

The R.U.1.2? Community Center's staff, Executive Director Christopher Kaufman and Program Assistant Khristian Kemp-DeLisser, recently attended the 15th Annual Creating Change Conference in Portland, Oregon. This year, for the first time ever, the conference took on a specific theme, "Building an Anti-Racist Movement." The opening plenary was a conversation billed as "A Rap on Race," echoing the famous 1971 talk of same name by queer African-American writer James Baldwin and white anthropologist Margaret Mead. At Creating Change, Latina activist Carmen Vasquez of New York City's Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center talked with white activist Tim Sweeney of the Empire State Pride Agenda about questions of power, trust, privilege and perhaps most importantly, risk taking in anti-racist work.

Upon returning from the Portland conference, R.U.1.2? organizers decided to create their own version of the "Rap on Race," specific to their work in Vermont and in the Community Center. The following is an expanded version of their effort, which originally appeared in the Winter 2002-03 R.U.1.2? newsletter, "From the Center..."

Khristian is a 23-year-old, black, middle-class gay male. Christopher is a 33-year-old, white, middle-class queer male and radical faerie. They interviewed each other for this article from either side of the antique "partner desk" that they share in R.U.1.2? Headquarters.

Christopher: In Portland, Carmen Vasquez challenged us again and again to take risks in our work. But what stuck with me from the rap was Carmen's demand that white activists truly be willing to give up our privilege in order to work for racial, social, sexual and economic justice. Time after time, Carmen noted, she has felt allies willing to run with her to the edge of the cliff but then felt them pull back when there was no guarantee of a soft landing. In my work as a white anti-racist ally, I have certainly felt my own resistance to jumping over the edge with my brothers and sisters of color.

Khristian: I won't pretend that I have no apprehension about this, Christopher. During a workshop at the conference, I had the most trouble with the ground rule that said, "Trust intent." I admit to not always trusting the commitment level of my white allies. I feel like white people need to make a conscious effort to confront racism. But I live with racism, and experience it at such a gut and basic level, even putting my views into words can at times seem like I am being oppressed. The implication that I even have to point it out hurts me. But I also know that in order to be partners in this, we must both commit to the process. I have to swallow the resentment, bitterness and distrust rising up in the back of my throat like a bad aftertaste.

Christopher: R.U.1.2?, like most non-profits here in Vermont, is a primarily white organization. As a young black man, what were you thinking when you decided to come to work with us?

Khristian: I was thinking I could make a life here in VT as a young gay man. I knew what I was getting into. I saw the website and R.U.1.2?'s brochure before I even found the physical location. I noticed the lack of faces of color. As a black man, I didn't expect to feel any more safe at R.U.1.2? than I did walking down Church Street in Burlington. I also brought my history of volunteerism and community involvement with me to Vermont. As a black man and as an activist, I have become accustomed to creating a space for myself where there is none, even in the face of resistance. I felt like I knew enough about what it is to be a gay man to feel comfortable at the center. And I knew enough about being black to be comfortable with my discomfort.

Christopher: When people come into R.U.1.2? Headquarters, we hope they feel welcomed and safe to be whoever they want to be. Do you feel safe expressing your full identity at R.U.1.2? Are there parts of your identity that it doesn't feel safe to express?

Khristian: I don't feel safe, but I hope that by showing up to work every day and being willing to be that one face of color, I am showing that I am willing to be your partner and ally in your work to build a welcoming organization and office. I often feel like I am single-handedly integrating R.U.1.2? When I go out into the community to represent the center, I feel like my black face is a blank check that R.U.1.2? better be ready to cover. Whether I feel safe here or not, if R.U.1.2? wants to create a space that is welcoming and affirming, we have to be willing to do the work.

Christopher: Many of the queer people of color that I know feel as though they are often forced to choose an identity and be either a person of color or a queer person. What do you think is behind this dynamic? How can R.U.1.2? support people of color in their right to an integrated, fully expressed humanity?

Khristian: The message I receive from the gay community is that black people do not matter. The message I receive from the black community is that being gay is too high a risk for an already oppressed people. For many, the gay

to homophobia through oppression. I know heterosexism can inform white gay people's knowledge of racism. Is it semantics? Perhaps. My race always trumps my sexual orientation. But you do not need to understand racism to fight against discrimination and oppression.

Now I have some questions for you, Christopher. The GLBTIQA acronym is largely a construction of upper-class, white culture. How would you respond to those who say R.U.1.2?'s mission is to serve GLBTIQA-identified people and that we are inherently ill-prepared to tackle anti-racism issues?

Christopher: In the gay movement, we deliberately constructed our identity as a minority. Many of us who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual can still pass in the outside world if we need to. Like you said, for many of us being gay is a luxury that we can take on and off as we desire. And indeed, much of our gay and lesbian organizing is built on the premise that we are "just like everyone else," that we are white, middle class and just want to "fit in" to the dominant culture. We have the responsibility to address institutionalized racism and shift our own work to be less identity-based and more inclusive of a broader definition of social justice. It seems clear to me that the way to end oppression of queer people is to work for systemic change, not to seek limited access to a broken and dehumanizing system.

Khristian: White people control the places of

be coming for me that night." It is in our own self-interest as white queer people to work against racism.

Khristian: Many white people in Vermont can conceivably go through their lives without ever having to see real people of color and therefore not be confronted by their own whiteness. What hand does racism play in creating and sustaining a world like that? How can white people actively combat the very racism that gives them such great privilege?

Christopher: As a white guy, I am often confronted by fellow white people who say, "There are no people of color in Vermont, so we don't have a problem with racism." Statements like this are based in an acceptance of American apartheid that allows white people to ignore and reject people of color living in our own communities. The truth is that people of color *do* live in Vermont in increasing numbers, we just refuse to see you. It's time to stop throwing events and then sit around wondering why no people of color showed up when we did little to demonstrate that we would actually acknowledge your presence if you did turn out. As a white person, I believe that I too am hurt by racism. I do not get to know my brothers and sisters of color and my experience of the world is greatly limited and diminished because of my blindness.

Khristian: What is R.U.1.2? doing right now to



R.U.1.2?'s Christopher Kaufman and Khristian Kemp-DeLisser Discuss the Issues of Power, Trust, Privilege and Visibility Amidst a White Majority

male identity is a luxury. R.U.1.2? can support people of color by not expecting them to walk through Headquarters door until we have shown we can walk through theirs. We need to reach out of the gay ghetto. We can't be afraid to show people of color that the beauty of "queer" is that it can encompass a rich diversity of views and experiences.

Christopher: How does it make you feel when white gay people say that they understand racism because they, too, are oppressed due to their sexual orientation?

Khristian: I can feel my gut twist up whenever I hear a white gay person say those words. I do not want to share the pain I get from being the victim of racism or the pride I get for persevering and thriving despite racism. I do not want to believe that being gay gives people an understanding of racism. They have not earned that right. I am more comfortable with saying white gay people understand how racism is connected

power and privilege in Vermont to such an extent that it is a hostile environment for people of color. Vermont has become a gay Mecca because of the success gay and lesbian folk have had in obtaining civil rights and protection under the law; civil unions being the crowning achievement in a long struggle. How are gay and lesbian social and political successes in Vermont linked to white power and privilege?

Christopher: One of the manifestations of white power and privilege has been the co-opting of anti-racist work to serve the status quo. For example, it has been argued that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 primarily served to allow straight, white women into the dominant power structure, despite its origins in anti-racist organizing. In Vermont, LGBT organizers have worked hard to win legal rights from straight people. But we must not rest on our laurels, we are not done until everyone's humanity is held as sacred and common. As James Baldwin said, "If they come for you in the morning, they will

combat racism?"

Christopher: R.U.1.2? is actively assessing its programmatic work, our efforts at collaboration and our overall mission to ensure that we are making choices through an anti-racist lens. We are working with the Women of Color Alliance, the Haymarket People's Fund and others to evaluate our work and give our board, staff and volunteers some tools to make their work at R.U.1.2? actively anti-racist. We also really want to know what our members and friends are thinking about this work and we will organize opportunities to make your opinions known. We're in this for the long haul and we know we won't be able to change overnight. But we're committed to the process, to making mistakes, to adjusting and to trying again. ▼

Khristian and Christopher can be reached at 802.860.RU12 or by e-mail at thecenter@ru12.org. Feedback, insight and collaboration are always welcome!