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CRIME

Victim of Violence Speaks Out

Emanuel Xavier, spoken word artist, attacked in Brooklyn's Bushwick

By ANDRES DUQUE

"I remember seeing them heading toward me as I walked alone on the street. I didn't really have much of a choice. I would either run screaming in the opposite direction or walk directly into them. I called my manager on the cell phone. I suppose I thought if they saw me talking to someone, they would leave me alone. It was pretty clear I wasn't looking for trouble."

Those words came from Emanuel Xavier as he began describing what happened on Tuesday evening, October 25, when he was beaten up by a group of 15 to 20 teenagers in the streets of Bushwick. Xavier sustained some facial bruises but declined hospitalization at the time. Audiologist reports later concluded there was nerve damage to his inner right ear for which he is currently on steroid medication with the hopes of regaining full hearing.

Probably best-known for his appearances on the HBO spoken-word poetry series "Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry," the 34 year-old has a long history of involvement in the New York nightlife scene and the neo-Nuyorican poetry movement, in the tradition of poets such as Pedro Pietri and Miguel Piñero. Xavier has also appeared as a guest host of the PBS newsmagazine, "In The Life," and co-starred in the 2004 film, "The Ski Trip," which recently debuted on LOGO Television.

Yet, among those of us who knew him from his days working at the now-defunct Different Light Bookstore in Chelsea, we remain mostly in awe of the written-word trilogy "Pier Queen" (1997), "Christ-Like" (1999), and "Americano" (2002), which delve deeply into his experiences as a homeless kid, ex-prostitute, and former drug dealer in poetry and barely fictionalized passages. These books and, particularly, "Americano," shine a light on subjects never before represented in prose—the experiences of urban queer Latinos born in the United States.

Just hours after the attack, still stunned and barely able to contain his rage and sadness,

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Xavier sent the following words to a few friends, noting the irony that attackers and victim may well have had much in common: “More than physical pain I feel shame and sadness that a poet’s blood, or anyone’s for that matter, may have tainted hands very much like my own.”

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The moment I read the message, I reached out and shared the conflicting emotions I had felt when a mugger held a knife to my throat years ago as a way to connect with Xavier, to let him know that things would be OK. What began as exchange about the pros and cons of speaking publicly about the attack and his concern that nobody would care because it was not a bias incident in time convinced Xavier to speak out as a crime victim.

That Tuesday evening found Xavier walking through his neighborhood on the way to visit his mother.

“They were just 15 to 20 teens,” he said. “By the time I saw them it was too late to turn around. One of them hit me on the back of the head, which I think was meant to knock me to the ground. But I somehow managed to turn right only to have the others punch me around.”

Xavier said that in addition inflicting bodily harm, his assailants attempted to rob him.

“It’s funny that they only got to steal my keys because I had my cell phone in one hand and money for my mom in my pocket,” he observed.

Xavier is aware that things could have ended much worse.

“I suppose had they managed to knock me to the ground, it would have been the end of me,” he said. “But I remember feeling more anger than fear and repeatedly shouting back at them.”

Xavier believes that there were two things that saved him: “My anger and the fact that a guy happened to drive by at that same moment and had the courage to stop long enough for me to jump in the car and speed away.”

He said that in the rush of things he forgot to ask the driver his name.

“We didn’t even speak until he dropped me off at home and I thanked him, but I hope he knows how grateful I feel toward him,” Xavier said.

Now that some weeks have passed, Xavier has put the attack into perspective.

“I know that I was one of the very few lucky ones that made it out alive,” he said. “This is why I will not remain silent about what happened to me. Bias attack or not, I will not give others the permission to justify any violent acts against our community because some choose to be different.”

If he was surprised by the anger that surfaced as he was being attacked, Xavier doesn’t show it.

“I was born and raised in New York City and spent some time out on the streets. I’ve been a criminal and even done poetry readings at Riker’s Island, so I wouldn’t consider myself afraid of much,” he said, and turning to his frustration about the difficulty of reaching teens much like the ones who attacked him, added, “but the fact that this was one of my target audiences, the fact I am an openly queer writer, the fact that with my words I have tried to reach those who think outside the box, brought up this sense of anger from inside.”

Xavier’s manager posted a Web message that the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation, considered the largest gang in the nation, had recently asked permission from Xavier to print one of his poems in its national newsletter. The Latin Kings have an ambiguous image. Some see the group as a benign community services organization. But federal law enforcement authorities believe the Kings have links to organized crime. The group has long been reputed to be extremely homophobic.

“I asked my manager, Leo Toro, to add that specific statement because I wanted to clarify that the Latin Kings had nothing to do with the attack,” Xavier said. “As far as I know, the men who attacked me had no gang affiliation.”

As for the group being homophobic, he added, “I made certain they were aware I was openly gay and it was absolutely no problem with them whatsoever. They simply respect me as a spoken word artist.”

Xavier also addressed e-mail messages he received taking him to task for being out late at night on a Brooklyn street. The messages implied that he might have brought the attack upon himself and also that he might have been up to no good.

“Those are ignorant comments,” he laughed. “I didn’t exactly think it would be dangerous to visit my mom at 8 p.m. on a Tuesday night in a neighborhood where I grew up. Yes, it was dark but I’ve been in seedier places at more ungodly hours in my life.”

But the suggestions obviously riled him.

“These comments hurt more than the physical pain I endured during the attack,” Xavier said. “As an openly gay spoken word artist, I have no shame in being myself. I have absolutely no desire to live a life on the down-low and I am proud of who I am. As a Bushwick native, I know when to remain private and unassuming in certain areas despite the recent gentrification. However, had I been running around cruising on auto-pilot like Carlos [his character] in ‘The Ski Trip’ or wearing a pair of Daisy Dukes and a tube top, that still wouldn’t grant anyone permission to attack me.

“I do not necessarily come across in my everyday life as a gay stereotype but would not be afraid to do so or walk alongside someone that is. It was the ballroom and transgender community, people like Anji Xtravaganza and Leslie Feinberg, and my drag sisters and brothers that gave me the big mouth I have today. They gave me the balls to attempt walking fearlessly past a group of threatening thugs.”

Xavier emphasized that the response he’s received has been overwhelmingly supportive.

“For the most part, people were extremely supportive and beautiful in how they reached out to me with their letters and prayers,” he said. “I was overwhelmed by how far and wide the news had spread throughout the country.

“You know, I actually read one of my poems not so long ago at a police brutality protest and the universal message of the poem was about peace. With everything going on in the world, that a man could be randomly attacked on the street by a group of his own people without motive still remains the most disturbing to me.”

Editor’s Note: Emanuel Xavier will appear at a benefit fundraiser for the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, which advocates for the rights of the transgender and gender variant community. Sponsored by VelvetPark magazine, “American TranStand” will be held on Tuesday, November 15, from 8 to 11:30 p.m. at the Canal Room, 285 West Broadway at Canal Street. Tickets are \$12.50 in advance at velvetparkmagazine.com/events or \$15 at the door. You must have an ID proving that you are at least 21.

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