

features

Living OUT Loud

Keke Palmer surprised more than a few fans last year with her “I Don’t Belong To You” video. (If you haven’t seen it yet, she leaves her boyfriend for another girl.) The “Scream Queens” star took it one step further when she came out as sexually fluid soon after. Then, in December, Amandla Stenberg came out as bisexual via Snapchat. While Keeks and Amandla deserve major props for what they’ve done, it’s not always easy for Black girls to come out, and as a result, Black LGBT+ youth are at higher risk of being homeless, being harassed, and committing suicide. Find out how one girl, though, is defying the odds and living by her own rules.

By Princess Gabbara



Morgan Butler has struggled with her sexuality for years. It didn't help that she was outed by a classmate in the seventh grade. "Being outed was definitely a weird experience," says the 19-year-old college freshman from Springfield, Virginia. "I wasn't necessarily mad, more like embarrassed, for both her and myself. I was embarrassed for her because she was so insecure she felt like she had to try and invalidate my own identity. And I was embarrassed for myself because I was lowkey ashamed of my sexuality." Since then, Morgan has learned to love all parts of her identity — but discovering exactly what that meant for her took a little time.

"I've been queer since middle school, though I didn't exactly know what to call it," Morgan says. "After fluctuating between identifying as a lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual, I settled on queer because I feel like it's more inclusive."

Confused about what all of that even means? Let's break it on down: So, LGBT stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender. The "+"? That's just an easy way to cover everyone else who's not heterosexual, including pansexual, asexual, demi-gender, and queer, which is a term for people who feel that LGBT is too confining.

And while Morgan is all self-love all the time now, she does admit that there've been times when she's felt depressed and hopeless because of her sexuality. Her squad reps hard for her, though, so she considers herself lucky because she knows that's not the case for many others. "I had a community of people who were super accepting and supportive, so I was able to work through it," she says. "It's really sad knowing that our world is so judgmental that people feel like their identities aren't valid. It really sucks."

In fact, an overwhelming number of Black LGBTQ+ teens are rejected by their families, which means they're often left to the streets. According to a 2013 report from the Center for American Progress, a survey of LGBTQ+ homeless youth in New York City was done back in 2007 showing that 44 percent of homeless gay, lesbian, or bisexual youth and 62 percent of homeless transgender youth are Black. Those numbers could actually be much larger. "I've seen LGBTQ youth go to extreme measures just to survive and that can mean resorting to selling drugs and becoming sex workers," says Ieshai Bailey-Davis, a board-certified sex and gender therapist who works extensively with the LGBTQ+ community in Jacksonville, Florida. "It's very unfortunate and heartbreaking."

And double discrimination? Yep, it's a thing. Not only are Black LGBTQ+ teens judged based on the color of their skin, but they're also treated unfairly based on who they love or how they see themselves. "A lot of times, we as human beings can be one-track minded," says Bailey-Davis. "We can see color as being on a spectrum, but when it comes to gender and sexual identity, you either have to be male or female or you have to be heterosexual or homosexual. Human beings are just so much more complex than that."



"Being Black and queer is a double whammy," says Morgan. "Being Black, queer, and a woman is a triple whammy! Oftentimes, you're forced to choose between your blackness, queerness, or womanhood, and it's like, nah fam, I am all parts Black, queer, and woman."

It's not just those outside of the LGBTQ+ community shading and discriminating, either. "My [experience with] discrimination within the LGBTQ community comes from white and white passing queer folks who just feel like they just have to be the face of the movement," she says. "There's a lot of racism in the LGBTQ community and it's just really gross."

Suicide attempts are also a huge issue. "I think suicide attempts are at least four times higher compared to the white and Hispanic youth," says Bailey-Davis. "I work as a crisis evaluator at a local hospital and I cannot tell you — I would say at least 60 percent of the people I see are from the Black LGBTQ community and the attempts are very serious."

Morgan turns to poetry as a way to cope and heal herself, but she knows that many queer teens think the only way to deal is through self-harm. She hopes that they realize how precious life really is, though, before it's too late. "Your life matters, every aspect of it, including your sexuality. There are people in the world who identify the same way you do, people who need support and community," she says. "Somewhere, someone is hoping that you pull through."

For the record, being lesbian, gay, queer, bisexual, transgender, or any of the others isn't a choice. "People are still uneducated about what it means to be lesbian or what it means to be transgender, so they think that these individuals are choosing this way of life," says Bailey Davis. "Who makes a choice to be stereotyped, ridiculed, and pushed out of their homes in some cases? Nobody makes that



Help is Here

Ozone House

www.ozonehouse.org
102 N. Hamilton St.
Ypsilanti, MI 48197
(P): 734-662-2265
Crisis line: 734-662-2222
queerzone@ozonehouse.org

The Audre Lorde Project

www.alp.org
85 S. Oxford Street
Brooklyn, NY 11217
(P): 718-596-0342
or
147 West 24th Street, 3rd
Floor
New York, NY 10011
(P): 212-463-0342
alpinfo@alp.org

The DC LGBT Center

www.thedccenter.org
2000 14th St. NW, Suite 105
Washington, DC 20009
(P): 202-682-2245
supportdesk@thedccenter.org

The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Community Center

www.glcb.org
1000 Cathedral St., 3rd floor
Baltimore, MD 21201
(P): 410-777-8145

Reach LA

www.reachla.la
1400 E. Olympic Blvd, Suite
240
Los Angeles, CA 90021
(P): 213-622-1650
reachla@earthlink.net

The Trevor Project

www.thetrevorproject.org
PO Box 69232
West Hollywood, CA 90069
24/7 hotline: 866-488-7386
info@thetrevorproject.org

JASMYN House

www.jasmyn.org
932 Peninsular Place
Jacksonville, FL 32204
(P): 904-389-3857
jasmyn@jasmyn.org

Lost-n-Found Youth

www.lnfy.org
2585 Chantilly Dr.
Atlanta, GA 30324
24/7 hotline: 678-856-7825

Youth First Texas

www.myresourcecenter.org
3918 Harry Hines Blvd.
Dallas, TX 75219
(P): 214-879-0400
youth@myresourcecenter.org

choice.” Think about it for a second. If you like boys, is that something you actually make a deliberate choice to do every day, or is it just something you feel?

“Queer folks are here to stay,” says Morgan. “We’re literally fighting for our rights to love and live our lives comfortably. Why wouldn’t you want folks to live comfortably? You’re whack if you’re trying to prevent people from flourishing.”

Not sure what to do when someone you know is struggling or comes out to you? Turns out, all you need to do is be the friend you always have been. “Listen to them even if you don’t understand some things,” Morgan says. “Take the time, do your research, and just listen to people’s lived experiences ... Listening can be better than asking questions sometimes.” Offer your support and encouragement, but also use the opportunity as a way to educate your friend about what resources are out there — we’ve got some to get you started on this page — so she knows she’s not alone. Real talk, one of the best things you can do is educate yourself about the LGBT+ community. Learn what issues matter to them. Don’t worry, you don’t have to become an expert, but making an effort shows that you care.

Maybe you, reading this right now, are confused about your own sexuality or are thinking about coming out soon. Remember this: “You are necessary, you are valid, and everything you’re feeling and thinking is okay,” says Morgan. “And although there is a lot of language to support you, your emotions, and your sexuality, defining yourself is a process. Don’t ever think you have to be just one thing. You are infinite and every vector of yourself is valid.”

Sexual Orientation ... or Nah?

Sexual Orientation vs. Gender Identity

“It’s who I am through my eyes, whether that’s sexually, romantically, or personally,” says Bailey-Davis.

EX: lesbian, gay, bisexual

“Gender is in the brain. It’s not about what I see through my eyes, but what I identify as in my brain,” says Bailey-Davis. “(It) is basically an umbrella term for those whose assigned gender or assigned sex does not align with how they identify themselves.”

EX: transgender



“You have individuals who call themselves ... androgynous, meaning at the same time, they could be masculine and feminine,” says Bailey-Davis. “There are people who are demi-gender, where they could be partially, halfway connected to a particular gender ... meaning they’re gender neutral. These are individuals who do not feel they are a part of the ... stereotypical role of what it means to be either male or female.”