

Vignettes on Queer-Identity in Khayelitsha, South Africa's Toughest Township

by Daniel Cothran

I left my post as LAMBDA's managing editor to study abroad last semester on UNC's Honors Semester in Cape Town program. As part of the program, students interned with an organization involved in development. I chose the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), South Africa's largest non-governmental organization. Among many other roles, TAC advocates for the government rollout of antiretroviral medication and runs a treatment literacy project to raise the community's consciousness of HIV and its treatments. I opted to work in Khayelitsha (ky-el-eet-cha), a sprawling township of nearly one million people, the majority of whom live in serviced shacks. With the country's highest incidence of crimes, a high proportion of violent crime, and widespread conservative views on masculinity and women's roles, it is difficult to imagine Khayelitsha as LGBTIQ-friendly. For the most part, it's not. As well as hearing stories about women who were raped or murdered because they were lesbians, I also saw instances of harassment and partner-abuse on the minibus taxi. However, a few of my experiences relating to LGBTIQ issues were positive.

My first, and most powerful experience around LGBTIQ issues was meeting Athini (silent h), who came to the TAC office to have his resumé typed and printed. His painted fingernails and vivacity caused me to suspect he might be gay, but no one

spoke about his identity. Afraid that he was closeted or that I was misinterpreting his actions, I didn't want to bring the issue up with him. Then one day while we were talking, he said, "I want to tell you something, but I need to write it down." The paper read: "I'm a gay." "That's not a surprise," I told him, and then I spoke of my involvement with LAMBDA and my work as an ally, letting him know I appreciated the trust he placed in

