

Tacoma stage performer finally comfortable in his own skin



LUI KIT WONG/The News Tribune

Chad Goller-Sojourner, who grew up in Tacoma, rehearses for his autobiographical play, "Sitting in Circles with Rich White Girls," at the Rainier Valley Cultural Center in Seattle. He was a bulimic teenager, but that was largely seen as a girls' disease. "I watched all these white shows on TV," Goller-Sojourner says, "but I didn't get to be the rich white girl. I just got their defects."

Tacoma native Chad Goller-Sojourner's first full-length solo stage show takes on the pain of growing up 'too black, too gay, too fat.'

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For one guy, Chad Goller-Sojourner's got a heck of a lot of stories to tell. Like the sixth-grade bus trip where the kid behind called him a tar-monster the whole way.

Or 10th-grade biology class, where his classmates held a mock auction for the prize of dissecting his "Nigerian lips." Or the time he got caught purging by a janitor who thought a girl was sneaking into the boys' bathroom to vomit.

You could almost believe it was a novel, except for the very real guy who's getting up onstage this week at the Rainier Valley Cultural Center to tell about what was a very real life growing up in 1970s Tacoma: black, bulimic, gay and adopted by a white family. "Sitting in Circles with Rich White Girls: Memoirs of a Bulimic Black Boy" revisits that life via poetry and prose – just Goller-Sojourner onstage with minimal props and 75 minutes of stories. And while some of the stories are squirmingly vivid, they're a way for Goller-Sojourner – and, he hopes, others – to find healing.

"This play is all about children," says Goller-Sojourner. "Kids have very few rights – like jury duty, you can't opt out of school. When kids teased me on the bus, I couldn't just stop the bus. This is my story, for that kid."

Nursing an iced tea at a Tacoma cafe, Goller-Sojourner definitely stands out from the crowd. He's a big man in an African-collared red shirt, and an energy that keeps him looking around, talking a mile a minute. As he talks, it's easy to believe him when he says he had a hard time blending in as a child.

Born in 1970, Goller-Sojourner was adopted at 12 months by Alan and Gayla Goller, both white, who lived in University Place and were deliberately creating a family of adopted children of color. Chad – black and Indian – was the last of three, and had already had a few rebuffs.

"He'd been rejected twice by black families who said he was too black," remembers Gayla Goller. The Gollers made big efforts for their three children: enrolling them at Annie Wright School because the local kindergarten didn't have any black dolls, obtaining school district waivers to allow them to attend Stanley Elementary School (a more diverse school than the local Narrows View Elementary), joining the local Black Parents Association. ("We were the only white people in it," says Gayla.)

And it worked – for a while. While he did get teased "for nappy hair," the kids mostly didn't care about his race, or his family's.

But in fifth grade, Chad and his older brother Brett had to change back to Narrows View, where they were the only two black kids – and things started to go wrong. Classmates hurled racial slurs at them. The Gollers' next-door-neighbor made nasty comments about them devaluing property values and moved, Gayla remembers.

At Curtis Junior High School, Chad – unhappy with his weight and body image – was throwing up regularly, a trick he'd learned from the wrestling team. They did it to maintain weight; Chad did it because, unlike race or family, "it was the only thing I could control." He learned how to hide from tormentors in the library, in the bathrooms. He made bargains with God. He mentally wrote his own eulogy.

By the time he was at Curtis Senior High School, he was having to convince doctors at St. Joseph Medical Center that bulimia wasn't just a girls' disease. ("I watched all these white shows on TV, but I didn't get to be the rich white girl. I just got their defects.") He was also sorting out his sexuality, and hiding it with homophobic comments. And the race issue was still there: To blacks, Goller-Sojourner says, he wasn't black enough; to whites, he was the token, "safe" black acquaintance.

The only thing that saved him from suicide, he says wryly, was realizing he didn't want people to laugh at his corpse being so fat.

What saved him was writing and acting. After some stressful, bulimic years in college in Bellingham and New

York, which included coming out as gay and adding “Sojourner” to his name after the 19th-century black abolitionist, Goller-Sojourner moved to Seattle and began writing poetry. He performed and directed works at Richard Hugo House and Seattle Poetry Festival, and published a book of poetry.

Finally in May he staged a poetry version of “Sitting in Circles” for a new-works series by the Central District Forum, nationally recognized with an NEA grant. Now the show is full-length, includes prose stories as well, and – says Goller-Sojourner – makes him feel, at last, like he fits.

“As I maneuvered through life, things kept fighting: I was too black, too gay, too fat,” he says. “On stage, none of these fight. Everything about me fits when I’m on stage.”

And, says the poet, he’s happier now with his body – ironically, he points out, since his school photos actually show a much slimmer physique. The bulimia is behind him, and he’s far enough away from his childhood to be a tour guide for it.

Which, he hopes, will not only bring in a diverse crowd, but bring some good to others.

“Some stories are out there, where people can find healing,” Goller-Sojourner says. “I didn’t find a story like mine. I think it’s worth telling. There are universal themes that everyone can appreciate. We should look at how we treat each other, how we resolve things. It’s never too late to go back.”

Rosemary Ponnekanti: 253-597-8568 “Sitting in Circles with Rich White Girls: Memoirs of a Bulimic Black Boy”

Who: Chad Goller-Sojourner

When: 7 p.m. Friday-Saturday; 2 p.m. Sunday

Where: Rainier Valley Cultural Center, 3515 S. Alaska St., Seattle

Tickets: \$12 general, \$10 seniors, students

Information: 1-800-838-3006, www.brownpapertickets.com

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