

For the Love of Chad: A Bulimic Black Boy Speaks Out

Chad Goller-Sojourner's *Sitting in Circles With Rich White Girls: Memoirs of a Bulimic Black Boy* opens tonight at the BrownBox Theatre @ the Rainier Valley Cultural Center, and runs through Sunday, July 20. Tix available online.

In terms of identity, Chad Goller-Sojourner either hit the jackpot or got the short end of the stick, depending on one's perspective: a gay black man raised by a white family with a "girl's" eating disorder.

"I thought it was harder to come out as a Christian in Seattle than to be gay," he told us with a characteristic smile and hearty laugh over coffee recently. Add one more to the list.

The complexity of identity is just one of the themes that runs through Chad's writings. A poet, prose writer, and spoken word artist, Chad has always identified himself as a story-teller first and foremost, and starting tonight at the BrownBox African American Theatre at the Rainier Valley Cultural Center, Chad has transformed his diverse writings into a one-man show, *Sitting in Circles With Rich White Girls: Memoirs of a Bulimic Black Boy*, running through July 20.

Through poetic monologues and stories, Chad recounts his rocky coming-of-age. Predictably, the show runs the gamut of the painful and the psychologically scarring, from racial slurs to identity crises to the absurdity of eating disorder treatments. But this isn't navel gazing or misery tourism.

"Someone told me my stories are much funnier than they are tragic," Chad said. Indeed, Chad's work shows how even the most painful of experiences can be reclaimed, transformed, and accepted for what they are: the building blocks of our unique identities. And in the end, if Chad's life demonstrates anything, it's that the narrow categories we assign people to will inevitably fail to represent their whole selves. Chad even found himself on a racial slippery slope in the first months of his life.

"In the beginning, I was born in Cleveland, Ohio," Chad explains, "and I was in a foster home for 13 months," he explained, "and I was looked over--passed over--by two black families because I was *too dark*. So before my white parents entered the picture, race had already been a factor, but this was a factor between black people."

Chad was ultimately adopted by a white couple, moved to the Puget Sound region, and from an early age struggled with what it meant to be black with no black role models. Compounding that was his homosexuality, something he, like so many other gays, grappled with. It was the experience of not knowing what you are, but having an idea of what you're *not*.

By the fifth grade, Chad had already discovered bulimia. A childhood fixation with his weight compounded the need to establish order in a confusing world and led him to him to settle on self-induced vomiting as a control mechanism. Food came to dominate his life. He doesn't even really remember his teen-age trip to Hawaii: Instead of enjoying the beach and the sun, he spent his time going from one McDonald's to another, binging then purging Big Macs.

By this time, his family was becoming aware of his problem and struggling to find a means of treatment for a boy with a teen girl's disease.

"My sister was already dealing with her problems, her alcoholism, she was a few years older," said Chad, "and I remember thinking, 'There's a lot of things we can do for alcoholics!'"



Not so much for teen boy bulimics. Chad wound up in in-patient treatment at St. Joseph's in Tacoma, where he found himself sitting in the titular "circles with rich white girls."

"The treatment plan wasn't geared toward me, even what they were saying," he explained. "I mean I knew I was a *boy*," he remarks with a grin. "It didn't work, I didn't fit. Not because they made me uncomfortable," but because their lectures on the impact of bulimia on the menstrual cycle, for instance, didn't mean anything to a boy like Chad.

The upshot of the experience was that Chad was more or less able to chart his own recovery path, a process of self-discovery that continued through his 20s in New York City, where he found a gay culture that was more inclusive. By the time he moved back to Seattle around age 30 (he's now 37), Chad was more in touch with himself and was able to begin writing and exploring his complex, multi-faceted identity, which turned out to be a double-edged blade: on the one hand, Chad never fit in completely; on the other, his diversity inured him to some of the harder blows that can come with being a minority.

"I'm a large black man, and so I've never had the gay bashing that can come along," he frankly admits, "because people still see a large black man." Conversely: "I was in the elevator one time with my friend in New York, and had the whole women, black man comes in, they move to the back and hold their purses, but after we open our mouths, it's all different--we wind up *discussing* purses."

At this point in his life, Chad's come to terms with the variously elements of his identity, which has allowed him to use his work not as a process of self-discovery--that he's already gained--but as a reflection on his experiences of a hard youth with the perspective of adulthood, exposing the pain he felt and giving voice to the child he was, speaking for the kid who couldn't. And that makes his work approachable by a broad audience.

"When I talk about being bullied on the bus, some people will identify with that," he explains by way of example, "but then there are some people who *were* the bully on the bus. There will be white people in the audience who called black kids 'nigger' growing up, and they've never reconciled that. Because we don't talk about that, we don't talk about what I call the 'ghost,' which is that we've all done things in our childhoods to people that we really haven't made right."

By Jeremy M. Barker in Arts & Events on July 11, 2008