

BALANCING ACT

Gay and lesbian youth speak out

An exhibition celebrating the 10th anniversary
of the Constitution of South Africa

The young people in this exhibition were interviewed for the oral history project of the Gay and Lesbian Archives of South Africa. Their stories have been published in a book called *Balancing Act*.

As South Africans we are proud of our Constitution which protects the citizens of our country from all forms of discrimination.

But the Constitution is not just a document. We all need to put the values of our Constitution into practice in our daily lives. This exhibition reminds us that many South Africans are still the victims of prejudice and even hatred because they are seen as different.

**Look at their faces. Read their stories.
Are they really so very different from you?**



GALA

APARTHEIDMUSEUM

The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, **sexual orientation**, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth.

Equality Clause of the South African Constitution

“

I LOOK AT MYSELF IN THE MIRROR AND SAY: I M A **BEAUTIFUL** YOUNG WOMAN; I CAN T GIVE UP NOW.

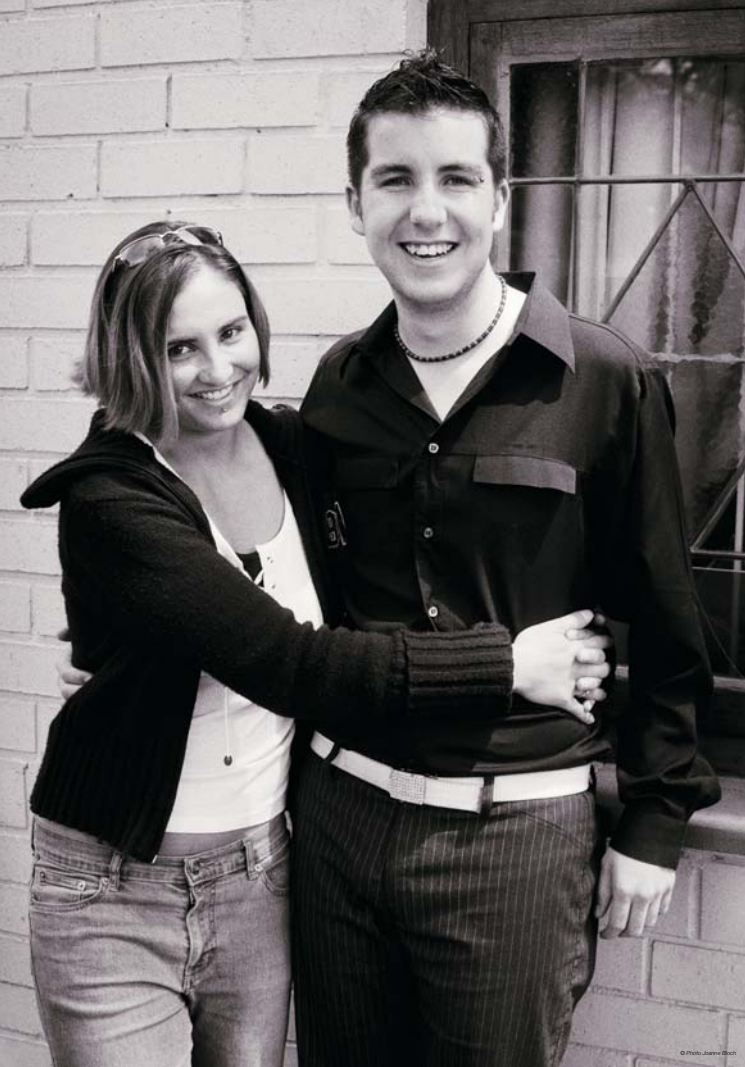
”

NUNU I was 16 when I decided I was a lesbian. When I told my mom, she sent me out of the house. After about six months, she said I could come back home.

When I was 13, I was raped by my cousin. I couldn t talk about it. Our parents, it s difficult for them to talk about sex. They feel very embarrassed. Later, that cousin came and told me that he was HIV positive, and that he had raped me on purpose. I had no option but to go for the test.

When I found out I was positive, I was thinking all the time, Why? Why? I went to an HIV counsellor and I also joined a support group. My mom blamed herself and also had to go to counselling. Now she supports me. It s all about support; it s all about communication.





“ I ALWAYS KNEW THAT I WAS **DIFFERENT**, BUT I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT IT WAS. ”

ANDREW (right) I was mocked the whole time at primary school by this guy called Billy. He would call me names. I didn't know what they meant, but I knew they were not nice things to be called.

Then in Grade 9 and Grade 10 there were always rumours about me. At first I was very embarrassed. It was humiliating. Eventually I learnt to brush things off, but also to stick up for myself. There's nothing I can do. I am gay and I have to deal with it.

I wrote a letter to my mother to tell her that I'm gay. She came and kissed me and said, I love you no matter what. And that was it. I haven't really spoken to my dad about it, but my mom told him.

“ I GOT **BEATEN UP** BY THE KIDS AT MY SCHOOL WHEN THEY FOUND OUT. ”

AJ (left) My parents divorced when I was four. I've always been quite scared of my dad, actually. But now that I know who I am, I'm not scared of him anymore. Both my parents have accepted it. They don't agree with it because of the biblical side — they're both Christians — but they accept it and they still love me.

At school, I got beaten up when the kids found out I am a lesbian. They kicked me and threw stones at me, and called me names. I was off school for a few days after that. I just had to be brave. My best friend turned her back on me. That hurt me a lot.

I don't hang around with girlfriends much. I hang with four gay boys. I love them to bits. I'm very lucky with the friends I've made.

SOMETIMES I THINK
ABOUT **WHY** I
ENDED UP BEING
LIKE I AM. I LOOK
FOR THE **CLUES**.

TEEZ I grew up with my grandparents. When my grandfather passed away in 1996, I had to take care of my grandmother. I went out and faced the world out there.

After matric, I went for dramatic art, part-time. I was very good in drama at school. I've got a friend who is a **drag queen***, and I fell in love with what he does on stage, dressing up in all those women's clothes you know? I told myself, OK, I'm going to do it with him. I'm always in boys' clothes, so it's nice to wear bikinis, make up and wigs for a change.

Sometimes my grandmother understands that I'm a lesbian; sometimes she doesn't. She is 89, so she's old, and she's from the rural areas. She tells me: I don't know what you are talking about. We never had that before. But when my girlfriend is at the house, my grandmother understands. My mother, my sisters — everybody understands.

* A drag queen is a man who performs on stage in women's clothes.





MATHABATHA My parents are divorced. I've been very close with my mother from my early childhood. I didn't have to sit down and tell her that I was gay: she knew it as I was growing. I am lucky to have my mother. She was the breadwinner: a father to me, and a mother. My mother told me that if I do not make it out there, no one will make it for me. I very much thank her for everything that I have become.

People know me in Alex. You go to the first road and you ask, Where is Mathabatha? They will take you to my house. People from Alexandra are very proud of me. People accept me because I am outgoing and outspoken. In Alex, we mix with straight people. They understand us; they treat us very well. They've been very welcoming. I hang out with gay friends and straight friends, male and female.

**“ I WAS LABELLED.
I WAS CALLED NAMES. ”**

“

I FEEL **COMFORTABLE**
BECAUSE I KNOW HOW I FEEL
ABOUT MYSELF. *Yanda* ”

YANDA (right) I used to be very tomboyish when I was young. I used to climb trees and fight a lot with my brothers. We had scars everywhere. In Grade 6, I went to a girls' boarding school in Queenstown. We had classes to teach you how to be a woman!

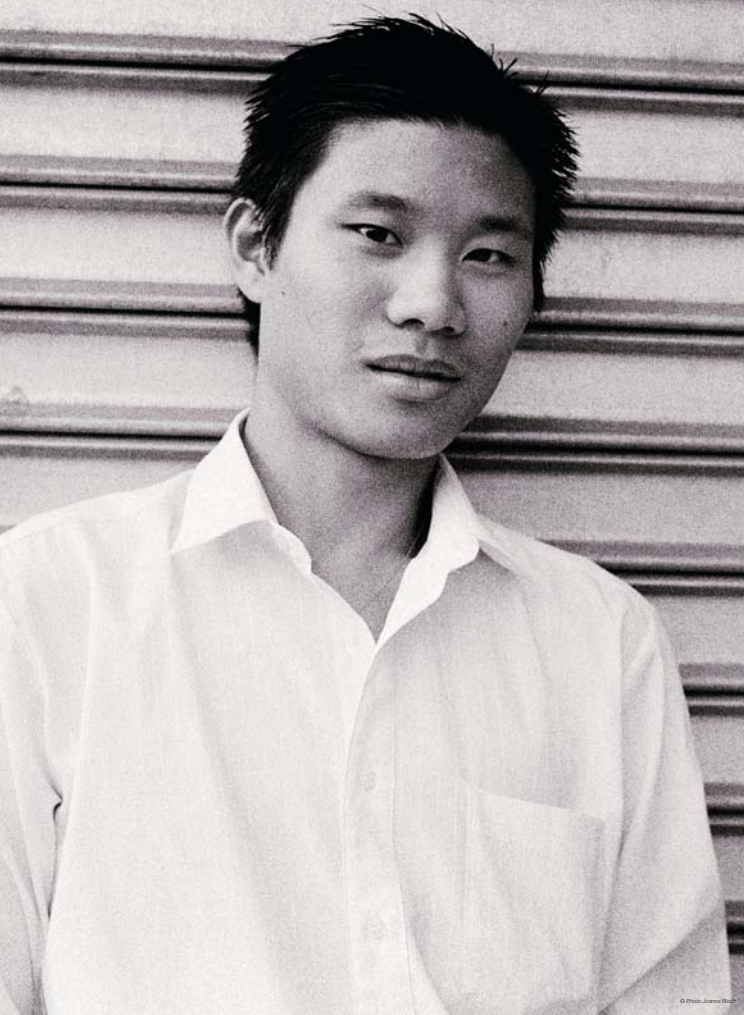
I became quite rebellious when I left school, until my mother sat me down and asked me, 'What's your problem?' That was the first time in my life that I sat down with my mother and talked. She started to understand me better, and I understood her and her position as a mother. That's how we got closer.

“ KIDS ARE NOT **PREJUDICED**.
THEY ONLY THINK THAT
SOMETHING IS **WRONG** WHEN
THEY'VE BEEN TAUGHT THAT BY
THEIR PARENTS. *Bongi* ”

BONGI (left) I had a very nice childhood. I was so naughty! I got into trouble all the time, but mostly for childish stuff like stealing peaches. I played with the guys' marbles. I had cars and guns. Last time I owned a dress was in Grade 2 or 3. I don't like dresses.

I didn't need to come out to my family. They saw my everyday life and they knew. They normally call a meeting for you if they suspect you're gay, because they think something is wrong and they need to do some traditional thing for you. With me it was different. It was just normal. I think it's because there isn't a communication breakdown in my family. Even my father and I, we talk like friends.





BRAM I was born in Taiwan. For those who don't know, it's a small island off the south-eastern coast of China. We came to South Africa in 1990 — my father, my grandmother, and my great-grandmother — when I was seven or eight years old. My Chinese name is Yen-Wu.

My grandmother is the one who raised me. I recently told her that I am gay. She just sort of sat there, very quiet. I mean she didn't have a heart attack! She wasn't hostile, but she wasn't totally accepting. But I understand: it's the age gap.

On my 17th birthday, in matric, I came out to my close group of friends at school. To my surprise they took it exceptionally well, even those from a strong religious background. In fact, our friendship grew stronger, because I shared my life with them. And I didn't have to put on a mask every day.

I HAVE NOTHING TO HIDE.
AND I'M NOT **AFRAID** TO
ANSWER ANY QUESTIONS.

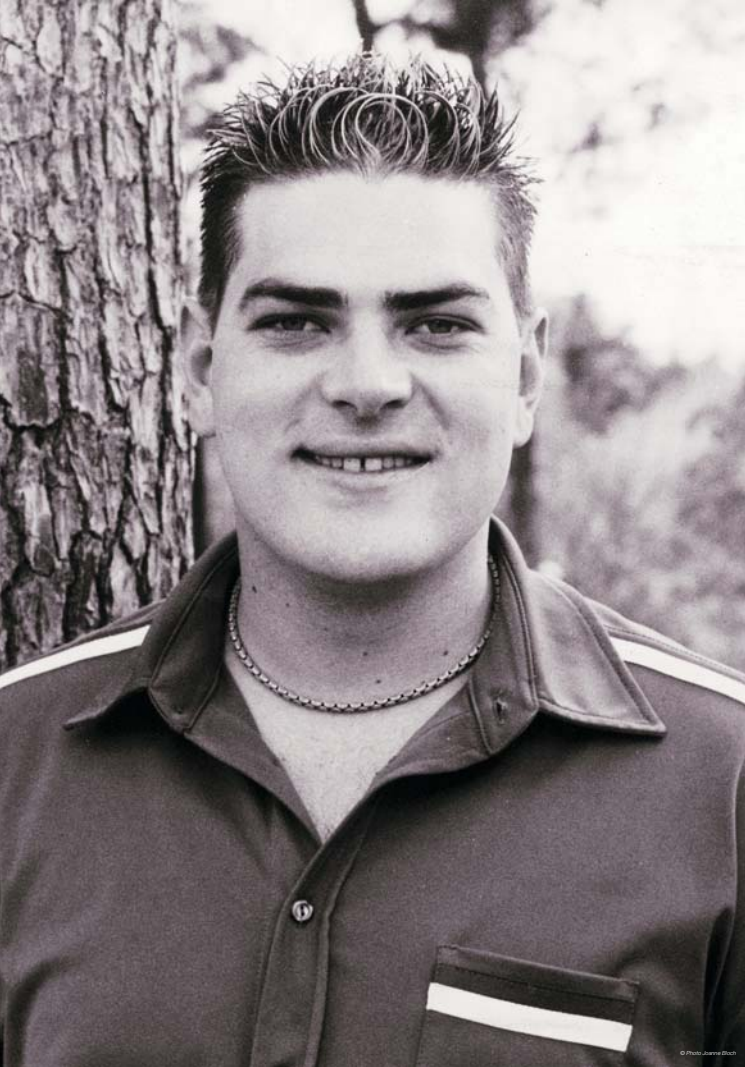
“ I AM STRONG-MINDED.
I FEEL **COMFORTABLE**
WITH WHO I AM. ”

JOHN I grew up in Soweto. I'm the first born, then I have four sisters. I am the only son. I was born deaf. I went to a **Deaf*** boarding school when I was six. When I grew older, the learners there began teasing me, saying I am bisexual. Someone told me that it means I am a girl. I didn't understand being gay, but I slowly started to understand.

After I accepted it fully, I felt it was fine for me to inform my family. I'm old enough. I feel strongly about who I am. When I told my grandmother, she was really shocked, but we finally decided to tell the whole family. My family has already had to understand that I'm Deaf — and they can't reject that exactly! But they refuse to accept that I am gay.

* We write Deaf with a capital D in the same way that we write French or Zulu with capital letters. People who use South African Sign Language as their first language are proud to be part of Deaf culture. When deaf is written with a small d, it indicates a person with a hearing problem who uses spoken language, hearing aids and lip reading to communicate.





© Photo: Joanna Black



I KNEW
I WAS
DIFFERENT
FROM
EARLY
PRIMARY
SCHOOL.



JASON I decided that I could never tell my mom or my family that I was gay. My whole family is very Christian, so I didn't discuss it with anyone. No one knew. Not a soul. Then it just happened one day: I told my mom. She stared at me and said, "That's impossible!" She and my sister were in tears. My mom made me tell my dad when he came home. My dad also burst into tears.

I tried to scare my mom once. I said, "If you don't change your attitude towards me, I will leave and never come back again." She just kept quiet, but my dad said, "No, you can't do that. We love you, and we want you here no matter what."

If I have to spend any amount of time at home I get very depressed, because I can't be myself. I'm a totally different person at home compared to when I'm with my friends. My parents don't know a whole other side of me, and until they learn to accept me, they won't know.

I WANT PEOPLE TO **ACCEPT** ME THE WAY I AM AND TO TREAT ME THE WAY THEY TREAT OTHER PEOPLE. ”

ANDILE Nobody at home speaks to me about the fact that I am gay. My mother is angry with me — and my brothers only tell me that I should try to get away from those gay people. Sometimes I feel sad and lonely, like I m not loved. But its not easy to accept that your child is gay because of the stigma.

These old women from our street — I used to go to the same church as them — they told me that being gay is a sin, that its not a choice that we re supposed to make. They said I ve changed, and I m evil. I just kept quiet.

I found the Hope and Unity Metropolitan Community Church, the HUMCC. I loved it when I went there. For the first time, I felt free and accepted. I felt like this is the place where I belong. Before, I didn t think it was possible for a gay person to be a Christian. But when you read the bible, you will find out that God loves us all.

I think being gay is not an issue. If you believe in God and you live a religious Christian life, then you have the right to say you are a Christian. My faith keeps me strong: knowing that there is someone out there — God — who will never desert me.





© Photo Helen McDonald

“ I M A
LEADER.
I M READY
TO FACE
LIFE. I M
ALEX. ”

ALEX We had gay kids in my primary school. But I knew that I was very different from them. In Grade 7 I discovered what I actually am — a **transsexual***. I spoke to the social worker at school, and she referred me to a doctor. I m having hormonal therapy, and I will have operations later to change my body to a woman s.

The teachers at my high school are great. Many have their conservative ideas about what a man should be, what a woman should be, but I ve never had any confrontations. I ve been on the SRC for five years, and president for the last two years. For students day, I wore very feminine clothes — stiletto heels and jeans. I had to hand out badges to the new SRC, and when I walked onto the stage the school went wild, screaming — in an appreciative way.

From day one at high school I told myself I would not allow anyone to bring me down; I would not allow anyone to make me feel useless. I ve made them realise that my sexuality is just one part of me.

* A transsexual is someone who does not feel right in the sex they were born in. For example, they were born male, but they feel that they should actually be female. Transsexuals sometimes take hormones and surgery to change their sex.

“ THIS IS MY LIFE.
I WILL **LIVE** IT
THE WAY I WANT. ”

MUNTU One night I was on my way home from church. This guy came up and greeted me, but then he dragged me to his house and raped me. When the police told my family, they were shocked. They called me names and blamed it on me. They said that if I was manly, I would not have been raped. It was very hard.

Being raped made me feel small. I would get angry and sometimes become aggressive.

I took an HIV test and the result came back positive. I went for counselling, and I also got information through my cousin. She told me what to do and what not to do if you are living with HIV. I am not bothered by the fact that I am HIV positive. I can still do anything I want to. I enjoy my life to the fullest.

