

LIVING IN EXILE

A Jamaican gay man flees his island home amid persecution and violence

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A troubled picture of Jamaica has surfaced in the global news media. In September Newsweek reported that 98 people in that island nation had fallen victim to 43 anti-gay mob attacks. Although terrifying, these reports remained distant and intangible to me until I met Nathan, a gay Jamaican man who is seeking asylum in the United States. Nathan consented to an interview in the hope that this piece would draw attention to the mayhem that is consuming Jamaica.

Nathan reflected on the sharp escalation of anti-gay violence in his country over this past year: "I remember since the start of the year it has been really bad. I had attended a funeral of a friend. And while we were at the funeral, they [a mob] threw stones in the church. God, that was a funeral! About a hundred people, give or take. There were a lot of stones."

As 2007 wore on, Nathan began to fear violence in his own home: "I lived in a gated community 'coz I was threatened in my previous communities. I remember one evening some guys were sitting at the gate and they were talking about [attacking gay men]. Oh God, I was so scared. I didn't sleep. I would put glass drink bottles behind my door as an alarm." Nathan's decision to leave for America came after receiving death threats at work: "Somebody kept calling my phone.

They called and told me that if they ever see me or anybody from the [gay] community they were gonna shoot [us] up. It just went on for a period of time and I couldn't deal with it anymore. Can you imagine?"

While withdrawing money at his bank in order to flee, Nathan had another scare: "There was a report of a crossdresser being attacked in the same neighborhood as the bank. By then the people in the bank had heard the story and people were starting to talk and were being vicious about it. I started to think 'what if this [violence] spills over on me? What can I do?' So I was thinking of maybe jumping over the bank counter [to escape]. This was no way to live.....in constant fear."

When asked what Americans can do to help Jamaicans suffering abroad, Nathan suggested private donations to organizations that help the local gay community like Jamaica AIDS Support for Life (JASL) and the Jamaican Forum for Lesbians, All-sexuals, and Gays (J-FLAG).

At the end of our interview, Nathan left me with some words that gays, straights, Jamaicans, and Americans alike could relate to: "People should be treated equally regardless of who they are. See me as an individual first. And when you are able to see me as an individual, you are in a position to be

more appreciative of me and who I really am."

How You Can Help

If you would like to contribute to the effort to protect human rights around the world, check out these two organizations:

 **AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL USA**
ACTION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS. HOPE FOR HUMANITY.

Amnesty International's OUTfront project works on behalf of LGBT victims of human rights violations. www.amnestyusa.org

 **HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH**

Human Rights Watch documents and exposes abuses based on sexual orientation and gender identity worldwide, and advocates for laws and policies that will protect everyone's dignity. www.hrw.org