Korey Anthony Chisholm lives in Guyana, the country of his birth. He was the 2007 winner of the Miss Gay Guyana Glory Pageant; the pageant is still put on annually. Korey has been involved in youth activism in the Caribbean for a long time, and has been involved with organizations such as The Global Youth Coalition on HIV/AIDS. He is currently an advisor at the Global Forum on MSM and HIV, and an Ambassador at One Young World.

Kofi: So can you tell us a bit about what it’s like growing up gay in Guyana?

KAC: It is difficult. It’s very difficult, but it depends also on who you are. Because if you’re a very flamboyant person, you get troubles, you get bottles pelted at you, people will give you a lot of verbal harassment, throw bricks, things like that most commonly. So most times you get that form of reaction. And you have persons who are not out, they cover everything up—and that’s how most people live, because they’re afraid of the discrimination they will receive from everyone: community, family members, sometimes anyone who sees you and knows or thinks, perceives—they don’t even have to know that you’re gay—if they perceive you as being gay, you hear “fire bun!,”1 or if is more than one of you, you find bottles coming at you. So it is very difficult to be outdoors, or to walk around. So we don’t really go anywhere.

I remember growing up in my village: to walk from school to home was a challenge. I need to take the back streets; I need to think about if I see a group of guys liming2 at the corner, I don’t pass at that corner, I walk around, I find a short cut where there’s not much people, because of fright of being pelt at or hearing the slang; you just don’t want to deal with it.

Kofi: And these are people who don’t even know, people who just think you’re acting in a certain stereotypical way, or something like that?

KAC: Yeah, because they don’t know you, they just see you and that’s what they perceive that you are, and so they act.

There are some people, some gay persons in society, who are maybe respected for many different reasons, right? Because after a while if people start troubling you, and you react like a bad-ass—and you can fight and stuff—people don’t trouble you, they say, “oh, I wouldn’t dare go there,” right? They respect you. So you have a bit of leverage in terms of being public. So sometimes you can find those persons in society who can lime at a park, or you know, walk about without hearing those kind of slangs.

Sometimes, for me, I feel it’s very ethnic. Sometimes maybe East Indian guys trouble you, but that’s a very low percentage. But in the African population, homophobia is very, very deep, and so if you go out anywhere in a public area and there’s a lot of African guys, you’re bound to be troubled. In a venue where there are Indian people, your chances of not being troubled, or you know, not getting that kind of emotional distress put upon you, are much much better. So there’s not much of a public scene here; we’re private and enclosed.

Kofi: So is there any sort of open gay scene then, in Guyana?

KAC: It differs in the Caribbean, in terms of gay scenes, or places where you can go. I know in Guyana we do not have a club, we do not have any lime corner really. Most times if we party it’s like, I tell you, you tell whoever, they tell Joseph, and so on. You know where the party is, in some private place, but there’s no acceptance of gayness here, so there’s no actual public place in any meaningful way; there isn’t any place where you openly lime.

Kofi: You were saying that your ability to live openly in Guyanese society depends on who you are. Does economics play a role in that?

KAC: Of course, yes. Because many gay people in the Caribbean—I don’t know about the rest of the world—but in Guyana, are seen as very well-educated persons; they’re thought of as the sort of persons who went through school, they are seen as really bright and intelligent people, right? And that’s the expectation, and the way society stereotypes gay people. And a lot of the time the popular gay persons who live openly in society either have money, or they’ve been to school, or they have high positions. So people expect that everybody else who is gay will also be like that and have those things.