

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Opinion | Loving A Culture That Doesn't Love You Back

Opinion / **Published On June 18, 2018 11:49 AM /**

Staff **June 18, 2018**



This article is not a pro-gay fluff piece or a heterosexual dragging of our culture over coals of fire. I want to talk about humanness. I want to talk about compassion. I want to talk about unconditional love. For the past few months, I've sat back and watched from the shadows as a series of unfortunate events have befallen the USVI online community. I watched and read the posts, the lists of "undercover brothers" in the band community float around. I've watched live videos shaming, and exposing, and threatening men in our community for the crime of allegedly living in the closet.

I've watched the only openly gay senator be dragged by our community, not for the policies she's implemented or for the change she envisions for our territory, but for loving

a woman. I've watched as her personal life, her relationship drama, play out in the public. I've watched as she's spent more time defending her lifestyle than defend her political platform. From the comfort of my room, the comfort of living in a safe space in America, I watched the hateful, harmful, and toxic messages from many of the people that I love, many of the people that I grew up with, many of the people that I looked up to for guidance, for encouragement, for love and affection, for support, tear down the idea of homosexuality and using the word of God to justify their opinions of the LGBTQIA community on island and abroad.

This is not an article that seeks to change anyone's belief system or their perspective on gays. This is not an attack on the hypocritical morality standards that our people are well known for. This is not an attack on the pastors who preach fire and brimstone on the gays while sleeping with members of their congregation. This is not an attack on the leaders in our community who rape and molest children but their morality stops short of sleeping with someone of the same gender. This is not an attack on the members of our Government and Police department who fail to solve murders and cheat our people out of their hard earned money but consider protecting gays on island from abuse, domestic violence, and bodily harm outside of their oath to protect and serve.

This is an article about unconditional love. Unconditional love for my islands, for my people, for my culture. A culture that hates what I am, a people who hate the idea of me, music that fills my soul but is so filled with messages that says I am lesser, I am evil, I should be killed, harmed, that I am the personification of sin. Every room I go into in my career, every classroom that I have entered in pursuit of higher education, every person I meet, I represent for my culture, for my people. My love for my Virgin Islands shines through. My walk, my talk, my social consciousness, my experiences, makes Americans sit up and take notice. My boldness, my passions, my gifts and abilities, my creativity, were all shaped by my heritage. If you cut me open, my blood will bleed the red, white, blue, and yellow of our flag. My heart beats to the rhythm of the VI National Anthem.

But because of who I love, because of my preference, the same culture that I represent as I grow in my career, refuses to accept me, refuses to love me, rejects my humanness. I grew up in church. My faith and beliefs have shaped my identity, have made me the strong, loving, caring, person that I am and have always been. I am by no means the voice of Caribbean gays. It has taken me 30 years and a lot of reflection to step out of the closet and accept what I have repressed for the entirety of my life, that I Saralynn Augustine am a lesbian. This revelation will definitely come as a shock to my former church family and former teachers and mentors.

But I feel an obligation to say something, not for myself, but for the children, teenagers, young adults, and even those who are over the age of 30 who live in secret, who hide their sexual orientation, who marry to cover themselves under the guise of normalcy. I write this for the ones who struggle to find their identities because they are afraid of rejection, afraid of violence, afraid of being outcasts in their homeland. I write this to create a safe space for those of us who had to leave our home behind to find acceptance abroad, to live and love fully without shame, guilt, or fear. I write this for those who keep the violence they experience in their same sex relationships to themselves because their families and law enforcement officers see their pain as punishment for being gay.

I have met so many women and men who share their stories of being beaten on, stabbed, choked, threatened with murder, but kept silent because they feared no one would come to their rescue. They are the unsung heroes, rescuing themselves from heartbreaking relationships that leave their bodies battered and their souls broken, because no one fights for them. Our society doesn't see women as aggressors, and we see men who are brutally beaten by their partners as unmanly for not being strong enough to defend themselves. We see gay men as weak. We tear our boys down for showing any signs of femininity. We destroy our daughters' self-esteem for dressing more masculine. We are so afraid that this "sickness" of gayness will invade our homes, our lives, our islands, that we don't see our brothers, our sons, our cousins, our daughters, our sisters, our nieces and nephews, our aunts and uncles, as human beings who are suffering in silence, who have to hide the the very core of themselves from those they love most.

My greatest fear wasn't that I was a lesbian. My greatest fear was that my mother wouldn't love me anymore, that my family would cast me out of their lives, that my friends would distance themselves. My fear was that I would never again be allowed to step foot in the church that baptized me, nurtured me, taught me, and loved me when I was a child and teenager, at a time when I felt like the world didn't love or understand me. My fear was that I'd never be able to bring the woman that I would one day fall in love with home, that she'd never be accepted by those I loved and cherished most. I feared losing everything and losing everyone I held dear just for living, just for loving. I feared writing this article.

But despite my fears, I write, I live, and I love. I have no control over whether people stay, whether they continue to support and love me, whether they choose to love me unconditionally despite the doctrine they hold near and dear to their hearts. I can only choose happiness and peace for my life. I can only choose to live by one of my favorite verses, "let love be your highest goal." For in the end, it is only love that truly matters, not doctrine, not belief systems, but unconditional love, healthy love. The love for your child, the love for your sister or brother, the love for your cousin, the love for your friend. And until our people, our culture, our families and friends learn how to love us in this manner, then progress in the USVI as it pertains to the LGBTQIA community will continue to be a mirage no one truly believes in. Until the face of the LGBT community in the USVI isn't American transplants, but our own people who step up and step out of the culture created prison of secrecy despite being afraid to stand up and be their own voice for change, then progress is only a far removed concept we lie to ourselves about.

Submitted on Sunday by: *Saralynn Augustine*