the hall. As time progressed it fell into an ugly routine: I would swipe into the residence hall, walk to the third floor and pull out a paper towel from my bag in order to wipe off the whiteboard outside my dorm room. Everyday, the board would have messages from Larken: “faggot,” “dick lover,” “gay person lives here.” Larken would see me in the hallway and purposely bump my shoulder, then stare into my eyes as if he was daring me to react. I never did. Every night when I went to the showers, guys would follow me into the bathroom and stare, push in the curtain, and make gross advances, then they’d leave in a pack, their laughter echoing through the hall. I started showering later and later, just so I would have some peace and quiet.

I was surprised how much this all hurt. First, because I wasn’t expecting it, and more importantly, because it wasn’t just name calling, it was full out harassment. It was the daily remarks on the door, the constant intimidation in the hallway, routinely getting kicked out of parties, and the sexual taunts in the showers. It was the wedge that was driven between me and my roommate, who was afraid to stand up to them, and between me and my friends, who kept advising me to “just ignore it.” But I wasn’t going to ignore it. Ignoring it was not an option. I knew very well where ignoring it would lead: nowhere. I was going to confront the problem right away.

I told Larken’s friends and teammates that my patience was running out, that enough was enough, and I set up a meeting

with the Dean. While I hoped Larken would heed the warning and stop, I was fully prepared to go through with the formal complaint. He did not stop, so I met with the Dean of the College and relayed everything that was happening. Surprisingly, she was very impressed with my “strength” and my “ability to come forward without fear.” (Was it possible that I was the first student to come forward and challenge the homophobic culture on campus?)

The Dean had no idea what I had already been through, that I had a mother who called me the same names and thought the same things about me. The harassment at college was nothing compared to that, and my tears were all used up long ago. Furthermore, I wasn’t doing this solely for me. I was also doing it for other students who might be pushed to the edge but were afraid to speak out. Larken’s friends begged me not to press the matter, and others threatened me not to take it further, but I did. I demanded that Larken be removed from the residence hall, no matter how many people threatened me.

The day he moved out, I made sure I was home. I sat in the hall outside my dorm room and watched him carry his things out of the building. Although I was tempted to walk past him and bump into his shoulder, look into his eyes, and dare *him* to react, I didn’t. After he was gone, not one boy in that hall ever called me a faggot or wrote on my white board again.

I told my sister about the incident, and without my knowledge, she told my mother. A week or so later, my mother called me from prison and asked what happened. I couldn’t believe my sister had told my main bully that I was being bullied again. My mother wanted me to give her the school’s address so she could write to the Dean and complain. I actually started to confide in her, because I felt so alone—especially since everyone on my floor hated me by then. But something suddenly snapped inside me, and I realized I couldn’t sit there and tell her what he had done to me and listen to her tell me how proud she was of me for standing up to him, when she had done *exactly* the same

thing to me my whole life. Yes, I could empathize with her, and I could rationalize why she might have behaved that way to me all my life, but I was not going to deny my experience, and I was not going to tolerate lies anymore. It was over. So I thanked her for calling and I chose to move on.

I finished my freshman year free of Larken, thanks to a campus restraining order that kept him away from me. Then I transferred to a different university in Virginia, where I found a more welcoming environment.

Since that time, my mother and I have spoken occasionally. She's always excited about my endeavors, but we both refrain from discussing the past. I often think I forgive her and that I can love her as my "mother," but because of everything that's happened I really don't know what that means. In fact, I really don't look at her as "my mother" because she is not in so many ways. A lot of what she did I can forgive, but I fool myself in thinking I will ever forget. You grow from being hurt but you don't grow away. The pain is always there; it just gets lighter because you become careful to never let someone else hurt you the same way.

**I'M COMING OUT!**



## Coming Out in the Locker Room

Rod McCullom, DeMarco Majors, Wade Davis,  
and Will Sheridan

Pop quiz: What class did you absolutely dread in high school?

Ask most gay men that question and the answer probably won't be physics or calculus. Many—if not most—gay men would probably say their worst memories were of gym or physical education.

Not because many of us couldn't pass a ball or play a simple game of one-on-one. It was because high school was where many of us discovered our sexuality—and often were teased, bullied, or mocked by the more athletic or “masculine” boys. Sports and the locker room represented fear...as well as masculinity and an overwhelming sexual intrigue.

Flashback to my own experience growing up in the 1980s. I was an advanced student and fairly popular at middle school in an integrated Los Angeles neighborhood. By the time I hit high school? Not so much. My parents had divorced, my mother had less money, and we relocated to Chicago's South Side. It was light years from the multicultural, aspirational, and

feel good vibe of Baldwin Hills. This was the 'hood, where boys were expected to be men—hyper-masculine, thugged out, and a terror on the basketball court.

Being the captain of my swim team didn't count as playing sports in the 'hood, because there were no swimming pools. And talking “like I was white”—or so many of the kids sneered—didn't help either. Of course, I was also discovering at that time that I was gay. Not the best of times.

Running track and making the football team in high school became the perfect opportunity to reinvent myself. That continued in college and even afterwards when I started working out and hitting the weights seriously—to build not only muscle but psychological “armor” to protect against feelings of inadequacy.

For many other young men who were discovering their sexuality in high school and/or college, playing sports and the locker room offered a similar refuge from the outside world. With that in mind, I gathered three athletes to discuss coming out in sports, homophobia, and expectations of masculinity among black men.

Former Villanova University basketball player Will Sheridan came out publicly on ESPN in May 2011. DeMarco Majors played for the American Basketball Association and was seen on Logo's *Shirts & Skins*. NFL player Wade Davis played with the Tennessee Titans, Seattle Seahawks, and Washington Redskins. This interview marks the very first time he has publicly discussed being gay and his experience in the NFL.

— Rod McCullom

**ROD MCCULLOM:** Let's hear your coming out stories. Let's start with you, Will.

**WILL SHERIDAN:** There is my first coming out story and my first public coming out story. My first coming out was on ESPN's *Outside the Lines*. I basically said that I liked dudes and everyone should get over it.

But my first coming out was to my parents the summer after my first year of college. I was nineteen years old. I was watching a game on television and I said, "I have something to tell you." It was hard...but I felt I had to tell them. My father said, "Son, tell us whatever is on your mind." I told him and he was shocked. He told my mother and there was drama the next day. But I feel that it was the best thing I have ever done. My father respected it and it improved our relationship as men. My father respected my courage.

**WADE DAVIS:** My coming out story is a different. I came to New York City when I was twenty-six or twenty-seven. I was dating a guy for a long while and he was out to his family. I was very jealous because he had this open relationship with his family and I didn't. So I went home to Colorado to tell my mother and sister. I told my sister first because I knew my mother would be difficult, because I was so close to her. I asked my sister for advice on how I could tell Mom, and she said that I couldn't. "You're her favorite, the perfect son coming home, she can't handle that," she said. She was adamant about me not telling her. But I was going to tell Mom anyway. I drove over to my mom's house, and we went out for a walk. I told my mother that I had something to tell her. I said, "I like boys." I couldn't mouth the words gay. And she said, "What?" I repeated it and said, "Okay. I'm gay." She paused and looked out into space. "That's an abomination," she quietly said. She told me these other things—and stressed that I couldn't tell anyone. Then we headed back home. She didn't look at me or make eye contact with me. It was hard because I felt like I was watching this person decay and become this person I had never seen before. To this day, our relationship is not the same. We don't talk very much, and we have a very strained relationship.

**ROD:** So she knew during the years that you were playing in the NFL?

**WADE:** Yes. There were a lot of factors that went into this.

We were raised in the South, very religious. Plus, I was the so-called "star" of the family and taking care of a lot of people. For me to tell her that I was gay, maybe she thought that was a reflection of her and that she couldn't brag on her son anymore. My mother and I were extremely close, especially when I was in college. We talked once or twice a day. Possibly she had an inkling but never wanted to go there.

**DEMARCO MAJORS:** I was about to turn twenty-five years old. I was playing professional basketball in Argentina and Brazil. My father was about to pass away, I returned home. I didn't know what was going on with me but I understood that I had this attraction to men. I stopped going to church and stopped praying because I believed that my father died because I was gay. And I thought I lost my father because of what I was going through.

Then I went to the Gay Games in Sydney, Australia and was recruited to play professional basketball in Australia. I was trying out for NBA teams. Contracts that were previously being offered were pulled away from me. Without any explanation. And I was getting very angry.

Then I was asked to become part of the "Out 100." I had to fly home and tell my mom. We had this relationship where we could tell each other everything. I pulled out the magazine and said, "Mom, well, you know I'm gay. But this is how involved in the community I am. They choose 100 of the most influential members in the community." I was prepared for her to shoot me or go off on me. But she smiled and said for the first time in my life she was proud of me. "I'm so proud of you because you are using the gifts that God gave you."

**ROD:** Did you start to have feelings about other boys in high school? And did you see any anti-gay taunting in school and the locker rooms? Will?

**WILL:** Of course. Growing up I definitely had feelings when

I was young. Long before high school but I mostly denied it. Growing up, I was awkward—I was tall, walked funny. So I was teased and people were calling me gay, and I didn't understand why. It hurt my feelings. And I didn't understand how kids knew these things about me. I just wanted to be normal and wanted to fit in.

As far as bullying is concerned, I was never beat up. But I became a very aggressive player. I would always elbow another teammate or player. Having a wild, no limits personality probably helped me on the courts. And off the courts, too. I didn't want people to focus on how I walked or who I hung out with.

**WADE:** My story is a little different than everyone else's. I was actually the bully as opposed to being bullied.

**ROD:** Was that to over compensate or coming to grips with your sexuality?

**WADE:** Yes, that was primarily the reason. I don't think that I realized I was gay until [I was] a junior in high school. I was so focused on playing sports, it never crossed my mind. I grew up playing Little League or running track. I was also a class clown.

When I finally realized that I was gay, I turned up the comedy routine...I would just make fun of everyone, be they gay, straight, or whatever. And teasing and taunting kids, too. It was a way to keep the focus off me and on others. As I look back now, it was because I was so afraid that people would see through me.

**ROD:** Just to go a little further. You were in the NFL for many years. Did your teammates know or do you think they suspected?

**WADE:** I don't think my teammates ever suspected. Many of my teammates who I later came out to, don't believe me to this day (laughing). Several have asked for proof or pictures of me with a guy. That's because I did such a great job of hiding who I was. In the NFL, I was always the guy in the

strip club throwing out lots of money or going home with all these girls. I didn't have sex with the women, but gave the impression that I was a womanizer.

But twice there were incidents. When scouts visited me in college, one of the coaches made a comment that "Wade is not as much a ladies' man as some of the other guys on the team." That was the first time that I thought someone had seen through my shield. It freaked me out. The other time was when I was playing for the Titans, there was another player that many teammates knew was either gay or bisexual. That was my first year and I was signed as a free agent. One of the other players advised me against hanging out with that particular player. I don't think he said it because he thought I was gay. He just thought it would give me unwanted attention.

**DEMARCO:** I also had feelings about boys in high school but [didn't act] on them.

Growing up in the Midwest, in the country, growing up poor, you heard lots of gay slurs. People were always saying, "Oh, that faggot" to get into their head. I was always the nerd stuck in the jock's body and saw that.

Skin color and complexion was a problem for me. Being light skinned was sometimes a problem. [Some black students] fought me or pulled guns on me because of my skin complexion. Then when I went to school, I had [white students] who wanted to fight because I was too dark. And some parents told their children not to play with me.

**ROD:** Okay, let me ask the question that many guys want to hear about: Can you talk about being in the locker room. How did you deal with that? Was there fear of being discovered?

**WILL:** The most common comment when people read my story is—how did you deal with those hot guys in the locker room? The locker room wasn't a problem for me. I wanted my teammates to respect my position on the team as a player/leader so I rarely if ever played the jock grab-

ass games. Just so no one would ever think—once I came out—“Oh, Will violated me.”

So in a way, I was hyper aware of it. I wasn't afraid of them knowing—I just didn't want it to change our family dynamic as it did with my blood family. I guess in the end, my actions, dress, and sociability gave me away, but I never wanted (my actions in the) locker room to confirm anything.

**WADE:** I'm often asked this question. The answer is different at each level of football.

In high school, it wasn't a worry of mine because I realized I was gay late in my junior year and didn't have an overwhelming attraction to men yet. It was such an awkward time in my life. I look back at all the sexual exploration that went on in the locker room between my teammates, that even if I did something inappropriate, it probably would have went unnoticed because there was so much other “questionable” stuff going on.

I quietly began to understand my own sexuality once I began playing college football. I had to be careful about letting my mind wonder about men in general because sometimes those innocent thoughts would manifest itself at inopportune times. There's a lot of innocent male-on-male play in the locker room, and sometimes you think those playful actions are not as innocent as they really are.

During my senior year, I mentored one of the younger guys on the team. We spent so much time together, my attraction to him was inevitable. I eventually removed myself from our friendship in order to protect my own identity and not cross that line. But I can remember being in the shower with him and having to leave immediately before I finished because I felt myself becoming aroused. I know that if I were “out,” I would have been more comfortable with myself and not spent so much time trying to determine who else was or wasn't gay. But at that time in my life, anytime a man showed me the least bit of attention,

I'd panic because I thought they could see through me.

When I entered the NFL, my only focus was on making the team. I didn't have time to worry about being discovered. The minute I stepped into that sanctuary, most of my worries about being discovered were removed and replaced with an intense focus on football. Also being in the NFL was such a huge honor for me, it was initially easy for me to function in the locker room without the fear of being discovered. But I also had been in or was in a relationship with a man, so those urges weren't lying as close to the surface and ready to come out like in college, and my “control” was much greater. Ironically, later in my career, the need to be gay and free made it harder to focus on playing the game on the field.

**ROD:** Church is very important in the black community. How important was church growing up? And did this impact your sexuality?

**DEMARCO:** When I was thirteen I started going with my grandmother to the Church of Christ. I became a minister at thirteen years old. God was always my imaginary friend, because I was uncomfortable with myself, what was going on in my life, and talking to other people.

**WILL:** I went to a Christian, non-denominational church. I enjoyed the music a lot. To me, church was about invoking a fellowship, and similar to DeMarco, I didn't want to get to know everybody. At church we had a great youth group but I didn't become very invested in it. I believe in God, I believe there is a higher power, but for me religion has always been more divisive. I have seen too many Christians say that you can't do this or that if you are a Christian.

And speaking as a black man...our community is deeply rooted in the church—and that has held us back from embracing our gay community. Thankfully, the youth are changing. So many are accepting black gays, they really don't care. I see even black gay youth attending church,

having their own churches, being comfortable and openly gay in church.

**WADE:** I grew up in Louisiana so I was in church almost every day. Monday was Prayer Meeting, Tuesday was Bible Study, Wednesday was Youth Group, and Thursday was another meeting. Sunday was Sunday school, early morning service and then regular service. Sometimes an evening service, too (laughter).

Church is also where I grew up idolizing my mother. When she wasn't singing in the church choir, she would sit in the pews and wear those big floppy hats that you couldn't see around.

When I realized that I was gay, I began to question the Bible. If the Bible says "Thou shalt not lie with men," but on the other hand it says, "God is love," it became very confusing. I went from becoming a very religious person to more spiritual. But that is the reason why my mother and I are so far apart. She's very religious, takes the Bible very literally. She believes the gay thing is black and white. Can I say one more thing?

**ROD:** Of course.

**WADE:** One thing that I found interesting about the black church: Where I grew up my choir director was obviously gay. And I have been in so many other black churches and the choir directors and pianists are also very obviously gay. Their partners are seated in the back pews. The church is fine with that and loves them because they don't make it known, they don't announce it.

It's very similar to playing sports. There are so many athletes that players suspect are gay or know that they are. But as long as they don't announce it to the world they are fine. That's why I think so many players don't come out. There is this parallel between sports and the black church that I find almost comical. There are so many players that I know are gay. There are so many choir directors that I know

are gay. I know the preacher knows. My mother knows and loves this man. But yet when her son announces that he is gay she says, "Nope, I'm done, gotta go."

**ROD:** I was just about to ask about that. It's like "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" in the black church. We know, you know that we know, everyone knows, but we just don't talk about it. And if we don't talk about, it's accepted. Did you see that in sports?

**WADE:** The parallels are almost identical, it's scary! It's like "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." When you see what happened with Pastor Eddie Long, there was a rush to forgive him and it was swept under the rug. There have been other gay athletes who were outed but they weren't on ESPN or the news. It's like [NFL Commissioner] Roger Goodell made a phone call and it was [silenced].

Will, DeMarco, and I believe that it's our job to spark a conversation or dialogue. We won't change everyone's mind or heart, but as long as the conversations are being had.

**DEMARCO:** Wow. I agree with both of you! I can agree with what I've seen in church and in professional sports. It's not about whether there is a conversation or not. You just want people to acknowledge what is going on with the person. And not acknowledging another person as a human being is not acknowledging yourself. It's the same as in church or sports.

**WILL:** It's important to open up the conversation to all churches. My church was not a black church, it was predominately white, a mixed crowd, and white pastor. But you could say this about almost all churches. It's very applicable to the Catholic Church as well. And there are so many former or gay men in the priesthood in that church.

The most important thing about my coming out story is for the next generation. I was approached to do ESPN three years ago, right after I [graduated] from college. But my parents were like, "Don't do it." My dad loves me unconditionally, but, of course, he is still concerned about

walking down the street, or what the brothas may say to him in the barbershop.

I was able to do ESPN this year because I feel like I want to be a stronger person for the community.

**ROD:** Will touched upon perceptions of masculinity in the black community. All of you were jocks and many people don't consider gay men as masculine. How do you feel about that, Will?

**WILL:** Masculinity in the black community? Generally the more alpha male you are, the better. That's generally been our history. I had a conversation with my father, and he said that I was being more of a man by coming out as opposed to hiding or lying.

There are many parallels in the sports world with the music community, because I'm involved in music now. I'll do shows and the audience is mostly straight men. Offstage I might be less masculine, but onstage my delivery is very masculine, so they are drawn to that masculinity. Rappers are considered ultra-masculine and are among the most successful in the music game.

**WADE:** I'm at a point in my life where I hate that people refer to me as "straight acting." It took me a while to get to this point. Years ago I would act ultra-masculine to over compensate and act as if I wasn't gay. I thought people wanted this from me as a black man. The black community also reinforces this as well.

As I become older, I realize that men who aren't trying to hide their femininity and are less masculine are so much stronger. They are never able to hide who they are. I might be able to walk down the street and no one knows about my sexuality but that has nothing to do with strength. It has taken me so long to understand that. I used to wear thirty-eight size pants when I was a thirty-two, or triple X tees, all of this uber-masculine gear, because that's what I thought people expected. When I got my first check, I bought a truck

and twenty-two inch rims because that's what I thought people expected. That was my idea of what it meant to be a masculine or a black man.

Now I have no problems with that. I'll wear jeans that fit me. I might not be able to wear skinny jeans (laughter). There is a maturity level that our community reinforces with masculinity. I work now at a school with LGBT youth. I am so amazed and think they are so much stronger than I was at that age. Unfortunately, black culture does a horrible job in projecting what it means to be a black man. And it's not just gay men. Straight men have to overcompensate, too.

**DEMARCO:** I've always been a watcher. The one thing I've learned about the black gay community is that most of the femme men were fighters. They've had to fight their whole lives. They were feminine since they were young and always had to fight. And they kicked some ass, too. On the other hand, I see a ton of masculine men hide behind "I'm straight acting." And that's all it is—an act.

I play sports. But am I perceived as masculine or feminine? I don't know. To be honest, I came from a single parent household, so if you tell me to "act strong," I would look to my mother. My mother was real tough, a very strong woman, to help her family.

**ROD:** Finally, since most of you have come out, you have become somewhat public figures. DeMarco, you've been on a reality show. Will, you were on ESPN. Are athletes and players coming up to you and asking for advice? DeMarco?

**DEMARCO:** Rod, you've seen my journey since the beginning. The one thing that I always tell people is to come out on your time. The time that it took you to accept yourself, allow other people that same time. Just be patient in your giving, be patient in your loving, and be compassionate. If they truly love you, it's about you and your process. If you're ready, you'll tell people. If you're not, you're not.

**WADE:** To be honest, I don't get many sports guys asking

questions about coming out. But if I were, I would say to come out when you're ready.

Many people want to see a gay person being out and playing sports. An out player would do much for society, but coming out is a very personal decision. I would just tell that person if they were going to come out, make sure that they have a very strong support system. I was not ready to come out until I had a partner who I felt could support me emotionally and mentally. I would tell youth to make sure they were doing it for the right reason. Not to be famous, but for the right reasons. That's my advice.

**WILL:** A lot of people have reached out to me via Facebook, Twitter, email, and other forms of communication. It's overwhelming and humbling that people think I am a source to help make their life better. I agree with these two gentlemen that you should not come out until you're ready. I also agree with DeMarco's point that you have to give people time, as much as you gave yourself. I speak to a lot of black gay youth and tell them not to let coming out fundamentally change them. Don't try to become a "diva." Try to be amazing and try to change the world. Do some good in the community. Because as black gay men, we have to do things ten times harder than the next person.

## When I Dare to Be Powerful

*Keith Boykin*

It began with a white-haired white woman in a white windbreaker. While the four of us plotted our conspiracy, the grandma in slacks approached us awkwardly in the hotel lobby. It's not every day that an older white woman feels comfortable enough to engage a group of young black men, so I turned to greet her. "Can I help you with something?" I asked.

"Are you folks gay rights?" she said.

I looked at her with a transparent expression of bewilderment, as though my brain would not allow me to process the illogical syntactic construction that reduced a group of humans to a cause in which they believed. I responded tentatively to correct her.

"We support the *idea* of *equal* rights for gays and lesbians, if that's what you mean."

"Well, I just want you to know it's wrong," she blurted out.

Again my face must have given away a sense of ire because she moved a few steps back as though I had threatened her. But she had been the one to initiate the conversation, and the look on my face was more of confusion than confrontation. What she