

# THE ADVOCATE

March 11, 2008

## POWER PLAYERS

Five gay and lesbian entrepreneurs who are making the world go 'round



GROWING UP IN OHIO in the '60s, the son of a surgeon dad and a social worker mom, Howard Buford adored the familiar characters who hawked products in TV commercials—Mr. Whipple for Charmin, Madge for Palmolive, and Mrs. Olson for Folgers coffee. "I was always interested in advertising," he says, "in crafting messages and influencing people."

But one commercial he remembers not so fondly was for a facial tissue promising "skin as soft and white as snow." As a black person, he was irked by the assumption that all skin was white. "Who wasn't on TV, and why, and what that meant" preoccupied him.

Buford, 49, went on to graduate from Harvard College and Harvard Business School, then became one of the few African-Americans to climb the ranks of Madison Avenue in the '80s (where he told colleagues he was gay "when they asked—but they really didn't ask"). But those early memories partly explain why, in 1990, he started his own ad agency, Prime Access, one of the first to target people of color, lesbians, and gay men. Today, the agency employs 44 people, and it billed \$71 million in 2007.

What does he love most about his job 18 years later? "Providing opportunities for folks to create messages that might not be created," says Buford, who lives on Manhattan's Upper West Side with his partner of nearly nine years, Jeffrey.

Those messages are proudly displayed in the lobby of the Prime Access offices in New York City. Ads for the anticholesterol

drug Zocor, cast with middle-aged couples who are black rather than white. A Hyatt ad featuring two hot shirtless men embracing under a waterfall. The ad that broke Volvo into the gay market, featuring a racial rainbow of gay and lesbian couples, some with kids and dogs. And the ad for season 1 of *Queer as Folk*: "Showtime leads you where American TV has never gone before."

Before he went solo, Buford distinguished himself in-house at Procter & Gamble (working on big products such as Tide and Cheer), then at Young & Rubicam, where he worked on the Jello-O campaign, which featured Bill Cosby's iconic commercials. As one of the few high-placed blacks in advertising, he was all too familiar with the industry's bottom-line-driven racism. "Someone would suggest having a main character be African-American," he says, "but there was so much second-guessing of whether the client would accept it, they'd finally say, 'Let's just cast it nonethnic, general market'—all those words that mean 'Let's use white people, please.'"

Advertising to both people of color and to gays and lesbians has grown so sophisticated since then that it sometimes blurs with mainstream advertising. But Buford doesn't think that Prime Access will bill itself into extinction anytime soon. "We didn't have women of color in [mainstream] makeup ads until the late 1990s," he says. "I think it's going to be a while" before gay couples show up matter-of-factly in mainline ad campaigns.

— Tim Murphy