

An Interview with Keith Boykin

HGLC: In your talk you discussed your activism at Harvard when you were at the Law School (in the early 1990's). Can you talk a little about your experience as an activist at Harvard?

Keith Boykin: Sure. I was well known on campus because of my activism. I was a member of a group called the Harvard Coalition for Civil Rights, and we fought for greater faculty diversity at Harvard. The group was made up of eight different student organizations that came together to underscore the diversity issue at Harvard. We held teach-ins, demonstrations, sit-ins and ultimately we ended up suing the law school.

HGLC: You had a memorable experience while protesting in the Law School Quad. What happened?

KB: We were holding a vigil outside a faculty meeting when the dean of the law school walked by. He completely ignored us, so I was offended by the slight and I called out to him. "Hey Dean Clark," I said. "Why don't you come back and talk to us?" The dean turned around and realized he didn't know me and then kept walking. I picked up my backpack, slung it over my shoulder, and started to follow him toward the door. "Hey, Dean Clark, come back and talk to us," I said. At this point, the dean of the Law School saw me coming and literally began sprinting across campus to get away from me. I ran track in college, so I immediately starting running after him.

HGLC: What did he think was going on? Were you holding a sign?

KB: I think I put down my sign. But we always invited media to our events, so a photographer from *The Boston Globe* was there to cover it. They took a picture and the next day it appeared in the *Globe*. The picture will tell. It's at www.keithboykin.com/photos/politics/deanclark. Actually, I can't tell from the picture if I'm holding a sign or not.

HGLC: No, it's hard to tell what's goin' on. Looks a little chaotic! Anyway, what message did you take away from this incident?

KB: I learned the importance of speaking truth to power and not being afraid to take on the people who make important decisions.

HGLC: Did your activism continue at the Law School after that?

KB: Yes, I was very active. I became the spokesman for the Coalition for Civil Rights and a key organizer in plotting the sit-ins at the dean's office and the other tactics we employed. I was also a named plaintiff in the lawsuit filed against Harvard. We took the case all the way to the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, and lost on a technicality because we didn't have "standing" as students to bring the case.

HGLC: Just to clarify, the suit was about under-representation of minority faculty?

KB: Yes. Black, Latino, Asian, gay, disabled, and female faculty were all underrepresented at the time

HGLC: Has that situation improved at all in the intervening fifteen years?

KB: I think so. One of the first big issues was the absence of women of color on the faculty. Harvard said it couldn't find a single qualified woman of color to teach. Soon after we left they hired Lani Guinier, a black woman. Now the dean of Harvard Law School is a woman too.

HGLC: Cool. Another issue you addressed in your talk was that of homophobia in the African-American community. Can you talk about this a little?

KB: Where to begin? The black community is politically progressive but socially conservative. When GLBT issues are framed as political issues of basic civil rights, blacks tend to be very supportive, even more supportive than whites. But when these issues are positioned as social or moral issues, blacks tend to be much less supportive than whites are.

HGLC: Where does that conservatism come from? I'm sure it has something to do with religion.

KB: Yes, it definitely comes from the church. The black church helps to shape and dictate black moral values more than any other institution. However, the great irony is that the black church is the most homophobic institution in the black community and at the same time the most homo-tolerant.

HGLC: How so? Is it really homo-tolerant? I'm surprised.

KB: Homophobia comes from the pulpit, but if you look behind the pulpit to the choir, the organists, the deacons, and so on, you will see that black gays and lesbians are everywhere in the church. And nobody ever tells them to leave the church. We have a don't ask, don't tell approach to homosexuality in the black community—and especially in the black church.

HGLC: That seems like a good segue into your book, *Beyond the Down Low*. The phenomenon you describe was almost unknown to the general public until a *New York Times Magazine* article ran a cover story [August 3, 2003] detailing an underground world of mostly black men who engage in sexual acts on the sly while living as straight men with wives or girlfriends on the surface. What was your response to this article?

KB: Well, I didn't like it. I felt it was oddly contradictory. How were these guys supposed to be on the down low and then walking around town with a white gay reporter for *The New York Times*? And how could they be on the down low while they were running an Internet site that videotaped men on the down low?

HGLC: So was this whole thing mostly invented? Is there at least some truth to his claims about the DL?

KB: I felt the story pathologized black men and oversimplified a complex issue by shrouding black male sexuality under a cloak of mystery. Of course there is a down low. No doubt about it.

HGLC: How widespread a phenomenon in your assessment?

KB: The questions are: First, how many people are on the down low? Second, is it just a black thing? And third, is it the cause of the AIDS epidemic? To elaborate on these points: First, we have no way of knowing how many men are on the down low, but it's highly unlikely that the media assumptions are right. Second, it's definitely not just a black thing. When Jim McGreevey, the governor of New Jersey, announced that he was "a gay American," no one ever said he was on the down low. But here was a man who met most of the classic criteria for the down low, except that he was white. And third, the down low is not the cause of the black AIDS epidemic. Our obsession with the down low is a deadly distraction that prevents us from focusing on the real issues with HIV/AIDS.

HGLC: How so?

KB: Nobody really has an official definition of the DL. The most common definition refers to men who have sex with men but do not identify as gay. But then you have alternative definitions, too.

HGLC: What about all the "secret venues" that the *Times* article talked about? One had images of dark warehouses and the like.

KB: The media assume five characteristics about those on the DL. They are supposed to be 1) black, 2) male, 3) HIV-positive, 4) in relationships with women, and 5) secretly having sex with men. But that's such bullshit. They're talking about nightclubs and bars basically. Most black gay bars and nightclubs would probably look like dark warehouses to the untrained eye. The truth is that down low men meet each other at exactly the same places where other gay men meet each other. There is no great mystery there.

HGLC: You mentioned HIV rates, which are elevated in the African-American community for both men and women: isn't the DL implicated here?

KB: There is no evidence that the down low is responsible for the HIV epidemic in the black community. In fact, one of the big problems we have is in identifying who is on the down low. How do you study people who don't want to be identified? And those who self-identify as down low come in all different categories, including black gay men who use the term "down low" synonymously with "masculine." Furthermore, the AIDS rates for black women are not actually increasing, as the media stories always claim. In fact, last December the CDC reported that the AIDS rate for black women declined six percent in the previous four years.

HGLC: That's good news. In the title phrase of your book, what do you see as "beyond" the down low?

KB: We have to go beyond the rhetoric, the hype, and the simple sensationalized answers, and dig deeper to get to the real issues. We have to stop focusing on the down low and start focusing on real solutions. Every minute we spend talking about the down low is a minute we don't spend talking about needle exchange programs, condoms in prisons, universal HIV testing, safe sex education in public schools, and other important issues. And on the personal level, the down low encourages black women to focus on the wrong demon. The message is that as long as your man is not on the down low, you don't have to worry about safe sex. So women have become down low detectives, spying on their mates and their would-be partners.

HGLC: What should they focus on?

KB: We should be encouraging all men and women to use a condom and practice safer sex. Those who are in committed monogamous relationships or who want to have children should be tested with their partners before engaging in unprotected sex. Check my website for more on this subject (www.keithboykin.com/arch/001385.html). That's a link to an article I wrote today about media images of black gays.

HGLC: And what about the situation for gay men? One thing that came out of the *Times* article is that it's tough being black and gay—often harder to come out to family and friends.

KB: Yes, and here's another paradox. If we believe the message that it's so difficult for black gay men to come out, then our solution is way off base. Rather than demonizing black men on the down low or in the closet, we should be thinking about ways to encourage these men to be honest with themselves and others. We do that by creating a climate that challenges the homophobia around us. If you were a black gay man in the closet and you knew that if you came out, your family would disown you, your church would condemn you, and your friends might ostracize you, would you come out? So we have to create support structures and networks so people can be honest about who they are.

HGLC: That would seem to require changing attitudes in the black churches, no?

KB: Yes, changing attitudes in the black church is a part of the solution. But given the unprecedented power and influence black gay men, in particular, have in black churches, it's not unthinkable that they could effect change. Black gay men run many of our churches, but we don't come out often enough and use our power to challenge the homophobia. My friend Rainey Cheeks, a minister in Washington, always says that if black gay men stopped going to church, the music would stop. We are a sleeping giant, so now we have to wake up and use our power. The way to mobilize is through visibility and action. We have to stand up and be counted in our own communities, not in the Castro or Chelsea or West Hollywood. We have to be seen in Harlem and South Central and Oakland.

HGLC: How can they sit there in the choir and listen to the preacher rail against homosexuals?

KB: Don't get me started on that one. I don't have enough time left to be able to explain the ethical gymnastics that enable black gay men to participate in their own oppression.

HGLC: Before you go, any comments on the situation for young African-American gays? Are things improving for them?

KB: Yes, I sense that things are improving a bit. When I was a kid, I didn't see any images of black gays and lesbians anywhere in a positive light. At least today, there are some positive images out there. People can point to E. Lynn Harris, Me'Shell Ndegeocello, James Earl Hardy, or myself, and know that black gay people do exist. I spoke at the Harvey Milk School a few months ago for Career Day, and I was impressed by the percentage of students who were black or Latino. The school is mostly black and Latino, or so it seems. I think there are more outlets for young people today, but at the same time there are more challenges and distractions. We didn't have to think about AIDS when I was a kid. Now young gay men come out knowing that AIDS is a real issue.

HGLC: And it sounds like coming out is getting easier for young people across the board—even in these conservative times. Do you agree?

KB: For the most part, I think that's true. It's better to live a life that is open and honest than to hide. On the other hand, I don't counsel all young people to come out right now. People have to come out on their own time frame, not on mine. In the end, no matter how scary it is to do, it usually lets us release a huge burden from our shoulders. And in the end, when we have the courage to be open and honest about who we are, people not only accept us, they respect us more.