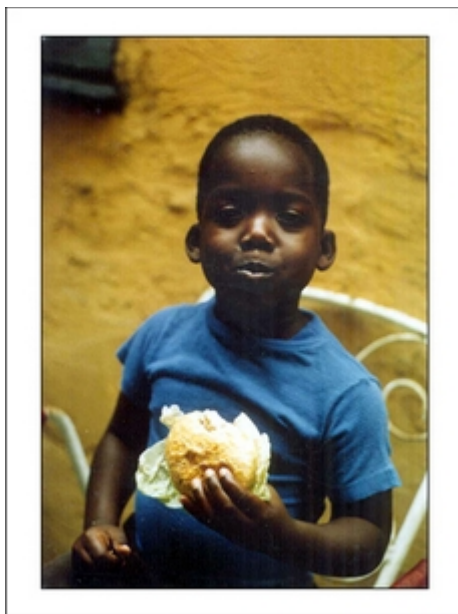


## Black, Gay and bulimic Chad Goller-Sojourner relates to everyone



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by Miryam Gordon - SGN A&E Writer

**Sitting in Circles with Rich White Girls: Memoirs of a Bulimic Black Boy**  
**Written and performed by Chad Goller-Sojourner**  
**Rainier Valley Cultural Center**  
**July 11-20**

Chad Goller-Sojourner is a Seattle poet, spoken-word performer and storyteller extraordinaire. He's crafted a memoir solo piece, *Sitting in Circles with Rich White Girls: Memoirs of a Bulimic Black Boy*, which he will perform courtesy of BROWNBOX theater and Tyrone Brown, at the Rainier Valley Cultural Center. Goller-Sojourner talked to SGN about the show, why he loves doing this work, and a brief history of his life.

"I've always been a storyteller. I love to tell stories and hear stories and I believe that everybody has a story and every story deserves to be heard. When I started writing, my purpose was to bring it off the page. What I mean by that is some people want the piece to be read by others. Others write for the stage, when they speak words they give intention and meaning to the words.

"My parents first met me in Cleveland, Ohio. I was 13 months old when I was adopted. My parents already had two adopted children, Bret and Vanna. Bret is biracial, black and white, and two years my senior. Vanna is Samoan and she's four years my senior. My mom, at a young age, decided after reading books by Pearl S. Buck [who adopted a child], that there were plenty of kids, they wanted kids, but there were hard to place kids that they could give homes to. The hard to place kids were ones of color, primarily.

"[My parents] lived in Tacoma. They were one of the first families to go outside of Washington to adopt. They were looking for a black boy child. Black boy babies have always been the hardest to place. Social Services is a national network and Cleveland popped up on the radar. I was also a year old; the older you get the harder it is to be placed. After a year, it becomes more difficult.

"I grew up in Tacoma, went to Western Washington and to grad school at Columbia [University in New York]. I stayed there for several years and then returned home. For a long time, I thought that if I moved to a place that was bigger

and found more people who looked like me, life would be better.

"My life had been pretty white and straight [in terms of the community], and New York is diverse in many different ways. I became active in ACT UP [AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power] and it did a lot of different things for me. But you can get lost in New York, not making very much of yourself.

"When I moved back, I hooked up with Bent Writing Institute, [in] 2003 or so. I started writing and being part of their showcases and being part of the whole community. Free writing was the thing. I had to learn the craft of just getting things on the page. You don't worry about punctuation. I'm pretty much an autobiographical writer; my stories are about myself. When you write that way, you need to be in a safe environment, because it's very vulnerable. I found that. There are different ways to perform. I did well behind a podium or lectern, public speaking was very easy to me. But to stand naked in front of the mic is very different because you're inviting people to come on a journey with you.

"When I write, put words to paper, everything about me fits. I'm not writing as black or Gay, it's a place where I don't have to explain. I don't write about the tragedy of being Gay, that's not my story. For me it's therapeutic. I also found that they're reclamation pieces. [This show is about] the reclamation story for a 15-year-old boy who hid in a bathroom stall for more than a decade. So just like the bathroom stall was a safe place for me, now the stage is. It's the one place that I feel everyone is pulling for me.

"Seattle has been great. As a black, Gay artist, Seattle has been very good to me. The poetry and spoken-word community in Seattle have really held me in their grace. They see me the first time I perform my work in its raw state. My initiation to my maturation has all happened here. The first time I did this, I was terrified, I was sweating profusely, but they encouraged me and told me to keep coming back.

"Writing pulls you together. Then I got comfortable writing and no longer had to decide whether I was a good writer or not. Then, there was performing. Then [this piece] went to a five-minute performance piece and to the Seattle Slam & it's been a journey to get here, which is good. I like that.

"In Seattle, a lot of communities are separate. You have black events, Gay events, a lot of audiences are separated by gender-orientation. I've done the same work on various stages. I've done it as part of a Queer organization, which is primarily white. I've done it for black audiences, which are overwhelming black and straight. I'm excited about the show. All the people I know, when they see the show, it will really be an audience that embraces diversity, people of every background, a mixed body of orientation and class.

"My work appeals to a wide audience. That's the nice thing about a solo show instead of being part of an ensemble group. With this show, the established Seattle art community was very welcoming to me. I was nominated for Seattle Poet Populist, got support from 4 Culture, and National Endowment for the Arts. The community-based support, but also the established grant support, tells me that my work is appreciated.

"For me, putting my stories on [the] page, I was tearing off a piece of immortality. Most of the stuff I write about, the writing is actually very difficult, so I've already had to work through that story, resolve the issue about being in 5th grade on the bus. You have to let the audience know that you're OK about what you're telling them. You have to be at peace with whatever it needs to be. I challenge the people who think I'm not black enough or what does it mean to be Gay. It reminds me that I choose when and where I enter and Sitting in Circles is about a lot of different things, but one of the things it's about is looking at issues of self-preservation.

"I had a lot of identities at a very young age. I grew up in the '70s and '80s. A lot of these [identities] were in conflict with each other. You weren't supposed to be black and Gay, you weren't supposed to be black with white parents. [It's about] how I became who I am what I am. How it helped me, how bulimia saved my life but betrayed me.

"All my life I've had a battle with a weight issue. There were several years, 15 or so, I had active eating disorder: bulimia. I was a wrestler in 5th and 6th grade and it was a way to make weight. I didn't have a word for it until I was 16. It made sense for me. I couldn't control being black, I didn't want to be black at that time. I couldn't control my family relationships, because my family is what it is. The only thing I had control over was whether I'd be fat or not. So, out of four identity issues that are part of the show: black, Gay, adopted by white folks and fat, fat was the one I

had control over, that was changeable.

"When I got caught throwing up, I was 16 at the time. My parents were looking for treatment options. Bulimia was looked at as a 'rich white girl' disease. Eating disorders were studied in residential centers. That being said, there weren't a lot of places to go. My parents found St. Joseph's Hospital in Tacoma, and they had outpatient treatment. I spent the next year in treatment places where there were predominantly girls and predominantly white, less than 10% of bulimics are presumably men. There weren't a lot of people like me; no treatment plan was geared towards me.

"If I had a different issue besides eating, it might not have taken so long to recover. Is it self-fulfilling prophecies, if you call it a 'rich white girl' disease? What about people outside that definition? Are they even seeking treatment for that disease? 'I'm not supposed to have this.' When AIDS was just a 'Gay' disease, a lot of people wouldn't get tested because they didn't want to be identified as having a 'Gay' disease. The treatment is not for them.

"When I went to these treatment centers, even though I was allowed to sit in the circles and talk, I sat through far too many sessions about how the disease affects your reproductive rights or your period or something. They had everything to do with everyone else in the room and they were valid and important, but I couldn't have gone to an inpatient program anywhere, they didn't exist. So, what happened was I finally found my peace in private therapy. Group therapy only works if you're part of the group, not a visitor. In many groups, I was given visitor status. 'We don't know exactly what to do with you.'

"Sexuality issues were happening at the same time. Gay wasn't really a word, I just knew that I liked boys the way girls liked boys. I had a lot in common with these girls. The first sentence in the show, practically, is 'My prayer was to have been born a rich white girl, not sitting in circles with them.' There's irony all over the place in this show.

"We didn't have the language. The first person I heard about who was Gay was Rock Hudson, when he died, and that was junior high. I had no identification with Gay white boys, coming up. The whole Gay activist issue, Liza Minelli, Barbara, which used to be things that Gay white men identified with, I didn't get it. It wasn't until I met black Gay men. 'Oh, this is where I feel at home!' Places like POCAAN [People Of Color Against AIDS Network]. They have an organization called 'Brother to Brother,' an association of black Gay men.

"Throughout the show, you learn about people who did things that were not very cool. I have not had the opportunity to go back and talk to these people, nor do I want to. Closure is not about that. Closure is not about me sitting across the table from anybody. Closure is about me being all right. If people get closure out of this, wonderful. You don't need to find Sally Sue who called you horrible names. It's a memoir, but at the end of the day, it's a reclamation story.

"It's very funny. There's humor in some of these pieces. Who would have thought that Billy Graham would lead me to homosexuality? That's funny. I'd love to take this show on tour to colleges and theaters. [But] what I'd like to do is focus on Seattle, or I'd feel like I'm not going to give them the best show. This has been 37 years in the making and six years in the writing. I just want to do this and then take some time off. I don't want to miss the joy of this by planning my next big move."