

# HELPING GAY BLACKS DEAL WITH PREJUDICE

**A**LL OF us have the capacity to look at problems two ways: We can point them out in painstaking detail, interrupting ourselves only to groan about how nobody is bothering to fix them. Or we can creatively dive in, tapping our blessed gifts of faith and creativity to try to come up with solutions that we can then put into action.



**DEB PRICE**

In the African-American gay and lesbian community, an amazing synergy is happening: Inspiring people all across the country are tackling longstanding problems. They're refusing to wait for someone else to fix what's wrong or to allow themselves to think solutions aren't possible.

Take, for example, Detroit resident Alicia Skillman. When Alicia came out 20 years ago, her mother attended a support group known as Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians

and Gays (PFLAG). But Alicia's mom felt out of place in the predominantly white group. And, like many parents of color, she never returned.

While Alicia thrived in her life out of the closet in the years that followed, her mom felt uneasy talking about her with friends at work and church. Frustrated that no PFLAG affiliate was geared toward the special needs of black parents, Alicia created one. Now "Family Reunion" meets monthly, offering parents like Alicia's mom an emotionally comfortable place to get support as they work toward fully embracing their gay children.

"We want to help estranged families come back together," explains Alicia, who hopes this year to encourage African-American churches to invite Family Reunion members to talk about accepting a gay son or daughter. (For details, call 313-527-7955 or e-mail [pflagdetroit@cs.com](mailto:pflagdetroit@cs.com).)

Charlene Cothran is another doer: In 1994, she groused to a white friend that gay newspapers never covered the black events she organized in Atlanta. "He said, 'Charlene, why don't

you just start your own magazine?' And I thought, 'Well, maybe I just will.'"

The result is *Venus* magazine, dedicated to black lesbians and gay men. Venus expanded its good work by launching [www.venusmagazine.com](http://www.venusmagazine.com), an incredible Web resource for everyone from black gay teens to seniors.

"What makes me feel best about the work I've done is I've empowered black families," Charlene says. "Any black gay person can look through our pages and boost their self-esteem. And we've gotten letters from parents saying because of the magazine, they've started a discussion with their gay child."

Alicia and Charlene are just two of countless examples of gay African-Americans helping to heal families, trying to curb the spread of AIDS, sharing a gay-friendly message in black churches and creating e-mail list groups to discuss solutions, not just problems. (One group for all people of color can be joined at [fofnlist@yahoo.com](mailto:fofnlist@yahoo.com).)

These efforts have the power to reverse the kinds of troubles outlined in a new report by the National Gay and Lesbian Task

Force's policy institute. "Say It Loud: I'm Black and I'm Proud" — available at [www.ngltp.org](http://www.ngltp.org) — is the largest survey of the experiences and views of black gay men and lesbians. Key findings:

**Racism:** About one-third of those surveyed reported negative encounters with white gay people in bars, gay organizations and personal relationships.

**Ostracism:** Generally, black gay men and lesbians reported less rejection by black heterosexuals: 54 reported positive family experiences, while only 14 percent reported negative experiences with black heterosexual friends. However, 43 percent said they had had negative experiences with religious institutions.

**Bias:** More black gay people said they had experienced race discrimination than anti-gay discrimination — 53 percent versus 42 percent.

While much work is left to be done, gay and lesbian African Americans are creatively discovering ways to bring about change. Find a way to be part of it.

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