



BENT BARS PROJECT

Newsletter

Issue 1 Autumn 2009

Welcome to the first Bent Bars Newsletter!

Welcome to the first Bent Bars newsletter and a huge thank-you to everyone who has contributed and made it happen.

Since the Bent Bars Project began in February this year, we have received many letters from those in prison. Among the various requests we regularly receive, many of you asked for information about 'coming out' in prison. Yet all the resources we could find on 'coming out' were not written with prisoners in mind. So we decided to create our own resource, by asking prisoners to share thoughts and advice on the topic. We put a call out for submissions in July – and asked you to tell us about your own experiences of being out, or not out in prison, and what advice you would give to other prisoners thinking about coming out. The responses are printed here.

One of the aims of the Bent Bars Project is to build links between lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersex, queer and gender-nonconforming communities (LGBTQ) inside and outside prison. We work in solidarity with those inside to build stronger community links across prison walls. Issues around 'coming out' ring true for many of us, inside and out: the attitudes of families and friends; wanting to resist being pigeon-holed and identified only by sexuality; fears about prejudice, discrimination, rejection and violence. Clearly these difficulties are made harder for those inside, where all these problems are increased by the severity and restrictions of prison life. We want to create a space where people inside can read the feelings and perspectives of others facing similar challenges in prison. We also want to make connections between those inside and other

LGBTQ people who are currently outside. Prisons magnify repression of queer communities. This repression is at the root of social exclusion that leads to over-representation of LGBTQ communities, communities of colour and low-income communities, within the prison system.

In these pages then you will read the voices of people who answered our call out for writings. The words they have sent us are powerful, moving, funny, creative and harrowing in turn. They offer valuable ideas and raise many questions.

Many prisoners who wrote to us said that we could include their full names with their submissions. Although we wanted to honour those who are "out and proud," we decided to publish first names or nicknames only for safety reasons. We hope that one day this will not be necessary – that one we will all be free to express ourselves fully and openly.

Once again we want to thank the contributors for all they have shared. It is important also to acknowledge that people inside make many different choices in order to survive, and there are many different ways of expressing identities and sexualities. Many people do not feel safe to come out or even to write to us: for this reason our newsletter cannot be fully representative. For those not able to, or choosing not to 'come out' in prison, we want to acknowledge the strength in those silences as well as the voices heard here.

~From your friends in the Bent Bars Collective



From Ross:

When I read that Bent Bars were producing a newsletter I was very keen to have some input. I wanted to tell everyone about the special topic, Coming Out in Prison. Well, firstly I am already out on the outside, however due to the high profile of my court case my sexuality was already known when I was imprisoned. This scared me before I came to prison, as I am sure the soap in the shower anecdote has formed many peoples view on prison life, that was my view too. However this was not my experience, however there are some that try!

I have only spent two months in prison, so my views may not come from much experience, but I find prison to be very hard to express yourself in. If you are openly gay, guards and fellow 'straight' prisoners poke fun, call you names and so forth. I find this

very odd as there is a very homosexual feel to this prison, 100's of men locked up together, some sharing cells, some not with no access to a sexual partner, but unspoken going ons between so called 'straight' prisoners.

I feel I should apologize for the overtly sexual way I have described my experience, but I feel it plays an important part of coming out or expressing your sexuality inside.

If I were to give anyone any advice on dealing with issues from this topic I would say a few things. Firstly be yourself, if you hide you will never be happy. Secondly if you are strong, others will follow and make everyone else's experiences easier to deal with.

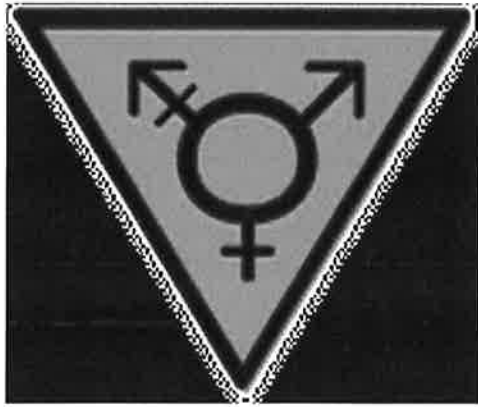


Hi Friends at BB Project. This is for your newsletter:

I am openly gay in prison, but not too long ago I was ashamed of how I am. But one day in 2007 I met a pre-op transsexual who help me see that it was ok to be a gay man and it wasn't a disease or a curse. Once I was comfortable with saying 'I am gay' out loud I came out to my personal officer on the wing. That was not such a good idea as he was homophobic and told the whole wing. I cannot explain the hatred that some prisoners and staff had for me. Everyday I was told I am a disgrace to my culture and that I should kill myself. Unfortunately I got very depressed and tried to kill myself, but thankfully I didn't succeed. I still get threatened every day but I will never let them get to me again. I am a gay man and I am proud of it no matter what they do to me. I will never be ashamed of how I am again.

I hope this has given you some idea of what prison is for me.

From Pedro.



'Coming out in Prison'

My name is Charlotte and I'm a 26 year old transgender person. This is my story.

I first came to prison in May 2007. I had previously started transitioning outside. I didn't know what to expect. I have faced a lot of challenges from prison officers and other inmates, associating transsexualism with sexuality. I felt not only locked in prison but locked in my own body.

Through sheer determination it has got easier. A lack of support can be very detrimental to an individual's self-confidence. Even if you don't understand you can reassure. It is sometimes easier to reject or ignore those who are different. And if we do that we may find ourselves ridiculing them in small ways that seem harmless to us. There are different terminology associated with trans. It is best to listen to the person and how they wish to be treated and referred to - no two trans people are alike. My personal experience of transitioning since coming to prison has been very up and down, and have found some staff more supportive than others. I also feel that since I have become more comfortable with myself it has led me to being far more sociable than I ever was. I am now able to correct those who express quite strong opinions on the basis of a little or no direct knowledge. As you read my story be encouraged to keep going on your own journey. You are not alone, there is support, you can achieve whatever you want. Just believe in yourself.



From Simon

I came out in prison after 20 years in the closet. I was as nervous as anything but the reality is I found a great strength to be openly gay on the wing. I've had grief and still do but because I'm open and honest I have some great straight friends who stick up for me even facing grief themselves. Being open has given me the strength to fight for equality and has earned the respect of many staff and other prisoners. This has made life a lot easier for other gay prisoners. Now I am the GBT diversity rep and am a voice for GBT prisoners in the big diversity meetings attended by heads of departments and the senior management. It

was really scary at first and I was frightened of the reaction I'd get. I was afraid of being beaten up or worse. But the more people who knew, the more support I found. Even against the odd, and they're very odd, phobe. My advice to anyone thinking of coming out is if you have some supportive staff then do it but if staff aren't supportive then don't. If coming out isn't an option then try to speak to the diversity officer and see what support they'll offer. Even better is the GALIPS rep if you know them. The more of us who are out the more fellow prisoners and staff will realize they have nothing to fear from us.

On Not Being Out in Prison

I am a bisexual man and I am not out in prison and never have been. In my experience prison is one of the most homophobic environments it is possible to experience.

There are two kinds of gender tolerated in prison i.e heterosexual and very camp and effeminate homosexual. Anything in between or different is seen as suspect and likely to attract homophobic hate-crime and violence. Anything loud and proud that is.

Obviously you do meet like-minded individuals from time to time and confide in

each other, but it is all hush hush and deep undercover. Most straight acting LGBTQ prisoners suffer in silence, which is why free LGBTQ newsletters and avenues of information and lines of communication are so important.

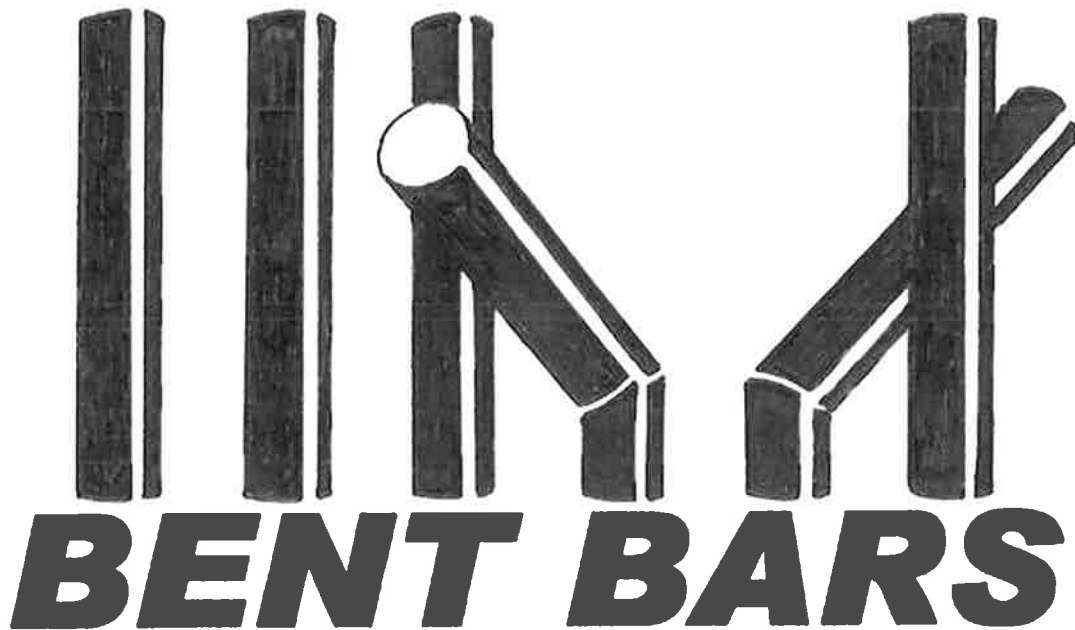
Although I am 'not out' openly on the landings (for survival reasons) I am out on the out (so to speak).

And I am not particularly worried about being outed in jail. Mainly because few would believe it. I am very straight acting, hardcore scouse scally and have been around for 20 years or so (in and out of prison). And I

can handle most things thrown at me.

It's the LGBTQ first timers I feel concern for. I have noticed a high percentage of self-harmers and would be suicides have had what I would call LGBTQ indication traits. And I would put this down to the extreme pressure and oppression they experience hiding their sexuality within the prison estate. In saying that, I don't have a great time myself. I feel the oppression too, and it is smothering and difficult to handle sometimes.

— From Paul



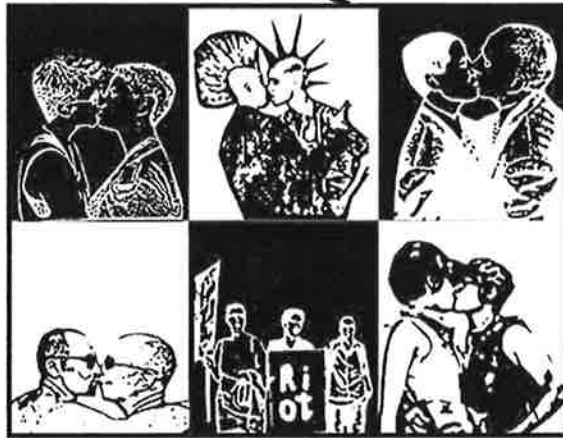
Artwork by Peter Collins

FROM JAMES:

I have never really understood until recently why we have to put a label on something, to judge it on whether it fits into our ordered or chaotic lives or not. Other than gay, bi, straight, transsexual, transvestite or lesbian how many labels do we actually have – fat, obese, thin, skinny, middle class, second class, black, white, alcoholic, druggo, religious etc the list is endless. But for every label we put on society there will always be people who either resign themselves to that label, argue against it, reject it or try to create even more. When you think about it it is all rather unfair that we are pre-judged and even denied life's opportunities because we don't fit the mould. I disagree with labeling sexuality and holding it up as a banner, a proclamation of this is what I am, or this is where I belong, this is my label

...for every label we put on society there will always be people who either resign themselves to that label, argue against it, reject it or try to create even more...

and I'm proud of it. I do agree that if we do believe in something and we are proud of that belief we should have the freedom to tell the world that, but I don't think that it should be encouraged to be the norm. Now that may sound controversial but I do think that there is a hell of a lot of pressure, especially in relation to people choosing to 'come out' and I think that sometimes that kind of pressure might not be that productive, especially if it opens you up for unnecessary criticism. It is so important in life to be accepted and to seek acceptance, to fit in, to feel like we have a place in life where we belong, but at what cost to confidence and self belief I'm not sure. To come out as 'gay' in prison is one of the most difficult decisions somebody can make and I admire and have enormous respect for those people. We all know too well that this is an emotionally charged environment full of people from every walk of life, incorporating every label that society has conceived. My own



feeling is that to be openly gay in prison can have a really negative impact not because it is a bad thing but because there is an ignorance and lack of understanding not just of sexuality but of life. In prison we somehow have to accept the label of 'prisoner' and our lives outside become a memory until we rejoin that life. We can fight for equality and support groups, but to whitewash change in here for everybody to be accepted as equal with one another is not in our time realistically achievable. I want their eyes to be opened so much, for us to be treated with dignity and respect, for the underpinning mentality to be changed and I hope to God it happens and that I am proved wrong, but what I don't want above all is for there to be negative consequences for being gay. This is not our life, this is not our future in prison, but it is a time of personal reflection and change and I hope that everyone who is faced with the decision of 'coming out' both in prison and outside will remember this: your sexuality is not what defines you, it's not a legacy and it's not a label that you have to adhere to. What it is is a part of your life, one part that makes you beautiful, that empowers you in happiness, that gives you acceptance, that brings you freedom. But it's not everything. Life should not be measured by how many breaths we take, but by how many moments leave us breathless. I love being unique, love my sexuality, I love that we can have a voice, I love that we can write our own names in the pages of history, but above all I am just totally in love with life.

COMING OUT

Coming out in prison as in life can be a very painful and in some cases dangerous decision both in prison and in the real world (civvy street) whether it's to close (supposedly) family, friends or fellow inmates on the wings. It can be a very frightening even intimidating thing.

I personally have found that being honest with oneself about what your true feelings are helps and if you are straightforward and honest about your sexuality as in most things in life then those around you will in time respect you for the honesty.

In my many years inside (17) I have had the pleasure of both longish term and short term shall we say Special Friends. And in the main I have found that whilst occasionally I still get the odd sneering "Batty Boy" or other comment that most cons eventually get to respect you for who you are and not what you are. And have in fact found in some cases those giving the slurs are normally those in the closet. And when their gangster mates are not around [they] are the first to try to get into your pants (bed).

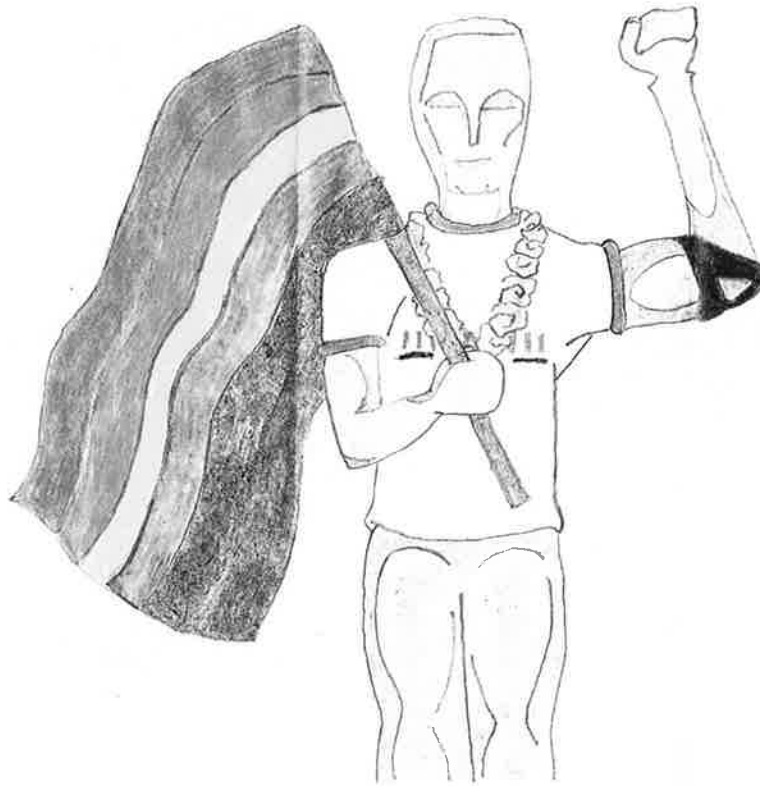
Until all are free



we are all imprisoned

I'll even give an example: when I first got to one prison, one guy -no names- for the 3 months all I got from him were death threats on almost a daily basis yet just when he was due for release he approached me to do a deal to deflower him (pop his cherry) saying he had wanted to do it for ages. But couldn't stand the stigma from his mates. I must admit I did so and we have been in postal contact since and he is doing well.

So I would say to those out there not in the open come out to someone you feel comfortable doing so to and ignore the idiots who will mouth off they will soon loose interest and go annoy someone else. ~ J.E.



Artwork by Daniel

From Aaron

When I first entered the prison system, I didn't come out as being gay due to what others might say or how they would react towards me. The next year I was moved to another establishment where I still didn't come out until two years later, when I decided what's the point I may as well be happy and be the person I am. So I came out to one of my good friends and to be honest I have had a lot of help and support from inmates and officers. I then became Gay offender Rep to support other gay, bi-sexual and transgender prisoners who may want to come out in prison. As a rep I also offer advice which may be useful to prisoners I would encourage anyone to come out in prison so that they can be themselves without having to act straight. If you have a GB&T rep talk to them as they will help and you will also have the support of family and friends. I am glad I came out and now I can truly be the person I want and can be happy for my sexuality and others respect me for doing what I have and together we can stand up for what we believe in.

From Chris:

Although I have known that I am gay since an early age, I didn't actually come out until I was serving my first prison sentence in 1993, when I was 25. I shared a cell with a guy who was also gay and he helped me to admit that I was gay and not to carry this big burden that I had been carrying for a lot of years.

Initially it felt great and a really big weight had been lifted from my shoulders but then I was moved from a local prison to a Category C prison and several of the other prisoners used to make fun of my sexuality but I had a lot of support from several of the officers and other gay or bisexual prisoners.

I still feel that it was the right thing to do because it gave me the confidence to talk to other gay and bisexual men about their experiences and the more we talked, the more comfortable and confident I became. This enabled me to finally tell my parents when I got out of prison in 1995, and although my mum died shortly afterwards and my Dad isn't happy with the situation, at least I wasn't living a lie anymore and I felt that I could properly start living my life as I wanted to.

It just shows that generally being gay or bisexual is becoming more accepted because when I found myself back in prison in 2004, I found that both staff and inmates accepted me for who I am and in one prison that I have been in there is even a support group which is run on a monthly

basis by two members of staff one of whom is a lesbian and the other gay and this was a really big help as we could really be ourselves. I have only experienced it from the vulnerable prisoners side of prison life but I have heard quite a few positive stories from other prisoners who have been on the main wings.

The worst prison I have found for discrimination due to sexual orientation is my current one and unfortunately it doesn't come from the other prisoners but from the officers and psychology who should know better.

My advice to anyone who is thinking of coming out in prison is to do it, as on the whole my experiences have been positive ones and if it hadn't been for my first cell mate back in 1993, I would probably still be carrying a big weight around and living a lie because I wouldn't be able to be myself and I have found this to be very important. Be out and be proud!!

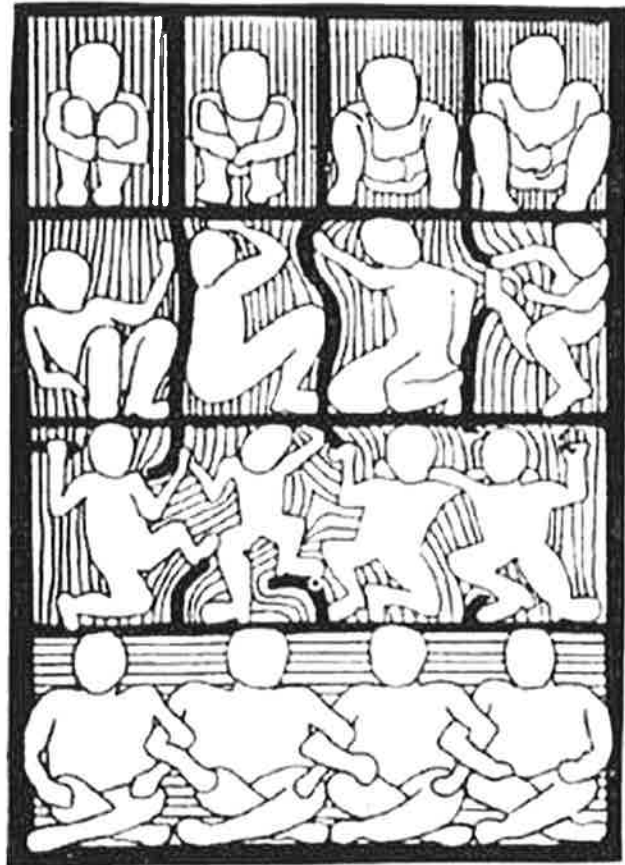


From Martyn

I've been out for years now so I've no problem with people knowing about my sexuality. Going into prison that first time though was among the scariest things I have done, I didn't know what to expect. There was lots of information about race relations which is good, but nothing about what you should do if you're worried about how your sexuality might affect your stay at Her Majesty's Pleasure.

Eventually I found my way round it all and was lucky with the cell mates that I had, I even managed to eventually get gay magazines such as Attitude.

For all the flag waving that the SPS and HMPS do about equality it still has a long way to go for LGBTQ prisoners. It's my opinion that lack of action on this is a time bomb waiting to happen.



From Shaun:

When I came to prison I knew that keeping my sexuality a secret would be something that I could not do. This was because of my offence and it was in the papers that I had taken the life of my boyfriend. This made me decide to be totally honest about my sexuality and to be "out" in prison. It didn't mean though that I had to "give out"! Being honest from the start of my prison life has worked for me and I have found people to be more accepting and even curious about you. I have met people who have hidden their sexuality in prison but when it is found out that they like men, the population turns against them; even if they were a well-liked prisoner previously. What other cons don't like is someone lying because they think that if you hid that secret, what else are you hiding. So to anyone out there who is reading this and knows someone who has just come into prison, tell them to be honest as they will earn more respect now and less hassle in the future. Prisoners are accepting of all races, religions and sexuality, so don't hide in the closet, be out and be proud of who you are.

FOR ABSENT VOICES... *We know that it takes courage to share words, thoughts, desires, experiences and feelings. For some people, it is not possible to share those things here. So this space is reserved for all those whose voices are absent. It is for those who, for whatever reason, cannot express themselves. It is for those who have been silenced through fear, pain, violence and shame. It is for all those who find courage and strength in other ways and means...*



Artwork by Kristine Virsis / Just Seeds

I am going out! by Carl

As long as I can remember I guess I always knew I was a little different from the other boys in my neighbourhood and it confused the hell out of me.

Imagine as a six year old boy watching "Flipper" on telly and popping a "stiffy" at the sight of Luke Halpin, Flipper's cute little blond friend in those wet, tight cut offs? Yes, I was a fickle youth and as a matter of fact at thirteen, I was still pretty fickle.

However I had moved on from Luke Halpin to Adam Ant. Wow! What a guy. I use to put his posters all over my bedroom walls. I think that was when my mother first started to suspect that her only son was gay. I mean, most ten year old boys put up posters of football teams, sports cars and even the USS Enterprise. In my case, apart from Adam Ant, my walls were plastered with Donny, Jimmy and the rest of the Osmond clan.

Anyway, as so often happens, my moment of truth finally came. After seeing the movie "Ode to Billy" a dozen times and fooling

around with my best friend. I finally came to the realisation that I was homosexual. Though unlike Billy Joe McAllister, I wasn't jumping off any fucking Tallahatchie Bridge.

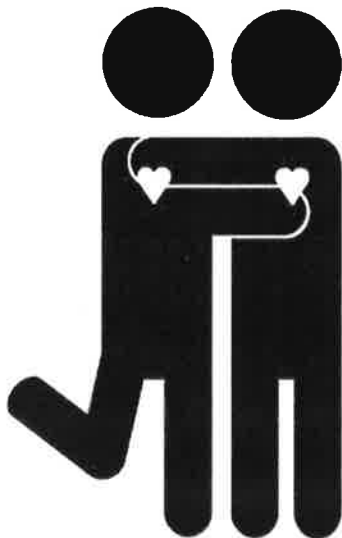
While I accepted the fact that I was different, I wasn't yet ready to admit I was gay, although I had a gay uncle and I had therefore seen at firsthand how cruel some people can be. My own father for instance, called my uncle a faggot every chance he got. They were brothers in law yet they had not spoken to each other for years.

"While I accepted the fact that I was different, I wasn't yet ready to admit I was gay"

Set against this background how could I walk up to my dad and tell him his only son was a member of the same sect as his "black sheep" brother in law whom of course we never spoke about. I was sure my father would have a massive heart attack. I just hoped if I told him he would not call me a faggot.

I lived with dilemma quite a while, Should I tell my father or not? Perhaps if I did tell him he would understand and maybe, even forgive me. After all it wasn't like it would ruin our relationship or anything. We were strangers really, and had begun to avoid each other most chances we got.

Strangely enough I'd always sensed that my father was disappointed in me and that always pissed me off. I mean I thought I was a good kid. My bedroom was always anal-retentively neat and in that day and age I'd never been in trouble with the law. The feelings persisted and I even thought he was disappointed in me because I wasn't some dumb-ass soldier



fanatic like he was. he served nine years in the army then joined the T.A. and I think that kind of warps your mind a little. The fact I wanted to work in an office did not help my situation either.

You know I often wonder what he would have said had he later found out I had fooled around with his fishing buddy's son Billy. Well, I did not mean to. It just happened. We were in Billy's bedroom after school looking at his dad's collection of girlie magazines and well, one thing led to another and pretty soon Bill looked like the lone ranger riding silver. Unfortunately, the experience wasn't mutual. Billy's catholic guilt hit him half a second after he shot the sheriff. He started saying we were both going to hell for being queens. He'd been "shaving his palms" (masturbating) twice a day for at least three years but he was going to hell for doing me once.

Billy had the nerve to say I seduced him what nonsense. He was the one that stuck his tongue in my mouth all the way to my tonsils. Anyway he did not know how he was going to face father O'Brian at his next confession. I tried to assure him that father O'Brian would be more than understanding and probably even identify with him. That's when Billy threw me out.

Although my father did give me problems, I wasn't worried about my mum finding out you know what they say mother always knows. I suppose she'd maybe cry. Then I would cry. Then we would both cry and embrace. It would be one of those precious moments but it never happened. I wished the rest of the world would be as open minded as my mum. But I knew it wasn't. I knew it wouldn't be easy being gay. Hell, it's never easy being different.

People who did not know me would probably call me all sorts of names just because I happen to like men instead of women no other reason. Macho guys with one foot in the closet would be repulsed by me because I reminded

them of a part of themselves they can't accept. Preachers would sentence me to eternal damnation just because some book of ancient mythology says it's a sin to be what I am; the same book that's caused many wars in this world.

All that said I didn't like living a lie and that meant I had to tell my dad.

My intentions were always good and later one day as I left my bedroom and began a slow walk downstairs to where my father sat drinking a beer whilst watching television, I couldn't help feeling like the beaver about to tell Mr Cleaver that he and Wally were butt-buddies. Well I walked in took a deep breath, puffed out my chest and announced I was going out and would be home later.

I then spent the next twenty odd years like one of those limp-wristed actors who go on Parkinson and sit lying through all their bonded teeth about all the women they have had.

I never did get round to telling mum, god rest her but I did tell my father. He said "I thought as much." Well you could have knocked me down with a feather. All that time I spent fearing his reaction wasted.



Artwork by Keith Haring

Michael

My name's Michael, I am a Black British gay male, I am serving a 4 ½ year sentence. I came out in prison which was very difficult but not as difficult as it would have been on the outside. I come from a family that does not believe in homosexuality, so it has always been difficult to express my true self to my close ones. I spent many years masking my self behind my marriage at the time and my business which was a caribbean food café, things were really hurting me inside it was like I was acting or playing a film role for 20 odd years. I was so ashamed of my self I didn't feel normal, I remember crying in my car saying to my self being gay is like a disease I felt I was given some germ.

I didn't have anyone to help me to come to terms with my self I felt trapped in a body I hated. My brothers would play homophobic music which would really make me feel sick at times I just wanted to die, my life came to a breaking point I lashed out, that's the reason I am in prison now. I realized over the time I have been in prison I have spoken to many black gay men who have felt isolated within their own cultures because of the stigma surrounding their sexuality, prison in some way has saved my life so I can have a life. My family are not really happy but they know everything about me. I don't need to hide my self from anyone anymore. I am who I am me. I read something the other day, and it said,

Am I a real man? It's hard to be your own Judge and Jury.

The only thing I can throw my whole weight behind is that I dont strive to be a fake man. I felt this is me now! This is what I strive to be. I feel there are many guys out there who have gone through this.



Come out and play

by Mainey J

Come out, come out
Come out and play
The grass is greener
so they say
I wouldn't know
Cause I've never tried
I've just lived
Behind my own stupid lie.

Come out, come out
come out and play
It's no big thing
Todays the day
Do it do it
Do I say
Stand up tall
Hey guess what? I'm Gay.

Come out, come out
come out and play
The Grass really is greener,
I can finally say.
Yes it was hard
But I had to be true,
Not to others around me,
But to myself and so do you.

From Jason

To be gay and open in today's prison service is like your head being buried in the sands. The barriers you face and sly looks by the people in the high places.

There's notices placed on every corner and corridor within the prison services. But I feel that it's to cover up the cracks.

We are a minority group of people, who need to have a voice and not kept in a suppressive environment just to suit the many.

I'm what I am, and I've always been proud. The problems stem from the cream at the top.

Maybe they are hiding or maybe they are not. They don't like to see people that are different.

But we should all embrace each others being different not just down to colour or what religion but your sexuality is your choice and not to be ignored. Everyone should be pleased because together we can be a powerful voice.

All is seen, but never can be heard.

Being gay in today's prison is living in the dark ages.

We need to stand together and kick people into their places.

And lets remind them at the top its not just down to expenses.

But standing by minorities and lets put gay people into some of their places. Then we are all equal and we should look up to gay aces.

This is my own personal account of what I've seen in diversity and equality within the prison system. Things are made to look good just to live up to auditors and inspectors of prisons. But I feel that the prison services don't cater for gay people in any way or form.

As you can see I can only write about what I see.



Artwork by Josh Sanchez

FUTURE NEWSLETTERS

Thank you for reading this newsletter. We send it out in solidarity with all queer and trans people in prison, in immigration detention, and forced psychiatric custody.

If you have thoughts or feedback about the newsletter, suggestions for future newsletter topics or general ideas to share about the project, we look forward to getting your letters at the address below.

Thanks also to everyone who has written to us about the project. We apologize for the delays that some of you may have experienced in hearing back from us. We are a small (but growing!) volunteer collective and currently meet twice a month to respond to letters and keep the project running. We also had some logistical challenges with our old P.O. Box, but we have a new one now (see address below). We are doing our best to get everyone matched with a penpal who has requested one. If you haven't heard from us in a while and are still waiting for a penpal, drop us a line to let us know.



How to Contact us:

BENT BARS PROJECT
P.O. Box 66754
London
WC1A 9BF

bent.bars.project@gmail.com
www.co-re.org/bentbars

The Bent Bars Project is a letter writing program that connects lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersex, queer and gender non-conforming communities across prison walls. If you would like more information or would like to request a penpal, please drop us a line.



Feel free to copy, share & pass on this newsletter to anyone else who might be interested.