



Boykin, Keith (b. 1965)

by Linda Rapp

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Keith Boykin.
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Activist and author Keith Boykin has committed his life to advancing the rights of the African-American and glbtq communities and to enhancing communication between them.

Keith Boykin's life began on a date that he finds particularly meaningful, August 28, 1965, the second anniversary of Martin Luther King's inspirational "I Have a Dream" speech and also the birthday of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, a pioneering advocate for glbtq rights.

Boykin was born in St. Louis, Missouri, but his family soon moved to the overwhelmingly white suburb of Florissant, where he felt "a little out of place." Nevertheless, he thrived, excelling at academics, participating in student government, and playing on several sports teams at school.

Boykin's parents separated while he was in grade school, but he remained in close contact with the two of them and with relatives on both sides of the family, including an uncle who was a church organist, gospel musician, and "a flamboyant gay man," although, Boykin recalled, "I did not even know at the time that he was gay or, for that matter, what it meant to be gay."

When Boykin was fifteen, his mother, a government employee, was transferred to California, and his father moved to Florida to start a business. Boykin was once again an excellent and engaged student at his high school in Florida--the president of the student government, an editor of the school newspaper, and an award-winning debater. He also made the varsity track team but decided against competing in wrestling, which he had done in Missouri, for fear that his new schoolmates might think that he was gay.

His high school achievements won him acceptance at Dartmouth College, where he continued to excel. He won the William S. Churchill Prize for outstanding freshman man in 1984 and the Barrett Cup as the most distinguished member of the graduating class in 1987. In between, he was editor-in-chief of the college newspaper, an exchange student at the Universidad de Grenada in Spain, and a member of a highly successful track team that vied for an NCAA championship. Boykin competed in national and international track events and set a school record for the 500-meter run.

Upon graduating from Dartmouth, Boykin became a press aide in the presidential campaign of Michael Dukakis and was subsequently named the candidate's Georgia state press secretary. Following the defeat of Dukakis in the 1988 election, Boykin remained in Georgia, teaching English and social studies at Lithonia High School.

Boykin successfully applied to Harvard Law School and began his course of study there in 1989. He took an active role in campus life, serving as an editor of the *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* and becoming a leader in the Coalition for Civil Rights, a student group dedicated to the cause of a more diverse faculty.

It was while Boykin was at Harvard that he came to terms with his sexual orientation. Having realized that

he was gay, he turned to prayer "for strength in facing the unknown and the then unforeseeable challenges [he] would encounter as an openly gay black man."

Boykin described his first steps out of the closet as "tentative." He attended a forum during Harvard's Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian Awareness Week and soon thereafter went to a bookstore where he "searched for a how-to book on being gay."

The first person to whom he came out was his mother, who was not entirely surprised by the revelation. Although at the time, Boykin wrote, "I think she held out hope . . . that I might change," she expressed her love and support for him, and the two continue to be extremely close.

Boykin began a relationship with a fellow law student and started coming out to friends and classmates. Revealing his sexual orientation to his extended family was a much more gradual process. While some relatives, including his sister, were immediately accepting and supportive, others condemned his "lifestyle" upon learning that he was gay. His grandmother declared herself sickened by the news. "It would be years before she would begin to change her attitude about my homosexuality," Boykin wrote, but she did eventually come around.

After graduating from Harvard in 1992, Boykin accepted a job at a San Francisco law firm where he had worked the previous summer. He soon left, however, to join the staff of the Bill Clinton presidential campaign as Midwest press director.

Following the victory in the general election, Boykin remained on the Clinton team, moving to Washington, D. C., where he worked first on the presidential inauguration committee and then formally joined the administration as Special Assistant to the President and Director of News Analysis. He was later promoted to Director of Specialty Media.

In April 1993 Boykin helped arrange a historic meeting between President Clinton and glbtq leaders. Although Midge Costanza, aide to President Jimmy Carter, had arranged a White House meeting with representatives of the gay and lesbian community in 1977, the meeting that Boykin put together was the first White House meeting with glbtq leaders that the President himself attended.

Boykin took part in the Oval Office session, which was attended by eight men and women from glbtq organizations, including members of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the Black Gay and Lesbian Leadership Forum, and the March on Washington Committee.

Boykin ended his service at the White House in January 1995 in order to devote time to writing his first book, *One More River to Cross: Black and Gay in America* (1996). In it, he recounted his own experiences as a member of both the black and gay communities and explored the wider subjects of the relationship--and often tension--between the two groups as well as their struggles for equality in American society.

In late 1995 Boykin became the executive director of the National Black Lesbian and Gay Forum. He spoke out on issues of concern to the black glbtq community and sought to increase its visibility, leading a group in the Million Man March in 1995 and making frequent appearances on television and radio programs.

Boykin left the organization in 1998 to work on his second book, *Respecting the Soul: Daily Reflections for Black Lesbians and Gays* (1999). The inspirational volume establishes a theme for each month and has entries for each day consisting of a quotation from a famous African-American, commentary about it by Boykin, and a suggestion for action. The work won the 1999 Lambda Literary Award for Spirituality.

Boykin joined the political science faculty of American University in Washington, D. C. in 1999. The

following year he was honored by the School of Public Affairs as the outstanding adjunct professor.

Boykin left the university in 2001, moving to New York, where he founded the National Black Justice Coalition, now the largest African-American glbtq rights group in the nation.

In New York, Boykin also met and fell in love with his life partner, Nathan Williams, an entertainment attorney who has also worked as an actor and model.

In the election year of 2004, Williams became Boykin's campaign manager on the Showtime network's *American Candidate*, a show on which a field of ten people--also including Chrissy Gephardt, the lesbian daughter of former United States Representative Richard Gephardt--competed in a simulated presidential campaign. Unfortunately, Gephardt was eliminated in the first round, but Boykin fared much better, falling only slightly short of reaching the final "election" round.

Boykin intended to speak at the Millions More March in Washington in 2005, but after being given a time slot by event organizer Louis Farrakhan, he was barred from both the podium and the VIP section by the Reverend Willie F. Wilson, the executive director of the march. Wilson, who had fulminated from the pulpit against homosexuality, alleged that Boykin had failed to meet certain conditions required in order to speak, but he would not say what they were. Boykin afterward commented, "It's a tragedy that one person stuck in the past can prevent our community from moving forward."

In *Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies, and Denial in Black America* (2005), Boykin discussed African-American attitudes toward sexuality--homosexuality in particular--and urged greater openness. He called "challeng[ing] the homophobia in our own lives, in our families, in our churches, and in our social settings" an issue of paramount importance.

Boykin wrote *Beyond the Down Low* in response to J. L. King's *On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of "Straight" Black Men Who Sleep with Men* (2004) and similar books and articles decrying "down low" behavior by black men, that is, the practice of secretly engaging in same-sex sexual activity while maintaining a heterosexual image and having female partners. King and others attribute the rise in the number of HIV/AIDS cases among black women to the phenomenon of men on the down low, giving little if any attention to other factors, such as drug use and inadequate health care.

King's ex-wife, Brenda Stone Browder, also wrote a book, *On the Up and Up: A Survival Guide for Women Living with Men on the Down Low* (2005), in which she concurred in linking HIV/AIDS rates for black women to the down low. She also called homosexuality sinful.

King cited a religious awakening as his reason for ceasing to live on the down low. Boykin pointed out, however, that the condemnation of homosexuality preached in some African-American churches may lead gay men to attempt to appear to conform to heterosexist norms. "If we do not want so many men to be on the down low, then we need to stop helping to push them there in the first place," he commented.

Boykin acknowledged the significant role of religion in African-American culture, noting, "Whether we go to church or not, we are influenced by the church," and expressed the hope that more churches will follow the lead of those that affirm glbtq people. "We know that religion should be used as a tool for love, not as a weapon of hate," he wrote.

For several years Boykin has been sharing news, views, and his personal experiences on his web site, www.keithboykin.com. In early 2006 he also took to the airwaves as a co-host on the BET J network's *My Two Cents*, an "urban current affairs talk show."

Boykin has long been deeply devoted to the struggles for equality of and within the African-American and glbtq communities. His dedication can be heard in the final lines of his "A Poem for the Millennium March"

(2000):

I Speak

as a proud African-American

same-gender-loving

Christian-identified man

unashamed of who I am

unwilling to be divided into identity camps, and

unbowed by the demons of hatred that would incite me
to fear instead of love.

I speak because Audre Lorde tells me,

"When I dare to be powerful,

to use my strength in the service of my vision,

then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid."

I Speak Today

As One Proud Gay Man.

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