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25 — THE WASHINGTON POST — SEPTEMBER 1990

The Point

Black Entertainment Television talk show tackles Gay issues

by Mark Sullivan

Is the black community more homophobic than other communities? No, according to three Gay activists featured this week on Black Entertainment Television's nightly talk show *Our Voices*.

"I don't find that there is more homophobia in the black community than anywhere else," said Angela Bowen, cochair of the National Coalition for Black Lesbians and Gays. "But I do find that it is different. It is grievously more painful because we are already discriminated against in so many ways."

Tuesday's show was the second to deal directly with Gay issues. Producer Stuart Perkins said the past show focused on the problems facing the black Gay community. Two others have dealt with AIDS, and two upcoming programs will deal with female impersonators and transsexuals.

TV

The guests on Tuesday's show agreed that many Gays are reluctant to come out because the black community's response is often to isolate them.

"You get shut out," said Barbara Smith, publisher at the Boston-based Kitchen Table Press, "shut out of something that's very profound."

But they also agreed that the fear of isolation is not the only fear black Gays have about acknowledging their sexuality. Another fear is potential violence.

"I knew I was different when I was five," said poet Essex Hemphill. "As I grew older, I also knew that what I was about could be dangerous for me. I knew that being flamboyant, like swishing or carrying a pocketbook, could get me beat up."

Bowen said some black Gays don't know that people with similar feelings exist, while others don't now how to find them.

"I didn't come out as a Lesbian until I was 40," Bowen said. "Until then, I wasn't aware that there was a word for what I was. There were no role models at that time."

Bowen said she "found out what I was missing" when she read the works of openly Lesbian writers like poet Audre Lorde.

"I could finally see that this thing real-



Carol Randolph (pointing) interviews poet Essex Hemphill, National Coalition for Black Lesbians and Gay cochair Angela Bowen, and publisher Barbara Smith on Black Entertainment Television's nightly talk show *Our Voices*.

ly did exist," Bowen said. "I could also see that with my husband, who I am still close friends with, was not where I belonged."

Bowen said that, despite the fear associated with coming out, she feels black Gays should just jump in.

"Come on out, the water's fine," Bowen said. "The cost is so outweighed by the feeling of relief. You never have to worry, 'Does that one know, should I tell that one?'"

"It's not that we don't take a lick," said Smith. "It's just that they don't compare."

But black Gay role models are still difficult to find, Hemphill said. The homosexuality of many historical figures, even those who were openly Gay, like civil rights activist Bayard Rustin and novelist James Baldwin, has been "carefully guarded with whispers and silence."

One viewer of the call-in program said he believed homosexuality was a European phenomenon and that there was

no such thing as homosexuality in ancient African cultures.

"I don't want to go back in history," said Bowen. "My family were slaves in history."

Bowen said Kenya banned Lesbians from a 1985 conference held at the University of Nairobi because "there were no Gay people in Africa." She said she and a few others attended anyway, and dozens of Gays came up to them and told them about how zealously they had to guard their sexuality.

"I don't believe that there weren't black Lesbians and Gays in every part of history," Bowen said. "People who say that don't know history."

Another caller asked how to make black Lesbians and Gay men more visible. The guests suggested joining "some of the staunch old organizations," like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

"You might cause some of them to have a heart attack," Hemphill said,

joking, "but that's how you get the old people to die off and let new people come in."

Bowen suggested that starting a group where no groups for black Gays currently exist.

"Get one or two friends together at Pride Day and make a banner that says: BLACK LESBIANS LOOKING FOR MORE," Bowen said.

They also encouraged black Gay organizations to build coalitions with other progressive groups, like women's groups.

"Sexism and heterosexism come from the same roots," Smith said. "Racists are the same people who are after us for being Gay. The right wing knows this, because they hate us all. And we all hate each other. We need to band together." ▼

Black Entertainment Television's Our Voices will present programs on transsexuals and female impersonators in April, and also plans to rerun Tuesday night's program sometime this summer. For dates and times, call (202) 636-2066.

by Doug Huckle