



Collection of Myanmar's Unstraight Stories, 2016

Myanmar's Unstraight Stories,

Project in 2016

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Advised by the Unstraight Museum

To all queer friends

INTRODUCTION

Unsatisfied with the lack of historical documentation of their own community in museums, several queer professionals in Sweden created their own Unstraight Museum. Here they invited friends to define their unstraight-ness and share personal stories. This was a huge success, and gained massive support from the Swedish Institute. Consequently, the Unstraight Museum has been collaborating with many organizations and small groups that focus on LGBT rights in several countries, including Vietnam, Russia, Cambodia, Serbia, and Myanmar.

Museum representatives came to Vietnam when I was busy collecting Vietnamese LGBT stories as an employee for one Vietnamese local non-profit organization called the Center for Creative Initiative in Health and Population. The organization did not have the experience and resources to make the large-scale exhibition they imagined--a kind of ethnographic exhibition about the life and history of Vietnamese LGBT people. With the financial and additional resource support of the Unstraight Museum and the Swedish Institute, and through collaboration with multiple organizations, the exhibition (called "The Cabinet") materialized as a great success. Last year, after the exhibition concluded, I brought my work to Cambodia, followed this year by work on the Myanmar Unstraight Museum Project. Efforts in both countries have been in collaboration with the Swedish Unstraight Museum.

My first sojourn in Yangon Myanmar was from 15-18 May, 2016 when Ulf Petersson from the Unstraight Museum and I participated in the IDAHO, an international day of recognition meant to raise awareness of human rights issues faced by LGBT persons and to prevent discrimination and stigma towards these communities. In this visit, we met some key members of the MSM community, and organizations like King and Queen and the Myanmar Color Rainbow Networks in order to introduce the project and initiate collaboration. At the end of the meeting, the name ECHO was selected for the planned exhibition.

Just before we left, these networks helped us recruit three staff workers: one coordinator and two assistants. It took a lot of time for our new colleagues to find these three staff members and language was a primary concern. We needed staff workers who could communicate with me--the curator from Vietnam. In addition, these staff persons needed to be from the country's LGBT community and to have networking experience with different LGBT groups. Later we hired someone to translate the transcripts of our interviews.

I started working on the Myanmar project on 16 July. The coordinator welcomed me, and all three of the staff discussed how to proceed. For the first week, we found an old apartment in downtown Yangon where I could live and we could all work.

This apartment became our interviewing site as well. The loud pattering of the rainy season and occasional blackouts added to the strenuous conditions, as did charity groups, who passed our window on the street with high-volume music and loud-speakers. There were no ideal recording studio spaces we could alternatively use.

There was much work for the whole team between networking, interviewing, and especially transcribing and translating materials. Prompt translations helped us fully understand early conversations in order to better shape later ones. As no interviewers had background in ethnography or sociology, their interviewing skills were based on personal charm, innate listening and communication skills, and their own curiosity to learn about their other LGBT friends. It was a learning-by-doing process and a lot of self-reflection needed to be involved.

As a curator and project manager, the language barrier prevented me from immediately understanding conversations. As I video-taped one interview after another, I became able to pick up information through observing facial expressions and the vocal tones of both interviewers and interviewees; but Sometimes I misinterpreted what I encountered. The stories were told in either non-structural or semi-structural ways. Stories were constructed in the set-up environments; or the

environments that the story-tellers knew about and where their stories would take place. They also had the opportunity to tell their stories and opinions to a significant audience including friends and interviewers. They were completely aware of the camera and audio recorders. Interviewees were informed about their rights to answer or reject questions, as well as to withdraw their participation even after the respective interview wrapped up. They were informed about their rights to reveal or withhold their identity, as well as the opportunity to discuss with the team the extent to which they desired to share their identity with the audience. To my surprise, many participants were willing to share stories, their faces and voices. This candor was all very inspiring. In general, most interviewees were apprehensive with the audience and camera; but they quickly forgot about the existence of the camera man/woman, and kept their eyes on the interviewers for periods of direct and frank conversation. Interviewers assisted with the construction of the stories as well. It was up to them to devise initial and follow-up questions in order to catalyze and expand stories. Interviewers' interests were highly important to give conversations depth. It all turned out to be a massive project with a lot of materials collected. Here in this book, we try our best to include as many stories, knowledge and perspectives from

the interviewees as possible. Whether we want it or not, these stories were reconstructed during the transcription, translation, and curatorial editing processes. They are authentic and raw but also polished in many ways. Even though I wish I could present these stories just the way they were told, I know not exactly how the rawest raw materials could look. We would never know. However, I would like our audience to keep in mind that the stories appearing in this book are constructed and co-constructed. Do these processes disempower the voices of story tellers? Are these processes exploitative?

As for the first concern, I would say no, as the story-tellers' engagement and participation with the project continues today beyond the conclusion of the interviews. The high level of engagement that has followed the stories suggests to me we are doing something right, and that the subjects' stories are somehow liberating, not only for themselves, but also to their audience. It is actually liberating and empowering for the interviewees, who are themselves from the LGBT community. Interviewees too were participants, so far as they were free to decide and actively involve themselves in the story construction process and engage in matters they valued. The donors and curators/project managers, who are outsiders in the Myanmar culture and LGBT community, give very restricted input to these

narratives. As a researcher, my interest would inevitably be different from those of the other team players. My questions and comments remain at the end of conversations. During the interviews I jump in only when I felt conversations were dry or there was a lack of concentration among the interviewees. I also gave suggested expanding conversations in order for us to learn not only the personal lives of LGBT individuals, but also about their professions, especially those of persons whom are ritual dancers.

I am greatly concerned about the potential for a project like this to exploit participants and victimize them; especially those with experiences of violence and sexual abuse. It is a tendency for researchers to ask as many questions as we can in order to learn as much as possible; but sometimes, our questions are too invasive, insensitive, or even offensive. There are sometimes power issues between the interviewees and interviewers that make interviewees uncomfortable and unwilling to react. I discussed this topic several times with a Vietnamese film curator who is a gay friend of mine. He said, "Why would we have to tell our story? Why do we have to be exposed in order to be accepted? I refuse to tell my story because once it is told it is out there and may be found, retrieved and used for many purposes without my consent. The most significant

possibility is its use as a kind of “evidence”: a truth, a fact, a raw material derived from my own testimony. It could all be used to describe me to others like myself, but audiences may bear little understanding of the context of the story narration and construction. Once it is online, it could be used without the inclusion of the context. Sometimes, after telling stories, I simply want to move on; but these stories remain there, and keep reminding me of parts of my life that are prone to a variety of interpretations”.

He suggested devising a somewhat fictionalized or artistically embellished narrative.

I share his concern completely, and question myself on how we could avoid this outcome. It is hard, and I think part of the strategy should be to make the audience understand how we did what we did, as well as how to “read” these texts and images properly. On one hand, we understood the power of the testimony to make a community’s history visible and significant; and on the other hand, we acknowledged the potential risks and share the concerns regarding the unintended consequences. I am also worried about the potential negative consequences of a fictionalized form as it may dismiss the accountability that a story teller takes on to depict injustice and prejudice. That is why while there are many fictional works, including films and literature, verbal history and testimony still have unique

value. Narrators often exhibited pride in who they are, no matter how much violence, prejudice, and discrimination they survive. They told stories with immense complexity. They refused to hide or mask themselves. How could we dare erase such spirit and performance? So we discussed the consequences and our concerns, and decided to give the choice to the participants. However, the story-tellers were not with us all the time, especially during the production phase; and thus we had to rely on our own judgment in which we considered what would be best for the participants and their community. Where the interests of the two conflicted, we placed the interviewees first. There is still the potential risk that we did not understand or make correct judgments, especially when we could not foresee problems or ask for opinions and advice.

Are we satisfied with this strategy? So far, we have not encountered negative reactions, but we never know. The consequences may arise far in the future. However, we could not risk worrying to the point of stagnation. The reality is many people who do not express their gender or love according to social and cultural expectations are mistreated and are said to oppose nature. There is not much room for these marginalized groups to voice their needs and challenge the supposed natural-ness/normality of these constraining norms. The discrimination comes in

many forms, including portrayals in institutions like museums that reinforce prescribed behaviors, and ignore the diverse and rich history of many minority communities, including the unstraight/LGBT (IQQAA2S)¹ communities.

By making this collection, we hope we will assist the development of understanding and tolerance. We hope it serves as a historical documentation for the community to learn about ourselves. Through learning about our history, we can circumvent a great deal of time that would otherwise fall to self-destruction and self-questioning over whether or not we are normal. We can in turn place more immediate focus on liberation and fulfilment.

Nhung Dinh

December, 2016



¹ (*)LGBT stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, but recently the community this acronym represents has come to include additional letters: I for intersex, Q for queer and questioning, A for asexual and ally, and SS for queer ritual specialist

Glossary

Homosexual

A person who has the capacity to feel for and/or wants to do one of the following with people of the same gender identity: sleep with, fall in love with, be turned on by, make out with, be together with

Bisexual

A person who has romantic attraction, sexual attraction or sexual behavior toward both males and females.

Heterosexual

A person who has romantic attraction, sexual attraction or sexual behavior with persons of the opposite sex or gender. A person who senses of their identity based on those attractions, related behaviors, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions.

Pansexual

A person who has romantic attraction, sexual attraction or sexual behavior toward any sex or gender identity.

Asexual

Anyone who lacks of sexual attraction to anyone or lack of interest in or desire for sexual activity.

Transgender people are people who have a gender identity or gender expression that differs from their assigned sex

Queer

An umbrella term for sexual and gender minorities that are not heterosexual or not cis-gender. Originally meaning "strange" or "peculiar", *queer* came to be deployed pejoratively against those with same-sex desires or relationships in the late 19-century. Beginning in the late-1980s, queer scholars and activists began to reclaim the word to establish community and assert a politicized identity distinct from the gay political identity. Queer identities may be adopted by those who reject traditional gender identities and seek a broader, less conformist, and deliberately ambiguous alternative to the label LGBT.

Cross-dressing

The act of wearing items of clothing and other accoutrements commonly associated with the opposite sex. behaviors of transgender identity or sexual, fetishist, and homosexual behavior, but the term itself does not imply any motives and is not synonymous to one's gender identity.

Cisgender

A term for people who have a gender identity that matches the sex that they were assigned at birth *Cisgender* may also be defined as those who have "a gender identity or perform a gender role society considers appropriate for one's sex. It is the opposite of the term transgender.

There are two versions of the term: *cis male* for "male assigned male at birth" or *cis female* for "female assigned female at birth". Further derivations analogously include "cis man" and "cis woman.

Gender identity

One's personal experience of one's own gender. Gender identity can correlate with assigned biological sex at birth, or can differ from it completely. All societies have a set of gender categories that can serve as the basis of the

The term *cross-dressing* denotes an action or a behavior without attributing or implying any specific causes for that behavior. It is often assumed that the connotation is directly correlated with formation of a person's social identity in relation to other members of society. In most societies, there is a basic division between gender attributes assigned to males and females, a gender binary to which most people adhere and which enforces conformance to ideals of masculinity and femininity in all aspects of sex and gender: biological sex, gender identity, and gender expression. In all societies, some individuals do not identify with some (or all) of the aspects of gender that are assigned to their biological sex, some of those individuals are transgender or gender queer. Some societies have third gender categories.

(Biological) sex

Is defined by inner and outer reproductive organs, sex chromosome, hormones. Often divided into male, female and intersex.

Intersexual

Refer to anyone who does not fit the typical definitions for male or female bodies. Such variations may involve genital ambiguity, and combinations of chromosomal genotype and sexual genotype other than XX and XY.

Local Terms (*)²

Apone

A person who looks like men and likes boy only. He is also called achaut.

Apone is also used to call a man who likes both girls and boys. He is also called achaut

Homo: Is a boy who looks like man and he just likes only gay and boy

Top: He is apone or homo and he likes gay

Bot: As achaut, homo who also likes boy

Ver: Who is both both and top

Apwint: A transwoman and she likes/is attracted only to boy (sexually)

² We heard about these terms during the interviews and this list of local terms came from Classics Aung Zaw Than from Mandalay. Please keeps in mind that these terms are used with different meanings from different people and groups. Many of them are really bad to indicate the community. Better to ask the terms they like to describe themselves when you talk with someone.

But she looks like girl

This word is also to indicate someone who looks like tomboys, a man

Achout: A term is used to indicate all gay, homo, and transgender women

Ganda

It is Indian terms to indicate gay man and it has been used in Myanmar for almost 50 years

Mamashan: Used more in villages and uptown areas

Nat Pine Ta Pine: Actual meaning is half and half, half man half woman

Bowpyar: It is used to call transman, tomboys

Dat chane: has been used at least 5 years and it is actually a stage name of a woman who looks like man and just likes only women

Some of them is also attracted to apwint achout

Breakdan: Literally means “knife”. It is very bad term to call trans man, tomboys

Thagne: a person who is not sex-worker but he has sex with same sex person for love or just only for sex irself. He is both boy and man and he looks like men. He could couple with girl, gay, apone, homo but not achaut.

Bow Byar: tomboy, a woman looks like a man. He looks like tomboy, never looks like girl or lesbian

Offer: A man who has sex with achaut for money. He is often young.

England (ing-a): a man or a boy who looks like man but in sexual preference, he is bot. He is not achaut. He could be attracted to women and transwomen but never to achaut. He does not like achaut.

Actually, “England” especially inticate to a man who receives sexual anal intercourse, a back door which is far from the front door. This is related to the polical relationship between Myanmar and England as England is far, like from behind, a back door of Myanmar.

Lesbian

A woman who looks like woman but is only attracted by women, girls and tomboys

Tomboy: a female who looks like man and is attracted to girls and lesbian

Gay: is achaut apone, apwint, homo, an umbrella terms to indicate all queergender male, transgender women, etc

Yowk Kyaw: Man

yaut kyashar:

Mamma: woman

Homo — **Top** he like gay. — **Apone.**
 (middle)
 Look like man
 He like boy only.
 He also do act
Apone. boy with boy.
 Look like man
 - He like gay and boy.

bot. he like boy.
 (middle)
 Look like man
 He like girl and boy (but sexually man)
ven. sleep and boy
 he like gay and boy, He do a act.

Apwint. — **Apwint.** — **Apwint.** — **Apwint.**
 (middle)
 Look like woman
 She like girl
 She like boy with boy.
 She like Tomboy.
 She like Transgender woman
 (middle)
 Look like woman
 She like boy only.

Achout (in Burmese term)
 Achout is all including gay, boy and nearly 20 year olds.
 (middle)
 Look like woman
 She like boy only.

Ganda.
 (middle)
 Look like woman
 She like boy with boy.

Mamma Shan
 Mamma Shan
 In Myanmar act like call
 in village and up town.

1/2
 both in. even act like
 woman

bow pyan. — **bet chere.** **break Zan.**
 (class is young o) (middle) (middle)
 (middle)
 Look like woman
 She like girl only.
 (some bowpyan like do
 apwint act).

Thagne. [not like sex worker], [sometimes like or sometimes force]
 Thagne is boy in
 look like man. He like girl, gay, Apone, homo)

Li
 class: body & health
 12.08.16



Tharko, the first day of the project, 20/7/2016 at the Panaroma Hotel

THARKO

26 years old, from Yangon

I'm a Bisexual, and my current partner is a woman. I identify myself as a human rights activist, and currently I am involved specifically in LGBT rights. I should be involved in this theatre as a human rights activist, but I haven't been so for a long while. My opinion is that the LGBT community is a group of disenfranchised people that have been placed in an extremely narrow quadrant of society. There is a lot to be said when it comes to LGBT rights, but the number one priority is awareness of who you really are. Are you gay? Are you lesbian or bisexual? It is important to admit to yourself who you really are, come to terms with this identity, and embrace it. Only when you embrace your true self can you make step by step progress in making society understand.

The next thing is capability. No matter who you are: a man, a woman, straight or gay, you owe it to yourself to live as a capable person because once you have established yourself as a person who is capable and good-hearted, people will think twice before belittling you. There is a time for everything: a time for fun and a time for work. We must do our part to contribute in the creation of an honorable society.

Those not of the LGBT community must also realize the fact that the rights of a human being come part and parcel when he or she is born. No one should deny that of a person because no one is going to give it to that person. If such rights are not available, it is our duty to fight for them.

There are laws within our nation that recognize basic human rights; thus a person should not discriminate and/or bully another because of their sexual orientation. I hope that if you are already pre-disposed to hatred of homosexuals and the like, you will change your mind. Almost everyone in our nation wants this thing called Democracy, and now that we have achieved and are living under a democratic system, you must end discriminatory behavior. It is time for change, and indeed it is time to truly see people as people. There is much work to be done ahead for all of us. It is my wish that we draw out the potential in all of us by breaking down traditional barriers like gender, and work hand in hand toward achieving a robust democratic nation that we all want.



People want to rest in a beautiful place where trees, lakes, chairs and the sunlight are surrounded. Our LGBT people also want to take a rest in this place. But our LGBT people cannot stay like this openly because of limitation from the society and not coming out to the society. I just drew it as I hope to stay in this place in one day. (Thar Ko, 26, Yangon)

I met my first love around five years ago. He was younger than me but we were madly in love. He didn't get along with his family and wanted to leave them. I asked him to consider every option; like whether he was ready to face financial and social hardship.

He claimed that he was, and came to me. We used whatever little I had to rent an apartment and bought a Kwoon Yar (bettle nut) shop for around Ks 35,000. It was like we got married. We were very happy back then; he worked at an internet café and I ran the Kwoon Yar shop. With the happiness we had, it was as if we were enjoying what heterosexual couples would enjoy in a marital life.

Unfortunately, it didn't last long.

It was like something out of a movie. One day, a car suddenly parked in front of us and his father stepped out from it. He followed his father home, but he came back after a while. He requested me to work under his father. I obliged. Since he was the owner's son, he served as the cashier, and I worked elsewhere. That was okay since I still got to see him every day. What wasn't okay was that he was secretly chatting with another guy online. He even went on a date behind my back. The cherry on top was the day his family somehow found out about the relationship between us. I made the decision that day that all of it was worth the lesson I learned; a person must be able to stand on his or her legs alone. It was worth his hate and worth the cut I gave myself on my arm.

My experience is something for others to learn from. I just want to say that decisions based on your feelings are fine, but what you feel must be real. The other thing is to have the courage to admit to yourself what you really are. It's never a good long-term option to keep it all bottled up inside.

I wish all my friends in the LGBT community luck.



(Tun Tun Lin's scar)



“We have a lot of choice in our life. We can choose a way we love. But we need to consider whether we can get a place for our life from the way we chose or not. We can only get a benefit from the way we chose to be. Some ways might be confused and some might be blur. But finally, we can see our way to get success”

(Da Ta Na, 26, Yangon)

Francis George

26 years old, currently living in Yangon

My name is Francis. I currently live in Yangon, but I used to reside in rural parts. I only realized that I was homosexual when I reached Yangon. In rural areas, things were quiet and people like me weren't out in the open like we are in the city. It was quite an eye opener when I arrived in Yangon to see such people out and about. Since I'm gay, I've been in relationships with other men--four to be exact. As usual, we met online. My current boyfriend is older than me. We met on Facebook.

We're living together, but my family doesn't know this. It really stresses me out when I ponder ways of conveying this to my family. Myanmar is conservative and these things are generally not accepted religiously or culturally. There are some families here and there who have begun to accept us. My friend's family acknowledges and respects him. I'm quite envious of that. I want to work hard so that my family will accept me.

Anyway, he is 11 years older than me. Like someone who grew up without a father, I can depend on him. I guess I've always been attracted to older guys.

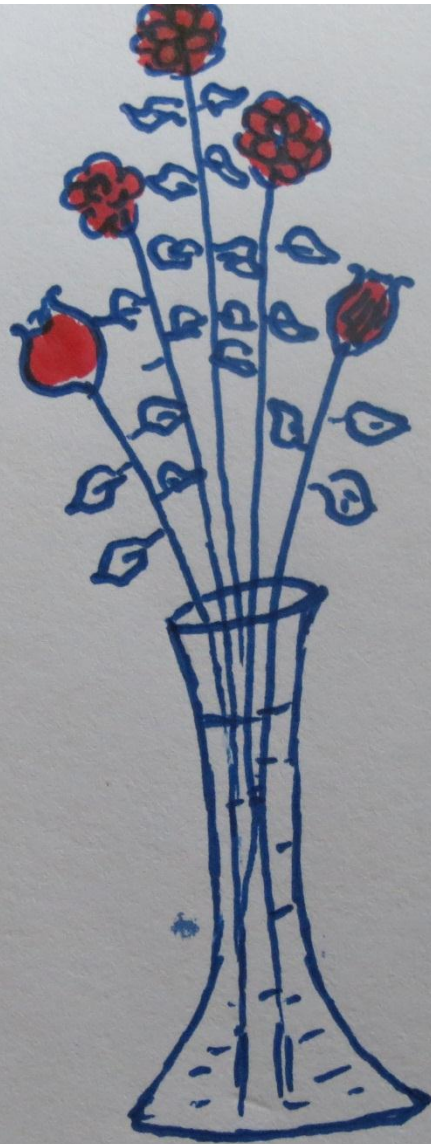
It's not like I turned gay overnight when I arrived in Yangon. I've always been quite feminine since my youth.

Maybe it is because I'm gay, but it's more exciting to be in love with a man. I've never been attracted to girls. I always get along better and even have fun talking or walking with other men, especially homosexuals like me.

I think that in a more open age like this, a lot more gays are coming out. There are those famous gay celebrities who came out to the public, and that makes me very happy, as well as envious. I used to be very afraid of admitting that I was gay. I had to hide everywhere in places like my job. It was suffocating to pretend in order to get along in my environment. Admitting to being gay was liberating. It got increasingly better after I started associating myself with a community of open minded people.

The advice I want to give to other homosexuals is that when you realize that you're a homosexual, it's your cue to work hard. You need to work hard and secure a position in life. If not, people in your surroundings will have even more reason to discriminate against you. Older homosexuals amongst us should also be guides for our youth in order to steer individuals down a good path. There is discrimination even amongst us in the LGBT community.

My wish is to have all discrimination disappear, and I pray that we will soon reach that point.



I drew a picture of a rose flower pot which means our LGBT people have sweet smell and thorns like a rose. I believe that if we combine pureness from water and strength from a flower pot, we can build a successful life.

(Francis, 26, Yangon)

Wit Hmone

(27 years old, Make-up artist, Dancer/Entertainer, from East Dagon)

I have known that I am gay since I was young. I did not let my parents know, but instead started wearing women's clothing and make-up at around 17 – 18 years of age. Right now I've been with my lover for 8 years. He was the one that made the first move at a restaurant. When I was young, I decided that when I meet my lover, I will spend the rest of my life with that person; but I initially never thought that this relationship would be the one. Both my parents and people around me ostracized me. I tried my hardest at making a living to solve this issue. The more I became stable in life, the fewer the attacks from society. Of course, there were so many times we were mocked behind our backs, and there were so many fights. There were many occasions where I gave in to my anger for being discriminated against. I hate being called Achauk, but apart from that, some people call me by my current alias; and there are younger people who call me by my real name. Sometimes I get called "Ama" (miss); and sometimes the kids that I used to babysit call me "Ako" (mister or elder brother). They can call me whatever they like, but I hate being called "Achauk". I'm happy as long as they don't mock me by using that term. Considering that I dress like a woman, I guess "Ama" would be the most appropriate term. My parents are conservative, and the family is not very knowledgeable. I tried telling my family that it is not just because of the sexual activity that I live my life this way; I was born with the mind of a woman. But they did not accept this. Most see being gay as an aberration, and the family likewise chose to embrace their hate instead of

trying to understand me as a family member and a "daughter".

When I began living with my husband, friends seemed fine at first, but later turned out to be against the whole thing. My family wasn't happy from the start. They are conservative. I'm no longer trying to earn their approval, but instead to bravely live on with my choices. Several times I tried to split from my family, but I kept failing at this.



Wit Hmone, at the hotel Panaroma, 21/7/2016

There were many times within the span of 8 years that my husband and I misunderstood each other or got jealous and bickered. My lover bought me many presents, and these lipsticks were most memorable. It was also useful with me being a make-up artist, and the lipstick color is always on my lips. We argue frequently, but everything is built on understanding each other.



(Wit Hmone & Sithu, at the hotel Panaroma, 21/7/2016)



(the lipsticks were her husband's presents)

When I started my profession as a make-up artist, there were many obstacles before me, especially as I was not very skilled. I am trying to start up my very own shop in competition with others in the same line of work. There are many who like my make-up skills, but there are also many haters who say that it looks ugly. When it comes to the latter, I feel bad, and customers who hear the criticism also begin thinking they look ugly. There are many problems of that kind.

However, I have never been afraid of anyone since I was young, and there weren't many things that I have feared either. I normally just brave through the difficulties tied in with things I want to achieve. Whatever comes later will be settled later is kind of my mindset. I want them (the LGBT community) to be the same. Ever since I was young, I would put on make-up and dance for "Ka Htein" or "Shin Pyu" events (Myanmar cultural events). I didn't care what anybody said. When you dress as a woman and society cries to you that you look ugly, that's their decision to be mean, and you don't need to keep those thoughts with you. Only put in your head the things you want to have and do. If you like men, just be brave and go ahead instead of pushing away your true feelings. The pressure will keep piling up if you decide to lock them deep inside, and one day, it will all explode. I want more people to be like me. I care less now about being pretty or not; I just go where I want to go, I wear what I want to wear, I buy what I want or I ask for it. I want more people to stand up and speak out about their homosexuality, but I understand that many are afraid of coming out, maybe because of the things society would say to them. For me, I have not cared since I was young; and yes, my neighborhood mocks me, but I still don't care. I've had many arguments, but I just kept my head up and walked on. You have to meet those fears face to face. I have

never regretted my choice. I don't think my life would be much easier if I remained straight as I've tried being a "boy". I started cross-dressing and all that when I was 17, and as I'm now 27, it has been 10 years. My hair has been long as well as short as I have tried being a straight man. But I was never happy with myself growing up usually dressed as a boy. Women's clothes I wore during these past 10 years clearly resonated strongly with me; and much of what I bought has also gone to others like myself, or to the poor in my ward. While I've tended to miss those clothes after I gave them away, regret was never involved. I sometimes thought about what people in my neighborhood would say if I dressed as a man, but I came to the conclusion that they will never stop criticizing me. This is because it's not the clothes, but my effeminate self that they have a problem with. So what's the point? People are never happy whatever you do, so I just live the way I decide to.

Si Thu

I'm 28 years old. I am the eldest in my family. I'm a carpenter by trade and I'm in a homosexual relationship. We met in 2008 and have been together since then. We met in a bar. Initially, I chased her on a bet with my friend that if I managed it, he would pay the bills for that night. I was drunk so I fell in love with her at the first sight. We accompanied each other until 4 a.m. that day. We also secretly met each other many times following that as couples often do. After around one year of a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship, we moved in together. My family was fine with it but my partner's family was not. My friends aren't thrilled about it because I'm together with an "Achauk" (Myanmar word for a gay person). There was so much criticism from people who told me that I could definitely snag myself a real beautiful woman. I was also mocked as an Achauk husband. In addition, it became terrible where I worked to the point where I dreaded going to work for fear of being branded a gay husband.

I was quite narrow minded back then before knowing my partner. Gradually, I understood more and more about the LGBT community and that love does not only have to be between a man and a woman.



Now, I am able to shrug off the mean comments and smile at my work. I don't care anymore.

At first, her parents were against it, but they later allowed us to live together. Society often sees me as a parasite that

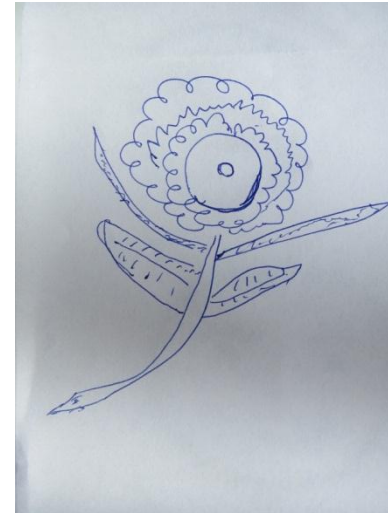
lives off an Achauk. But I have no interest in retaliating against them because I know that one day, they will understand.

I took a gay person, not a woman, as my significant other, but I worked hard to be the man of the house and provide for our family. We have an adopted child--a child that was abandoned at a rubbish dump. The girl is now over 12 years old.

Things are going great with her; she calls us mommy and daddy. All I want is a life with a happy, loving family. I will say that I did not love my partner at first; it was more like

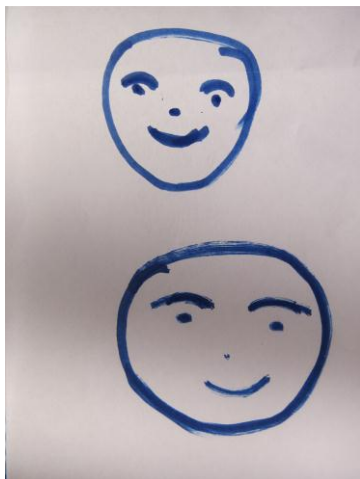
emotional attachment. But I have never regretted choosing this life.

My advice to those in the LGBT community is that there is no need to hide. Come out and attend lessons conducted by LGBT groups and learn. There isn't really a difference between taking a gay partner and taking a wife because I love him. I am not particularly fond of how women behave either. There is something that he does that I really adore. Around 6 years ago, I asked him, "Are you a man or a woman?" I really like the way he answered me "I'm Achauk". I wouldn't want him to change his sex organs to that of a woman. I like him the way he is now.



(Sithu's drawing his feelings to his wife as a beautiful flower:

I drew this because my life has been touched by the elegance and softness, just like a flower. I feel that my lover, "Wit Hmone" is just like a flower. Wit Hmone was born as a male but you cannot understand her the way man normally would, namely rough and uncouth. She is like that of a flower and thus the picture of a flower. (Si Thu, 28, Yangon)



"This is a picture of ever smile which means always staying happy. Like this picture, I want to live my life happily without sadness" (Wit Hmone)



"My lover gave it to me as a present. It is not expensive, but I still keep it with me. Actually, there is no criterion in love. Even though she is not a real woman, she is like an oasis for my life. I dare to face everything in life with her. It doesn't matter how much difficulty, I want to try to create a happy family life with her (Sithu)

Min Thurain



(Min Thurain, 22/7/2016)

My name is Min Thurain, I am 35 years old now and living in Latha (Chinatown), Yangon.

I have accepted that I am an “achauk” ever since I was 13. My parents knew when I was young too. My country’s religious culture forbids these things,

so I only openly confessed to my parents after I finished high school. My parents took it rather well, but forbade me from getting involved in things.

I have never experienced open insults from strangers before.

I think you have to make what you imagine life is like into reality, but so far I have been in many relationships.

I tried to make things work, but it takes two hands to clap after all.

Even in straight relationships, the husband and wife can get divorced.

The situation is worse for achauk(s), as even a 10 year relationship can all go down the drain. Anyway, I’m on friendly terms with all of my Ex-s.

There is a lot to be concerned about when you’re a gay person; but I think the priority should be to accept that you’re actually gay. I have never been interested in females ever since I was young, no matter how beautiful they were. On a whole, the culture of the country rejects gay people, but people should be accepting of gays, at least within their local neighborhoods.

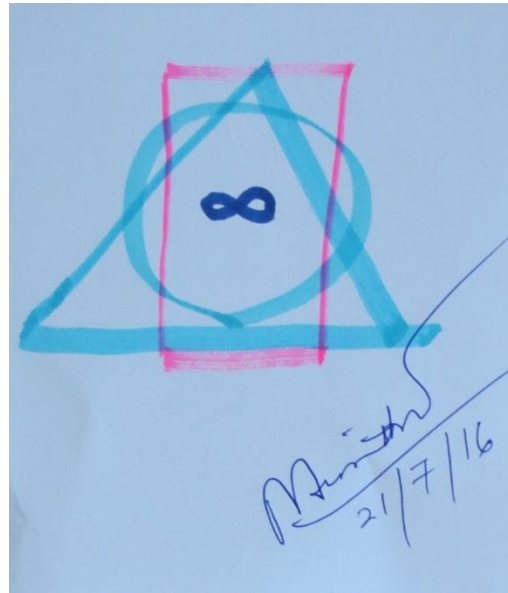
I have never once regretted being gay. I also have never felt depressed because I wasn’t born a woman. I used to take medicine shipped in from Thailand to increase the size of my breasts, which costs around Ks 2500 per dose. I took around 4 to 5 doses per year. There weren’t many side effects except for some acne.

Now that I am satisfied with how I look, I no longer take them. Regret was never a thing for me.

When I was young, my father hated achauk(s). When one would pass by, he would usually swear “motherfucking gays”; but ironically, his son turned out to be gay. I tried to fulfill my father’s expectations by living like a man. I even got a full back tattoo just to make myself feel more manly; but no matter what I do, I cannot change the way I feel--the way a gay feels.



(Min Thurain’s back)



(Min Thurain’s drawing)

In this picture, there are a square, a triangle, a circle and an infinity in the middle. As long as there is the universe, different things will be existed because the universe is composed of different and unequal things. So don’t judge on a thing “it is bad” just because it is different from you. Everything is useful with their own way.



My boyfriend gave it to me as a present. He is younger than me, and we met each other online. He stays in Dala which only accessible by boat. We have a plan to keep our relationship for many years. The standing doll is me when I am older, and the kneeling one is him. My hand is always ready for him, and whether he will hold my hand or not is forever his decision. Whatever, I always open my heart for him. If possible, I want to stay with him forever. (Min Thuyain, 35 years old, Yangon)

Ko Thet

My name is Ko Thet. I'm 42. I believe myself to be a man, and not just a lesbian. The difficulty I face in my life is I must start with my family. Since my elder brother is achauk and I'm a "Yautkya Shar" (lesbian/butch), we have been at the receiving end of many jokes. When we were young, my brother would play with pans and pots while I played with guns. Soon after rounds of this, my parents would realize it because others would notice every time we played outside. Our parents must've felt terrible. People would say things like "it must be because they've wronged other children in their past lives." My mom would beat us as if she could beat our nature out of us. We didn't change, no matter what passed. We

still exchange clothes with each other and wear them.

Due to too much pressure, I did not attend university. When I was just a child, it was okay because it was still fine for a kid to be wearing boy's clothes. But when I grew to a certain point, my parents started asking me to wear women's clothes. I didn't want them on my body. I just wanted to be with other boys, make noise and have fun. People would mock me every time as I was the gay younger sister of a gay brother. It was quite bad. I was alone a lot of the time.

Since my parents didn't want my brother to live this way, he went to stay with my grandparents. I stayed on with my parents; and I would regularly get beaten because I would always be wearing shorts. When school started insisting I wear women's clothes, I decided to quit. I also wanted to earn a living, but companies and the like require females to wear skirts and all that. So I resorted to odd jobs like waiting at teashops. Later on, I grew quite nicely into a "yaw pasoe" (type of traditional men's sarong) and shirts. Jobs and earning became easier.

I have been in plenty of relationships. When I was young, there were relationships with school girls. There would always be a group of yaut kyashar and a group of boys waiting near the school gates. When school was over, we would court whichever girl we were interested in. There was this one time that I was with a girl from that school. Her parents found out that we were in a relationship. They

personally came out and caught the both of us. Of course she was beaten when she got home. It turned out that my ex-girlfriend was the one that went to her house to inform her parents.

Anyway, as proof of my love for her, I got drunk on beer and smashed the bottle on my own head. It was fine at first since I was drunk, but I had to get 6 stitches later at the clinic.

Anyway, it's been a long time. She left for Japan, but we do meet up when she comes back. But it's nothing like a relationship. Her life is going along smoothly and I'd rather not do anything to rock that boat.

Currently, I'm in a relationship. We met online. It started at a time when I was quite sick of being in a relationship because I always got the short end of the stick. Girls tend to get whatever they can out of us and then elope with a guy or something. I had too much experience with

breaking up; parents, religion, peer pressure etc.



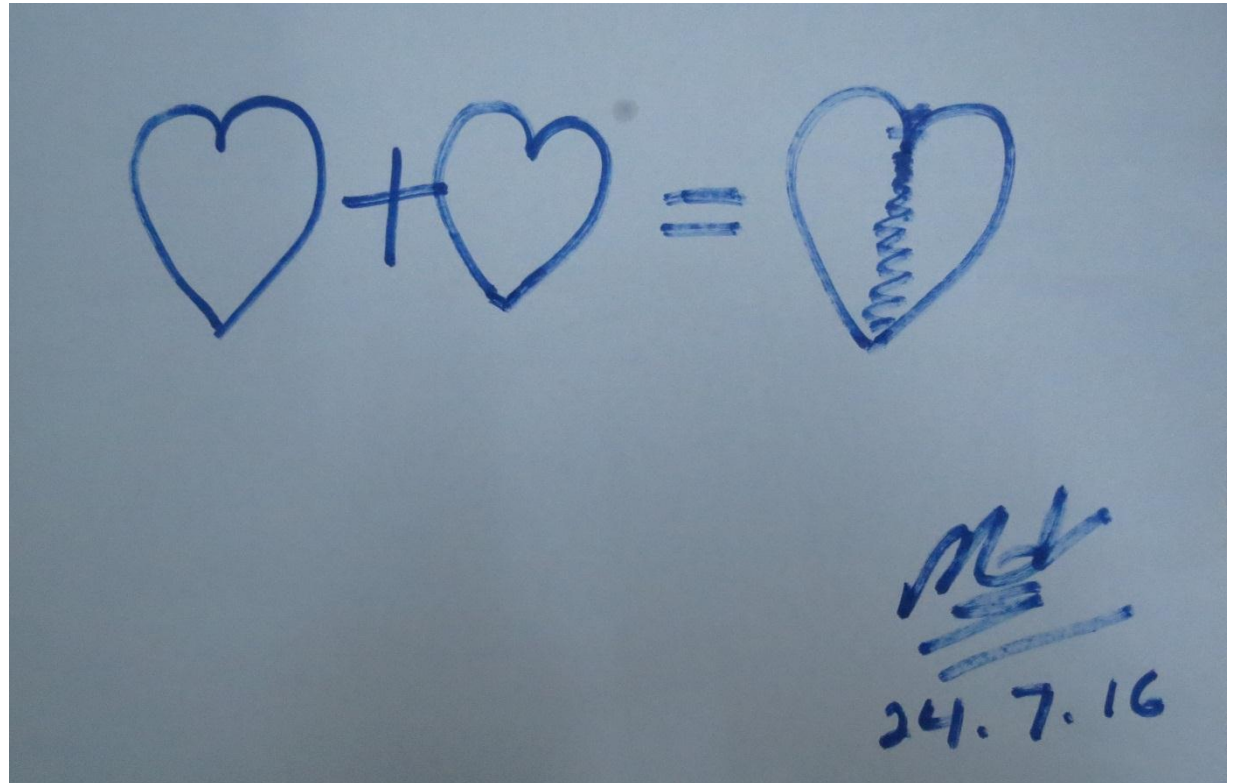
Anyway, since I had so many bad relationships before, I just wanted to keep an online girlfriend. At first, I pretended to be a boy. We never met each other outside nor spoke on the phone for quite some time. Of course, eventually she started asking questions. So we spoke on the phone and she got confused because she thought my voice sounded quite girly. When she asked for a photo, I would

just take a picture of my friend and send it to her. But then, I started feeling guilty. I was also worried that all of this would be for nothing if I kept on lying to her.

So, I told her everything. She took her time to think about it all, but she accepted the way I was. It's been over 1 year. She lives in Shan state and she visits Yangon. She is even kind enough to tell me that I can follow her home if I want. She says that she would provide for me. Even her parents are okay with me.

In the past I've worked for LGBT rights and for yaut kyashar(s), myself included. I think one significant thing is that it's very difficult for those of us who tend to keep our feelings bottled up inside. That is not a healthy habit to sport. In a way, it's natural because men tend to be this

way but it's not good. It's actually quite a big problem. Don't feel left out, there are plenty of us. Please don't choose to be alone.



***“We desire for love but always end up with broken heart”
(Ko Thet)***

PyaePyae

I am 26 years old. I fully accept that I'm gay. I'm the youngest in my family, and I have one elder brother and an elder sister. I have been feminine ever since I was young, and apart from my big brother on occasion, I don't get into much trouble with them because they generally just accept that I like being pretty.

I'm fortunate in the sense that amongst my friends and family, there was not a lot of resistance. Everyone else apart from my elder brother mostly minds their own business; and since my father has passed, I am fortunate that my mom says that she will accept her son no matter what or how he lives. But even though she knows, there are times when she will ask me openly whether I'm gay, but I usually just say that I'm effeminate. I think I'm not going to revolutionize anything by pursuing this matter further with her. I'm just thankful for being allowed to live this way as it is.

To be honest, I tried harder in academics just because I knew I was gay. People do not dare to make fun of me as much when I'm obviously more educated than they are. I can provide for myself, and I put on make-up by myself. The point is that I do not need to worry about the small things.

I am fortunate to have never been brutalized in my life; although I did get a good earful from my elder brother when I visited him in regards to him getting married. I even have a good deal of relatives as friends on Facebook, even though most people will block relatives from nosing up on you. But my mom will scold me after my uncles see pictures that are quite feminine and then call her up to report on me.



"I drew about my dream. I love to dress up beautifully and want to be a designer. I love to see beautiful transgender. The meaning of a hand and a ring is that I want to stay with my lover by wearing a couple ring"

I'm now working as a study guide, and there are plenty of times when I have to wear a man's clothes to attend events. It is really infuriating that I have to wear what I don't want to wear for people. Even though I don't exactly dress like a woman, I dress in quite a feminine way, which makes it quite uncomfortable for elders when I speak with them.

I think that no "achauk" has had just one lover in their life; and it is sad, but most of the time when people go out with gay folks, it is mostly for something material, not for love. I guess I am not fortunate when it comes to love. I was doing fine but we had to break up because of our families. This one time, I was in a relationship with someone famous, and he told everyone about me. I will always remember that. My latest relationship isn't going swimmingly either...because he was married, and when my family came to realize it, we had to be apart for the sake of both of our homes.

I believe that if more homosexuals are educated, the process of demanding rights will be greatly sped up. I think the (LGBT) community as a whole must be aware that even if the situation doesn't allow you to be educated, you do not need to go down the wrong road. I hope that those in the community who know better will be more helpful and united because I really do not want a bad apple spoiling the whole bunch. Most people that I regularly deal with are educated, so they are quite welcoming towards the whole LGBT idea. Even friends that are quite negative towards gay people are starting to change their views. I always explain to them as well as to the occasional LGBT member who is not very educated that everyone is worth it, not worthless. I make an effort to attend all LGBT events, even if that means having to go against my family's wishes. There are people that, in spite of how "educated" they are, refuse to understand. For example, some in my family don't like it when I doll up and leave the house. There are my sister's friends who always ask whether I'm an achauk when they talk to her.

I understand where they are coming from, especially my family. I just take it as they are not well-read enough. I got into a spat recently with one because she was sarcastic with me, and asked me whether to address me as mister or miss. I told her that she can call me whatever she likes that will reflect how educated she is. I do regular blood tests--once every three months and also bring my friends along and make them do it. I also do community work like distributing flyers and condoms. I wish for the LGBT community members to be more active. For us to receive the rights we deserve, we must be those deserving of them. As for future plans, I love to teach. I also like being a fashion designer. I used to work in an oil and petroleum company, but I hated it there because there were a lot of males, and I had to conform to being one of them. I guess I will continue teaching and will continue doing my best at being a good designer.

Chit Moe Sat

30 years old.

I'm fully committed in the fact that I'm a homosexual. My family kind of knows but not in exact details. I didn't have a father growing up, and I was gentle by nature, doing household chores that would usually be done by a woman. Since my job mainly deals with a female clientele, I'm quite feminine. I live the way my family likes me to--not a lot of going out. I leave for my job and I come home and do my chores. I have three other siblings; one elder sister, a younger sister and a younger brother who's already been married. We used to stay in Yangon, but moved to a rural region because of my family's financial situation.

I never used to think I would be able to live with my loved ones because of the fear involved. For example, I was afraid that I would meet someone unfaithful. There is also the fear of prejudice from those around me because there weren't a lot of (homosexuals/transgender) couples back then. Now that it is more open and same-gender couples are getting more common, I am living with my significant other; but I have to suppress my true self because of the fact that I must take care of my family as Father is no longer with us and mother is alone.

I met him after we moved to the rural area and after technology got more advanced with easy access to mobile phones and the internet. He was amongst the many online who flirted with me. He is older than me, and I guess an aspect of me is that growing up without a father made me want to rely more on an older man. Back then we never saw each other except through photos, but I told my family that I needed to go back to Yangon to work. Only then could I support the family. In truth, I just wanted to be together with him. My mother knows about it now, but I had to let her know through my elder cousin because I was afraid to tell her. I don't have any male friends either, especially as I work in a "female" line of work.

I guess it is going well now that people in my immediate surroundings know, and there has yet to be any jokes or unsavory comments thrown my way. When I first met him, I was so embarrassed to go out with him. I wanted to hold his hands so

much when we went out. Now I'm no longer as shy, especially since other same-sex couples are now also out in the open. I call him "KoKo" (Darling) and he calls me "Chit" (love). Initially, it was our plan that we would pretend by calling each other friends when we were at parents' houses, but we couldn't keep love silent. My mom definitely heard it but did not make any comments.



I think I've become used to it. We want to get married, but it is not possible now--maybe when the

situation allows it. I even used to accept friend requests (on Facebook) by family or relatives but only to block them subsequently. I don't care much about those trivial things any longer.

Of course there were many who used to mock me. There is this one childhood friend; he used to make fun of me all the time. When playing soccer as kids, he used to embarrass me by calling me "achauk" (a derogatory word for a gay person). I was angry, but made a point to be the better person by not retaliating with bitter words, but instead to do better than him. I've always done that. We grew up and he ended up marrying my younger cousin. Since they started a family at a fairly young age, things aren't going so well, and seeing them, I worry that if I had to take a wife, I wouldn't be able to provide for her. But it is all moot since my mind is of a woman and gravitates towards being dependent--not being depended upon. It has been a long time since I've heard from that friend, but now that I'm generally at a more successful place in life, he does not dare poke fun at me anymore.

I don't particularly feel the need to dress up as a woman does, but sometimes I and my partner talk about doing a pre-wedding photo-shoot for fun. It's funny when I imagine how I would look in those pictures. We haven't done it yet, but we want to, although we are kind of afraid.

There have been a lot of memorable moments and multiple arguments. We would quarrel, and I would be like "I'm going home", but he would then always spoil me and let me win. One of the reasons I fell in love with him was that he always spoiled me. I am a bit of a child in that sense. I will always remember this; I was still living in the rural area and it was my little cousin's birthday. He received a doll as a present, and I liked it so much that I took a picture of it, posted it on Facebook and asked who is willing to buy the doll for me. My partner was among one of them that offered to do so. Ever since then, I always believed that he will be the one to listen to me and spoil me. And then when I got back to Yangon on my birthday, he bought a white doll for me. Then he bought a blue one. He also bought a pig doll for me, saying that it's his body double.

I wanted to adopt a child at first, and my side of the family was fine with it; but we had to think about his side of the family, especially his father. Since we decided to live the rest of our lives together, we have to look out for each other's elders.

Sometimes the things his father says anger me, but I just let them go because living together with him was worth more than resistance.



People are generally still quite negative about same sex relationships, but in truth, it is just love between two humans. It might

be fate or it might be from our past lives, but one thing for sure is that we cannot change our nature. So we will live the lives we were given to the fullest. If you are living a similar life, I welcome you. I also try to set an example to others by being faithful to my relationship by only having one partner. I also wish that others like me take my example and realize that it isn't just about posting pictures of kissing on the internet, which just invites public ire. If your partner isn't good to you, hang on and do your best because that person will surely come along. I know because I have gone through it. If a bad influence on your life leaves, it makes space for someone with good intentions to be near you.

My hope is that people see that love doesn't need to only exist within conformity, and instead see love as it is. I don't like it when someone calls me achauk. I prefer something more polite. Even someone that simply cross-dresses wouldn't like that.



(Chit Moe Sat's drawing)

I want my life to be beautiful and colorful like in the picture. (Moe Htet, 42, Dala)

Chit Ya Aung

My name is Chit Ya Aung and I'm 38 years old. I work at a bank and currently am in a relationship. I realized I was interested in my own sex when I was in fifth grade. My mother is okay with it but my father is not. He's a soldier, and that plus the fact that I am the only son makes him even more uncomfortable. My relatives, neighbors and society in general have discriminated against me for being "achauk". I was even beaten regularly by my older cousins when I was young. My mom protected me. She wanted a daughter and so liked the fact that I was feminine. My father was even more embarrassed for me back then as I was the black sheep of the family. He seemed to let some of it go after my mother passed away. Later, I even introduced him to my lover and everything was fine.

Since I'm achauk, my childhood friends don't really hang out with me anymore. Because I'm the way I am, I always refuse when they ask me to play soccer, and eventually they stopped trying. I found some homosexual friends online, and usually I just enjoy their company because they are much more understanding. I previously tried going straight for several reasons.



(Chit Ya Aung & Chit Moe Sat, 24/7/2016)

One is that I couldn't have a child with a homosexual partner, and another is the worry that the guy I would fall in love with wouldn't love me back. I'm afraid of making mistakes. I grew up under strict parentage--I couldn't play with other children. I just studied at home, and if I ever made a mistake, my dad would beat me with a belt. Anyway, it didn't work out with the girlfriend because after thinking about it, I knew it wouldn't be fair to the girl and to our child. So we broke up. I met my lover on Facebook. We just knew each other through pictures back then; but one day he left his family behind and came to Yangon to meet me. Since he even left his family behind, I tried hard to do the same, but I cannot leave my dad. It has been 7 years since my mom passed. He and I are all that remain. My lover bought me a pig piglet because I am fat, but I did not dare

keep it at home because I was afraid of my dad.

Now when I go here and there with my lover, any relatives that see me will complain to my dad, and he will scold me. But I don't really care anymore. I just want to tell the close minded society that once it happens to them, I hope that they can deal with it.

I intend to stay the rest of my life with my lover. We have no kids but we are happy. I hope that people see regardless of whether it is or isn't between a man and a woman, love is love.

I hate being called achauk. I'd prefer being called a homo.

I think you don't need to hide behind the façade of a manly man if you are gay. Just come out with it and live happier because of it. There is a lot of oppression in this country's conservative society. I think homosexuals need to be conscious about how society minds the way homosexuals dress and go about their business.

I treat the LGBT community as if they are my family. I try to console and guide young homosexuals as well as try to support those suffering from HIV/AIDS. It could have been me and I see humans as humans. They should live the remaining amount of their lives happy.



Chit Ya Aung's drawing

This drawing of a throne indicates a place that ancient kings would sit on. My father is a Shan ethnic from Emirate descent, and my mother is Burmese from ancient kingdom descent. I am still living as a gay even though my parents did not accept homosexual. The picture I drew represents an ancient kingdom. In an ancient time, if a king loved a woman, he kept that woman as his wife even if she already had a husband or children. Families were broken and separated from their love because of these kings. These kings were dead after doing what they wanted. But all the mistakes they did are turning back to our new generation, and we became homosexual. I love my old grandparents and also hate them. Being a homosexual is innate from birth. No one can't be homosexual in the middle of their life. Even though I feel like being a gay is a sin, I try to stay happy and also encourage all of my homosexual friends and HIV/AIDS friends. I pray I will not be a gay in the next life. (Chit Ya Aung, 38, Yangon)

Htet Shine



My name is Htet Shine, and I'm 25. I work as a manager at a company. I became aware that I was a homosexual in 2008. I think my parents know, at least a little bit, because I have brought my "first love" home before. I think my mom realizes it the most. I guess the current situation is acceptable.

My love started in my freshman year at Taungoo University in 2008; and it was around that time that the internet in Myanmar really began gaining traction. It was the age where

programs like Gtalk and MIRC were popular.

By the way, I was yet to realize that I was a homosexual then.

Anyway, like guys do, we would look at pornographic pictures and videos. And one of those pornographic links was to a homosexual porn video. It made me curious because instead of feeling disgusted, I felt that it was freedom--freedom for the participants to live the way they want in their lives. So I started to dig deeper into homosexuality, and it was then that I met my first love on Gtalk. Initially, I had no idea that I was infatuated with him. But I knew something was up when I felt frustrated that the green light that indicates that someone is online wasn't on.

One day, during a school holiday he visited my home. Our home had a manual water pump and his lower lip got cut from operating it. It was the most memorable moment for me; the feeling of getting all flustered with worry. And the realization that I was in love with him was quite something.

It seemed that he had issues with relationships even before he met me. I didn't know about it, but when I learned our relationship was damaged. There was also another that was trying to win my affection. I knew I shouldn't do it, but the other guy and I went out together and stuff. But that lasted maybe a couple of months as I tried to salvage my relationship; but my first lover became too distant for me. He already had plans to move on.

He had these names in his phone contact list which were saved under the category of “names of girls”. It so happened that one day I needed to use his phone to transfer some data, and one of the “girls” tried contacting him to go out on a date. After this drama, the relationship was ruined.

I tried, but it was useless. I guess I was the one that set off the chain of events; but like I said, I tried.

It wasn't that he treated me badly, but rather it was the amount of attention the other person gave me. I got hung up on that attention and reciprocated; but after a while, my guilty conscience got to me. At that point, the relationship was far gone.

I guess in my case, the saying “absence makes the heart grow fonder” is false. After my studies, I moved to Yangon to work, and he did as well. So all of the aforementioned

things happened, we kind of split up. Both of us were scarred from a relationship that went sour.

Something else that was quite memorable was that he decided to start his own business and move to a border region. He came back to Yangon on the 27th of February, and we were together for the whole day. The next day was our anniversary. I had my presents ready but I wanted it to be a surprise. I just figured he would be there but he was gone by the time I got off work to meet him. He had a brother that only said that he left for Rakhine state. He wouldn't pick up my calls, and if it was through another number, he would hang up as soon as he heard my voice.

Anyway, I tried my best to find out his whereabouts. Things passed and I found out that the person he's with right now took away his personal documents and valuable items. I informed his parents in Thailand to do something; like bring him back with them to Thailand. But he refused our proposals.

Eventually, he came back to Yangon empty handed, save for his personal documents. Again I tried to make both of us work again. It might also be that I tried to be a role model in homosexual society; to fight against the stereotype that homo relationships never last.

But of course, I didn't get anywhere with him. By that time, I was stressed to the point that I could not focus my mind on any other activity except trying and trying again with him. I even thought of giving up on life--suicide. I started seriously pondering methods of suicide: should I jump into a river, hang myself or

overdose? Finally, I decided upon overdosing on medicine that I already handily had due to my high blood pressure and heart condition.

It's all very fuzzy but I somehow made it to the dormitory where he was living. But he wasn't there, and I must have called him hundreds of times, but he never answered his phone. And then I blacked out. According to others, those in the dorm at that time thought I was drunk and left me alone. The next morning, he came back and thought I was drunk as well, but he called up my other friends. Luckily, they warned him that I had health conditions which prompted him to check me. He found empty bottles of pills inside my bag and he rushed me to the hospital.

It was all very crazy and wild. Now I have just let it all go for both his sake and mine. There are a lot of events

that happened after my suicide attempt, but there're too many to list.



"I'm sure you remember the part about my first love and how he cut his lower lip. This is the cloth that I used to wipe the blood off. It's still blood-stained. This is one of the items I kept as a memento from our time together".

"It's a silver ring (925) that belonged to my first love. We exchanged rings with each other. But alas, amidst all the trouble, my ring is no longer with him."

Q: Have you ever turned to your family or friends for emotional support?

I have tried many, many things like going to meditation centers, support groups and such. I would like go to the pagoda, meditate and find a momentary respite. I would drink and I would forget for a while. My friends would console me, but the relief would soon fade away. I would go to KTV, but singing love songs made it even worse. There

I think it's because it is thought we do worse compared with the more natural male and female relationship. It's not because we homosexuals are unnatural. It's more like we have this mentality of going with the flow on what we've got. For example, homo relationship involves two men. So you can expect a lot less patience for one. There is very unequal understanding between the two.

Q: What do you think about the trend of homosexuals treating relationship simply as a means for sex?

We are humans, so naturally things like carnal desires come part and parcel. But it is also a human trait to be more than animalistic desires. If a relationship needs to be nurtured, it is your decision to do so, and to observe and practice moral

were many places that he and I went to in Yangon. So, there are so many memories everywhere. It's crushing.

My parents found out from the obvious fact that I look haggard and worn out all the time. I remember my mother telling me then that pain is the best medicine for many things, and that I would recover.

Q: Why do you think that there is a stereotype that homosexual relationships don't last?

behavior. Just because you are gay does not mean you are exempted from such discipline. If you decided to spend the rest of your life with that person, you owe it to yourself to at least see it through.

I guess it also varies from person to person in terms of factors such as family and friends. They play a big factor because homosexuals are always somebody's loved ones. The whole situation of homo relationships being just one night stands can be improved in leaps and bounds if people come to understand love between two people is just that, love.

Q: There are many that dislike the LGBT community here in Myanmar. Is there anything you would like to say to them?

The most important thing is the awareness of human rights. Some will see it as just politically correct fluff, but it is actually something that is very natural. It doesn't matter whether you are a Muslim, a Buddhist or a Christian.

I am speaking not only with regard for the LGBT world, but for everyone when I say that to be aware of and respect human rights are both necessary. We tend to discriminate more so than celebrate our differences--differences that result from man-made criteria. A vast amount of knowledge is definitely needed to show people the way.

Q: What is your opinion on lesbians? Is there anything you would like to say to them?

They and us--we're all the same in the LGBT community. We must come together and cooperate. Only then can we accomplish more.

Q: The current laws ban homosexual marriages. Any comments on that?

Everyone knows the infamous same sex law – section 377. Those are old colonial laws; remnants of eras passed. We must consider the current situation and make necessary adjustments. We will have to fight for our rights. I understand the government is doing the best they can to improve lives (beyond the LGBT community) but we have to request what we want from such campaigns.

Q: Have you ever been discriminated against and called derogatory names such as “achauk”?

A: Yes I have, but mostly as a joke. I'd have to say there was nothing out of the ordinary because that's what guys do. For example, if anyone among my guy friends put on makeup or Thanakhar, we would call that person “achuak”.

Q: How would you want people to address you?

A: I would not mind being called gay. Some people find offence in that, but achauk is a word that is quite demeaning. I'd prefer not to be called that. But I can't really put the blame on people who use such terms because that's the way it is. I don't like it, but if I'm called an achauk, to a certain extent my mind has already made peace with it. The psychological theory of behavioral reinforcement is also at work here. The behavior of calling someone an achauk is

positively reinforced by stimuli such as gaining the approval of others around that person. It'd be best if everyone makes more effort to respect others.

Q: So calling you something like “a ko” (big brother or brother) is fine?

Yes, that is okay.

Q: We've also only heard about it recently, but there are apparently tensions in the gay community between homos that live their lives as a woman and homos that don't. What are your thoughts on it?

If I have to be frank, I hated achauk(s) before. My views were too narrow and greatly influenced by the culture, religion, and straight family and friends. It was ingrained in us that an achauk is someone who is being punished in this life for engaging in extramarital affairs in their previous life.

But as I am now, I have to say that it's a fact that everyone is different. It is also a fact that there will be those that are good and those that are not. Same goes for the LGBT community. Again, awareness is key. I used to hate the LGBT community because I didn't know better. But I chose to research, I elected to be aware of LGBT rights and how

those rights are stripped. If they want to be left alone to their private lives, they certainly have the right to do so; but I think it's best if people can put aside their ego and work towards the greater good. It's just generally sound logic. We don't have that long of a life to be occupied with hate or jealousy. If the needs of the majority triumph every time, things will be very peaceful.

Q: What about yourself? Would you rather be not involved and live your life in peace? Or would you rather be contributing to the LGBT community?

I'd have to say I want both. My dream is still to live out the rest of my life with the ones I love. I guess in that respect, things are not going great because there's a girl that my family, relatives and friends all agree that I should marry. I've been trying to derail this politely, but no success so far.

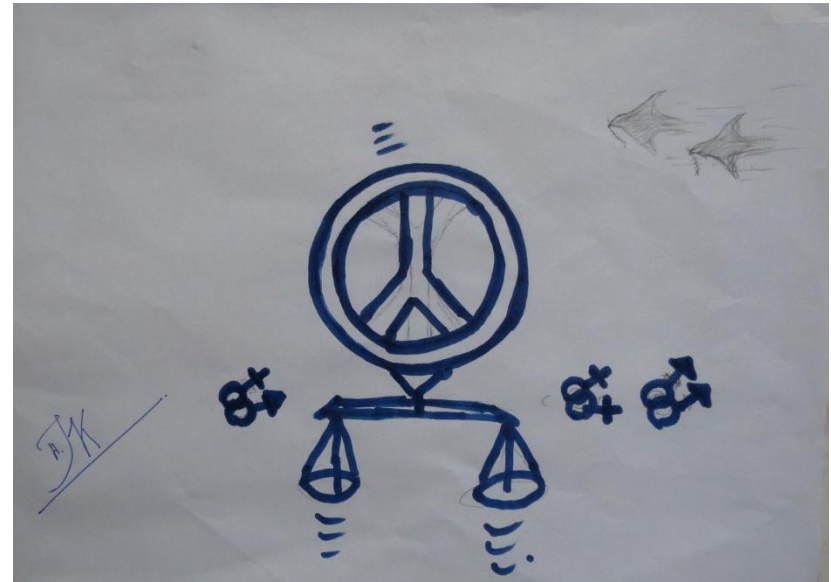
Anyway, my current boyfriend and I both agree on one thing. We agree that we both want to be someone whose efforts will be recognized by those in and out of the community.

Just a side note, I will have to thank my first love for this. Because otherwise, I would not be where I am—able to do

what I do. I had to put in a great deal of effort for that relationship.

Q: I think you will agree that homos must consider the general public surrounding them, even though they have the right to be left alone to their private lives.

Yes, I agree, especially as someone who wants to contribute to society in whatever ways I can. I think there is hope; we are human and we do have compassion in our hearts. Even if we do not have material things to give away, we can put in the time and effort. This is the same for the LGBT community. We have to rely on our surrounding community when we need to, but we also have to give some back.



*"I'm sure you can recognize this symbol that represents peace. Initially, I only drew it; but considering where my life is currently at, I decided to draw this piece. It's meant to represent balance in life. There are also two birds; the white doves. It's supposed to represent peace that is on the way. The whole thing--to sum it up--means that everyone should cooperate together to achieve peace."
(Htet Shine)*

Myat Noe Kyaw (37)

(From Yangon)

What I believe is that a person must stand firm for their own beliefs--giving it their best so that their beliefs don't come into conflict with religion, society, or extant laws. It all depends upon the individual in question to decide.

It's the same thing with homosexuality. The realization and subsequent acceptance might happen when you're over 40 or even 50. For me, I have known since I was young, and it wasn't about loving another of the same sex, but I loved dressing and living like a girl. I feel that boys are very uncomfortable talking, and female friends made me feel safe.

When I was young, I caused a lot of trouble between my parents and the neighborhood. They always beat me whenever someone questioned how the neighborhood could allow this kind of behavior. My family never asked why I was that way, and back then I was too young to understand why I was getting spanked all the time.

When I finished 11th grade, my mom told me that if I want to live this way, I need to hone my skills in being a makeup artist, and made herself my mentor. My father never did like it or accept it at the time; but it might have been my mom's amazing skills that brought him to understand and accept me later.

It doesn't matter whether you're the eldest or the youngest in a family. All that matters is that you're able to contribute-- contribute and earn a living on your own. Even conservative parents are able to become happy for you if you can prove your contribution.

I remember my neighbors and those in the community asking my mom why she allowed me to be this way. My mom replied that if her son was not an "achauk", he would take a wife, and the family will have to split. This way everyone can stay together.

So there are certain things I do for my mom's liking for being so understanding. For one, I don't wear women's clothes at home because she doesn't like it. There were times she disliked my boyfriends, and I subsequently stop contacting them. When it comes to a homosexual and sex, there are a lot of things we won't let our parents know about, but if ever something was obvious to mine's distaste, I let it go.

I think it was around 1997 that I watched a film about HIV/AIDS. The film portrayed the idea that if you perform sexual intercourse with a member of the same sex, HIV happens. But in reality, it is a disease that came as a result of consummation between a gorilla and a human on some island. I believe it to be some sort of punishment from God; especially on those who cannot keep the "Ngarr Par Thila" (Five Buddhist Precepts). Even if this disease disappears, another will just take its place.

One thing I have noticed is that people tend to classify, thus limiting themselves to transgender and homosexual tags depending on what is done under the sheets. Even I am afraid that the identity of transgender people might disappear and only "homo" will remain. We can't be conflicted amongst ourselves--we have to stick together and fight for our rights. We have to assess how welcoming we actually are to those in the same boat as us before we can judge how others accept us. It is along the same vein as what Daw Aung San Suu Kyi said; there must be peace for the nation to develop. I think that can also be applied here. How peaceful are we same-sex lovers with another? If there is a chance to cooperate, do we even want to? Some are such cowards--they are afraid to admit it. They will live at home, pretending to be just like a hot blooded male, and they will still do the same even if they move to a new neighborhood. And then they will trap others into becoming a homo just like them.

The other thing is that once branded as homo, people take it as a license to prostitute. It's quite a barbaric stereotype.

When it comes to rights, I believe people should just be seen as people: homosexual, transgender, male, female or otherwise--it doesn't matter. Only then will human rights implementation go smoothly. As it is now with so many different categories, achauk rights are going to get pushed aside because even basic human rights for straight people aren't there yet.

And then when it comes to rights, there are bound to be some silly requests like special clubs just for us or special toilets just for us. There is a need to discern what is really important in the country and do just that.

My mom to me is the most memorable. I have to say mom was very democratic; she accepted me when the rest of my world wouldn't. And so she is the first person for me to ever inform whenever I succeed in something.

I would also like to remind other achauk(s) like me that have been treated poorly by their families that they have also suffered as much as you, if not more. For example, my dad probably has his friends jest on how his son was gay. Some might even brazenly insult him by saying that he lays with his son. All those embarrassing comments and he comes home to find me all dressed up feminine. It's not surprising that he would lash out. The same probably goes for your siblings, as well as for your lovers. We have to be more disciplined than others in that regard because the source of their shame comes from us. We have to make them respect us first before they truly do. The first step is to live according to how the family would like, and the second is to play your part in the family. There are tons of achauk out there that keep dwelling on how they are being persecuted by their own family, but don't do a damn thing in the house. It's not always about being defiant by dressing in the style you like and living the way you want. Sometimes you have to go with the flow in your family and community. That will slowly give cause for people's opinion of us to change, and when it finally happens, we won't have to ask for our rights. Our actions will have already spoken.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was asked when democracy will arrive. She answered that it is within her, and when the day comes that she and the country are one, it will be democracy. Likewise, we have to be united. Otherwise, the ones who keep fighting for achauk rights will die before the whole thing is ruined by those achauk that do nothing or too little.

I am currently in a relationship; and he is good to me like both a big brother and lover, even though he tells me to never even think about living together. Even so, I'm satisfied. In a way, that's very manly of him because he doesn't want me to hope and wish for something that may never happen.



(Myat Noe Kyaw's drawing)

Kyaw Soe Han

(from Yangon)



(Kyaw Soe Han with the “flag” on a shirt. He said “I always wear this flag at my work to show our friendliness towards all the LGBT community at our resort”)

I am 34 years old. I am living differently from my friends. I make friends mostly with boys. My life has been extremely

geared towards studies. My mom teaches me very well. The first thing of importance in my life I recall was my study. I did not know about myself when I was young. Looking back upon most of my time spent with boys, I was very happy with their company, but I was also different from them. I was playing with girls, playing with toys, drawing, etc. I had the girls’ way of playing too. I think at that time, THAT spirit was already inside me. That means I was born this way.

After high school, I had two girlfriends, but the relationships did not last long. We just hung around and chit-chatted; but I was also attracted to a guy at that time. I asked myself what it meant. What if I had to choose? Then I made a test. I kissed a girl and tried to observe my feelings. Then I kissed that guy and asked myself how I felt. I concluded that my attraction was to guys, not girls. When I kissed a guy, it was like something joyful--peaceful in that moment in time. Kissing a girl was not like passion. It was simply like placing your lips on something--no chemistry--you don’t feel anything inside. So I concluded that I was gay.

I already knew the word “gay” at a very young age. My family was educated, so I read a lot of materials, but strangely I did not know the meaning of “gay”.

When I found out that I was gay, I was not very worried. I thought to myself, “I am gay, so what?” It is natural--I am not going to change it. My mom noticed that I was gay, and my father knew as well. They did not express any hate or stigma. I did not experience or see any negative reaction.

I graduated with an English major. After my graduation, I tried out some dating. But gay men in Myanmar were very discreet. There were only a few places to meet in Yangon at that time. I would not have known about these had not some gay friends

told me. It was in the early 2000s and there was no FB or helpful apps. There were only G mail and chat programs at the internet cafes. So we went to public internet cafés to chat with some suggestive names like Top boys, G, bot, or something like that. We used webpages and email to arrange dates at the bus stop or tea shop. When we dated through the website, we talked about our appearances, date and time, and significant features to help recognize each other. But you know, some people were very discreet. They said one thing, but then dressed in a different way and hid somewhere just to observe the person they arranged to meet. If their date showed up and they did not like him, they left right away. It was difficult and interesting. It was not easy to send photos as you needed to take many steps such as taking the photos, printing them, scanning them and finally uploading them; but sometimes we never met our date. Unlike the rest, I always showed up on time and dressed in the way I said I would. But some people forced me to wait for hours. One time I waited and waited, and the guy did not show up. He told me later I was not his type. It was difficult as I waited for a particularly long time at the coffee shop.

Then there came along more applications and tools to communicate with. In 2003, there appeared a website called Men Charm. It became very famous as a means for dating, and contained a lot of features. Many more tools developed from that time on. Then--you know--after 2010, mobile phones became extremely popular. From 2013 until now, there have been more and more dating apps for us, and I used a lot of these. We could arrange to go to hotels after dates.

In our country, we have kind of a “family culture”. We hug each other a lot. I would like to ask foreigners what they think of this. They might think there are many gay men here. Two

men going to a hotel hand in hand in public is not criminal. In my experience nobody has even checked our IDs.

However, back before we had handy apps on our mobile phones, we did not dare to go to hotels with our dates. We would go to our house or friends’ house, or even public toilets in the park, etc. We did not go to the hotel because of the expense; but it was also very exposing for us.

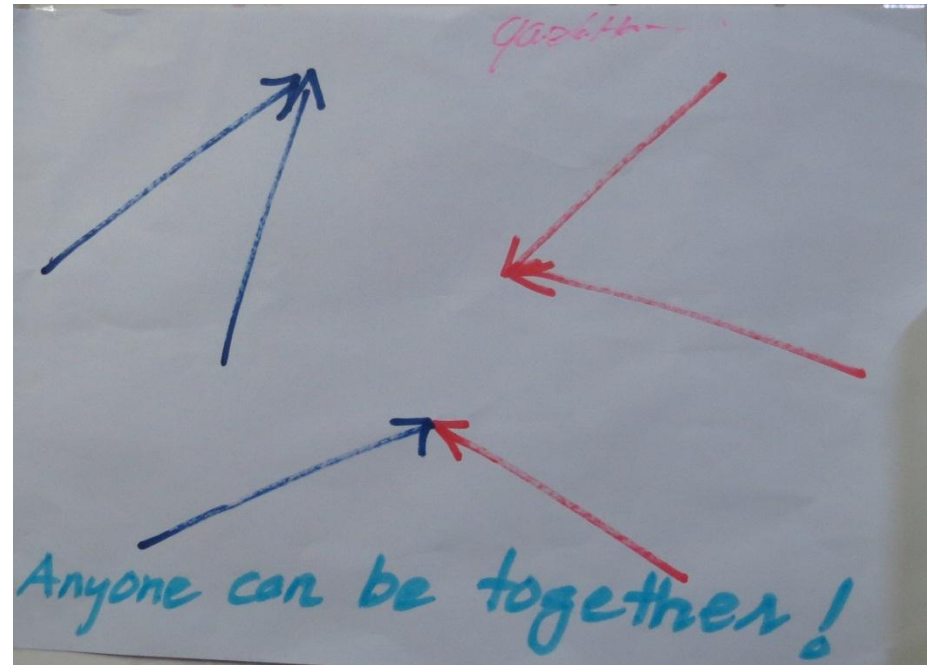
As I mentioned before, I used a lot of apps and I had a lot of sexual partners, but right now I live peacefully with my husband. He is one year older than me and he is the only son in his family. We hooked up on Facebook while living over seas. At first we took the relationship casually, but we grew strong feelings towards each other. I realized that I did not want to lose him when I saw him posting pictures of another boy. I kept asking lots of questions until I realized that I was jealous. I wanted something with him beyond just casual flirting. He was a serious man--perhaps a bit older than me, and he longed for a relationship.

So when he came back to Yangon, we talked, and I wrote a letter to my parents that I first gave to my sister. I asked her to give it to my parents. I talked about him, and expressed how I wanted to have a life together with him along with our families. Then I went straight to the airport to pick him up. I did not let him go to his home first as I knew once he was there we would not be able to meet. His family was strict and he did not share many important aspects of his life with them. His family was rich and powerful, and they had power over him once he was with them. So I just went to the airport, picked him up, and took him around a bit. Then we headed to my home.

I was nervous, I did not say a word after arriving, but went straight to my room and left him at the front door. He did not

know what to do. My father looked at him and welcomed him. He was nervous like I was. Fortunately, my family took it very naturally. My parents even gave their special bed to us as our wedding bed. He became a family member as if my parents had another son. He cared about my siblings too, and they all liked him a lot.

When we fought, especially during the early stage of life together after he found out I had sexual partners outside, he would collapse. My family was very angry at me, and when I noticed him in that condition, I promised myself I would care for his feelings and not hurt him. I did not scarify my sex life; but we talked, and I explained to him about my seeking to derive pleasure from love. He did not agree, but gradually we came to understand one another. Sometimes we tried a threesome, and sometimes we talked about new persons we found. he would even drive me to meet that person, but he would wait somewhere else. So did I. we share a lot, and our feelings and attachment with each other has grown into a kind of special brotherhood. We dated other people, but we always have each other at heart. We are open about our sex lives and distinguish them with having a special relationship. We do not fight or get jealous anymore because we can trust each other. He is planning to open a business to make a living so we can have some security for when we are old. He is very good at distinguishing different materials, and I am there to help him, but I cannot do as well as he does.



“Every human being is like an arrow. You can be whatever color, whoever you are, meet whatever other human being, and love that person. That’s love. That’s life” (Kyaw Soe Han)

Gay Cruising Area in Yangon in early 2000s

“At that time...the cruising area was along the road with many cinemas (Bogyoke Road). There were a lot of teashops. There was no particular teashop, but it was on the road and there was Theingyi Market. There is a pedestrian bridge, and that area is a cruising area mainly for prostitutes. Usually some activities happened at night, but some places attract people during both day and night. Some guys would wait at this particular teashop known for prostitution. There were fewer cafeterias back then, and we would visit this particular teashop during day time for [blind] dates.

Another place was near Kandawgyi Lake. There was a long winding road that circles the circumference of the lake. There were a lot of big trees as well. It's very dark along that road at night, and many gay people would cruise along that road. At that time we also had underground toilets--these places were where people would go and have sex, right? These were the two that were very famous at that time. There were other toilets in other areas, but every underground toilet was a cruising area for gay people at that time. They'd even had “glory holes” inside of them. They made a big hole that was large enough for a penis to fit through so people from the other side can do “it”--

they did not have to see each other's faces. These places do not exist anymore as governments changed, and toilets moved above ground. But then toilets had glory holes in them. Even if the partition was made from metal, people would try to make holes. Back then, there were no gay bars, no legal places for gay men. Now I am in a stable relationship and just back to Yangon after three years, so I do not know many popular places for gay men.” **(Kyaw Soe Han)**



Ma Ma

(from Yangon)



Q: Mingalapar Ma Ma, can you please state your name and age?

A: My birth name is Than Naing Myo but I'm more commonly known by my transgender name, Ma Ma.

Q: What about your age?

A: Must I say it? I'm a little bit over 50.

Q: Let's just say it's 50. What do you believe yourself to be?

A: I consider myself to be openly transgender. I'm satisfied with the life I am leading, and it is also appropriate since I

work for an MSM project that encourages coming out to the community.

Q: What kind of experiences did you have to go through in your life to reach the place you are now?

A: I will have to start from my childhood. I was the youngest amongst my siblings. My sisters and mother always used to spoil me and I picked up habits, partly because I didn't dare go against mother, like putting on "Tha Na Kha" (traditional facial cream). Boys usually don't like to do that. It was obvious that I was quite feminine since I was in primary school. I would only be interested in playing children's games that were traditionally played by women: playing dress up, "Htote see htoe" (a traditional Burmese game) and others that were mainly played by girls. When I moved up to middle school, I started getting a lot more heat from elders. They think a man shouldn't be this way because the life of a male is holy. They might be right, but the way they said it, it sounds like anything otherwise is unholy.

People tend to blame it on life. "It's karma from a past life". "It's because of how he grew up". No, I was born with it. It's my nature to have a mind of a woman. Others might

attribute it to those things, but I don't want to blame it on any of this. I am happy with how I have been living my life.

During middle school, I wanted to dance "Kayin Done Yin" (a Karenni traditional dance) during "Thadingyut" (also called the Lighting Festival). I got scolded for it but I did it anyway. I graduated middle school and during my high school years, my dad passed, leaving his wife a widow. My mom stopped doing business and went to live with my eldest sister. Since I wanted to be with mom, she brought me along to stay with my sister's family.

Fast forward a few years--I took the university entrance exam and I failed. While I was repeating 11th grade, my sister's husband passed away, leaving my pregnant sister a widow with 6 children. The situation was bad: the cost for her husband's medical treatment, the expenses for her children, an aging mother, and a repeater sister. I managed to pass this year and even attended a distance learning university for a short while before I decided to quit my studies to help out. I asked a friend to help me look for a job and she suggested one at The Worker's Hospital. Sorry If I keep droning on. Do tell me if I am.

Q: Don't worry, if it's necessary, I will interject. Please continue.

Her mother held a senior position there, but it turned out I had to wait for around 3 months. It was during the "Ma Sa La" (Burma Socialist Program Party) era, so there were complications with the worker's council and all that.

After that she took me--to my surprise--to the police office at 46th street. At first I was afraid she wanted me to be a policeman, which I didn't want since I'm quite effeminate. But she told me I could do something else, like being a clerk; and while I had a bad feeling about this, I was desperate. Her uncle, Win Myine, who is now police Brigadier-General, was working there. He made sure I was employed within one week. Initially I was just employed as a kind of extra staff person at the Tamwe Station. I would just go to the office and leave when it was time to go. Later on, an order came down that everyone had to take an exam. I cried because I was so worried. Normally, when people apply for the police force, they have to first attend a 6 months training program. For us the training came later.

We had to take the exam at Saint Paul's (an all-boys high school) together with a total of over 6000 people. They were only going to let 500 pass. The exam tested us on English and the Myanmar Language, as well as general knowledge regarding country leaders, and such things as the date of formation of the police force.

Now--I didn't like any of this, but I already received help and got the job. I didn't want to be disrespectful, so I tried. In the end, I was one of the chosen 500. I didn't expect it, and I definitely did not want it. In hindsight, I guess that not knowing what I wanted prior to joining the police, which was to be a makeup artist, was to blame.

Anyway, I also couldn't decline the training because doing so in that era would have landed me in jail for desertion. I was afraid of that threat, and I had to attend training at the police academy in Yamalthin, Mandalay. There were a lot of tears as I am effeminate, and you know how men can be? Thoughts like: I'm going to get bullied, mocked, or any of several other nasty things kept me up at night. So I had to train myself to not care. Of course, it wasn't all bad. There was a little bit of good. You see all sorts of people in there from all over the country. And with myself among them with a woman's mind, I had to learn a lot of self-control.

Even while sleeping, I had to be cognizant of where and how I slept. I was afraid that if someone knew I was "achauk", everyone would find out. A person like me shouldn't belong with the armed forces to begin with. The shame would not only be on me, but also on my unit. By the way, I had a cute nickname in the academy. People would call me "Sa Koe Lay" (Lil' 19) since my ID number was 19.

It was exhausting--I couldn't keep up with the training. I cried and I was angry and I directed my anger at the friend that got me the job.

There was this one guy named Than Htun Aung with the ID number of 20. He was a stocky "A Nyar Thar" (a man from a rural area); but the way he treated me was ok. The rude ones are those from Yangon--always looking to poke fun at everything. I mostly just acted indifferently and tried to ignore them.

Anyway, I did my best when assigned duties. I would often have to take medicine to soothe my sore arms and legs. The worst for me--at least I think I was the most hopeless--was the running. We had to run while carrying our equipment and singing military cadences. I couldn't run for long distances while carrying a heavy backpack and gun. Consequently the drill sergeant would often scold me. He would tell me to not be soft, and to man-up. I did not dare say much to him except to agree that I was soft. He never let me off the hook. I don't blame those men though--they were carrying out their duty.

It took me three months to get used to everything. I even managed to pick up on policies and politics of the ruling party back then. In more modern times, police training and

education has been almost solely done by the police; but back then, people from political parties or worker's councils regularly taught us.

And so I finished six months of training. In the end, it kind of worked out because towards the last of the training, everyone knew that I was effeminate. But by that point, I was on good terms with everyone. For example, when some duties required moving heavy objects, they would instead assign me to something like sweeping. I thought that once they all knew, they would treat me differently or even bully me. I expected to be discriminated against, but instead, I was accepted. Even the police chief back then was friendly with me. He was also the head of the academy.

Q: Can you tell me about any terrible treatment from others if there were any in your life?

A: So by terrible treatment, you mean to say anything like jokes or remarks that hurt me? What will you do with the information?

Q: We will keep some details hidden if necessary.

A: I hesitate to say it, but when I was young, there was one time when I was sexually assaulted. He was older, someone

familiar with me, and a person I looked up to as a mentor--a senior. Maybe he thought that I was achauk or something; but we had to spend a night together due to some work. We were sleeping under different "chin htaung" (mosquito nets), and that was when he assaulted me.

Q: How did you feel about the incident?

A: I was afraid. And I was in pain. I was still rather young – 19 – just fresh out of the police training.

Q: So it was the first time you ever experienced something like this right?

A: Yes and it was a jarring experience. It was scary because I was totally unused to it. I was very angry at him as well. You know, for example, getting familiar enough to do these sorts of things might have been better. It was a very raw shock for me because I treated him as a mentor. Also, I was asleep, so that added to the shock.

Q: So now that you're openly transgender, when did you tell your family and how did they take it?

A: So, the financial situation isn't looking too good. I am working at the Ministry of Home Affairs (police) and supporting the family, especially the kids with their

education so that their lives can be better. I sympathize with my widowed sister and her family a lot. We are family after all. Everything I do and everywhere I go, I think of them.

I had a favorite--a niece by the name of Kin Than Oo. It's unfortunate but she has now passed away from cancer. Before her death, I was a closet case. It was later after her passing that I opened up and started living, dressing, and talking the way I really want. Of course people in my surroundings have sneered at me, but I don't have time to care about them. I worry about the ways I can support my family, and I can't support them the way other men do. I need to do what best fits me--no time to be embarrassed about it.

Q: When did you quit Home Affairs?

A: It has been a long time, around 17 to 18 years.

Q: The next question is again personal. Have you ever been in a relationship or are you in one right now?

A: It's sad, but I never had anyone who I could call "a lover". And it has not been because I haven't wanted to; but I haven't been able.



Q: So you were too busy with work?

A: Yes. It was so hectic. My nieces were all that was on my mind, and then it would be my work. On payday, I would always ask my superior for leave because I had to rush home to Twantay (a far-off township in Yangon), pay what needed to be paid, stay one or two nights, and then it would be back to my office. I ran a small business as a trader after I left home affairs. I would normally go up to Pakokku (Magway Region) and Loikaw (Kayah State). I would be depressed if I incurred losses; and when I made profits I would be too focused in dividing it up. I had no time for a love life. It wasn't like I didn't find anyone attractive enough--I actually found many guys to be quite attractive. At least their physical appearance was appealing. Even now, I'm not in a relationship.

Q: We know that you're now working in a position that benefits the LGBT community here in Myanmar. Can you tell us a little bit about what you do?

A: Now I'm working for the MSM community as a PE, which means I go out and get involved. It's like a support group that will welcome, advise, help and console others that lead the same sort of lifestyle as us. For example, we talk to the youngsters and educate them on important health issues. We provide free blood testing services; and for those that face difficulties in coming to our offices, we support Ks

4,000 travel fare per individual. The blood tests are specifically for HIV and other STDs. If someone is diagnosed positive, we encourage them, support them and let them know that it is going to be okay. We try to keep things positive by using light words and with gentle reminders to follow doctor's instructions.

We also are on the lookout for those that are in harder to reach places. If we hear and can confirm that this X person is suffering from Y, we submit an official request to the office. Once its approved we travel there, let that person know what's up and try to persuade that person to seek proper medical care.

Q: What kind of lifestyle advice do you want to give to the younger crowd in the LGBT community?

A: I find that there are more members of the LGBT community compared to when I was young. It was somewhat rare back then; but what's not rare is long-lasting love. In this new age, sex is more casual and sometimes given priority over actual emotional attachment. Things about sex are more widespread than ever before, so much so that even kids 13 to 14 years old know so much. They're more curious. And I don't want to condemn young love, but I advise caution because once you contract HIV or some types of STDs, it's going to be with you for life. Once you engage in sex with a disease carrier, despite all the

protection, you're definitely going to get it. If you value your life and your body, get blood tests done regularly. It is the best option. If you tested positive, seek medical assistance promptly by either discussing it with healthcare professionals like me in NGOs or experts. We will always welcome you because you kids are our future.

Don't be afraid to love one another, in fact I encourage you to spread more love, but always be smart about it. If you are sexually active, at least always carry a condom with you. It's nothing to be embarrassed about. We have a motto; "Saung Naing Yin Shaung, Ma Shaung Naing Yin" ("Avoid if you can't keep, Keep if you can't avoid"). Please attend workshops and seminars regarding sex education held by us or others. Only then can people gain knowledge to know what's good and what's not. A little bit of straying can lead to a lifetime of regret.

In Myanmar, people have very little knowledge about sex education because parents are extremely reluctant to let their kids go to these events. This only puts the children at greater risk. If possible, I want everyone in the family to know: father, mother, grandpa, grandma, sister, brother. Everyone must open up to learning these things because the diseases are multiplying rapidly and growing stronger. It's worrying for Myanmar. Knowledge regarding not only

STDs but also other health issues must be better accepted by people.

I also request you (the interviewer) and your fellow colleagues to do your part in raising health awareness. I will also be doing my best on my end.

Q: Thank you. Can you tell me if there are any memorable items in your life, such as gifts?

A: I've been wondering about that from the beginning because I definitely had such gifts. But Cyclone Nargis happened. Some things went with the floods, some things scattered in the winds. Our house collapsed when it hit, and we had no time to save things precious to us except our lives.

Q: It doesn't have to be a gift. It can be anything that is treasured by you. Maybe it's the first Hta Main (women's sarong) you wore when you came out, a hairclip, shoes, anything.

A: Well, I do have hair pins and clips. Some are broken, but I still keep them lying around because I felt it a waste to just throw them out. And I have plenty of slippers since I normally just wear slippers.

Q: We also are asking for donations of such items because we would like to showcase it all at our exhibition on items that are treasured--even if broken.

If you can't part with them, we do request a temporary loan.

A: Okay, it's fine. The other youngster wanted to ask me something about hormones?

Q: We will contact you at a later time for your items. Yes, I will be asking about it now. Have you taken any hormonal medicines before?

A: Yes, I have.

Q: When did you start taking them?

A: I secretly began when I was in 8th grade. There was a doctor that graduated from a medical university in the USA. We knew him well. One day, he asked me whether I wanted to be like a girl. I told him the truth, and when I started attending 8th grade classes, he showed me this golden yellow colored bottle of pills that he told me he brought from The States for "research". He gave me 30 pills, told me to take it once daily along with other supplements to be taken once every three days. I wanted to be more me, so I started taking them. The first thing was the hunger. I started eating large amounts of food and sleeping for long periods of time. I grew, and it was noticeable, especially because I was a scrawny person previously. I grew especially noticeably in places like my chest and hips. When I finished the pills, I started taking anti-pregnancy pills as things weren't accessible back then.

Anyway, my family, understandably, was shocked. I had to keep my enlarged chest hidden from them. You can just imagine the trouble I had when I was attending the police academy. I had to do things like sneaking in a shower at night time.

Q: That must've been quite the struggle. How large did they grow?

A: I think it grew as much as it should have, around the size of a clenched fist. It was fairly obvious. I had to meticulously prepare everything in advance so that people in the academy didn't find out. This is also one major reason why I was always so exhausted and angry at my friend.

Q: Sounds like it was a very tough 6 months of your life. Can you please tell me next what your plans are for the future?

A: I have a lot of emotion invested in making my current job more successful. I want to do even more because I feel that this kind of job is really quite special. If I manage to do my job right, it might be the start of saving a life, and that is amazingly positive karma. In a world where nothing ever remains the same, I want to do my part in contributing positivity. Even If I cannot be the catalyst for big changes, I aim to remain happy as I can be with where I am in life, and continue to help.

And to all main ma shar(s) out there, do not be embarrassed and do not be afraid if you have a disease. If you need our help, we're already here. You should nurture your dreams, not let them wilt away by throwing caution to the wind and simply indulging in carnal pleasures. Think big but act prudent. Be open minded but cautious. It is the dearest wish of mine to see HIV disappear, because only then will the main ma shar(s) lead better lives. It's heartbreaking to hear others call them "disease carriers" and other mean names. I would also like to tell boys to keep it under control.

Q: This is the last question. Is there anything you would like to see the government do for the LGBT community?

A: I think it's quite complicated. It was hopeless during the previous administration, but I have high hopes for the government led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. No matter what people say, "Amay Suu" (mother suu) is an intelligent woman with broad visions. The LGBT issues are global problems, not only in our little country. I would like to request more understanding towards the LGBT community from the government—understanding that love conquers all, least of all gender barriers.



"I adore beauty and I always strive to look beautiful, just like a flower. That is why I drew this flower. Kyay Zu Tin Par Dal"
(Ma Ma, 50yr, Yangon)

Ma May Soe



I'm called Ma May Soe. I'm 61 and of Myeik origin. I believe myself to be a woman in the body of a man. I grew up with prejudice and discrimination because I was an "achauk". I had to try hard to get by amidst all that. I attained my diploma and pressed on with studies all the way until my PhD. Then I devoted myself to the education sector by joining the education department as a teacher. But no matter how academically accomplished I am, I still get mocked for being an achauk.

I moved up from being a kindergarten teacher to middle school instruction, and at last to being a high school teacher. I attained a B.Ed. during this time before becoming a headmaster and getting posted to the Taninthayi Region. For my whole life I've been working in education. In 2001 I took a medical retirement due to my Aortic Stenosis and soon became the headmaster at a charity school.

I have faced much discrimination in my life. It doesn't matter how educated I am; as long as I'm an achauk, I am discriminated against. It's silly, but parents think that if their children go to a school governed by an achauk, the children will turn out gay. But I just keep myself composed and live my life. There is respect from the education department and related communities because I'm a graduate from the University of Cultural Arts.

My family doesn't quite like it. When I started my stint as an educator, I used to dress up like a woman and went to dance at festivals. My mom used to scold me for not going along with how society expects me to be. My dad also had many arguments regarding me, especially since he faces more pressure as a high ranking government authority. But I always make it a point to remain smiling and solid. My attitude and my efforts later earned the trust of my parents. When it comes to sex, I have faced brutal assaults. I guess people think that it's okay to do these things to an achauk. I'll be upfront. When I was stationed in a rural village during the 1988 uprising, I was dragged along one of the military's forced recruitments. Since I'm an achauk and not fit for hard labor, they kept me hanging around a sergeant. One night, they got drunk. I'll never forget the black stain that night left on my life--the night that I was raped by a platoon of 16 soldiers.

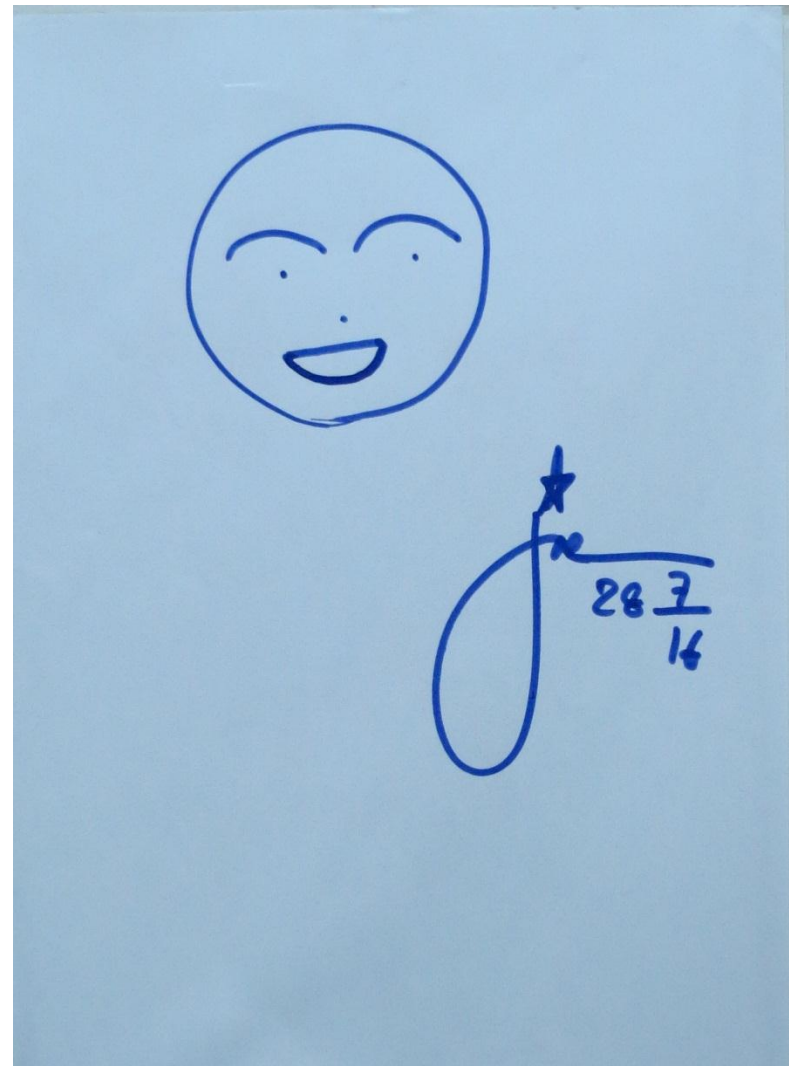
Now I'm at a point in my life where I can live independently and proud as a headmistress. Most of my relatives are even understanding and accepting. I try not to dwell on the terrible things in my life. Since my youth I have been into teaching and art. I also found my first love at a tender age at a festival; but we had to split after 6 months because we could not stand the pressure from society. It broke my heart even more so because he was my first, but my pride allowed me to forget about him. I met him again at a Ta Saung Tine festival (a famous Burmese hot air balloon festival), but I was to be stationed away as part of my job. When I go back to my hometown, I see him, but we are no longer as friendly as we were. He even has kids and grandkids now. I've given up on finding a lover.

I have had to try extremely hard and stay very upright. Kids now-a-days are more open--perhaps too open for my taste. I hope that gays and transgender people behave better because no bad apple should spoil the whole bunch. A gay person with a bad attitude in life may make the whole LGBT community look bad. I often see that most gays here have problems with xxx and stealing. I want the LGBT people to be educated and live respectable lives. I don't want achauk(s) to form a gang and go on clandestine activities at night.

I am currently leading a charity school, one that is within Aung San Suu Kyi's network of charity schools. I put in my best efforts for the children to not get swept away by pleasures such as sex and instead enter bright futures. I will continue living my life doing as much charity work as possible.

I told you about my life's positive and negative experiences. There were some aspects of my life that I think you should know about.

After I graduated I attended the course needed to get my certificate for teaching. I got my license and got posted as a teacher in a village. I had to stay at the local ward administrator's home. There was a boy living at the same house. He was 15 and I was 20 at that time. He was the eldest of three siblings. His parents are gone and his aunt, who is without a child, adopted and took them all in. As is the case with people in rural areas, he only attended school through high school before concluding his education. I tried--as someone who is older than him, and as a teacher, to persuade him to go back to school. He never listened, and eventually I gave up.



"Whatever the challenges I faced, I overcame with smiles in my life. (Ma May,61,Dala)

We used to hang out often because we were both youngsters. It might be because both of us were very close (living in the same house) but we fell in love with each other. Others didn't see anything amiss because they thought I was just a "teacher's love". Anyway, I served my three-year post in the village. After that, orders came from above to transfer to another school in another area. He came along with me on the day that I left. I initially thought that he was going to come for a little while and then go back; but he refused to go back to his family and relatives. So the situation was that I was at my job teaching at a school in the next village when he got shot by armed bandits. He tried to escape by boat when they attacked the village but got shot three times. He was sent to the hospital, and meanwhile I was in class. When I got home, there were many people staring at me, and I was so confused until one of them told me the news. I was beside myself with worry. The hospital wasn't too far away. It was a 30 minutes trip on a motorcycle and I didn't even know how I got there. When I finally got to see him, he was delirious from lead poisoning. He begged me again and again to help him and stay by his side. The doctors told me that he needed to be hospitalized for 45 days, but I had to go to another place after 15. So every day, I would be there after my classes, and even if I couldn't be there, someone would always go in my stead. A lot of people supported him so far as they could. Anyway, when it was time to leave the village, the

head doctor permitted the discharge. So again, he tagged along with me in bandages and casts.

For years after that time we lived together as if we were married. We only separated after he turned 35 years old. He got married to a girl. From the time he passed his teenage years I told him repeatedly to not waste his life with me. He had the potential for a real future. He was quite gifted as a mechanic. But he refused. He told me that even if he had to marry, he would stay with me. I didn't agree to that half-way kind of action. Anyway, we just continued on with our lives until he decided to get married with the daughter of a wealthy person in Myeik. He did ask for both my own and my mother's permission. At that point I was the headmaster at a school. There was a lot of pressure coming from everywhere, and especially from his upcoming wedding. I struggled quite a lot to decide whether to show up at the wedding; but in the end I went, and I resolved to let it be the final time I am to see him.

But I twice saw him later in my life: once when his child was born, and once when my beauty parlor was burned to the ground. There was a big fire in Myeik that spread through quite a lot of areas in the city. His family came to ask me how I was and to see if I needed any support. I haven't seen him since I moved to Yangon; and if I do see him again, I shall still be nice to him but nothing more than that.



Ma May Soe's beautiful belongings.

Ma Wine (34)



My name is Ma Wine. I live my life as a woman, made apparent by my wearing of women's clothing. There are a total of 6 siblings in my family including myself, and I am of Pathein origin.

Ever since I was young, I wanted to study in girl's only classrooms and I pestered my teachers frequently about it. My siblings didn't like the fact that one of their own siblings did cross dressing. I was the youngest, so my parents used to spoil me. My mom ironically was the man of the house, and while she was around, I could live the way I liked.

When I was 14 the whole family moved to North Dagon Township, and three years later my mom died.

Once she died, all the house rules flew out of the window. They never said anything while she was alive, but once she bit the dust, they told me that they didn't like one of their own living "this way". They made it clear that they didn't want an "achauk". My family literally kicked me out of the house; so I went to a beauty salon operated by another achauk I knew and proceeded to beg the owner to allow me to learn from her, to work for her and also to stay there. She accepted me, and after 6 to 7 years she started treating me as an employee because I became skilled, and she started giving me a salary.

After I began devoting myself to the way of the achauk, my list of friends grew. It was also helpful that I was young, and thus I sometimes went around working as a "Nat Kadaw" (spirit dancer) or even prostituting myself. I got to see

many things. Now I still work in a beauty salon and other temporary jobs.

I used to love this guy so much because he was my first sexual partner. I even got a tattoo on the spot of my neck where he often kissed me. When I later got to know the pleasures of sex, I started prostituting myself more.

Back then I didn't even think or know about being safe--sometimes I didn't even collect the money. As a result, I became HIV positive. It has been 10 years since I've been taking ART (**Antiretroviral therapy**) medicine, but it's still the first batch of meds. I was lucky that an achauk friend of mine brought me to an NGO to get tested. Now that I'm getting older and my health is noticeably getting worse, I rarely prostitute myself anymore.

I was so afraid of letting my family know, and I still am--they still do not know. But my senior achauk and others know about my condition. My senior is the one that helps me get the medicines. I'm currently a volunteer worker at AMI (a NGO working on HIV prevention). I am regular with my meds.

My father took another wife around one year after my mom passed away. What I will never forget in my life is the abuse my step mother put me through, and how much it hurt to see my own father take her side. I will never scorn him though because he played a part in me being born after all. I remember sleeping on the side of streets or on top of some stranger's car.

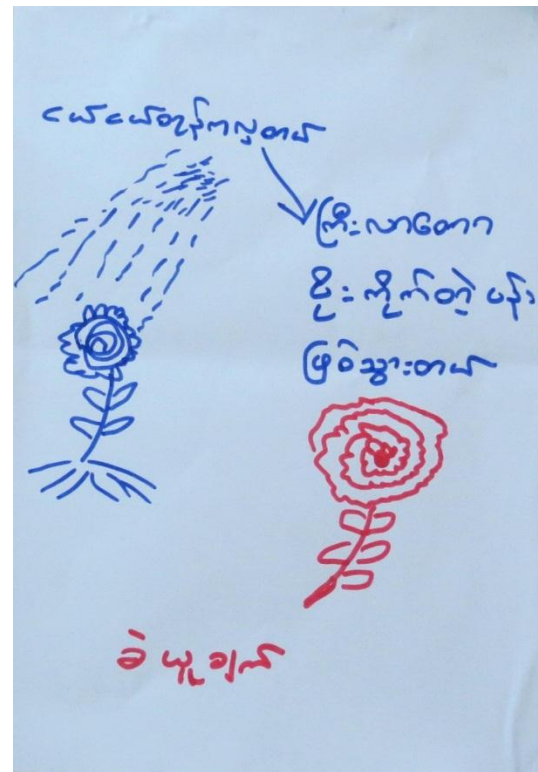
My siblings--except for the eldest sister in Pathein, do not welcome my visits. My sister tells me to come and stay with her in Pathein; but she doesn't know about my condition, and I can just imagine the harrowing scene when they find out while I'm living together with them all. But I tried slowly by bringing them informational books about HIV, and talking to them in order to sympathize with HIV patients. I'm still terrified that they will find out and belittle me even more.

I'm currently working for my senior achauk sister who owns billiard joints and beer shops. I manage one such beer shop, occasionally going home with some customers. Sometimes they do it with me, and instead of paying me, they beat me. Once I got hit so hard my teeth flew out. This other time I was kicked into Inya Lake as well. I've never opened a case with the police because--well, I myself am prostituting against the law.

Before we broke up due to my ill health, I lived together with one lover for seven years. He was a soldier, and we would get posted in rural regions. Every time he came back home, I had to take care of everything for him since I was the "wife". It's not like I don't love him still--I do; but health was my top priority.

If I have to say something about the homosexual community, I'm seeing a lot more educated people, and also those who have decided to never come out. There is also this social stigma on us that our fight for homosexual and transgender equality is

just a front for prostitution, or that we are always stealing things. I wish that would go away. But to do so, please keep in mind to live an honest life no matter how much it keeps beating you down. I always try to teach the younger ones to not be like me, and encourage them to attend lessons or seminars if there are any. I have seen some individuals change their way of life after listening to me and attending those lessons. That makes me very satisfied and happy.



My childhood life was so innocent. But I could not be innocent anymore when I was beyond the young age as my stupidity. I am like a flower bitted by an insect that no one wants to adorn it.
(Ma Wine, 34, Dala)

Ye Htike

Mingalarpar, My name is Ye Htike. I am 23 years old and currently live in Bago City with four other siblings. I believe that a person's sexual preference is something that is not created just to suit our needs. I also believe that everyone has the right to love who they want and spend the rest of their lives together with that person, including even those of the same sex.



I live in a rural region, and I did not complete basic education. My dad took me out of school, which meant that

I couldn't realize my rather grandiose expectations of myself. My mom has passed away, so that's one person I can no longer depend upon. It was heartbreaking, but I had to move on.

I lack the education for a decent living here, so I asked my dad permission to allow me to pursue a profession that I like. My dad did not allow it, saying that it was a job for women and "achauk". I argued with my family and after some time passed, I went to Bangkok Thailand with the help of a friend. It was hard there, but I did my best by doing hard labor, saving whatever I can to send home.

But it turned out dad took another wife along with all the money that I sent home, which I intended to use to attend a vocational school. It was crushing to see that my future was bleak.

My parents knew deep inside that I was gay, but they refused to accept it. I have lived my life avoiding trouble with my father, with my neighbors and with everyone. I have even at one point taken a girlfriend because my family and relatives will not accept that I am achauk. I adored her greatly. She is married now.

When I arrived in Bangkok, I met my first love as a homosexual online. We lived together and both of us tried our best in our work, but in the end, he turned out to be

unfaithful. It was difficult in Bangkok, especially for a rather gentle gay person like me. I had to toughen up.

I remember the arguments with my first boyfriend well. It had been 3 months together and I broke my phone. We argued so much just to buy a new phone for me.

I've been single ever since, and I might look for a relationship once I feel that I'm ready, and if that person is good to me. Until then, I'm doing my very best alone. I am working towards a future profession that I enjoy and does not cost so much--something like the textile industry. I like selling things too, but I have to see what life brings me. If I have the chance, I want to learn things that captured my interest as a child, such as "Zat Thabin" (Burmese theatre), make-up and "Yat Kan Khat" (traditional weaving).

My father's stubborn belief that I must become a farmer because he is one is one of the things that stop me from learning what I want. If there is a chance, I want to devote myself to learning those things.

I hope to learn from older gays in the community on how to succeed in life despite such pressure and attention from society. I also wish that there were more educational opportunities like vocational skills training that general society is more accepting of when it comes to those such as myself—those that were unable to receive proper education.

I also want other gays to be mindful of their health, especially amidst a situation where the stigmatizing belief that HIV/AIDS comes from homosexuality exists. I hope that more families become accepting of their own gay members in spite of their sexuality or sickness.

Lastly, I want to say that just because you are gay does not mean you can behave immorally. I wish that I will see more same sex couples behaving the same as or even better than different sex couples. Don't blame your homosexuality for weakness, but instead toughen up and work hard.



"I drew a house, a brick and a Myanmar traditional stove. Bricks can be used for building a house and for cooking a rice with a traditional stove. The property of a brick cannot be disappeared wherever used. So being a gay person is also useful in everywhere like a brick. (Nay Ye' Htike, 23, Bago)

Oo Ko Ko

My name is Oo Ko Ko and I'm over 38 years old. I was initially a bisexual, but I have been "gay" for a while now. I guess I'm gay. My parents might have known from the start, but as for friends and family, they only learned after I went gay.

Q: When you made the transition from a bisexual to a gay man, what kind of hardships did you have to endure from those in your surroundings?

A: People in my immediate surroundings didn't change much at all because I went gay after I got divorced. They (people in my surroundings) knew about how my spouse cheated on me as well. I would say it was a smooth transition.

Q: So you were married? How did you get hitched?

A: In hindsight, I think it was largely because it was at a time I was suppressing my true self. I was not aware that I was really gay back then.

Q: How long were you married before the divorce? Any kids?

A: It was 13 years, and I have two sons. The eldest one is 12 and the other is 5.

Q: Do you have custody over the kids?

A: The eldest boy is with me, and my ex-wife took the younger brother.

Q: How did you feel about your divorce?

A: I was kind of well-read on things like the Arabian Nights. So I am somewhat shielded from the treacherous nature of women. I came from a broken family as well because my parents got divorced also. A childhood like that drills a sense of numbness into you.

Q: Which side of your parents did you stay with when they got divorced?

A: I alternated. When I reached 7th grade, my parents got divorced. My mother took care of me from that point until I finished 11th grade with her new husband around. My father, of course, was also with his new squeeze. I went back to my father when I started out in my university.

Q: So you got married fairly young?

A: Yes, I was. It was during my second year (of college). I was 23.



OKo Ko

Q: Your life is very interesting in the sense that there are a lot of sudden changes. How did you know in the first place that you were bisexual?

A: I knew because even when I was married, I still looked at other couples. The difference was that I was more aware that I was most interested in the guy instead of the girl. It wasn't like I was not attracted to them (females), but it was when I realized that I am a bisexual.

Q: So you got divorced and became totally gay. When was that?

A: It was after my younger son was born. Back then, I was aware that my wife was cheating on me, but I could never prove it. I just dealt with it and continued the façade until eventually she confessed to me. By that point, my mind was ready. I was neither angry nor sad because I already knew of her infidelity. Even then I clung on to the marriage, and tried to make it work until she cheated on me again. That was when I decided to divorce her.

Q: So she cheated on you, told you and then cheated on you again. Only then did you get a divorce. Is that right?

A: Yes. It is.

Q: So she is currently married to the one she was cheating on you with?

A: Yes she is. I was actually the one that did all the arrangements for her to be with him. Since we know that now we were going to have to walk our own paths, I helped them out for the last time. I had to come up with pretty fancy stories so that everybody didn't look bad.

Q: How did you feel when you went through with that?

A: Well, there was no love left, that's for sure.

Q: Only duty?

A: Yes, only the sense of duty.

Q: Did you find a gay lover soon after you were divorced?

A: I wouldn't say only after the divorce. About three months before, I had been making the transition. When I was done with my "marriage", I totally became gay.

Q: So when did your first love as a homosexual appear in your life?

A: Like I said, it was three months before my divorce. It wasn't a relationship or anything really. I contacted someone who was looking for a hookup, and we had sex.

Q: That is very interesting. So you only had sex and nothing else?

A: We were just sex partners. So was the second one, but for the third one it was different. It has been 1 year and 7 months into our relationship.

Q: Have you ever experienced sexual assault?

A: There have never been any.

Q: What about any nasty treatment from friends, neighbors or strangers?

A: No, there never was. When I started living with myself as a homosexual, I was fairly aged. I'm a little over 38 years old and my life as a gay man is still just in its second year.

Q: So you believe that it is also because you're older and more experienced--calmer in life?

A: Yes, and it is also because we're in the digital age now. It's much easier in my opinion. It was like, I saw some pictures on the internet and it reminded me of my true self.

Q: What do you work as?

A: I used to run a small hostel near the train station. Now, I just rent out the place.

Q: Can you tell us more about your relationship? How did you guys meet?

A: Initially, it was also just for sex. We talked online and we would meet outside. It may be like once a week or twice a

month. It was irregular. After around two months when I knew him better, we became partners in a relationship.

Q: How old is he?

A: He is only half my age. So he was around 18 to 19 years of age when we first met.

Q: Are you living together?

A: No, but I have offered it. But since he's still young, there is more for him to worry about: family, education and all that. I too have to worry about mine; but the difference is that I am willing to stand up for who I am and the kind of lifestyle I lead. As it is, no matter how much I offer, he will never come and move in with me.

Q: So you guys live in the same city, right? That must feel so close but so far away for you.

A: Well, we do still love each other.

Q: So both your family and relatives, and those of your partner know about the relationship?

A: Mine certainly does. But his side knows nothing at all.

Q: So I assume he's still a student?

A: Well no. He left school during 8th grade and has just been living with his family members since then.

Q: Have you been to any LGBT events?

A: Since I live in a rather rural region, I usually don't get to attend those events. I would only get to go to those who

make the effort to invite me properly via a physical invitation, phone or online.

Q: so only via more personal connections to the event will you attend? Have you ever helped any other gay people out?

A: No, not at all. In Bago, where I live, I don't have relations or ties with the LGBT community to any degree. Most people I know are in Yangon.

Q: In the future, how would you like people to treat the LGBT community--in different and better ways?

A: One thing for sure is that transparency is inevitable. Everyone must come to accept it and we will all be playing our part for it to happen. For example, a parent must accept the homosexuality of his or her children. Being extremely strict and oppressing the child's natural feelings will bring nothing but negativity. That is all I can really say to them.

There are also problems of short term or casual relationships amongst the younger crowd. There is a lot of ego going around as well as too much invested emotions. I think that it's best to take it easy in your life, especially a homosexual one.

Q: Are there any memorable items from your life as a homosexual?

A: I think it would be a picture I posted online of us kissing.

Q: Will you allow us to use the photo that you posted online?

A: Sure. But the face is not clear at all.

Q: Let's say you are a person of great influence. What would you like to say to the homosexuals out there?

A: I think there is a lot to say. But the gist is that the LGBT community must and will be accepted. The state must acknowledge us, and everyone will acknowledge us.

Q: How would you describe your future plans?

A: That is quite difficult.

Q: So this might be a sensitive one to you. You're a father to two sons and currently living with one. Could you accept it if your child turn out to be gay?

A: I think that to say that the parents did not know how their child felt is a blatant lie. Every parent knows what their child is like. Since I'm gay myself, I will accept his choice of partners or whatever.

Q: We talked about your memorable photo before. At which point in the relationship was it taken? What made it so memorable?

A: It was our 3 month anniversary. I didn't know a picture would be taken but it turned out to be quite the memorable photo for us.



(Oo Ko Ko's drawing)

"It would be very peaceful to stay a natural green place. I don't want gay people to love so hard with their life because if you hope too much and nothing happen, you would be sad deeply. (Oo Ko Ko, 38, Bago)

Pone Na Mee (51)

Mingalapar, My name is Pone Na Mee. I am 51 years old and live in Dala. I'm a makeup artist and "Nat Ka Daw" (spirit dancer).



I've suffered from plenty of discrimination and since, I am quite temperamental, I retaliate a lot. I'm religious so I usually just blame it all on myself. I pray to god to bless me with future lives as a real man or woman.

Since I'm not educated, I get more discrimination. They treat me as less of a person. Both my parents are of the Islamic faith, and even they get treated differently by wealthier relatives.

My work as a spirit dancer has its own competition as well. Sometimes the amount of jealousy and hate in that line of work frustrates me. I'll be attending the upcoming "Taungpyone Nat" festival in August. I'm also trying to make it as a makeup artist.

I lived together with my lover for 20 years and we fought a lot. He has more of the mind of a man than I do, so that might explain why his fists hit hard. He nevertheless provided for us by going on fishing trawlers, or by being a carpenter. I too provided for him later when I managed to open a beauty salon. When we had to split because he was cheating on me, I was devastated both physically and mentally. What he did was something I can almost never forgive.

After we split, I got into a relationship with a young boy still at school in 11th grade. Things weren't so fortunate in that either. He got hitched with another and went to work in Malaysia.

My parents have passed away, but one good thing was that they were accepting when I moved in together with another man. I used to inject and ingest hormonal drugs as

was taught to me by older “achauk(s)”. The drugs--they come coupled with several negative side effects, and since I have a heart problem, I no longer take them. I think that if taken with proper discipline, the drugs really do benefit. Another bad habit was that I used to drink for years. I took up drinking as a result of pushing away the stress I felt from the fights with my lover.

I see “man to man” people as just that; people. And since I have been living all my life in my place of origin, most in my neighborhood know me. They call me names like “ may gyi” (elder woman) or “mami”, while other, younger achauk(s) would call me grandma.

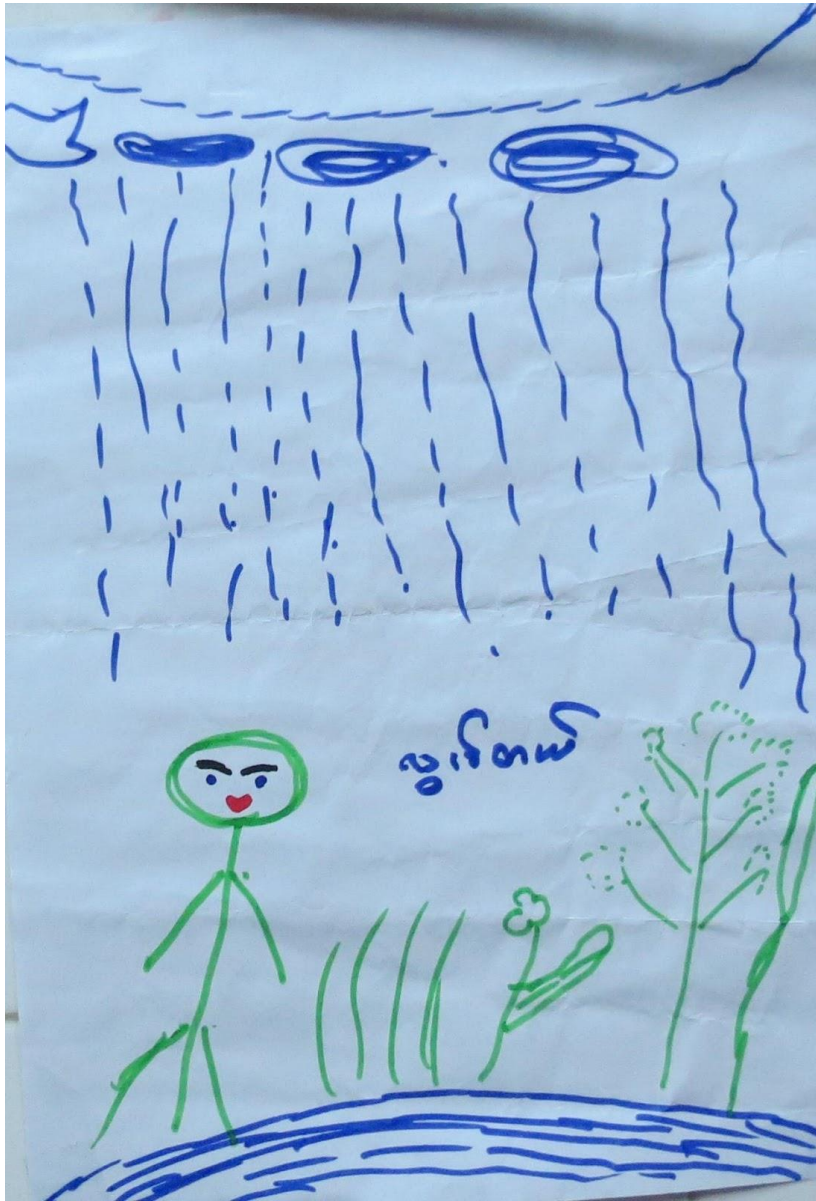
I think achauk(s) are treated respectfully in Dala. We enjoy more understanding and freedom from others. Although when we go to visit pagodas, we often get told off and asked not to make gold offerings. God does not discriminate, but people and monks do. For example, three achauk(s) were allowed to go through “Pa Zin” (Buddhist monk ordination), but my achauk foster mother, who wishes to do that before he dies, was not allowed to. Even among the monks, there is discrimination. I remember when I was young, I went through the Buddhist novice initiation ceremony, and for a whole week, I kept to all the rules of a monk, fervently praying that I’d be a real man in my next life.

I wanted to be an achauk actor when I was young. Of course there was no such position back then. The younger achauk(s) are lucky to have more opportunities; but I’m now too old to do anything of that sort.

I wish that more parents will acknowledge how their children really feel, and then guide them in life based upon that.



I got this tattoo at a festival as a keepsake, a memory of a time when he and I were together.



“I drew this because it reflects how I feel inside. In the picture, I’m walking on a green pasture while reflecting on my past experiences in order to build a better future.

I got this tattoo at a festival as a keepsake, a memory of a time when he and I were together.”

Pone Na Mee (51years old, Yangon)

Soe Naing

(Yangon)



My name is Soe Naing. I am 40 years old and living in Tamwe, Yangon. Currently, I sell dried materials and goods.

I knew that I was homosexual when I was around 22 years old to be exact.

Q: So you had girlfriends before that?

A: I did, and when I was around the age to get married, I tried to make it work with a girl, but it never worked out. I'm still single to the present.

Q: How did you feel when you first self-confirmed your homosexuality?

A: Initially, I was sad for myself, but I decided that this was the path I will take.

Q: Can you tell me some stories about how you try to get your friends and family to accept you?

A: Naturally, I was scared to let them know. But when you find someone you love, you are able to do anything. As for us though, we just eloped. Only after one year together, we let our families know. In that situation, I guess there was no longer any need to tell them.

It really matters what you do with life; like how you live it. My family and relatives know, but they don't dare criticize much on this matter.

Q: What are some things that make them reluctant to criticize you?

A: It's the way I walk, work and talk as a respectable person would. Nowadays, people are using the term "homo" as if it makes any difference in how society sees us. In their eyes

we are all “achauk”, and you or I is not somebody like “Ma Htet” (celebrity transgender makeup artist). Thus we have to carry ourselves out in public in a respectable fashion. We need to put in the extra effort because we’re not like the rest.

Q: How do people see you and treat you when you are on a date with your lover?

A: My immediate surroundings; my family and my neighborhood, are the type to get suspicious even when friends are staying over or visit late at night. Of course, since we’re “queer” to them, their eyes are always on us and judging us. That’s what I meant by behaving in a respectable manner. You only have yourself to blame when you know that surrounding people will treat you in a certain way, but you still can’t behave with your lover or your friend while walking on the streets.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about your love life?

A: I guess I found out what “love” was when I was over 30. It’s not like I didn’t have girlfriends or was a 30 year old virgin. What I mean is love in the way I wanted. It was quite obvious when I was continuously offered sex and turned it down because I was simply not interested (in women). I can’t quite define whether it was a case of finding true love or not, but when I first found my first love, my feelings were of sympathy instead of love.

Q: How did you meet? Were there any complications?

A: We met at a teashop near Sule. He was coming in the shop and when he saw me, he smiled at me. I thought he was someone I knew, so I smiled back. So he, a complete stranger, came to sit with me and we started talking. So we got along pretty well, and found out from each other that we’re both homosexuals.

One day he brought me to where he lived and I saw that he lived poorly. He slept in an attic room with no bed, no pillow and no blankets. He slept on a straw mat with folded shirts for pillows.

Two days later we met again, and I found out that he had pawned some of his things, such as rice cookers and fans for some extra cash. I helped him get those things back, which cost me over Ks 20,000. He did not request anything of me and I did not request anything of him in return for helping.

A couple days later, on a morning when it was raining heavily, I suddenly remembered how he slept without a blanket. I figured it must have been very cold for him right then. So I got a friend who had a car to help me bring some to him.

All of these things happened before we recognized our feelings for each other. It’s been a long time since we parted

ways due to several reasons--one being that I was much older than him. We're still on good terms though.

Q: Have strangers treated you harshly for the way you act, especially when you were young?

A: Not really. Actually--never. There was only this one time when I was still living in a rural area, and I had Thanakha on my face and had a "gaung paung" (sort of a turban) on. My mom said that my cheeks were so pink--like a girl's; and that it would have been great if I was a girl. Other than that, I don't recall anything.

Q: What do you think about others in the LGBT community and relationships between them?

A: Everyone has a right to love and feel loved. We enjoy those rights and so should they. It's not something unnatural; although, it depends on individual beliefs when it comes to love, like where that feeling of love springs from.

Q: What do you think of the current laws in the country that ban same sex marriages?

A: I think that is bad. But not only in the sense that it strips off the rights of LGBT peopled, but also in the sense that it kicked us out of the fence. And when we're outside of their jurisdiction, there is a lot less control. Take for example a marriage between a man and a woman. People don't pay much attention to it; but they are not only together because

of love, but because they are also bound by the law. When you legalize things, it most often brings more control. There is a lot of negativity when it comes to how people view homo relationships. It is partly because of the fact the law doesn't allow it that we are most often seen as immoral and unfaithful people.

That, plus all of the other prejudices, also affect how those in the LGBT feel. I think that being treated as outcasts, not only socially but legally, influences how many LGBT members live their lives. I think if the law is made to recognize the LGBT community, quite a large number of people's lives will change for the better.

Q: What advice would you give to others in the LGBT community on how to live in Myanmar?

A: Again--going back to my point in the previous question, people are just so accustomed to seeing us in the negative. It's because they're not use to this idea that there is more to the so called natural way of life. They're not accustomed to this new idea, and most people have this obsession with associating homosexuality with sex because that's where their train of thought ends. They see same sex couples and think of the things they do with their loved ones. And that kind of thing already creeps them out. When their imagination comes to sex, it horrifies them and their thinking stops.

What we have to do is put in the same effort as “normal” people do in their lives. In fact, the LGBT communities go beyond the norm because they constantly have to deal with people in their surroundings while making a living and trying to build a family. It falls on those in the LGBT community to demonstrate such behavior. It is now an age where things are accessible: books, knowledge, and the internet. It’s true that reading makes you smarter, but you cannot read one book and claim that’s all there is to it. I’ve seen younger homosexuals in places like Facebook and stuff that post quite inappropriate pictures and videos. It’s true that they have the right to express themselves, but they’re definitely not helping the LGBT cause any.

It’s bad enough that others subjugate by their perception that we’re obsessed with sex. But it’s even worse for ourselves to become trapped in the pleasure of sex. Think less about that, and think more about helping others and contributing. Only then will the homo world be accepted as a proper community.

Q: I understand you’re working in a volunteer group now. Can you tell us a little bit about it?

A: Our volunteer group is a small one. It is called BFF. Most of us in the group are homosexuals, but we didn’t get into volunteer work just because of our sexual feelings. By the way, I believe that homosexual men most often operate at a

higher capacity than “normal” men would. If you look at top-tiered professionals in an area like marketing, there are a lot of gay men. I think it’s a best of both worlds kind of situation. We possess qualities that are intrinsic to men such as definitive decision making, while also having qualities associated with women: patients, sacrifice, and sympathy.

We also dress nicer/neater than most. And when it comes to business, you know that looking professional and beautiful is one of the keys to success. That is one of the reasons that when I recruit people for our volunteer group, I tend to favor homosexual men. There are straight people who are mostly young male students; but I instill discipline within the group so that messy problems don’t appear. For example, when we sit for lunch or something, I make it so that all the gay men sit on one side and the straight boys another. This is also to make the boys feel more at ease. There are unavoidable situations to be sure, but I always try my best to not mislead the young. If they decide that they are gay on their own volition, and without the possibility of our influence, we will welcome them anytime. As to what our volunteer group does, it is what you might suspect. We donate rations, tools and other necessities to places like monasteries, orphanages and to refugee camps like those from the floods.

Q: What is the name of your group?

A: It's called BFF (like, omg, BEST FRENS FOREVAHHH) because it's a group that's built on true friendship between all of us. We don't really have a proper chain of command or a structure of sorts because we're all equal with each other. I might seem like the leader, but it's just because they respect me as the eldest in the group. They don't hesitate to point out my mistakes or to criticize me; And I will correct myself if they are right. I counsel them too, and often they come to me for advice when there is trouble in their lives.

Q: Is there anything that you would like to say as a member of the LGBT community?

A: I would start by not speaking as part of anything but the human race in general. Everyone should do volunteer work because it really broadens your views, and enlarges your capacity for love. You won't really see the reality of people living in destitution by sitting around. You need to get involved and you need to know, because only then will you realize how unfair the world is. Once you realize that, it's another step towards having peace and harmony for everybody.

Q: Were there any unrealized dreams for you? Can you share a little bit about that?

A: It wasn't supposed to be just a dream at first, but in hindsight I guess it is. I told you earlier that I and my lover

eloped. My dream--a seemingly realistic goal back then--was to live the rest of our lives together. There are photos on my Facebook account that he showed me and wanted me to keep about the house that we both were going to live in, the rings that we were going to wear and the things we wanted to do together. I still have yet to take them down after so long a time.

Q: Any other advice you would like to give to the LGBT community?

A: advice....well...

Q: Maybe in terms of the social and political situation?

A: Well, as general advice to people--keep track of what you are doing. It's important to not lose your goals. It's so easy to lose track of things, especially when politics are currently in a state of chaos.

There is so much going on in politics. It's all interesting to be sure, with all the parties and the political movements and what not, but most will do well to remember that they're not politicians or political experts.

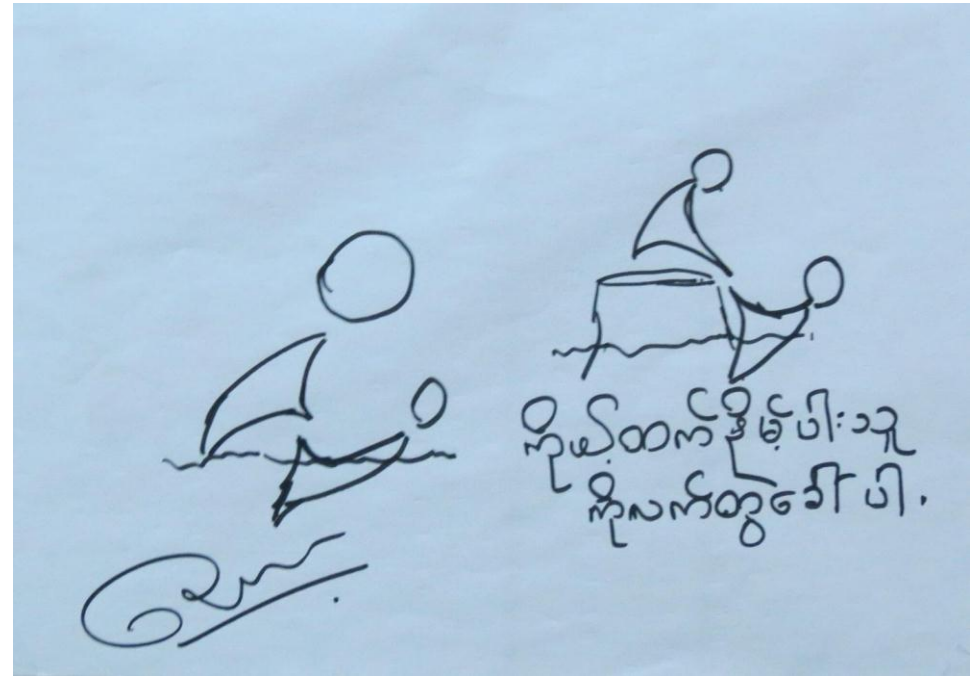
For example, you might believe in the USDP (the previous party in power before the current government) but don't just use that to justify senseless bashing on Aung San Suu Kyi. Same vice-versa. Play your part to make our country a better place. People from all walks of life can contribute. If you see trash on the street, and you're walking by, pick it

up and put it in a dumpster. If you're selling things at the market, don't rip your customers off. We just need a mindset that desires better change. You're not going to get that by sitting around at teashops and blaming people. Just do your part for the greater good, and from your one comes ten, comes a thousand and so on.

It's the essence of Network Marketing in a way. You make sure that you've got what it takes to make it. Once you're capable enough, you nurture others to reach success just as you did, which in turn benefits you.

Q: Thank you very much.

A: Thank you as well.



"I drew this picture for orphaned and refugee children from natural disasters such as the Cyclone Nargis. They need our help now so that their lives will have a better future. It's also drawn for the elderly that also need love and care. We need to care for them and stay beside them until the end.

The message is that all of us that are generally in a better place in life must and be willing to help those that are below us. If circumstances can bring them this low, let's change the circumstances with our help."

(Soe Naing, Yangon)



Ma Hla Htay

(Yangon)

A: My name is Ma Hla Htay. I'm 55 years old.

Q: Who do you believe yourself to be?

A: I am content with this life (as a gay person) because life is a rare, God-given gift. We have to be content with the lives we lead. God created us all so that we can live in harmony with our surroundings and make do with what we've got. It's important to be happy and at peace with your own life.

Q: What do you currently work as?

A: I work in a beauty parlor.

Q: When did you realize that you were gay?

A: When I was a child. I was a kid interested in pretty things and vibrant colors like red. I loved to sing and dance.

Q: Were there any problems with your family and surroundings?

A: I was lucky. I was the only boy among my siblings--I was the middle brother. Whenever my elder sisters bought makeup or lipstick, I could use it. When I finished 4th grade, I attended "Panyar" school in Yangon (an arts and culture school) which was a school under the department of arts and culture. I was happy because I could look pretty and dance in school.

I was also fortunate to receive love, care and support from my family and relatives.

I attended the school until I was 16.

Q: What about your surroundings?

A: During the time period I grew up in, the people around me always segregated gays - "achauk" - from the rest, and of course that saddened me. But I always managed to adjust myself to them because in your life, you have to be able to fit. This is especially true as someone who was involved in entertainment. You have to be able to get along with others in that field.

My mom told me "Son, be good. You work in entertainment, so you have to respect those around you as well as your elders." Those words are always in my head. It also helps that I have the mind of a woman. She also said what she said because I was the only boy among her children.

My mom's love might have rubbed off on me, but since I'm always friendly and amicable, people around me have never treated me that roughly. It might be good karma from my past life, but when I compare other "main ma shar" (transgender) lives with my own, I find myself thinking "Oh, my life has been so much better than theirs". It's thanks to my mom's words that I have always kept in my heart.

The other thing is God. Ever since I was 14, I have been devoted; praying, citing mantras, counting beads and sending out "myittar" (love and/or compassion).

So to sum it up, the first source of fortune would be good karma from being religious, and the second would be good karma from respecting my elders. The latter also helped me in arts and entertainment. I feel that people liked me more because of this aspect.

Q: You mentioned that you were involved in arts and entertainment. What exactly did you do?

A: I'm a graduate of Panyar school, so in terms of cultural arts, I have done my fair share of traditional dances, and sung traditional songs in "zat tha bin" (theatre). A lot of anything I say really comes from the experience of my theatre days. I was a lead dancer for specialized roles that were suitable for a main ma shar, like "Nha Par Twar Aka" (pair dancing). The audience would support me by referring to me by my stage name "Thar Htee"; and Nha Par Twar Aka is only enjoyable if I'm dancing.

The theatre life was rough. We went from place to place in zat vehicles (decorated trucks), performed at night, got up in the morning with minimal time to sleep, and moved on to the next place--it was tiring. What I learned from such a gypsy life is that one can't just get through life by simply singing and dancing. I decided to learn more practical skills. I then threw myself into the beauty parlor business in '83. I graduated in '81 and devoted myself to the shop in '83. In

between those times I was in zat tha bin running a beauty parlor of my own.

Q: What kind of challenges did you face as a result of the transition?

A: There were several. One was that zat tha bin people usually get to rest during monsoon season. Also, to be a part of the zat tha bin world means you have to do it yourself--your own dances--your own songs. Charisma and luck also really influences how much the audience likes you. Only then can you succeed in being a "Min Thar" (actor). There were even times when I had to do solo acts--which are uncommon.

In the beauty parlor business, there is none of that. A normal transaction simply entails making use of your skills to put on makeup, cut hair, style hair and such. If the customer is satisfied, that's that. It also helps that I can get along with people.

Q: Have you ever been a victim of sexual assaults? How did you deal with those?

A: When it came to sexual intercourse--my own experience at least--I was sexually assaulted. I did not want it, but the guy forced it on me, and sometimes there were physical struggles. In short, I have been sexually assaulted. I would sometimes just make things easier by letting it happen, but I made sure the person understood what they were doing.

And it might be because what I said got through to them somewhat, or it was just my luck; but it was always quick and never violent. It was also helpful that I was an entertainer and an achauk. If I can sway an entire crowd, I can sway one person with my words. It's like I used softer methods to avoid or mitigate forceful attacks.

Q: What were some of the things that people have said to or about you before you started your beauty parlor?

A: People often criticized me when I practiced putting on makeup, saying something like "don't these grow on trees?" I always try to make such critics understand that as professionals in the entertainment industry, we should be familiar with makeup. I guess it wasn't too surprising that people made such comments as makeup and other beauty products weren't all that common 15 years ago.

Q: What about experiences in your love life?

A: There were many experiences. Such is the nature of love. There were times when things were one-sided, and there were times when my love was reciprocated. But for a main ma shar like me, it's usually just one-sided. It was difficult, perhaps even more so when both of us were in love with each other.

I remember my father forbade me from visiting this young guy, but I did it anyway. I came back late at night, and he hit me, and warned me that he raised me as a man, and a man

had no business doing the things I did. He warned me that the next time I broke his rules, it would be worse. He did not understand the way I felt, but my mom did. As much as I was confined by my father, my mom gave me freedom. It's not as if my father did not love me; he did in his own way. I remember this one time--I ran into my father on his way back from work while together with my date. He just asked me "What are you doing?" with a stern face; and all I could do was hang my head dejectedly and follow him back home. I was beaten when we got back.

Q: So far you have mentioned that you have taken boyfriends before. Has there ever been a female love interest for you?

A: No, all of them have been males; although I might have had a couple of female fans while I was a min thar. Of course, I looked much better back then at ages 19 and 20. I was much fairer, and I had a way with words. Graduating from Panyar School taught me many things. Anyway, there might have been women infatuated with me, but I was never interested in them. I like "Tha Ngal" (boys or young boys) because I am gay. I remember this one time--we were performing in Paung, and this girl gave me a basket of gifts which included fruits from the region. I tried to make excuses, saying those fruits would affect my voice, but she adamantly insisted on it.

Q: Have you ever been married/lived together with a man?

A: While I wouldn't say we were married or lived together, I will never forget this relationship. He is called KAN, and to give an idea of him--he looks like Ye Aung (a famous actor). I was around 23 years old and he was 35. We never lived together, but he would always visit me. We would talk; visit Shwe Dagon, Sule and Shwe Bhone Pwint Pagodas. We spent time together outside, and I could feel the love from him, especially since he liked to spoil me because I was younger.

I always count prayer beads at the place designated for those born on Sunday at Shwe Dagon Pagoda. One day, I was doing the same and I just had this feeling that I would see him here. I felt this presence at my back, I opened my eyes, and turned around. There he was, standing tall and asking me whether I was done.

Q: How did the two of you meet?

A: He came to cut his hair. His hair was fairly thick and I worked on his hair. After I was done, I noticed and told him that he looked like a darker version of Ye Aung. I think which kind of hairstyle a person wears makes a difference; it can change you into looking like a completely different person. Anyway, he replied that I must be joking, and that he had nothing to feed me for my compliment. From that

moment I was interested in him. It also helped that he looked like Ye Aung.

One day, he told me that visiting me made him feel happy, and that he would give me "Halawar" (a type of Burmese traditional desert) all the way from Pathein (famous also for Halawar). He phoned his mother in Pathein and asked to send it all the way to Yangon just for me. That was the start of something special and memorable for me.

But to be honest, I had a lot of boyfriends. Most of them were also like older brothers to me. That may just be my luck, or maybe because I was trained to always smile as an entertainer.

Q: Are you currently in a relationship?

A: There was also this guy that was with me for a long time. We didn't live together or anything; but he would come and see me three to four times every day without fail. But as years passed, he got hitched with a nurse. I first noticed because he would visit me less and less. I asked him why and he told me. The tears that I shed over it made me realize that love was harder to come by for gay men. It doesn't matter whether you're old or young, or in a long term relationship or not.

No, I am not currently in a relationship. I am not looking for one either since I am at the age where religion should be my top priority. I guess I'm also afraid of past experiences. I

made peace with the fact that main ma shar lives cannot hope for much in terms of love. It might just be because I got old.

Q: What would you say about memorable experiences in your life?

A: There was this one time in my life when I got an ear piercing. Others are more like mental scars. I guess I gained many of them by having so many boyfriends. I guess I was very lovable to many men. Of course, things weren't all rainbows and flowers.

Q: What would you like to say to the younger generations?

A: I am getting older and experienced, so I can impart some wisdom for them. Love, but don't fall in love too hard. Main ma shar(s) almost always get the worst end of the break up when too much emotion gets invested.

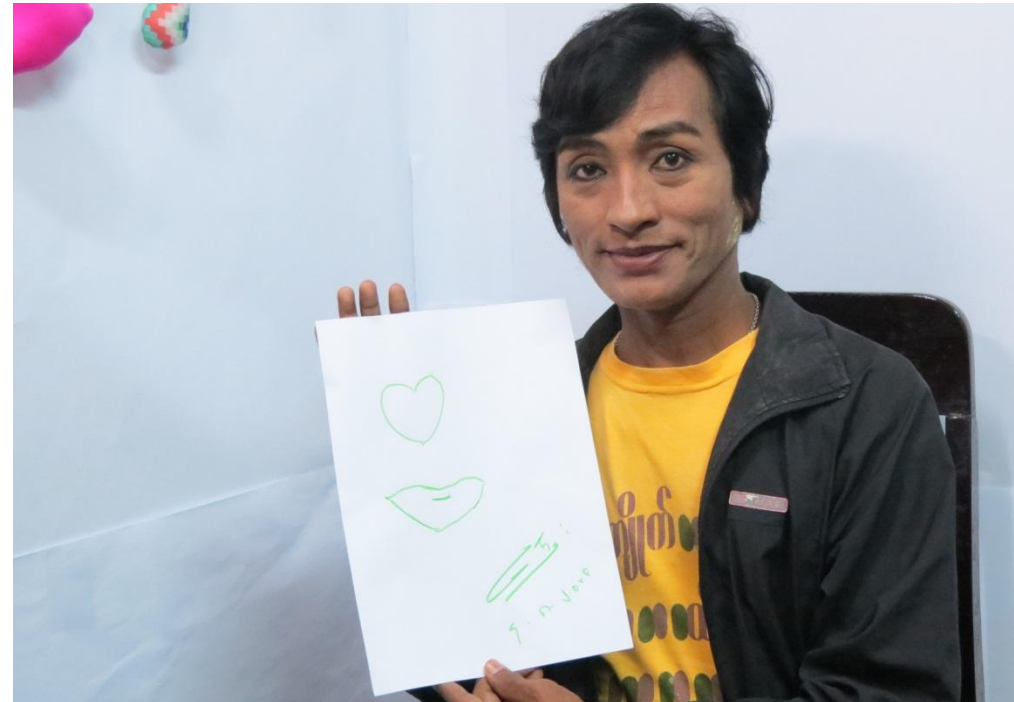
I also want to say to spend but don't waste.

Times are changing fast; technology is advancing rapidly and intellectuals are multiplying by the minute. Always be cautious and aware, especially when it comes to love. True love doesn't exist, and I have been hurt so many times before. I think the younger generations have it worse. Love cautiously and maintain awareness.

Q: Any advice you would like to give them on how to live their lives?

A: A main ma shar must always be polite and graceful in how he talks and how he walks. Also be disciplined when it comes to love, because if you don't, you cannot expect your lover to be. Set the rules and play by them. I noticed that many young main ma shar(s) lack these qualities.

Thank you very much for your time.



I drew a heart and a smile. Every person has a heart, including main ma shar(s). And I drew the smile because smiling is the best; everybody loves a smile. You've got to have heart and a smile in life

La Mu
(Yangon)



Q: Mingalapar, Can you tell us your name, age and profession?

A: Mingalapar, My name is La Mu. I'm 41 years old and used to play soccer/football professionally until my aging father's health required me to quit the sport.

Q: Who do you believe yourself to be?

A: I believe myself to be a man. My family and surrounding people are also quite accepting of the fact that I think myself a man.

Q: So you being different is okay with family and friends? Can you tell me about your life?

A: Yes, we're on good terms. I started playing football with my friends. I have been through multiple girlfriends and also much heartache. Of course I have been mocked for being a "yaut kyashar" but I don't let them get to me. I just go on walking and talking like a man. I have been that way ever since I was a child--ever since 1st grade. Since then I have refused to wear girly clothes, only played soccer with other boys and never had any female friends.

Q: What are some memories you have from your childhood?

A: My brothers wanted me to be like a girl. They would force me to wear girl clothes, but I would refuse. They would beat me, but I would still refuse to do so. All things

considered, my parents have been quite encouraging. They have understood that I just want to be myself and nothing can change that.

Q: Can you tell me about your experiences as a soccer/football player?

A: I got to playing soccer because of my guy friends. At first it was lonely, but I started making more and more friends. I was quite happy just to play soccer, even if I didn't earn a living out of it. I started out at local competitions in Dala. When I heard they were forming a women's soccer/football team, I joined them. I manage to play my way up different levels of leagues. I was the same batch as Thidar Kyi (former national player) for national try outs. I qualified but I chose not to participate. My parents don't earn much. My father even wanted to pawn the house so that I could go and play abroad. But I didn't want that. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if following my dreams meant my parents have to live on the streets. But I would see my juniors that made it playing abroad, and that made me feel sad; but I know in my heart that I had what it takes. When I was representing Dala, our team managed to win silver. It was also during that competition that I came to be known as La Mu instead of my birth name.

Q: Are you currently in a relationship? Can you tell me about the two of you?

A: We met during a training session at one of the ministries. We bumped shoulders. I managed to win her heart amidst many boys who were trying to court her. She told me that I was tougher and more patient than men when it's about her. We've been living together for 18 years since that time. I remember this one time she asked me to prove my love for her; So I went and got a tattoo for her. She told me that she is more in love with me than she would be if she was in a relationship with a man.

Q: Is there any advice you want to give to the LGBT community?

A: I only finished 5th grade in terms of education. One of my wishes for others--especially for LGBT people--is to receive a proper education. Only then might they be able to fulfill their dreams. For those who are unable to further their education, please learn some vocational skills. Please don't stray from the path. Take care of your health.

Q: What about getting medical attention?

A: I don't get sick easily, and even when I get sick, I don't go to the clinic. Most people also tend to assume the worst when they see someone queer visiting a clinic. I'd rather die

than be looked down upon. I normally buy medicines from the pharmacy. I remember this one time my coach asked me to visit the clinic for a shot, but I didn't want to. I only went when someone in charge took me.

Q: How do you deal with people who openly discriminate against you?

A: I am the type to not do anything about it. But it does make me feel bad. If I was a real man, I wouldn't be treated like this. Anyway, I normally won't respond to them with swear words or anything like that. It's fine anyway since I get along well with my girlfriend's community. She has also been very loyal for 18 long years. Things are going well between the both of us.

Q: Any particular cases of strangers insulting you?

A: There has never been anything too horrible, but there have been cases of people asking me why I would not prefer a real man instead of a yaut kyashar or a woman. It's quite obvious really. It's all the same to me. I can provide for my own family just as any man could. I am even willing to go further by shoveling manure if it meant feeding my family.

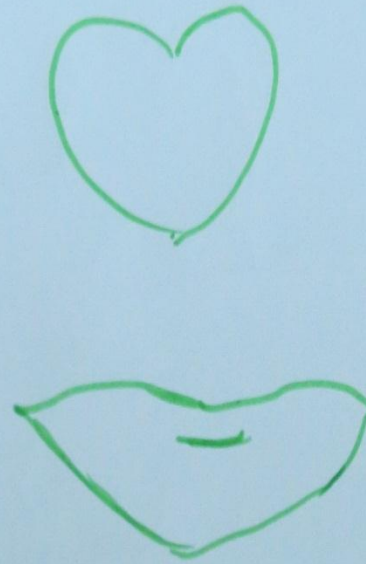
Q: Any words of advice to young LGBT members?

A: Please be polite and always be loyal.



4 8-2016

(La Mu's drawing)



Ma Hla Htay
4. 8. 2016

Ma Hla Htay's drawing



Nyein Thu
(21, Yangon)

Q: Can you tell us your name and age?

A: My name is Nyein Thu and I'm 21.

Q: Who do you believe yourself to be?

A: I have believed myself to be a man ever since I was a child.

Q: How young were you when you first realized it?

A: It was when I was 9.

Q: What does your family think about it?

A: My family, in fact, likes it. My mother passed away, and only my alcoholic father is left as a parent. He drinks and he travels a lot, so needless to say, he's not around most of the time at home. I am the eldest in a family of 6 siblings and we live together with our grandmother.

Q: Have you ever dressed or behaved like a woman in your life?

A: Well, there was this one time I had to wear a skirt to get my certificated when I passed 4th grade. Even then, as young as I was, I took it off the moment it was okay to do so. I don't like it at all.

Q: Have you ever taken hormonal pills to be more like a man?

A: I have never done that. I don't really have a lot of knowledge about those things. I'd just live as how I am.

Q: Have you ever experienced something that you would call brutal?

A: Not really because I don't socialize much at all. I'm pretty much by myself most of the time.

Q: Have you ever been in relationships?

A: I have. I was with my first love for four years. She lived near my cousins, and she apparently was attracted to me. She forced on me snacks, and called my phone many times. She asked me out first and we started dating.

Q: Were you guys living together?

A: No, but I had a friend that lived nearby who did live alone. Whenever I was around, she and me would meet there.

Q: Since you live the way you believe yourself to be and even got yourself a girlfriend, what do your family and people around you say?

A: Well, at first I lived in a rural area, so we only met when I visited Yangon. I didn't have my own mobile phone at first, so she had to call my uncle's phone. Every time there was a phone call, my uncle would pass it to me, but later my grandmother grew tired of it all and forbade it. My uncles are not happy at all about this. I grew tired of them nagging

at me to live my life like a woman. I won't even pass in front of their houses; I normally take a roundabout way.

Q: Which rural area was it?

A: Ingapu.

Q: How did you first meet your current girlfriend?

A: A cousin of mine lives at her place. She is currently married but stays with her mother instead of her husband. She's a mother of two. Anyway, when my cousin came back to the village, she would often visit another cousin in Ngaputaw. Since it's quite a distance, I would often accompany her there. I would get bored and tinker with my cousin's phone. One day I accidentally called her number. We just sort of clicked and kept in touch. We would chat through Viber and send pictures of each other and stuff.

Q: How did you guys get to living together?

A: She asked me to come and stay with her. So I did. It's been around a year now.

Q: As a "yaut kyashar" like yourself, how do you see others in the LGBT community?

A: Like I said before, I don't really have a lot of friends or colleagues. I really only gained contacts when I decided to move to Yangon. Anyway, I had yaut kyashar friends before,

and they encouraged me to get a girlfriend or even get married (to a woman). I guess it's nothing special.

Q: Have you a plan to live out the rest of your life?

A: Well, there is one thing that I want to do, and that is to live together with the person I love out in the open. She's still married so we have to pretend. It would also be more convenient if both of us were of the same age. I am currently not employed right now.

I used to work, but I had to quit because my family's home needed repairs, and I was ill at the time. Now my mom is gone and my father might as well be gone. I can rely on myself to take care of stuff like cooking and cleaning.

Q: Did you run into any trouble at school when you were young for being a yaut kyashar?

A: Not really. I didn't have a lot of female friends and the ones that knew me tended to bully me. I mostly hung with boys and played football or other games that boys play.

Q: How are you getting along with your girlfriend's children?

A: its okay I guess. They are children, so there are times when they throw tantrums and stuff. I have gotten angry sometimes, but they're children. I still love them.

Q: Would you like to say anything to other younger members of the LGBT community?

A: I would encourage those that are the same as me to live like a man. But just be wary of the friends you keep. Don't stay up until well late into the night with friends. I have had experiences with some of my friends that would get drunk in secluded places and have no idea what was going on. One day I even saw one of them passed out on the road. Exercise caution in all things.

“I always made a heart shape letter whenever I gave a love letter. As I like a heart-shape, I just drew this picture.

(Nyein Thu, 23, Dala)”



Thein Aung

(32,Dala)



Q: Mingalapar, can you tell us your name and age please?

A: My name is Thein Aung and I'm 32 years old. I live in Dala.

Q: What is your sexual orientation?

A: I'm a homosexual.

Q: When did you first realize that you were gay?

A: It was when I started attending primary school. It was pretty rough. I would get punished as a child in cruel ways. One way was that I would be forced to run naked through the neighborhood while shouting "I'm a man! I'm a man!". But I would instead shout 'Gandu' (meaning coward or gay) instead of 'man'.

So my family and my eldest sister's husband came up with the brilliant idea to leave me tied to a log in the drainage for like an hour. Even when I got older my life was rough. Even when I got older and I made other 'main mashar' friends, I had trouble. I remember that I went to 'Pwal Zay' (seasonal night market) at the behest of other, older 'main mashar' but once they got there, they disappeared with their boys. I was left wandering alone and got beaten up. It was rough.

Q: How did your family and neighbors treat you?

A: I received a lot of unfair treatment from them as expected. I'm doing okay with my current husband though. I am the youngest of 6 other siblings. They don't even want to eat together with me. Neighbors and surrounding people were the same. They see me as some sort of disgusting disease distributor.

Q: Have you experienced any sexual assaults?

A: I have. I would be flirting with a person I would be interested in but then I would be forced to have sex with another person I didn't like. There was this one time in Pwal Zay, and like I mentioned before, I was left alone. It was when I didn't have a lot of experience either as a 'main mashar'. So I went home alone and I was assaulted. I was bleeding, and that made me really worried. I had sex really early too. There were these two brothers that I always played husband and wife with. We would play under the house where there were plenty of cover and sacks. If either brother went to the market, I would have sex with the other.

Q: What did your family, friends and neighbors say of you?

A: I think my family didn't really say a lot of mean things to me because they somehow felt guilty. Neighbors and

strangers called me a lot of mean names. Pervert and 'Gandu' were just a couple of them.

Q: How have you been responding to those people?

A: Well, I just leave them most of the time. Eventually they get tired of insulting me because--really--it's not like I am going to change who I am because of them. It goes in one ear and comes out of the other. I just hope that they know how karma works. I hope that their children don't turn out to be like I am.

Q: What kind of difficulties have you had to face in your life?

A: I don't have a whole lot of problems, but my family treats me differently. My father has passed away, and only my mom is left. The rest of my siblings are married and have their own to worry about. So, I'm the only one left to care for her. But no matter how much I sacrifice myself to provide for her, she never appreciates me.

Q: If you could, what do you want those family members and others to understand about you?

A: I think they may only do so when I die, at least when it comes to how much of a help I am to them. There is one sister for whom I paid for child birth. I even went to the hospital to accompany her and help out. Everything went smoothly because I paid for the cost of going to the hospital in Yangon. Her husband wanted to take her back to Dala

when she was showing signs of impending birth. But even after that they still see me as a nuisance. I hope that they will understand that I have been, and still just want to help.

Q: Do you currently, or did you have a boyfriend or a relationship that you will always remember?

A: Well, I was on my way to Hinthada, and he was asleep on the car because he was drunk. I was too nosy in other's affairs for my own good, and I helped him get home. Then people spread the news that we were together. Even though it was not true then, it came true soon after. He's the same one I'm with right now. He treats me very well. He massages me and care for me when I'm home tired from doing theatre. He would even wash my underwear for me.

Q: You said that you did theatre. What kind?

A: Well, I dance 'Zat' (traditional theatre). But it's a small group called "Kyarr Maryar". If my seniors ask me to, I will go and dance for a couple of nights. But my husband is always worried about me due to things like people coming up to the stage to give me a kiss, or hooligans in the audience throwing stuff at us.

Q: Have you ever dealt with a homophobic audience before? Have they tried to boo you off the stage for example?

A: No, nothing that terrible.

Q: Can you tell us about certain memories or items of importance from your relationship?

A: Well, we went out, and he told me that he wanted to buy a watch; so I gave him some money, and he came back with both. I don't like wearing watches, but he told me to wear it if I loved him; so I haven't taken it off ever since.

Q: Is there any advice you would like to give to the LGBT societies in Myanmar?

A: I would like to say--especially to the young 'main mashar'--that no matter how you go about your sex lives, always put health safety first and foremost. Please always use protection--a condom. There are so many diseases out there that once contracted will never be cured. I've seen 16 and 17 year old lives go to waste from just moments of sex or oral sex.

Q: Thank you for your time.



This watch is my lifelong unforgettable thing. 2 years ago, I went to a pagoda festival with my husband. My husband told me that he wanted a watch. So I gave him 30000 Kyats to buy it, and he bought 2 couple watches and gave me one. The watch is a masculine watch. So I told him that I didn't like it, but he told me to wear if I loved him. Thus, that is why I wear this watch everyday, and we are still together until now. And I hope to have everlasting love with him. (Thein Aung ,32, Dala)

Lay pyae

(29, Yangon)

Q: Mingalapar, can you please first tell us your name and age?

A: Mingalapar, my name is Lay Pyae and I'm a 29 year-old gay man living in East Dagon.

Q: How does your neighborhood treat you for being gay?

A: Everything seems okay on the surface at least. Who knows what they say behind my back?

Q: How did you feel when you first realized that you were gay?

A: Well, nothing special really. I just thought what my priorities should be, and I went with what I think was best.

Q: Any problems between you and your friends?

A: Well, friends from way back in state school are reluctant to associate with me now. But who cares? It's not like they're going to provide for me anyway.

Q: Have you ever run into any sort of discrimination from people in your surroundings?

A: No, I have personally not, but I'd like to say that we're all humans; it's not right to discriminate against others in this situation, because that's the card life dealt them

Q: Any sexual harassment?

A: Nope.

Q: When was your first gay sexual experience?

A: I met this "offer" on my way back from my class. I didn't know about all that back then though.

Q: Did he become your first love? Anything memorable to share?

A: Well, he was my first, but we were only together for four months. Nothing really that memorable to share.

Q: So who was the one that you shared the most memories with?

A: It was during my second relationship in which I spent five years. There are a lot of memories. He even lived together with my family and they loved him as well. But he left me.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about that relationship?

A: I met him on April 28, 2011. He was working, but he made time to always visit me at my work. We went out a lot. We made a lot of memories. The situation right now is not as though we've completely stopped talking to each other, but its grown cold between us. We talk, but not much. It's so different from when we first got together. I don't really know why he did the things he did, and that hurts the most. One day he told us he was going to his



Q: How about some things you really remember from your time together with him? Maybe like a special anniversary?

A: Well, like I said, there were many things. We would always catch a movie in a theatre once a month. I really enjoyed our time together because he favored a lot of the things I wanted to do.

Q: It sounded like you guys weren't of the same age.

A: Yes, he was a year younger than me.

Q: So everyone knows about you two--as in both sides of the family and all relatives?

A: Well, everyone from my side knows about this, but only his mom knows from his side.

Q: How did your family take to the fact that you were gay?

A: Well, I live with my mom and two brothers. My mom is on my side; she was the one who argued for me. She asked me to just pretend a little bit in front of my brothers and do whatever I want when they don't see me.

Q: Since you have brothers, is there any kind of bullying from them for being gay?

A: No. Everyone has their own business to mind after all. We mostly just go about doing our own things.

Q: Can we get back to talking more about your lover? How did you two meet?

A: Well, as we tend to do, I started going out a lot more during evenings and the night time when I was sure that I was gay. I met him, and we started out as friends. We would meet outside, and I would finish my work earlier than him-- before 7pm. I would bring snacks and stuff to eat whilst I waited for him. I'd bring something different every day, and we grew to love each other. I told my family about him right at the beginning, although I didn't bring him home. I told them that he was a filial son, working hard to provide for his ailing mother.

Q: How did you feel when things started going wrong?

A: It's just that we've been together for so long that everyone knows about us. For example, I never did anything without him. I would wait for him for the whole night if he wasn't back from work to eat dinner. I'd be awake at night with worry if he hadn't come back home for the night.

Q: How long did you two date for?

A: For five years.

Q: That's a long time. Any other things you can tell me about the two of you?

A: Well, we've had several serious fights before. I'm talking about us hitting the crap out of each other with bricks. This one time he fainted after I hit him, but I apologized afterwards and it was okay.

Q: How did you guys get through five years with problems like that? How about other people around you? How did they treat the two of you when you fought?

A: Well, there are those aunties that I am quite familiar with. I told them everything, and they're very understanding mostly. They are always on my side.

Q: Can you tell me more about your ex?

A: Well, he used to work at a steel workshop in Yangon. Now he's with his aunts in a rural area. We've been monks together before as well. There are so many memories.

Q: Is he with another person right now or a wife?

A: No, as far as I know he's still a homo. He used to say he was straight when we first met, but he claimed that he was homo later.

Q: Any items that you treasure from your time together with him?

A: He used to buy me clothes. We used to buy things for each other regularly. For our 3 month anniversary, he bought me a platinum necklace. I never got anything platinum from anyone else in my life. There is also this one time that he was late to come home on our anniversary day. It was raining very heavily and I was out there in the rain waiting for him at the bus stop. I was ready to fight, but it

turned out that he was late because he was buying my favorite 'Kyay-Oh' (type of Burmese noodles).

Q: Were there any political or religious obstacles between you two?

A: No.

Q: Can you give us your opinion about the LGBT community in Myanmar?

A: I think that as for homosexuals, most men taken as husbands are actually straight. So the gay person has to work and provide for the family and the 'straight' man. The latter will later just take a wife or something, and leave the gay guy because a lot of men that associate themselves with gays tend to be someone whose family even gave up on.

Q: Are you part of the LGBT community in Myanmar anyway?

A: I'm part of a non-profit homosexual charity group called MRA - Myanmar Rock Angel. The group is a little over a year old, with at least 24 charities or donation projects. For example, we provide food for the public on big days like the full-moon day. MRA has around 30 core members and even more substitute members. No one in the group is wealthy enough to provide for all the good deeds--everyone is pitching in with their hard work and sweat.

Q: Are you in a relationship now? If you aren't, then what is your ideal type of guy?

A: I'm not seeing anyone right now. My ideal type is someone that's gentle and understanding.

Q: Have you noticed how the LGBT community treats each other in Myanmar?

A: Yes, I have, and while it's almost always nothing serious, they always have petty quarrels and fights between them. The fights never last though.

Q: How do you survive in an environment generally not welcome towards homosexuality?

A: Well, most gays I associate with are now on good terms with their families. But of course, we had to fight for who we are at first. Even my mom did not accept me for who I am; and it took a lot of effort to get to a point where she started to understand.

Q: Did anybody make fun of you—did someone in your neighborhood insult you or something like that?

A: I have. I didn't know what 'gay' was when I was young. I would only make friends with girls and play with them. So other kids would call me 'achauk gyi' (big gay) and make fun of me. I used to reply bitterly with things like "I slept with your mother". I grew up, came out as gay, and came to terms with it all. I found peace because now when someone pokes fun at me for being gay, I just go "What of it? Don't associate with me if you don't like it". Before that, it was

tiring to always feel like you're being attacked by them every time they make fun of you.

Q: What would you like to say about policies and laws in the country regarding gay people?

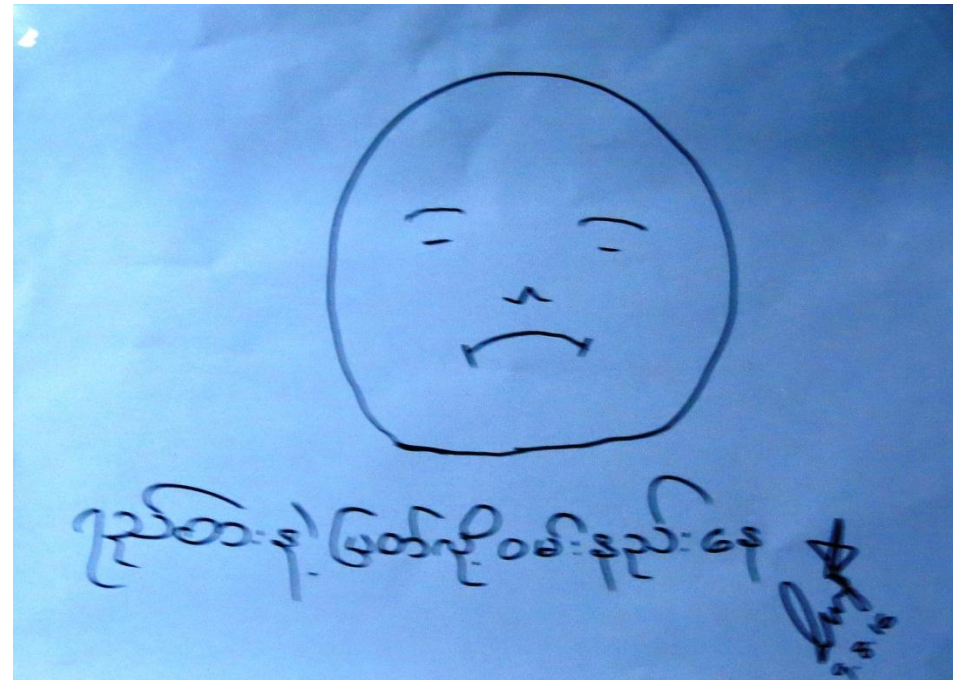
A: I don't really understand much about laws, but we homosexuals hope that we will be accepted, even though Myanmar's culture is one that rejects homosexuality. We want to be seen as human.

Q: Any religious thoughts or points you want to make?

A: I see myself as being punished for some bad things I did in my past life.

Q: Any life advice that you would like to impart to the LGBT community?

A: When you come to terms with being a homosexual, please think it through and decide on the path you will walk from then on. Don't be the one waiting by the sidewalk, waiting on offers of free sex and charity. Stand up on your own.



Lay Pyay's drawing

My current feeling is I am so sad as I have broken with my lover. (Lay Pyay, 28, Yangon)

Yin May Oo (29)

Q: Mingalarpar, Can you tell us about yourself?

A: My name is Yin May Oo. I'm 29 years old. I make a living selling Kwoon Yar (chewing bettle nuts) and live in Dala Township.

Q: Can you tell us when you first met your lover?

A: I met her in 2007 when she was selling Toto numbers. I knew from the start that she was female and I even half-jokingly tried to tell her to live more like a woman since I was older than her. Time passed and we grew attached to each other and ended up living together. Of course, our family did not agree and even once forced us to split for like a year. We got back together and it's been 7 years since.

Q: I heard you were living with your aunts. How do they take your relationship?

A: My aunts love me a lot, so they accept it. It might be because I threatened to not stay with them anymore if they don't.

Q: So if things are fine right now with your aunts, how about the rest of the family?

A: My parents got divorced when I was young; my mother got remarried, and my father lives in Mingalardon by himself. Anyway, they strongly disagreed with it at first, but they haven't said anything much lately.

Q: What about with your siblings?

A: I'm the only child in the family.

Q: So what about your other relatives?

A: My aunts and my grandmother understand. My grandfather is not. I don't get along with him at all.

Q: Have they tried arranged marriage with you?

A: Yes, they have, but they haven't tried ever since I adamantly refused.

Q: Did you ever think before that you would be in this kind of relationship?

A: I never thought life would turn out like this. Even when I first met her, It was the attachment that led to us living together.

Q: Have you ever had boyfriends?

A: Yes, but it was when I was a teenager around 15 or 16. I haven't been with a boy ever since I met her.

Q: Why do you think that for someone like you, who has been in both straight and gay relationships, the gay relationship is more durable?

A: I think the main thing is the attachment. She's also younger than me, so there is also the little sister factor involved. I constantly worry that she will set foot on the wrong path. We have argued sometimes because of things she says.

Q: Do you face any discrimination from your neighborhood or surroundings?

A: No. Well, I have been living here in Dala for a long time, even before she came to live with me.

Q: So you guys go out together all the time?

A: Yes, we're always together, no matter whether we go to the cinemas or to pagodas.

Q: What about your workplace?

A: My workplace is fine as well. The boss knows about it.

Q: What is the thought that keeps you going every day?

A: I guess it's the thought that my life together with her may end abruptly because everything depends on luck. I am working hard to improve our chances every day.

Q: So how do you guys split your household duties?

A: Well, we normally just go Dutch. For example, I will wash my own clothes and she will wash hers. The exception is that I cook the meals and send it to her every day.

Q: Do you get along with her side of the family?

A: Yes, I do. We all live together anyway. When I'm free, I cook for her relatives. They even took my side whenever we were in arguments.

Q: Any plans for the both of you?

A: There are currently no plans. We're currently just content with having enough to fill our bellies, and having peace of mind.

Q: Have you ever regretted your decision to enter this relationship?

A: No, never. Frankly, it doesn't matter if my relatives scorn me, because I'm surviving on my own two feet. We're both working so it's enough to make do. I'd prefer not to grovel in front of my relatives and beg them for money.

Q: Are there any plans to adopt a child?

A: We do have a plan, and we will do so when we're finally making enough. We will need help when we get old after all.

Q: Can you tell me a little about your plan to adopt?

A: I think we will get a boy to adopt since we both agreed that having a boy would be better. Even if we cannot support him well, we will do enough to at least make sure that he will be educated.

Q: Most people call females who love other females "yaut kyashar". What do you prefer to be called?

A: I prefer terms like sis.

Q: Are there any difficulties in your relationship?

A: Well, there are plenty. But our arguments never last. It never carries over to the next day. I think in fact we grow closer after every fight instead of getting pushed apart.

Q: Sounds like you guys get into arguments occasionally. What about?

A: Well, the main reason is that I don't like her drinking. It is okay when it's with them--other yaut kyashar; but I get worried when it's with men. Some are quite trustworthy, but some will definitely take advantage of you when given the chance.

Q: Would you prefer if she got a sex change operation?

A: No, I would prefer she remain as herself. There is no sexual involvement between me and her. It's more akin to sisterly love.

Q: Would you like to get married if there is opportunity to do so?

A: Yes, we both want to get married. I've told her about it before too.

Q: Are there any clashes with your religious beliefs and ideals?

A: No, not really. Sometimes I will question out loud to her whether it was a mistake to be in this relationship with her. But those words have no real emotion behind them.

Q: Does she get jealous often?

A: Yes, especially when I come back late from work or when some stranger mistakenly calls my phone; but it's all right since I know I have not done anything wrong.

Q: What kind of a character is she?

A: She's a good person, very kind. She really wants to help people, and sometimes we argue because she goes too far with it.

Q: How do you feel about this interview?

A: I feel happy. This is my first time. She told me that she was going out for an interview so I tagged along. I brought my friends too!

Q: What do you think about "main mashar"?

A: I treat them as I would anybody else; normally. I even have a friend who is one; although I take care to call them by the term they prefer.

Q: What do you think about man to man love?

A: I can sympathize with it. I'm also in love with another woman after all.

Q: Is there anything you would like to say to those in similar situations like you?

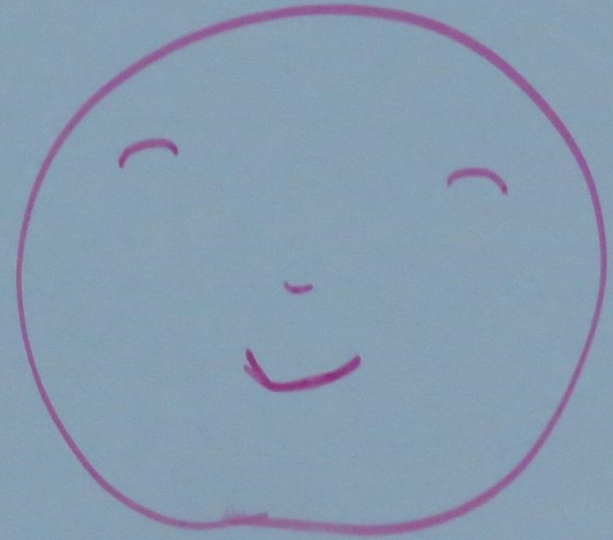
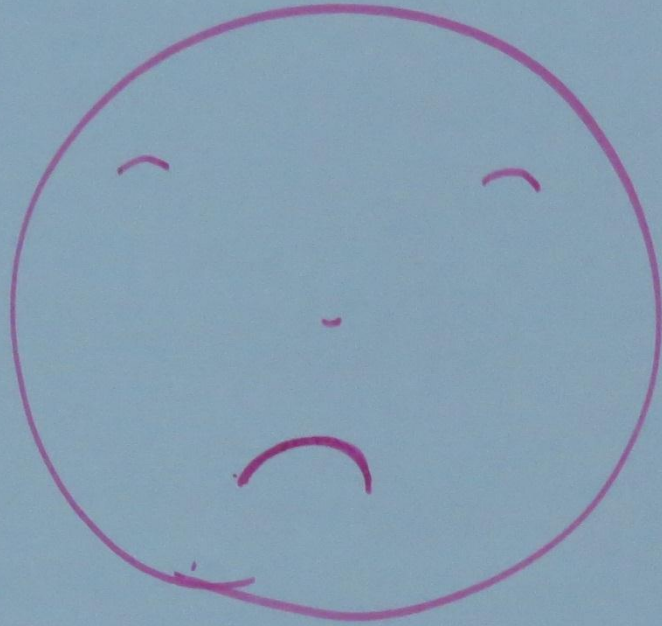
A: I want everyone to be at peace through more understanding between each other.

Q: How many kids do you plan to adopt?

A: I think one is quite enough company for us.

Q: Do you think that you will be part of the community (LGBT) more in the future?

A: Yes, I think I will. Everyone that's similar is gathered and I think its very fun.



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Bo.k.
11.8.2016



Will be continued