

Bishop Ma-Heé: A Journey to Self-Acceptance

By Mary Damiano

You can call Bishop S.F. Irons-Ma-Heé a lot of things, but can't call her a slacker.

Though she's only 29, Ma-Heé's journey has encompassed the three P's: performing, politics and preaching. She's performed with an international lesbian theater company. She's worked as liaison to the mayor of Atlanta. She founded the International Fellowship of Independent Churches and is the first known openly lesbian consecrated bishop with apostolic succession. She is founder and CEO of Gay Black Pride South Florida. She serves on the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Religious Roundtable, which is trying to determine how gay-oriented churches and synagogues fit into President Bush's faith-based funding initiative.

She's struggled with her sexuality and her own internalized homophobia. But through her constant faith, she's found her way these through challenges to become a strong voice and leader in the community.

One of the greatest challenges Ma-Heé has faced is reconciling her sexuality with her spirituality. "My prayer is that we simply affirm people where they are and let them know that God loves them just the way they are, as opposed to telling them they have to change in order to get or receive God's love, because that's not the god I serve," she says. "I tell my parishioners that if the god you serve doesn't serve you, get a new one."

Right now, Ma-Heé is especially proud that the church she founded, Fellowship Tabernacle-I.F.I.O.C., has found a new home on the campus of the Sunshine Cathedral in Fort Lauderdale. Worshipers meet there each Sunday at 3pm to hear Ma-Heé spread her message of love and acceptance. The large, airy chapel is a long way from the office space in Miami where the congregation formerly gathered.

Like her church, Ma-Heé has come a long way. The Bronx native was born and raised in the church, by her mother, a Minister of Music and evangelist. While mother and daughter now differ in their religious beliefs, Ma-Heé is glad for her

upbringing.

"I don't agree totally with the theology I was raised with; it at least gave me a foundation I am grateful for," Ma-Heé says. "It stressed the importance of God in one's life and the need for that to be the center of one's life and that's something that's literally saved my life."

Because of her religious background, coming out was not easy. Ma-Heé describes the process as brutal and violent. She was very conflicted about being gay because it went against what she was taught.

Ma-Heé says that when her family gets together, things get interesting. While her younger brother is still trying to find himself, her two older brothers are orthodox Muslim. "With the fundamental Christian, the orthodox Muslims and then the lesbian Christian pastor, it's hilarious," Ma-Heé says. There is something on which her mother and brothers agree. "The one thing they have in common is they think that homosexuality is a sin."

Ma-Heé and her mother have agreed to

"With the fundamental Christian, the orthodox Muslims and then the lesbian Christian pastor, it's hilarious." - Bishop S.F. Irons-Ma-Heé

disagree about their disparate beliefs and Ma-Heé being gay. "My mother reminded me that she's still holding out hope that I will be delivered. I've been out to my mother for 15 years," Ma-Heé laughs. "I've gone through two marriages, both to women, and she still holds out that hope."

Ma-Heé came out at 14, while attending a performing arts high school in New York. "I knew instantly when I went to audition that this is where I wanted to be because there were queens as far as the I could see."

Knowing she wanted to be a performer, she eventually joined WOW, Women's One World, the largest lesbian theater company



Photo By Pompano Bill

in the world. "I went from this environment of a performing arts high school, a predominantly black gay male environment, to this white, leather-wearing motorcycle-riding lesbian separatist dyke community," she says.

She credits both communities for shaping her life, though she was still conflicted about her orientation. "I tried to do the ex-gay thing," she says. "In my opinion, it doesn't work and should not be offered as an alternative."

The 16 year-old prayed and fasted for God to shift her sexuality. She asked every minister she could find to lay hands on her and ask God to deliver her. "I was consumed with having my homosexuality erased from my experience," Ma-Heé says. When her prayers were not answered, she decided to conduct an experiment to find out what was so awful about being a lesbian that she didn't want to be one.

She found her way to WOW, and fell in love with the lesbian community. She made another prayer that God either take away her homosexuality or make her okay with it. Another prayer and big epiphany later, she was out, proud, and married to her first wife.

"It was truly a radical quick shift," she says. "Once I prayed that prayer... I began to get an overwhelming sense of peace that this wasn't something I wanted to change. It became something I wanted to celebrate."

At 17, Ma-Heé moved from New York to Atlanta. "New York roughed me up," she says. "Atlanta smoothed me out." There, she found politics, and became a walking testament to those three taboo subjects, sex, religion and politics. As gay and lesbian liaison to Mayor Bill Campbell, Ma-Heé was being groomed for political office, though she couldn't deny the pulls she felt toward performing and religious life. A friend gave her his advice: they're all the same, pick one. She chose religion, entered seminary and went on to found the Redefined Faith Worship Center, formerly the Redefined Faith Worship Church, the first place of worship for the African-American GLBT community in the Southeast.

The altar is her stage now; a chapel serves as her theater. She preaches a message of love and affirmation to worshippers on the campus of the Sunshine Cathedral.

On the Sunday after Thanksgiving, Ma-Heé eschewed a traditional sermon and sang and drummed, leading her followers in a spirited outpouring of thanks and praise.

This is preacher as rock star, and while at 4'9, bespectacled and bald, Ma-Heé doesn't exactly fit the rock star profile, she does embody the spirit of one. She's charismatic, dynamic and clearly having the time of her life.

Always eager to reach new people, in February Ma-Heé will perform her one-woman show, *Sister From the Hood*, which is based on her experiences. The show will be part of Ma-Heé's Ministry Without Walls, designed to reach people who don't need a worship experience. The ministry will also offer HIV testing.

"My objective is to reach and affirm by any means necessary," Ma-Heé says. "As long as we get that done, I'm a happy camper."

Ch-Ch-Ch-Change Is...

New Play to be Sponsored by GLSEN

By Ian Drew

Change— "A Family In Conflict", a new play written, directed and produced by Fort Lauderdale resident and Broward County Schools psychologist Robby Kendall, will tell the story of one man's coming out process to South Florida audiences beginning in January of next year. The Greater Fort Lauderdale chapter of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network has announced that it will sponsor the play performances on the evenings of January 18 and January 19. GLSEN Miami is also considering sponsoring the performance on January 12.



Robby Kendall

GLSEN Co-chair De Palazzo says that the non-profit organization plans to provide literature and a 10-minute spoken introduction at each sponsored performance.

The play was chosen after Kendall presented it to GLSEN and Palazzo read the script. "This is a great piece of work. Robby

Kendall's play dramatically displays not only the painful and very realistic school-day to school-day challenges of a gay high school youth, but it also unveils what many of our lesbian and gay youth go home to at the end of each day," she says. "I suggest that one will surely be moved, if not 'changed,' after viewing this strong and very realistic piece of work. GLSEN highly recommends not missing this poignant and telling story of one young man's challenging life."

The play is loosely based on Kendall's own coming out experience with his mother. The Tampa native, who has no previous professional theater experience, says that the idea to write the script and base the lead character, Bryce, on himself was a way for him to deal with his own issues over coming out. He says his mother liked the script so much she cried, and will come down from Atlanta to view the play when it is presented.

Israeli actress Haylee Elkayam was chosen to play Laura Senate, the character based on Kendall's mother, for *Change*. "I took the role because it had a lot of challenges," she says. "It is not because of playing someone much older (Senate is 45 while Elkayam is 25), but because of how ignorant she is towards homosexuality. She is so detached from the reality of the gay experience."

The play also tells the story Bryce's

Haylee Elkayam



coming out process with other characters, including other members of his family and his schoolmates. Kendall is very happy with the work being done by the actors, who are collaborating with him on creating the realism of the production.

"I am very impressed with the strong cast and they work very well together. Some have no previous acting experience, but you would never know it from their performances. It is nice to see all of this coming together," he says.

The performances will run on January

11, 12, 18 and 19, as well as on February 15 and 16 at alternating times. The Broward County Library and Auditorium – Sunrise Branch, located at 1350 East Sunrise Boulevard, will hold the initial run of the play. Kendall next plans to direct a film version of the piece, and he also plans to stage a theatrical version of a gay-themed television soap opera that he created in the spring.

For more information or to purchase tickets to *Change*, call Robby Kendall at 954.525.7703.