



MRS. LOCKHART PRODUCTIONS PRESENTS

# BORN THIS WAY

A DOCUMENTARY BY SHAUN KADLEC AND DEB TULLMANN

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A person is seen from behind, standing in a doorway. They are wearing a vibrant, multi-colored patterned shirt with geometric designs in shades of yellow, green, and blue. The background is dark and indistinct, suggesting an interior space. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the shirt and the person's silhouette.

## SHORT SYNOPSIS

More people are imprisoned each year for homosexuality in Cameroon than any other country in the world.

With intimate access to the lives of two young gay Cameroonians, *Born This Way* sketches a vivid portrait of day-to-day life in modern Africa. Lyrical imagery, devastating homophobia, glimpses of American culture and a hidden-camera courtroom drama coalesce into a story of what is possible in the global fight for equality.



## LONG SYNOPSIS

Born This Way explores the underground gay and lesbian community in an intensely homophobic culture that is taking its first steps toward greater acceptance. More people are imprisoned each year for homosexuality in Cameroon than any other country in the world, serving sentences up to five years. The film focuses on two people who dream of sharing with their families the truth about who they really are: Cédric wants to come out to his mom, and Gertrude wants to come out to the Mother Superior who raised her in a Catholic convent.

Cédric and Gertrude work at a nonprofit that officially operates as an HIV/AIDS clinic, but also functions as a safe space where LGBT people can come together without fear of going to jail, being attacked or being rejected by family and friends. When two young women in a remote village are arrested for “lesbianism and witchcraft”, they turn to brilliant human rights lawyer Alice Nkom to defend them. Cédric and Gertrude’s activism becomes bolder and stronger as they work with Alice to help the two women.

Born This Way is a view from the inside of a secret community on the verge of transforming into a social movement. It offers an inspiring portrait of this young, courageous community as it struggles to find its voice in a deeply traditional culture. The film is not only an eye-opening work of art, but also a key component of a global campaign to raise awareness about an unjust, anachronistic law and the compromised legal system that enforces it. Lyrical imagery, devastating homophobia, glimpses of American culture and a hidden-camera courtroom drama coalesce into a story of what is possible in the global fight for equality.



## FILMMAKERS' COMMENTS

We met Steave Nemande, the founder of Alternatives Cameroun (the first LGBT center in Cameroon) at a Human Rights Watch event in Los Angeles. As we talked, he told us about a very brave group of LGBT people who congregate at Alternatives. He described how they work and play there: doing HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, providing psychological counseling and supporting people who are rejected by their families, but also throwing amateur runway fashion shows, dance parties and soccer matches. And during all of this, exploring together what it means to be gay, lesbian, African, human—in a place where none of these things are simple. He said that he believed many people in that community were ready, for the first time, to tell their stories.

So the two of us traveled alone to Cameroon on tourist visas. We spoke almost no French, the official language, and though we have both traveled widely, neither of us had ever been to Central Africa. We had no idea what kind of film we would end up with. We only knew that we would determine the structure and content by listening to the people who agreed to share their stories and their lives.



On our first day in Douala we visited Alternatives Cameroun, and the first person we talked to was Cédric. Alternatives has a tiny but fully-functioning clinic where they do HIV/AIDS testing and treatment. When we met Cédric he had co-opted the clinic's only hospital bed and was lying there with an IV in his arm, fighting a bout of malaria. Despite dehydration and a high fever, his smile illuminated the room. As we talked we got to know that he wanted more than anything to come out to his mom—that he couldn't bear being dishonest to her, that he loved Lady Gaga, that he believed his culture was changing and that he wanted to be one of the brave people who stands up and teaches a new way of thinking. We also found out that he lived in a poor and crime-ridden part of town where his neighbors had discovered that he was gay and had threatened his life.



We were drawn to his complexity and passion, and he agreed to let us follow him with our cameras. In the film, Cédric is Cédric—he is not the archetype of The Brave Activist or a symbol of a movement. We did not want to make a film with an ideological agenda. He is just an individual, but he is doing something profound: figuring out what it means to fight and to be honest and to be hated all at once but to keep on going. He has a strong sense of who he is and is part of the heart of the Alternatives Cameroun community.



Gertrude is also part of that heart. We met her the same day and were blown away by her courage, her humor and her spunk. She also wanted to come out to the mother who raised her, a Catholic nun. Her relationship to religion was complex and even tortured at that time, but she insisted on confronting it head on. She also agreed to participate in the film.



Relatively simple questions guided our shooting: who are you? What are your lives? What does it mean to be gay right now in this part of Africa?

We followed Cédric and Gertrude as they went out into the world to confront their own challenges and then returned to Alternatives to regroup with their friends, to figure things out, to treat each other's wounds and to build up their courage to go out once again.

One challenge to all of this was Cameroon's laws. It is illegal to shoot documentary footage without government permission. We filed for a permit under the cover of doing a film on HIV/AIDS prevention, but when they said that we needed to have a government observer with us at all times, we realized that we would have to stay undercover.



We alternated operating camera and sound. We shot on a Canon HD SLR and a Panasonic HVX200. We moved around the city and country with our subjects on the crowded buses and motorcycle taxis that they use, with our cameras in backpacks, being careful not to shoot when police or official-looking people were around. We hid in plain sight, much like LGBT Cameroonians do. Living with a constant sense of danger and often fear helped us connect with our subjects on an empathetic level—though the fear and risk that they live with every day of their lives is much more serious. When we went into Alternatives Cameroun with them, almost all of the fear evaporated. It is one of the only sanctuaries where LGBT people can be who they are openly with one another.

So we built *Born This Way* around our subjects' movement between safety and danger. It is not an essay film. There isn't a lot of exposition. It is a view from the inside of a secret community on the verge of transforming into a social movement. It observes the very specific details of several lives. Background information on Cameroon and the legal situation is available on our website.



# BACKGROUND

## The Republic of Cameroon (République du Cameroun)



Cameroon is often referred to as “Africa in miniature” for its cultural and geographical diversity; it is home to over 200 linguistic groups living in climate zones ranging from desert to tropical rainforest. Multiple waves of migration contributed to Cameroon’s ethnic diversity, beginning with hunter-gatherers in prehistoric times. A shifting collection of kingdoms, chiefdoms and fondoms developed until 1884 when the German Empire claimed the area as a colony. After Germany’s defeat in World War I, the territory was divided between France and Britain, with most of the British territory eventually merging with Nigeria and the French territory (along with two of the formerly British provinces) becoming today’s Republic of Cameroon. French and English are the official languages, though English is only spoken by about 20% of the population.

Cameroon gained independence from France under President Ahmadou Ahidjo in 1960. He passed an anti-homosexuality bill in 1972 that states: “Whoever has sexual relations with a person of the same sex shall be punished with imprisonment from six months to five years and a fine of from 20,000 to 200,000 francs (\$50 to \$500 USD).” According to Human Rights Watch, there are more arrests for homosexuality in Cameroon than anywhere else in the world.

In 1982, President Ahidjo handed the presidency to Paul Biya, who has now been in office for thirty-one years. The President of Cameroon has broad, unilateral powers to create policy, administer government agencies and appoint government officials at all levels.

In 1998, Transparency International ranked Cameroon as the most corrupt country in the world. Their 2012 rankings place Cameroon at 30th most corrupt—certainly an improvement—with a “transparency” rating of 26 out of 100.

### Dangers of Coming Out

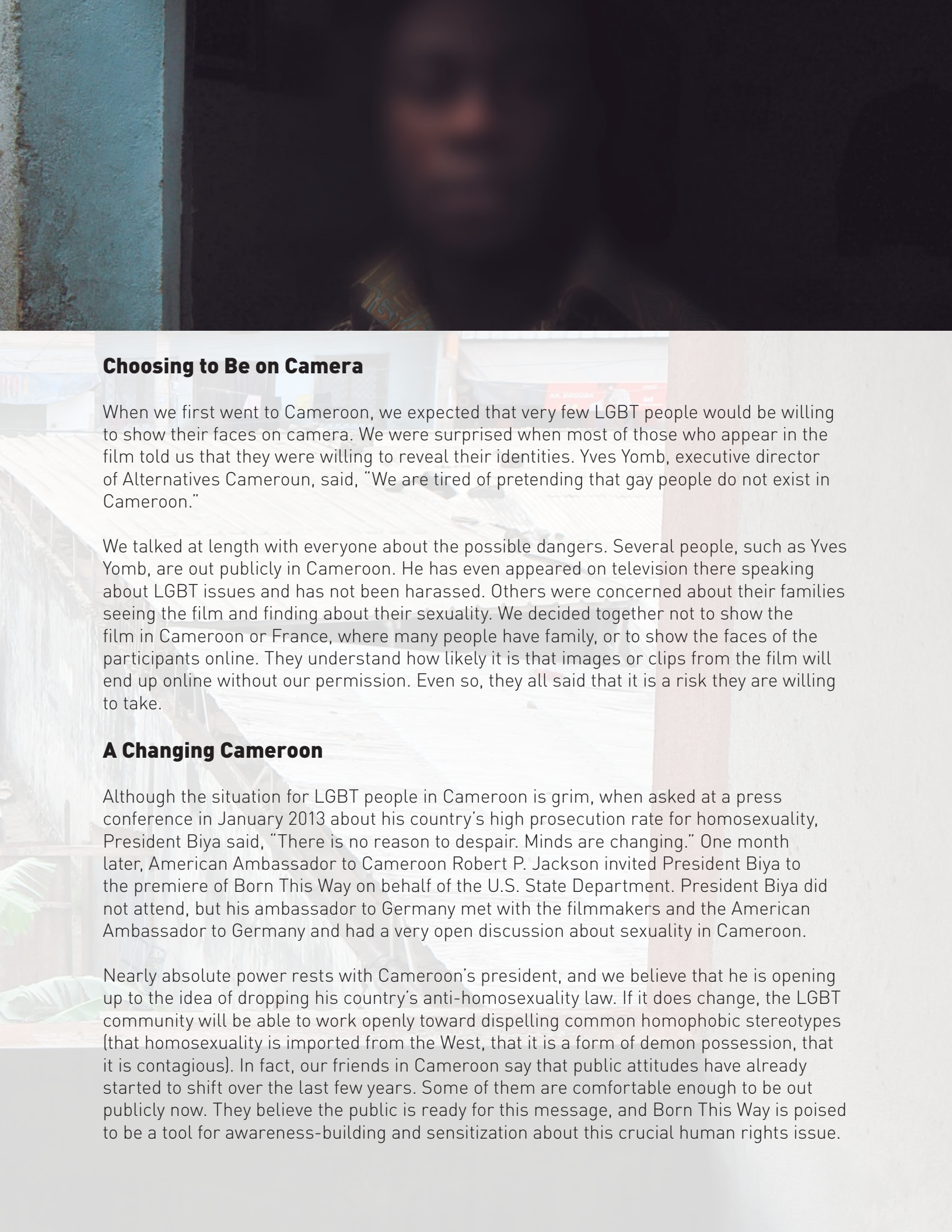
When LGBT Cameroonians are outed, they expect to be disowned by their families, fired from their jobs and even driven out of their neighborhoods.

Convictions for homosexuality are often based on little or no evidence (see Human Rights Watch’s report “Guilty by Association,” listed below).

For those who end up in prison, conditions are horrific. The two main prisons in Cameroon are operating at triple their capacity. Inmates must pay for food and medical care, and they must even pay to rent a bed. Many of those with no money and no support network find themselves sleeping on the floor in a hallway, severely malnourished and sick.







## Choosing to Be on Camera

When we first went to Cameroon, we expected that very few LGBT people would be willing to show their faces on camera. We were surprised when most of those who appear in the film told us that they were willing to reveal their identities. Yves Yomb, executive director of Alternatives Cameroun, said, “We are tired of pretending that gay people do not exist in Cameroon.”

We talked at length with everyone about the possible dangers. Several people, such as Yves Yomb, are out publicly in Cameroon. He has even appeared on television there speaking about LGBT issues and has not been harassed. Others were concerned about their families seeing the film and finding out about their sexuality. We decided together not to show the film in Cameroon or France, where many people have family, or to show the faces of the participants online. They understand how likely it is that images or clips from the film will end up online without our permission. Even so, they all said that it is a risk they are willing to take.

## A Changing Cameroon

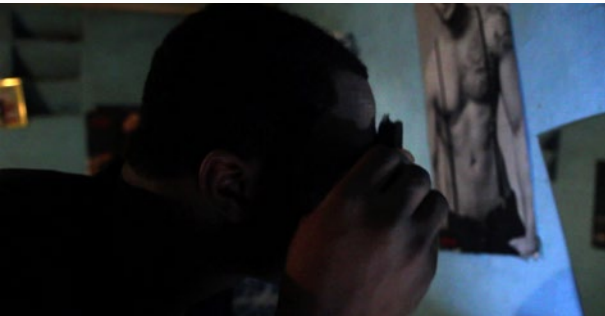
Although the situation for LGBT people in Cameroon is grim, when asked at a press conference in January 2013 about his country’s high prosecution rate for homosexuality, President Biya said, “There is no reason to despair. Minds are changing.” One month later, American Ambassador to Cameroon Robert P. Jackson invited President Biya to the premiere of *Born This Way* on behalf of the U.S. State Department. President Biya did not attend, but his ambassador to Germany met with the filmmakers and the American Ambassador to Germany and had a very open discussion about sexuality in Cameroon.

Nearly absolute power rests with Cameroon’s president, and we believe that he is opening up to the idea of dropping his country’s anti-homosexuality law. If it does change, the LGBT community will be able to work openly toward dispelling common homophobic stereotypes (that homosexuality is imported from the West, that it is a form of demon possession, that it is contagious). In fact, our friends in Cameroon say that public attitudes have already started to shift over the last few years. Some of them are comfortable enough to be out publicly now. They believe the public is ready for this message, and *Born This Way* is poised to be a tool for awareness-building and sensitization about this crucial human rights issue.



## SUBJECT BIOS

**Alice Nkom** is a Cameroonian lawyer, well known for her advocacy towards decriminalization of homosexuality in Cameroon. A lawyer since 1969, she was the first black woman called to the bar in Cameroon, at the age of 24. In January 2011, she was threatened with arrest by a representative of Cameroon's Ministry of Communication after her organization, the Association to Defend Homosexuals, was awarded a 300,000 euro grant by the European Union. Later that year, she represented Jean-Claude Roger Mbédé, a man imprisoned for three years for "homosexuality and attempted homosexuality" following a series of SMS messages to a male acquaintance, and who was named a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International. For more information on Alice Nkom go to: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Alice-Nkom/162544403808540>



**Cédric** is a gay Cameroonian who has received death threats from his neighbors in Douala. He currently works as director of HIV/ AIDS education and prevention at Alternatives Cameroun.

**Gertrude**, a devout Catholic struggling to reconcile her faith with her sexual orientation, was a regional amateur boxing champion and worked as a security guard before becoming a counselor at Alternatives Cameroun.



**Alternatives-Cameroun** is an organization working for equality, tolerance, and respect for people who suffer from social exclusion. Alternatives-Cameroun was founded by young Cameroonian professionals fighting for human rights in Cameroon, especially for the rights of people who have sexual relations with people of the same sex.  
<http://www.amsher.net/Default.aspx?alias=www.amsher.net/alternativescameroun>

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# PRODUCTION TEAM BIOS

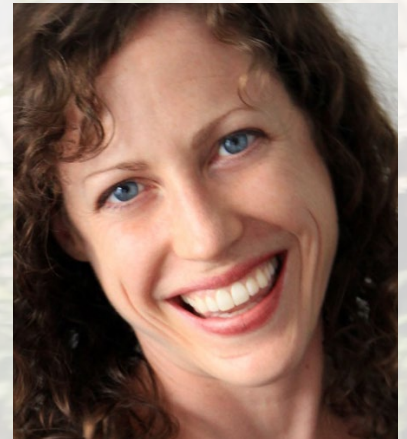
**Producer/directors Shaun Kadlec and Deb Tullmann's** collaboration began in the third grade when their teacher Mrs. Lockhart assigned them to memorize and recite the poem "Little Boy Blue" by Eugene Field, about a child who dies in his sleep. Their paths have diverged and re-converged many times since then, but their friendship has held steady throughout.



Shaun went on to complete his undergraduate degree at Carleton College in musicology, focusing on the history and theory of twentieth-century experimental music. Soon after, he spent a year in Sri Lanka on a Fulbright Fellowship studying Sri Lanka's civil war through contemporary literature. After the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean, he co-created a research project to investigate how international aid money was being used for Sri Lanka's disaster reconstruction. That took him back to Sri Lanka for another year, and that is where he made his first documentary film (on the role of Sri Lanka's media in their civil war).

Deb and Shaun have co-directed many commercials and short documentaries, including "First and Loveliss," an intimate portrait of two eccentric retirees in rural Tennessee which won the jury prize for best short documentary at Outfest in 2009.

After receiving her BA in English and Theatre from Westmont College in 2000, Deb spent several years doing international development and Public Health work in Latin America, Mongolia and Thailand. The interplay between social change and a fascination with visual storytelling led to her first documentary project in 2005. 2 years later, she co-founded Candlefoot Productions, a boutique video production company, that has produced pieces for PBS Frontline, UNDP ABC and many others. Born This Way is her first feature documentary.



Deb and Shaun both were raised in extremely conservative Christian homes in a small town in Central California. Making a film on this subject has sometimes put strains on their relationships with their families, though Deb's parents have come around and are very supportive. Shaun gave his mom a DVD of the finished film after its premiere, but after watching the first 10 minutes, she refused on moral grounds to watch any more.

**Jamie Wolf (executive producer)** is a producer, journalist and photographer whose work has been published in The New Yorker, Harper's, Los Angeles Times Magazine, motherjones.com and many others.

**Josh Peterson (editor)** has been nominated for a national Emmy (Soldiers of Conscience) and short-listed for the Academy Award® (The Rape of Europa). He recently co-edited The Island President.

**Joan Jeanrenaud (composer/cellist)** played with the Kronos Quartet for 20 years before launching a solo career as composer and performer.



## KEY FACTS

Penal Code (Law No. 65-LF-24 of 12 November 1965 and law No. 67-LF-1 of 12 June 1967) as amended in 1972 provides: "Whoever has sexual relations with a person of the same sex shall be punished with imprisonment from six months to five years and fine of from 20,000 to 200,000 francs (\$50-\$500 USD)."

More people are arrested for homosexual acts in Cameroon than in any country in the world. (source: Human Rights Watch)

The U.S. Department of State's 2010 Human Rights Report found that homosexual persons generally kept a low profile in Cameroon because of the "pervasive societal stigma, discrimination, and harassment as well as the possibility of imprisonment."

For UN statistical information on Cameroon:  
<http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=CAMEROON>



## CREDITS

Produced and Directed by  
**Shaun Kadlec and Deb Tullmann**

Editor  
**Josh Peterson**

Executive Producer  
**Jamie Wolf**

Camera and Production Sound  
**Deb Tullmann and Shaun Kadlec**

Original Music Composed and Performed by  
**Joan Jeanrenaud**

Post Production Audio by  
**Berkeley Sound Artists**

Re-Recording Mixers  
**James LeBrecht**  
**Dan Olmsted**

Digital Intermediate by  
**Colorflow, Berkeley, CA**

DI Colorist  
**Kent Pritchett**

DI Producers  
**Alex D. da Silva and Kim Salyer**

Publicist  
**Maggie Begley Communications**  
**Jonah Blechman**

Primary Funding Provided By  
**Arcus Foundation**  
**Rosenthal Family Foundation**

### Major Funding

Glen Dake  
Pacific Pioneer Fund  
Deborah and Andy Rappaport  
Bill Resnick  
Renee Dake Wilson  
Tom Safran  
Tish and Milan Momirov  
Weston Milliken  
Erika Glazer  
Ron and Nancy Garret  
William Delvac  
Linda Brown  
Andy Abowitz and Michael Levin  
Gregory and JaLynn Prince  
Paul Song and Lisa Ling  
Eliot Seal  
Tom and Janet Unterman



# ARTICLES

## **Born This Way in Berlin** **Rick Jacobs, Huffington Post**

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rick-jacobs/born-this-way-in-berlin\\_b\\_2668956.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rick-jacobs/born-this-way-in-berlin_b_2668956.html)

Ambassador and Mrs. Philip Murphy, America's diplomats-in-chief in Berlin, put their nation's support for full equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people front and center with the government of Cameroon. How the heck did that happen? It's a story of the finest in American diplomacy and art, an example of how the Obama administration's policies have global impact.

My partner Shaun Kadlec and his colleague and friend Deb Tullmann spent the last two years directing and producing Born This Way, a documentary about the lives of gay and lesbian people in Cameroon, where homosexuality is punishable by up to five years in prison. With a population of 20 million, Cameroon actually imprisons more people for simply being gay than any other country in the world. Born This Way premiered Saturday night here in Berlin for the 63rd annual Berlinale, founded as part of the Marshall Plan and now one of the two or three most respected film festivals in the world. 350 people filled every seat in the magnificent theater. Afterward, the moderator asked that we all pause briefly before Shaun and Deb answered questions because "the film was very powerful." She was right. The audience did not want to leave, did not want to talk amongst itself. It just wanted to absorb.

With us that night were Mechthild Rawert, a member of the Reichstag (Parliament) who represents some of the LGBT population in Berlin. She included two friends, one of whom is from Cameroon. Nicole, the Cameroonian now studying here in Berlin, said "I went to Cameroon without setting foot on a plane. You captured the real spirit of my country, the lives and the way people are."

Check two boxes: the film hits home with audiences and clearly is authentic. But what of the law's draconian effects on people who just want to live and love peacefully in Cameroon?

Enter the diplomats. On 30 January, Cameroon's president for 30 years Paul Biya, shook things up a bit, at least from France. According to Reuters: "Speaking to journalists after meeting with French President Francois Hollande in Paris, Biya stressed that homosexuality had been illegal in Cameroon since before he came to power more than 30 years ago.

'Now I can say that discussions are under way. People are talking, minds can change one way or another but currently it's a crime,' he said."

The American Ambassador in Cameroon, Robert Jackson, forwarded a letter from Shaun and Deb to President Biya inviting him to attend the premiere of Born This Way in Berlin. Saturday at a luncheon in honor of the Berlinale, Ambassador and Mrs. Murphy invited Cameroon's Ambassador to Berlin as a guest seated with Mrs. Murphy and Deb at the Born This Way table. (Each of the films represented at the lunch had a table named for them.)



Deb spoke with Ambassador Mpay about the film, invited him to attend the screening on Wednesday night, which he said he would attend. In his remarks at lunch, Ambassador Murphy referenced *Born This Way*, and speaking directly to Ambassador Mpay said, “Documentary films can help to highlight marginalized populations, the disabled, native cultures or homosexuals. At the risk of singling out just one film, *Your Excellency, Born This Way* tells the story of homosexuals in Cameroon. It does not accuse or attack. It just tells the story. We hope that this may help change minds in your country.”

If you ever wonder what diplomats do or whether a policy goal on an issue like LGBT equality of a U.S. president matters in countries beyond our shores, wonder no more. Ambassador Mpay was the only foreign envoy invited to that lunch. He was clearly invited for the purpose of encouraging him to see the film and to emphasize that the words of President Biya last month are a good beginning, but only words if laws do not change. And Ambassador Robert Jackson, a career diplomat in Yaoundé, took the time to deliver the letter just as he took the time to help Shaun and Deb with their work. Others in the State Department, including Deputy Secretary Tom Nides and LGBT Senior Advisor Ken Kero-Mentz, put this effort high on their list, encouraging still others to do the same.

Will it matter? As Lady Gaga knows well, art can change lives. Perhaps she will appeal to First Lady Chantal Biya, no stranger to progressive culture, and ask her to watch *Born This Way*, the title of which comes from the inspiration Lady Gaga provides to some of the “stars” of the film. Perhaps the leadership of President Hollande in France to make marriage legal will inspire Francophone Africa at least to decriminalize being gay. Lots of work remains to be done, but what we know for sure is that when art, culture and diplomacy combine with courage, liberty knows no bounds.

## **Cameroon: Rights Abuses in ‘Homosexuality’ Prosecutions**

### **Human Rights Watch**

Summary: <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/03/21/cameroon-rights-abuses-homosexuality-prosecutions>  
Full report (55 pages): <http://www.hrw.org/node/114185>

Cameroon prosecutes people for consensual same-sex conduct more aggressively than almost any country in the world, four human rights organizations said in a report released today. The organizations – Alternatives-Cameroun, Association for the Defense of Gays and Lesbians (ADEFHO), the Cameroon Foundation for AIDS (CAMFAIDS), and Human Rights Watch – found that at least 28 people have been prosecuted for same-sex conduct in Cameroon since 2010. Most cases are marked by grave human rights violations, including torture, forced confessions, denial of access to legal counsel, and discriminatory treatment by law enforcement and judicial officials.

The 55-page report, “Guilty by Association: Human Rights Violations in the Enforcement of Cameroon’s Anti-Homosexuality Law,” presents 10 case studies of arrests and prosecutions under article 347 bis of Cameroon’s penal code, which punishes “sexual relations between persons of the same sex” with up to five years in prison. The report found that most people charged with homosexuality are convicted based on little or no evidence. The report includes numerous cases in which the law against homosexual conduct was used for settling scores, showing how the law is easily subject to abuse. Dozens of Cameroonians do jail time solely because they are suspected of being gay or lesbian, the groups found.



“It’s regrettable that our country stands out as one of the few countries in the world that regularly prosecutes people for same-sex conduct,” said Dominique Menoga, executive director at CAMFAIDS, a Yaoundé-based organization. “Cameroon’s government says it’s committed to respecting human rights, but its actions, when it comes to sexual and gender minorities, suggest exactly the opposite.”

Cameroon’s article 347 bis violates international human rights standards and Cameroon’s own constitution, the organizations said. Laws against consensual same-sex intimacy violate provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) that protect privacy and the right to non-discrimination. Cameroon’s constitution integrates international treaties that Cameroon has ratified, including the ICCPR, into the law of the land, and states that when international law conflicts with Cameroonian law, international law takes precedence. The constitution also provides strong privacy guarantees. In addition, Cameroon is a member of the Commonwealth, which has a new charter that opposes discrimination on all grounds.

“Our government and our courts need to recognize that when it comes to Cameroon’s international human rights commitments, they cannot pick and choose on the basis of personal biases,” said Alice Nkom, president of ADEFHO. “Every time a judge in Cameroon convicts someone of homosexuality, they are violating the law, pure and simple.”

Nearly every “homosexuality” prosecution investigated by the four organizations was marked by serious due process violations and other rights abuses. Suspects were regularly arrested solely on the basis of rumor and without warrants, in violation of Cameroon’s criminal procedure code. Police in Cameroon claim that the law exists for the purpose of punishing people who engage in same-sex conduct in public, but in all of the cases known to the four organizations, there was not a single case in which a suspect was caught having sex in public.

Because most “homosexuality” arrests are not based on information from witnesses or other evidence, law enforcement officials rely heavily on confessions, often extracted through torture and ill-treatment. One 17-year-old arrested by gendarmes in Yaoundé said, “The investigator beat me on the bottoms of the feet, 50 strokes with the back of a machete.”

A man in Limbre told the organizations that when gendarmes arrested his friend on suspicion of homosexuality, “They beat him with an iron belt, asked him to swim in the gutter, and burned plastic bags on his chest.” A man arrested by police in Douala said police forced him to sleep naked on the floor and beat him with clubs on his feet so severely that his toenails fell out. In several cases, men arrested for homosexuality were subjected to anal exams, which have no evidentiary value and may rise to the level of cruel and inhuman treatment.

Judicial officials frequently fail to uphold their obligation to interpret the law with objectivity, relying instead on their own biases. Two men in Yaoundé were convicted because gendarmes found condoms and lubricant in their house while purportedly searching for a stolen laptop.

When two young transgender people in Yaoundé were arrested, a judge said their choice of alcoholic beverage – Bailey’s liqueur, which the judge regarded as a “woman’s drink” – constituted proof of their homosexuality. They were convicted and sentenced to five years in prison. Their conviction was subsequently overturned by an appeals court. But the same court recently upheld the conviction of Roger Mbede, who was charged with homosexuality for sending a text message to another man reading, “I’ve fallen in love with you.”



"No one should be sentenced to prison time because they blurt out a confession to stop torture, or because a judge doesn't like what they drink, how they dress, or what kind of text messages they send," said Neela Ghoshal, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights researcher at Human Rights Watch. "The way the law is enforced in Cameroon seems to suggest that if you're suspected of being gay or lesbian, human rights, such as the right to a fair trial and the right not to be tortured, no longer apply."

The report also documents repeated death threats received by two human rights lawyers, Alice Nkom and Michel Togu , due to their defense of clients charged with homosexuality. Both lawyers have alerted the authorities, but law enforcement officials appear to have taken no action to investigate the threats against the lawyers.

President Paul Biya stated at a news conference in Paris in January 2013 that "minds are changing" with regard to homosexuality in Cameroon, but he made no commitment to take concrete steps to decriminalize homosexual conduct.

"We are calling on our government to stop waiting around helplessly for minds to change, and instead to show a bit of courage," said Yves Yomb, executive director at Alternatives-Cameroun. "The government should decriminalize same-sex conduct, withdraw charges against those who are currently being tried for homosexuality, and inform the public that this is a matter of upholding fundamental rights."

## **Shaun Kadlec Talks About Gay Underground in Cameroon and Filming 'Born This Way'**

**Patrick Range McDonald, LA Weekly**

[http://blogs.laweekly.com/informer/2012/10/shaun\\_kadlec\\_talks\\_about\\_gay\\_u.php](http://blogs.laweekly.com/informer/2012/10/shaun_kadlec_talks_about_gay_u.php)

Living in gay-friendly Los Angeles, and an increasingly gay-friendly America, is a wonderful thing, but not all gays and lesbians are so lucky. Born This Way, a documentary by Los Angeles filmmakers Shaun Kadlec and Deb Tullmann, focuses on the underground gay and lesbian community in Cameroon.

The film, which should be completed by the end of this year, follows Cedric and Gertrude, two brave, young Cameroonians. They move between a secret, supportive LGBT community and an outside culture that, though intensely homophobic, is in transition toward greater acceptance. We caught up with Kadlec, a former Fulbright Fellow, and asked a few questions about the documentary.

**L.A. Weekly:** Why did you make a documentary about gay Cameroon?

**Shaun Kadlec:** It started with meeting a compelling person. My directing partner Deb Tullmann and I met Steave Nemande, a Cameroonian physician who founded the first gay and lesbian center in his country. He was here in LA where he was honored by Human Rights Watch. I hadn't realized that Cameroon has one of the most aggressive programs to prosecute gay and lesbian people in Africa, but that it is on the verge of positive change. A vibrant and brave LGBT community has formed there, and they are beginning to come out publicly.

**Weekly:** Did you personally face any dangers as you filmed in Cameroon?



**Kadlec:** I guess the most danger we got ourselves into was sneaking a homemade hidden camera into a courtroom where two women were being tried for “lesbianism and witchcraft.”

We hadn’t planned to use hidden cameras, so we taped an iPhone into the bottom of a briefcase and cut a small hole for the lens. It’s illegal to shoot in Cameroon at all without a permit, and we definitely didn’t have one--and it’s illegal for anyone to record inside of a courtroom. Plus, it’s illegal to be gay. The audience also got pretty rowdy by the end of the trial. So we probably could have gotten into a lot of trouble.

**Weekly:** What were the main things that you learned while working on the documentary?

**Kadlec:** I have a whole new definition of bravery now. Homophobia is so intense in Cameroon. There’s a huge lack of education about sexuality. Most people think that it’s a cult or a form of demon possession or at the very least an evil, immoral practice that you choose to do.

When we went to Cameroon for the first time, we expected that we would have to conceal the identities of the people who appear in the film. But they are ready for the world to know that they exist. They are willing to risk everything to be who they really are. I am incredibly humbled by that bravery.

**Weekly:** What do you hope the audience will get from your film?

**Kadlec:** I hope they’ll have the experience of being in Cameroon with the amazing people we followed. It’s all about their lives. Sometimes it’s strange or beautiful or confusing or shocking, just like it is to be there.

We don’t have interviews with experts, and we’re not in the film. We wanted to recreate the experience of living in their world. There’s something about being there that makes you feel like dancing and crying at the same time.

So much joy--friendship, music, culture, passion to succeed, but at the exact same time there’s the poverty, homophobia, fear, illness, unemployment. I think there’s something universal in the struggle to reconcile these contradictions. It’s a lot easier to ignore them here.

**Weekly:** Why is it important for people to see the film?

**Kadlec:** Whatever your sexuality, if you spend an hour and a half with the people in Born This Way, there’s a good chance you’ll fall in love with them. And if you love them, maybe you’ll want to connect with them and maybe even support their work and their struggle.

They feel really isolated from the rest of the world. Though that has changed some since Hillary Clinton made her speech last year in Geneva declaring that gay rights are human rights -- which happened while we were making the film.

We met with the American ambassador to Cameroon, and he said that supporting LGBT rights has become a priority. And the potential that Cameroon will change its laws against homosexuality is very real -- especially if the international community helps both the leaders and average citizens understand what a positive thing that would be.