



me. In spite of the language barrier, I learned a lot from him. He said he had always known he was gay, and told his mother when he was twelve. I asked him if it was difficult being gay in Khayelitsha, and he said it was at times, that "people don't understand what gay stands for." He told me he wanted to be an actor and wanted to play gay roles—perhaps to help people understand what gay means. He avoided talking about how people had harassed him, but said, "if someone tells me something, I tell them this is my life, and no one can tell me how to be." His first kiss was at thirteen (he is now nineteen). About love, he said, "If you are in love with someone, you have to stand in love only. No one can tell you what you have to do." He told me that at home he wore women's clothing (which I later learned is common for gay men in South Africa), and that his radio slot on the local radio station, Radio Zibonele, is popular because he is "gay and open about it". When we got on the subject of LGBTIQ identities in America, Athini laughed and said, "Thabo Mbeki [South Africa's president] is going to tell Bush!" South Africa became the fifth country to legalize gay marriage a few weeks later.

While my assumption about Athini proved correct, a custom among Khayelitsha women of kissing close friends on the lips confused me. I assumed many women were lesbian when they weren't. Still, many of the women I met at TAC were lesbian, and out with style. Although women, and especially lesbians,

face particularly difficult circumstances in Khayelitsha, women are also a rising force to be reckoned with. Flipping through "Equal Treatment," TAC's newsletter, the vast majority of articles are by or about women. Many of the leaders are women. As I was told in an interview for my research project on gender-based violence, women are becoming empowered much faster than men are and are dealing with their problems more productively. Support networks for women are large and powerful, and it is clear that circumstances are improving for women, though always with setbacks.

As I mentioned earlier, it is common for gay or other queer-identifying men to dress in women's clothing. I came across this twice while traveling in Khayelitsha. The first time I was riding on a minibus to another part of town. Two passengers appeared to be men in drag, although one displayed a huge box of tampons. When they got off, a woman whispered some-

thing about them and chuckled, and the driver said something too, but I didn't understand, and wasn't sure I wanted to. The second time, I was walking through a neighborhood where one of my co-workers lived, and a guy in women's clothing passed me and said, "Hi, umlungu [whitey]," which seemed to be half-intended to seduce and half to intimidate. Both of these instances struck me as acts of bravery or recklessness on the part of the men, although they could probably have said the same about a white foreigner walking the streets of Khayelitsha.

My experience with LAMBDA and my commitment to being a good ally thoroughly improved my experience in Khayelitsha. Over the past three years, I have become much better attuned to LGBTIQ issues, thanks to many of you who are reading this now. I wanted to make my time in South Africa a complete cultural immersion experience, and I would have missed out if I hadn't thought to look at how queer-identities shape peoples lives and relationships. In spite of the crime, violence, poverty and unemployment, I was frequently amazed at the acceptance people showed each other, only twelve years after the fall of one of the most intolerant governments in recent history. Overall, I am filled with optimism for LGBTIQ-identifying people and for society as a whole. As former president Nelson Mandela said, it's a "long walk to freedom." With the help of allies, at least in the case of LGBTIQ-rights, the last leg of the journey will be a sprint.