QUEER UGANDA STANDS UP

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
JAKE NAUGHTON

Three years after courts struck down a "Kill the Gays" law, LGBTQ Ugandans weigh the cost of participating in a society that hasn't always accepted their right to live

BY **JACOB KUSHNER**

The Kampala poolside nightclub is dotted with patrons sharply dressed in tight skirts and slim shirts. The evening air is warm but fresh, the pop and hip-hop loud enough that you have to lean in to be heard. Groups of men and women crowd around small high-top tables, taking selfies and then marveling at them. Others sip bottles of Club Pilsener, their eyes fixed on the soccer highlights on TV. Some are young and some are old, some single and some married. Some are straight and, surprisingly, some are not.

Just a few years ago, Uganda, a calm East African nation of 41 million people, became known as the most antigay country in the world. Homophobic American evangelicals teamed up with Ugandan politicians and religious figures to warn against the impending global gay agenda. To keep the gays at bay, they claimed, Uganda needed stricter punishments. Fourteen years in prison—the maximum penalty for acts of homosexuality—was not enough. Under the 2014 Anti-Homosexuality Act, the original draft of which proposed the death penalty for "aggravated homosexuality," sodomizers and anyone caught harboring them could be locked up for life. Although the legislation was overturned after only six months, the anti-LGBTQ sentiments that arose alongside it linger on.

Living in Kampala, the nation's capital and home to 1.5 million people, turned into a nightmare for gay, lesbian and transgender Ugandans, some of whom were beaten and stripped in the streets, chased by angry mobs or jailed.

But you wouldn't guess that from the relaxed atmosphere at Cayenne on Kampala's north side. Few people seem to notice the transgender woman dancing by the pool, and if they do, they don't seem to care.

Dressed in knee-length shorts and a loose light blue polo, Javan is tall and has a face that's hard to read, punctuated by a small stud on the left side of her nose. She moves her elbows and shoulders like most men but her hips like most women. When the DJ plays "What's Luv," I start singing the Ashanti part of the chorus, and Javan sings the Fat Joe part. When I ask her how she knows the lyrics, she replies, "My dad loves old school."

Javan is just 20 years old—young enough to think of Fat Joe as old school. She belongs to a generation of queer Ugandans barely old enough to remember when the antigay fever first erupted here, in 2009. Earlier in the week when I'd suggested we go to Arrival Lounge, a popular gay bar in town, she rolled her eyes. "Arrival? It's *fake*. The vibes aren't good." She told me to meet her at Cayenne instead.

Cayenne isn't a gay bar. On Sundays the pool fills with teens and 20-somethings, gay and straight. On this night, a lesbian couple sitting near the bar whisper into each other's ears; one toys with the other's thick braids, a gentle hand on her partner's upper back.

To be queer in Uganda today is to experience a jarring dissonance. By night you may feel safe dancing in a bar with your friends, but by day you may be attacked by a mob, as Javan was last year. It was shortly after that attack, in February 2016, that she joined hundreds of other LGBTQ Ugandans fleeing across the border to Kenya to escape their neighbors, their families and the police.

But just six months after arriving in Kenya, Javan made an unlikely decision: She chose to come back. No matter that her father had all but disowned her, ceasing to pay her university fees and refusing to see her. Javan returned to prove herself as a woman to her fellow Ugandans, her family and above all her father.

Javan's return is emblematic of this strange moment for LGBTQ Ugandans. After passage of the Anti-Homosexuality Act, international attention on the state of gay rights in the country skyrocketed, generating opportunities and visibility for LGBTQ Ugandans that would have been unthinkable previously. Today, partnerships between the gay community and foreign embassies are common, LGBTQ organizations host events with drag performances and queer activists travel the world untouched. The same way U.S. Christians have joined with Ugandan antigay churches, global LGBTQ allies are now entering the fray, creating safe spaces for queer Ugandans and helping sensitize straight Ugandans.

But visibility is a double-edged sword. Threats to the LGBTQ community no longer come from politicians, who can be held accountable to the constitution, or newspapers, which can be sued for libel, but from everyday people.

"Our fear is society now—not the government," says Sandra Ntebi, a local lesbian-rights advocate. "Anyone can do anything."

Which makes it all the more daring that Javan chose to return to Uganda in spite of the transphobia and violence that awaited her there. Her homecoming was a declaration that nobody—from Uganda's homophobic leaders to the more traditional LGBTQ community, with its rules and etiquette and gay bars—could dictate where she could go. Here at Cayenne, Javan would drink among straight couples and sing along to the male rappers of her old-school hip-hop. Her experience would put queer Ugandans' future to the test: Would LGBTQ Africans ever be free?

On my ride home from Cayenne, I thumb through news that on the other side of the world President Trump has reinstated the ban on transgender people serving in the U.S. military. I ask my Uber driver what he thinks.

"America likes to tell us Africans we have bad leadership," he says. "Karma is a bitch."

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Homosexuality wasn't always illegal in Uganda. At the turn of the 20th century, British missionaries spread Christianity across a colonized East Africa, preaching against the sins of sex between man and man; in this century, the torch was picked up by American religious figures, the most famous of whom is named Scott Lively.

An evangelical pastor and longtime anti-LGBTQ activist, Lively traveled to Uganda twice in 2002 and once in 2009 to speak against homosexuality. Local evangelical pastor Samson Turinawe heard Lively speak at a seminar back in 2009.

"The American culture warriors," says Turinawe of Lively and his associates, "say gay people have this agenda and that it is destroying the world." After the conference, Lively addressed Uganda's parliament, rallying it to take action to stop the acceptance of homosexuality. "That's when they started the process of drafting the bill," says Turinawe.

Written and championed by Ugandan legislator David Bahati, the Anti-Homosexuality Act, nicknamed the "Kill the Gays" bill, passed in December 2013, with Bahati's death-penalty provision replaced by life imprisonment. (Bahati did not respond to an interview request.) The bill was signed into law in February 2014 by longtime Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni, then struck down by a court in August 2014 on a technicality. But the fervor surrounding its creation had already left its mark.

In 2012, the Ugandan LGBTQ rights network Sexual Minorities Uganda sued Lively in a Massachusetts federal court for his impact on the bill. They claimed he had violated the Alien Tort Statute, which allows victims of human rights abuses abroad to sue in U.S. courts.

This June, U.S. District Court Judge Michael Ponsor concurred that Lively had “aided and abetted a vicious and frightening campaign of repression against LGBTI [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex] persons,” working with counterparts in Uganda to “deprive them of the protection of the law, and render their very existence illegal”—a clear violation of their human rights. “His crackpot bigotry could be brushed aside as pathetic, except for the terrible harm it can cause.”

But because few of Lively’s interactions with Ugandan lawmakers and other power brokers had taken place on U.S. soil, Ponsor ruled that the court didn’t have jurisdiction over the case, and the lawsuit was dismissed. Despite this win, Lively appealed the decision, arguing that the court’s language was “prejudicial” against him.

“I thank God for His deliverance from this outrageous and malicious litigation, designed solely to silence my voice for Biblical truth on LGBTQ issues and to cause me pain and suffering for daring to speak against the ‘gay’ agenda,” Lively wrote on his blog after the decision. Today he says that he publicly opposed the Anti-Homosexuality Act “as written.”

“I believe in balancing individual civil liberties with the goal of preserving the primacy of traditional marriage [and] the natural family,” says Lively in an e-mail.

Back in Uganda, Javan knew nothing of the case. She was only 13 the day that Lively addressed Uganda’s parliament. It wasn’t until years later that she saw footage of a man dressed as a woman being harassed on a Kampala street.

“They undressed her on TV. They caught her and took her to police, asking her, ‘Are you man or are you woman?’ They beat her up badly.”

Members and allies of the Ugandan queer community gather for a service led by gayAmerican pastor Joseph Tolton, who makes annual visits to East Africa to mentor faith leaders in LGBTQ acceptance.

Javan had never heard the terms *trans* or *transgender,* but she recognized a bit of herself in the person on TV. The next day, a newspaper published the trans woman’s name and mentioned the police station she’d been taken to. Javan decided to go meet her. They ended up talking for hours. “She told me to be myself—but that I have to be careful,” Javan recalls. “She was listing the places I could go—places which are trans-friendly. I told her, ‘I’m just happy to meet you, because I’m happy there’s trans women like me too.’ ”

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Before Lively and his Ugandan counterparts brought homosexuality into the limelight, many queer Ugandans didn’t know others existed. The LGBTQ community was small and invisible, explains Ntebi, a smiling 34-year-old lesbian with thick braids and glasses.

“That movie whereby they say Uganda is the worst place to be gay? I’m against it,” she says, referring to a 2011 BBC documentary as she sips an early-morning beer at Kabaka landing on the shores of Lake Victoria. “Look at Sudan! God, mention you’re LGBTQ there, they’ll just kill you. Burundi? Go and stand there on TV and say you’re gay. You will leave the TV station, but you will not reach home.”

Ntebi and her friends started out not as activists but as socializers, holding parties for Kampala’s LGBTQ youth. In fact, Ntebi says, “the first person who went political—we expelled her. That was Kasha Jacqueline.” In 2003, Kasha Jacqueline Nabagesera appeared on TV, speaking about LGBTQ rights. “We said, ‘Now, Kasha, what are you doing? Why did you have to go on TV to expose us like that?’ ”

But once exposed, Ntebi began to embrace the visibility. “The more this person went public, the more members we got.” Suddenly young gays and lesbians were coming out of the closet right and left. Along with Nabagesera, Ntebi co-founded the group Freedom & Roam Uganda to advocate for lesbians in particular.

But as the LGBTQ-rights movement gained momentum, religious leaders increasingly pushed back, denouncing homosexuals in church and on TV. “It’s a disease,” Ntebi recalls them saying—a disease spread by foreigners seeking to “recruit” Ugandans to their gay lifestyle.

When newspapers began outing gay Ugandans on the front page, “we started losing jobs,” Ntebi explains. “We were expelled from schools. Some people were excommunicated [from their families].” In Ugandan culture it’s highly unusual for parents to disown a child, but to queer youth, “it happens all the time.”

When President Museveni signed the Anti-Homosexuality Act into law, Ntebi says, everyday Ugandans took it as a sign that they could attack their queer fellow citizens with impunity. “Society thought it gave them permission to kill. They thought they could just harm you anywhere. Some of us were undressed on the streets, thrown out of our houses,” Ntebi says. “That is the time most of us activists decided to leave the country.”

In the months after the bill passed, LGBTQ Ugandans went into exile by the hundreds. Though Javan didn’t know it at the time, she would soon be among them.

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The third of six siblings, Javan was born to a Christian mother and a strict Muslim father. When she was growing up, most of her friends were girls. She would put on makeup, wear dresses, remark to her girlfriends on the cute boys in class. “They would ask, ‘Why don’t you talk about girls that way?’ I would say I just love it, talking about cute boys.” Almost without exception, Javan’s friends supported her.

But home was where the heartache was. “In a family, to have a homosexual is a curse,” Javan tells me, using air quotes around the word *homosexual,* the catch-all term for LGBTQ people, who are also referred to as *kuchu.*

Sunday service at Watoto, a Pentecostal megachurch in Kampala that hosted Scott Lively in 2009. Activists say Watoto, led by American pastor Gary Skinner, has been instrumental in spreading homophobia in Uganda.

The deepest disdain came from her father. “He would spend the whole day telling me, ‘Why don’t you change? Be a man!’ ” His rhetoric trickled down to other members of the family. “My uncle used to say, ‘When you’re grown up you’ll be gay,’ ” Javan recalls. “I was young. I knew nothing. But inside me I would feel like, I’m not gay. I’m a *girl.*”

Javan’s only relief came from the women in her family. Her mother would tell her, “Don’t hate your dad—he doesn’t like what you do, but love him more.” But Javan couldn’t fathom that. “I’ve never seen a father who hates his kid,” she says.

One day Javan was called away from school to attend a meeting in the western Uganda village where her father’s relatives lived. They didn’t tell her why—she figured it was either a wedding or a funeral. It turned out to be an intervention.

“One hundred fifty of them surrounded me. I’m in the middle. Everyone is throwing words on me. They asked, ‘Are you doing this to my kid? Are you teaching them how to do the other sex?’ My granddad is like, ‘Can’t you change, my grandson?’ ” One uncle wished she would disappear. Another suggested killing her.

“That was the worst moment I ever had. Everyone bullying me was my family—not strangers from outside. My family.” Her relatives’ reaction seemed to fortify her father’s attitude toward Javan. Months after she’d begun studying business administration at Makerere University in Kampala, her father cut off her tuition. “He told me, ‘I can’t let you go back to school, because you’re shaming my family. It’s better you stay home.’ ”

One day in January 2016, Javan left her mother’s house. That’s when the attack occurred. Men beat her and kicked her, then ripped off her clothes.

“They wanted to see if I’m a boy,” Javan recalls. “I was totally naked, on the street.”

After parading her up and down the road, throwing rocks and berating her, the men resumed the beating. Javan lost consciousness. She woke up in the hospital with a bloody nose and wounds on her face and head. Her left ear had been badly damaged, and to this day she has trouble hearing out of it. When Javan returned home from the hospital, her mother pleaded with her to stop ‘acting’ like a girl, fearing she’d be attacked again, even killed. “She said, ‘Why can’t you do this for me, change your ways?’ I told her I was born like this. ‘You’re my mother—you should know.’ ”

A lesbian friend who’d fled to Kenya and was resettled in Canada told Javan about the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, a relocation agency. If Javan could get to its office in Nairobi, she could apply for asylum and perhaps even resettlement somewhere safe—like the United States, a place she’d always dreamed about.

“In the U.S. I could transition,” Javan says, referring to gender-affirming surgery. “Then I could come back to my country and they could see the girl that I am.” To Javan, it seems that the only way to persuade her family she’s a woman is to look the part.

In reality, fleeing Uganda came with the possibility that even if she did return someday, there was no guarantee of acceptance, or even survival.

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One afternoon shortly after the attack, Javan and her mother went to downtown Kampala to book Javan a one-way bus ticket to Nairobi, 400 miles east. “Just make sure you’re safe, and don’t let people attack you like they did here,” her mother told her.

Four days after arriving in Nairobi, Javan went to the UNHCR office, only to discover other LGBTQ refugees sleeping outside, homeless as they waited to see if they’d be resettled. They told her stories of being attacked by Kenyans and blackmailed by police. “I went to Nairobi to seek protection,” Javan says. “But there is no place that is safe.”

Javan was able to stay with a relative. By day she would hole up inside the house, afraid to go out and be seen. Only at night would she risk the five-minute walk to a popular bar called Gipsy, where queer Kenyans and foreigners often went to flirt and dance.

But something nagged at her to come home. She was moved when she learned that, back in Kampala, her mother would sometimes confront the men who sat on their motorcycles at the intersection where Javan had been attacked. “She would tell people, ‘You made my son go away for good. Are you happy now?’ ”

A new sense of purpose arose in Javan. “I wanted these people to feel guilty,” she says. What’s more, she started to question the example she was setting for other LGBTQ Ugandans by running away.

“I want to be like, ‘Javan is still in Uganda, so you also can stay in Uganda. It’s your country,’ ” she says. “If you won’t get freedom in Uganda, where will you get freedom from?”

Visibility is a double-edged sword.

Left: Javan and a friend let loose at Ram, a Kampala bar that hosts Sunday *kuchu* nights and has become one of the city's de facto gay bars.

In August 2016, Javan made up her mind. "I came back. I can't keep on running."

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But to return to Uganda was to return to the heart of intolerance, where homosexuality is still criminalized. In one Kampala neighborhood, a dozen men squeeze into a tiny two-room safe house. Many have been fired from their jobs because they're gay. Others are fleeing the wrath of their families, neighbors or police.

The leader of the house is a soft-faced middle-aged man who goes by the name Henry Love. After the antigay bill passed, he heard that many gay Ugandans had fled to Kenya, only to be persecuted there too. "It's because the situation is worse in Kenya that I started this shelter," Henry Love says. The walls of the house are covered with portraits—younger versions of the men at high school graduations and confirmations. It's a family-photo wall for a different kind of family, most of whose members have been disowned by their biological ones.

One man was a lecturer at a local university but lost his job when someone found out he was gay and blackmailed him. Another man fled here after his boss spotted him at an LGBTQ-rights press conference. "He gave me two options: either take me to the police or lose my job. At that time, they were hunting gay people...." The young man trails off, then begins crying and retreats to the other room.

Because they can't hold down formal jobs, they "do sex" to pay the rent, according to Henry Love. Often their clients refuse to use protection. "It's only by God's prayers that we don't get infected," he says. "There are many here who have struggled with HIV."

Sex work is illegal in Uganda, which makes it all the more dangerous—a sex worker can't go to the police if a client refuses to pay or is abusive. One week earlier, a 24-year-old trans woman nicknamed Sweet Love went to meet a client and upon her return was beaten in the street just a short walk from the safe house. An uppercut to her jaw caused her to bite her tongue hard, severing the tip. A week later, she is still unable to talk.

The meager protection that the safe house offers Sweet Love and her companions may soon disappear. A few weeks before my visit, two of the men were seen kissing just outside the door. Word reached the landlord, who gave the group three months to get out.

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Since returning to Uganda, Javan has received constant reminders of the way transphobia permeates the lives of trans people here. On several occasions police have targeted her for her appearance, then arrested, jailed and forced her to bribe her way out. Once when she was sitting in a cell, she says, fellow inmates made her undress "to see if I was a boy." She adds, "It's jail—you can't negotiate. They came and took those clothes off me."

Late last year on Facebook, Javan met a Pakistani man who was visiting from Dubai. He asked her to take him out one night to help him meet girls. But the girlfriend Javan introduced him to wasn't interested. Later that evening, the man asked Javan to pick up some cash from his hotel room in Kampala's upscale Kololo district.

Once she was inside, the man came up behind her. "This guy got drunk and started touching me, but I was not interested in him," Javan says. When she refused his advances, he pulled out a gun.

"He said, 'Your friend said she doesn't like me—so now you have to give me.' " If she refused, he would call the police and tell them Javan was a prostitute and had tried to steal his money—a story they'd likely believe. "I was scared. I didn't want to be called a thief," Javan recalls. But also, "I didn't want to be shot."

The man forced her to have sex. Only afterward did he allow Javan to go. "After leaving the hotel, I went to a clinic for medication. I was worried. We never had a condom. What if he has HIV?" she says. From the clinic she went straight to a nearby police station and told the officers what had happened. To her horror, she says, the police not only blamed Javan for going to the hotel room in the first place, they charged her with sodomy. "They said it's me who seduced the man."

Eventually Javan managed to speak with a more senior officer, who redesignated the case as "domestic violence." He told her to come by the next morning so they could confront the man. Javan said she waited in the hotel lobby while police brought him down from his room. But instead of arresting him, an officer told her, "I think he should just apologize to you maybe." With that, the man said,"I'm sorry," and walked away free, according to Javan. She assumes he paid off the cops.

"The case just died there," she says. "I was so hurt—reporting that case, and you make me a fool? I went home, took my medication and forgot."

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Despite stories like this, Javan remains convinced Ugandan police are coming around. She tells me about a time three weeks earlier when a man accosted her on the street, saying, "Look at this gay person—we should kill you!" Javan dialed the number of a police deputy who'd been sympathetic after one of her previous attacks. She told him about the death threat and described the man. "The deputy took the guy. He said, 'I have the guy here. I am going to charge him.' " As Javan explains, there are a few upstanding cops, but most still arbitrarily decide when and if the law is enforced.

Still, some point to such incidents as progress—evidence that international condemnation has worked and that Ugandan police, pastors and politicians are beginning to respond to pressure from LGBTQ activists.

After Judge Ponsor etched Scott Lively's human rights violations into the public record this June, homophobic U.S. activists seem to have been making fewer appearances in the country. Take Pastor Martin Ssempa, a Ugandan American ally of Lively's who once had an enormous following.

"Martin Ssempa was the face of spiritual aggression and animosity toward the LGBTQ community," says Joseph Tolton, a black American pastor who has traveled across Africa to meet with LGBTQ Christians. "Now we literally can't find him. He has not appeared publicly. He has ceded his mantle as the architect of the antigay movement in Uganda. That is not just a moral victory, it's an incredible victory for the community." (Ssempa did not respond to an interview request.)

By "community" Tolton doesn't mean just LGBTQ Ugandans but the global gay rights movement itself. "This fight is not just their fight; it is ours as well," he says. Many black Americans still struggle to overcome the same narrative, that "beyond being un-Christian, homosexuality is un-African," he says.

If the Scott Livelys of the world fought a proxy culture war, inciting Ugandan society to pick up the American battle against queer identity, now, Tolton says, Americans have a duty to defend the foreign victims of that war.

In the U.S., fights over gay marriage and transgender rights play out in courthouses. "For them it is more law, the legal part," says Ntebi. "Here in Uganda the legality comes last. Laws don't work. It's not the law that is going to beat you up. We must negotiate with society."

Few things in Ugandan society are more revered than family. "Some of us are protected by our parents. We are lucky. But if they all turn their backs on you, you're left helpless," says Ntebi. This is precisely what makes Javan's predicament so complex. Her mother has supported her throughout. Javan will never forget the day she called to ask, "How are you, *my daughter*?"

"I laughed for two minutes without talking, jumping around the house so excited," Javan recalls of the first time her mother acknowledged her as a woman. I ask Javan what it would take for her to at last feel free.

"When my dad does that," she replies.

Javan has tried to be seen as respectable in her father's eyes. In the neighborhood where her mother lives (her father rarely visits), she volunteers for community work, picking up trash, cleaning the police station. Like other LGBTQ Ugandans, Javan feels a constant need to show she can be a productive member of society.

It's an attitude familiar to many gay Americans. "LGBTQ people, at least of my generation, are overachievers," says Amy Valenzuela, a lesbian living in Long Beach, California who has helped more than a dozen LGBTQ Ugandan refugees integrate into the U.S. after being resettled there. In America, "entire generations of gay people made themselves indispensable to family members," she says, "like the stereotypical mother-son bond or the adult child who provides financially for the drug-addict sibling. For many of us there is an ever-present need to prove oneself, to make up for the deficiency of being queer and of causing parents or family pain and disappointment."

> **"It's not the law that is going to beat you up. We must negotiate with society."**

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On one of my last afternoons in Uganda, I find Javan in a particularly good mood. She tells me that earlier that day, after nearly a year without communicating, her father called her out of the blue.

"I don't know if you're my daughter or my son," he told her. "But that does not stop me from being your dad. I want you to go back to school."

Javan looks up at the sky with an enormous smile and lets out a soft shriek of delight as she recounts the story. It wasn't quite the recognition she'd been waiting for—the expression of true acceptance. "I want it to be direct, not 'My son or, whatever, daughter.' I want it to be, 'Hi, how are you, my *daughter*?' " Just like her mother had said it.

"At least I have hope now."

But for many queer Ugandans, hope can seem fleeting. The day after dancing at Cayenne, I meet Javan for lunch at a café near her home. She tells me a young transgender friend of hers was attacked by several men that very night.

Her younger queer friends aren't accustomed to such attacks. "To them it's not normal," Javan says. "They'll get used to it."

Although the exodus of queer Ugandans fleeing to Kenya has slowed, activists including Ntebi lament the void left in the LGBTQ community back home. "Why do we have to leave? If all of us leave our country, there will be no more gays in Uganda."

When Javan was forced to decide between her gender identity and her home, she chose both—opting to be here, to be visible and to deal with the repercussions. "There is still hate in the world," she tells me. "But if someone attacks me today, maybe tomorrow, someday, he will support me."

Since returning to Uganda, Javan has embraced this visibility, dancing with other LGBTQ Ugandans in music videos that espouse acceptance and meeting with activists such as Ntebi to figure out how to serve as a role model for younger trans Ugandans.

"Transgender women are noticed first; they are neglected first. They are tortured by their families. I want those people to love their kids, because they can be something one day," Javan tells me. "Let me be an example to young transgender people who don't know who they are."

Two years in a row Javan has participated in Uganda's Pride festivities. Last year she was voted "best trans woman" at the event. To Javan, as well as Ntebi and many others, visibility is key to changing society's negative perception of LGBTQ people in Uganda. But sometimes being visible isn't easy. In August the Ugandan government canceled this year's Pride festivities after officials threatened would-be participants with violence and arrest.

"Things don't come from nowhere," Javan says with a sigh. "Ugandans will change with time." ■

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