

King of the Outcasts

Chad Goller-Sojourner gorges on fruit pies and feeds you the shame.

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He'd already penned the eulogy he wanted read at the funeral. But Chad Goller-Sojourner couldn't kill himself just yet—there was a glitch in the plan that could not go ignored. "I couldn't die until I was skinny," he says. "I imagined people laughing at my fat body in a casket."

So the black, gay—and fat—15-year-old destined to wallow at the bottom of Curtis High School's food chain schemed in his room while listening to Frankie Goes to Hollywood and Madonna. He schemed as he gorged himself with fried chicken and Hostess fruit pies. He schemed during fifth-period chemistry. Then he'd sneak off to the bathroom, stick his finger down his throat, and puke.

It worked at first. Nobody noticed Goller-Sojourner's long and frequent disappearances or his rapid weight loss. Besides, he was careful. A running faucet masked the sound of gagging, soap covered the smell. He did all right in chemistry. But Goller-Sojourner got lazy. He stopped worrying about covering his tracks and began puking in the trash can. The janitor alerted the guidance counselor to a potential situation: One of the female students was sneaking into the boy's bathroom after lunch to throw up.

The following day they staked out the crime scene. Goller-Sojourner went about his routine as usual, when someone began pounding on the door. Missing 10 minutes of chemistry was one thing; missing the entire class was another. So Goller-Sojourner emerged from his stall. "They weren't expecting *me*," he says laughing. "It confused 'em."

It confused the staff at Tacoma's St. Joseph Medical Center too, where Goller-Sojourner was sent for treatment. He was turned away from the inpatient program, which was for women only. Instead, he began an outpatient regimen that consisted of biweekly meetings in which patrons practiced art therapy and breathing exercises.

The opportunity to have his self-penned eulogy read seemed more appealing than ever. Not only was Goller-Sojourner the only boy in a sea of bulimic girls, but he recognized one of them from school. Yet, when Goller-Sojourner retells the story, it's funnier than it is tragic. So are the rest of the struggles he shares in his one-man show *Sitting in Circles with Rich White Girls: Memoirs of a Bulimic Black Boy*, which plays Saturday night at The Creation Project Showcase.

Goller-Sojourner uses short stories as a tool to weave through the complex issues that plagued him as a child. In "Frozen Foods" he stares deliberately at the audience for several moments, then slowly and quietly reveals, "I once ate five frozen Hostess berry snack pies in less than 30 minutes." But even his darkest confessions are peppered with snide commentary. Goller-Sojourner berates the interior design in his therapist's office, noting the carpet looks like "the kind of shit people load into their cars at midnight and drop off at the Salvation Army donation bin." Even less reassuring than the unaesthetic environment is that the one person Goller-Sojourner thinks might be helpful is the art therapy lady—and she's fat.

The witty rhetoric is there, but Goller-Sojourner doesn't resort to other common tactics used by memoirists. His experiences aren't dramatized or glorified. During a rehearsal at Langston Hughes Cultural Arts Center, Goller-Sojourner runs through a piece in which he assaults a peer for teasing him. The director stops him and suggests a more macho approach. "It was fifth grade," Goller-Sojourner replies dryly. "Let's not make it more than it was. I was a sissy."

During the day, Goller-Sojourner works as a paralegal for an insurance company. He's now unwinding with a cranberry juice and vodka in the back corner of the Twilight Exit. "This place is for misfits," he says, gesturing toward a few figures hunched over the bar. "These are the people who stayed at home during prom. That's why I like it here."

Goller-Sojourner is the reigning king of outcasts. His mother handed him over to foster care after she had him in 1970 in Cleveland. The first two couples that expressed interest in Goller-Sojourner rejected him after seeing him, claiming his skin was too dark, he says. The third couple, Alan and Gayla Goller, thought he was perfect. They flew back to their Tacoma home and raised Goller-Sojourner the only way they knew how: white.

Problem is, nobody at school—including Goller-Sojourner—got the memo. For years he grappled with identity, as people who looked like his parents called him a nigger and people who looked like him criticized him for "acting white."

Last year, the Central District Forum for Arts and Ideas granted Goller-Sojourner and five other local black artists \$1,000 each to develop their work. For Goller-Sojourner, the grant helped affirm his upbringing as a legitimate black experience.

In a piece titled "Self Preservation," Goller-Sojourner explains, "I've often thought of my childhood as a life full of pieces that mattered but never fit, or fit but never mattered." Growing up, he avoided addressing fastidious identity politics by instead directing his attention to calories and pounds. It wasn't until after college and years of therapy that he stopped binging and purging completely.

Now he's 150 pounds heavier than he used to be. "I know I'm fat," he says. "But let me tell you—I was a lot less comfortable in my skin ten years ago than I am now."

A bartender walks by and Goller-Sojourner grabs his attention. He wants a sandwich and fries. Oh, and a side of ranch. "I know I don't need the ranch," he says, perhaps wondering whether the wheels in my head are turning. "But I want it."

Between bites, Goller-Sojourner plunges not only the fries, but the sandwich too, into the milky residue. "I'm not chained to the scale," he continues. People who like him don't care about his weight, he says. "They enjoy my company. They miss me if I don't show up to places."

The reiteration isn't for my sake. It's for the 15-year-old who hid in the bathroom stall for more than a decade. That boy remembers what the air smelled like the first time someone called him a nigger. The grass was freshly cut.

It's dusk by the time Goller-Sojourner and I finish our conversation. The Twilight Exit's bulbs are set at the lowest possible wattage, and it's easy to lose track of place and time there. Returning to the world outside is jolting. For some, that feeling pervades more often than not.

"When you're dark-skinned, gay, and fat, you don't have a lot of spaces where you feel safe," Goller-Sojourner confesses. "What I like about the stage is that it's the one place where I feel like everybody in the room is pulling for me."