We Are Family

April 30, 2013 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

I've never been the kind of person who wraps himself up in the flag—any flag, whether it be the stars and stripes of the United States, the scarlet, gray and gold of the Marine Corps, or the bright colors of the rainbow flag. That said, I am happy to be an American, to have served my country in uniform and to be a gay man. I've just never been comfortable wearing those things on my sleeve.

I do, however, feel more than comfortable seeing those flags displayed—I feel a sense of pride and camaraderie. At their best, flags are symbols that unite an otherwise disparate group of people under an idea, such as citizenship, service or equality.

The big difference among these flags is that the U.S. flag and the Marine Corps flag when displayed send a message of love of country, but the rainbow flag when it's displayed sends a message of love of self: "You are welcome here." I'll never forget how accepted I felt seeing all the rainbow flags waving at my first LGBT pride parade.

It is this sense of acceptance—or rather, the lack of it—that is so dissonant when it comes to HIV stigma among gay men. An essay by Mark S. King—an AIDS advocate, an author and a blogger living with HIV since 1985—explores why it persists.

Our Q&A with Paul Semugoma, MD, reveals not only a lack of acceptance, but also an abundance of intolerance for LGBT people, especially gay men with HIV, in his native Uganda. Case in point: He hasn't gone home since he came out as gay in a speech in Washington, DC, during the XIX International AIDS Conference last year.

Such circumstances are reminiscent of a time not so long ago in the United States when our AIDS epidemic started to take hold. Not only was there a lack of empathy for gay men dying of this disease, but there was even outright hate from some parts of society who believed that we had it coming. Such sentiments continue, but our humanity has turned the tide.

The emotion of that time was expressed in many ways, but perhaps no medium was a better outlet than art. Visual AIDS—the creators of the Day Without Art and the Red Ribbon—helped harness that creative explosion into a focused weapon in the war against the virus. Read our feature to find out how 25 years later the group still arms HIV-positive artists. Happy Pride Month!

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