

editor's note

by matt comer
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Out in the newsroom



As much as we've become accustomed to mostly positive coverage of LGBT people and issues by national and local news networks and publications, there was once a time when positive coverage might very well have been no coverage at all.

Locally, we have people like Don King to thank. A decades-long employee of *The Charlotte Observer* and this publication's very first editor, King worked both behind the scenes and later publicly to advocate for fairer, more complete coverage of LGBT people.

1986 was a landmark year. That's when Queen City Quordinators made the move to turn its monthly newsletter, *Queen City Notes*, into a monthly print newspaper. *QNotes* survives to this day. Also that year, local media was allowed for the first-time ever unrestricted access to cover an LGBT community event. WSOC-TV, WBTV and *The Observer* each covered a 105-person demonstration in response to a Charlotte visit by anti-gay researcher Paul Cameron. And, in December 1986, King's Closet Buster Productions aired the first episode of its "Gay/Lesbian Forum" on Charlotte's public access channel.

The drumbeat toward more media awareness and positive coverage for LGBT people

continued nationally, as well. In 1989, a landmark study commissioned by the American Society of Newspaper Editors took an in-depth look at LGBT journalists in America's mainstream newsrooms. In 1990, Leroy Aarons, a former *Washington Post* writer and at the time editor of *Oakland Tribune*, presented the results of the study at ASNE's national convention. In doing so, he came out publicly; an all-too-rare show of courage among journalists of his time.

Aarons would later join with LGBT journalists across the country and form the National Lesbian & Gay Journalists Association. The group heralded the needs of LGBT journos, helped to shape LGBT-friendly corporate policies in America's news companies both large and small and gave rise to increased positive news coverage of LGBT people and issues.

Two decades later, LGBT people continue to leave their mark on the news industry. Out writers, reporters and anchors are more common. Yet, for many, it still takes quite the bit of courage to come out to one's newsroom peers and especially one's audience.

Chris Brown is a good acquaintance of mine from our days at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro. There, he headed up

several news programs and even covered my campaign for student body vice president. Now, he's the Jacksonville, N.C. bureau reporter for Greenville's WNCT Eyewitness News 9.

On Oct. 19, Brown did what many LGBT journalists don't do — at least not so publicly. In a report on bullying, following weeks of coverage on gay youth suicides across the country, Brown came out on air.

"Growing up I wasn't just picked on because I'm gay, my big ears were also a target for bullies," Brown told his audience.

Brown says his on-air coming out just made sense.

"I've been watching the news just like everybody else and I've seen what's going on with gay teenagers," he says. "You hear these stories about kids being bullied and tormented. It's heartbreaking. You see someone like the city councilman in Fort Worth telling people it gets better and they need to know that. I'm a very small part of that puzzle, but it did get better for me. I think my viewers deserve to know who it is they are relying on for their news. It's just a part of me. And if I can be an example for just one person, that makes all the difference."

Brown says he was out to his colleagues well before the report aired and he encountered no resistance or hesitation from his supervisors when he approached them with the idea.

"From a news perspective, it's generally shied away from to put yourself into a story, but in this particular instance it added something to the story — it made it more personal," Brown says. "My boss' only question was if

I was okay with it. I said I was and he said, 'Have at it.'"

That's phenomenal progress, especially in an industry that hasn't always had such a great history with our community. We're seeing that progress play out not only in Carolina, but across the nation. Even on national cable networks, out gays and lesbians are leaving their mark. MSNBC's Rachel Maddow has been leading that charge in recent years.

Brown says the decision to come out in work was a difficult one, but a decision he made early.

"When I graduated from college and I did my first reporting gig, I made a decision that I was going to be me and that was it," he says. "I've been nothing but upfront with everybody, even people I work with. But it was a tough decision. I went back and forth on it. Are people going to think I will lean a certain way politically? Are they going to think I can't be fair?"

Brown says he sees the day where it's no longer an issue.

"I think the landscape is changing," he says. "What it means to be gay is evolving. I hope that over time it becomes much less a taboo and just another part of life."

I, too, hope for that day and I stand with Brown in working to shape that future. While he carries a camera and microphone, I'll carry a notepad and pen. Combined with the efforts of LGBT and ally journalists across the country, small ripples of progress will coalesce into waves of change — change that started with folks like King and Aarons in the 1980s. It's their legacy we carry, and it's one I'm damn proud to be a part of. ::

commentary

by Tyler DeVere :: tdevere@goqnotes.com

Anti-bullying efforts needed for schools, and society

"When the message out there is so horrible that to be gay you can get killed for it, we need to change the message," Ellen DeGeneres poignantly explained on her show after the 2008 killing of 15-year-old Lawrence King. By the same token, if the message is so horrible that you should kill *yourself* for it, we need to change the message.

As important as it is to tell today's kids "it gets better" on an individual level, it's also critical that we as a society become better for the benefit of those kids. For the LGBT youth who are in hostile environments, we need to tell them that it won't always be so difficult, that their lives will improve. But, we also need to reduce the hostility in those environments.

Achieving this goal is by no means an

easy task, nor is there an even remotely simple solution. From sensationalistic media and homophobic politicians to the language in schools and stereotypes that dehumanize us, there are clearly areas screaming for improvement.

While there are truly positive media images and figures for LGBT youth, there are also many negative ones and the impact of the positive images can seem far removed and irrelevant to a young person who has no similar example in his or her own life. The real conditions for many of these adolescents are hateful politicians, teachers and even parents. When combined with constant repetitions of "that's so gay" and "what a fag" from supposed friends — and there is no one standing

against such language — a very bleak outlook is created for youth who think that's all the world has to offer them.

Stereotypes also play a major role in building latent (or not so latent) homophobia in our culture. Many people, even those who comprise the LGBT community, accept stereotypes as reality, despite their severe consequences. When stereotypes about a large community become perceived as true, as they are by many, we lose the very thing that makes us human — our individuality. When we're all seen as monolithic, we're not

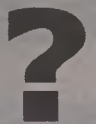
recognized as fully human and that results in a fundamental lack of respect toward us.

At the It Gets Better candlelight vigil held on Oct. 11 in Charlotte, hundreds took hand in reaching out to struggling LGBT youth to tell them that suicide is not the answer. I am proud to have been a small part of that, but I hope attendees also left with another mission going forward: standing up and speaking out against homophobia wherever, whenever and however it manifests itself. ::

— Tyler DeVere is an editorial intern with notes.

qpoll

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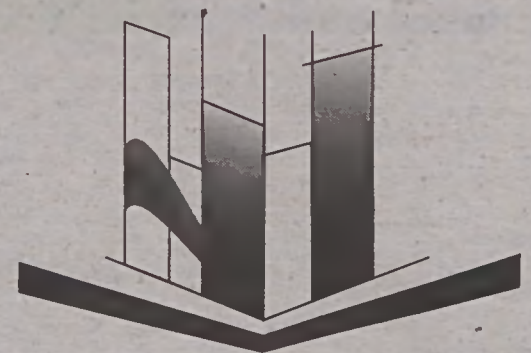
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