

The Pitch

The *Queer Eye* cast talks toxic masculinity and filming in the Midwest at the Kansas City Library

BY KIM MUELLER — NOV 18, 2018 2 PM



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After not-so-secretly filming in the area for the last five months, the cast of Netflix's *Queer Eye* appeared Wednesday at the downtown Kansas City Public Library to answer a few questions about Kansas City and their new book, *Queer Eye: Love Yourself. Love Your Life*. The event was extremely sold out. Over a thousand

tickets were purchased in 20 minutes — a record for the library, according to media relations coordinator Courtney Lewis.

But most who attended the event did not come for the book. They came to see the Fab Five author/celebrities: hairstylist Jonathan Van Ness, food and wine connoisseur Antoni Porowski, life coach Karamo Brown, interior designer Bobby Berk, and fashion expert Tan France.

The Netflix's version is a reboot of Bravo's original *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*," which aired for five seasons from 2003-2007, and was considered a courageous breakout program depicting gay men making over heterosexual men. Netflix revamped the show in February 2018, abbreviated the name, and assembled a new Fab Five with a new mission: promote inclusivity and combat toxic masculinity.

Simply by attending the Wednesday night program, some men might be criticized for not being "man enough," said Eric Crawford who took the day off from work and traveled from Waldo to be first in line to see the "Queer Eye" cast.

"Toxic masculinity prevents men from expressing their likes and desires because they fear societal judgment," Crawford said. "It is something that is highly detrimental to men in society and has a negative effect on men — and women as well — because it doesn't allow men to express their emotions and accept themselves in the way they should."

The cast echoed Crawford's assessment.

"It definitely is a problem," said Tan, who is married to a Mormon cowboy. "I don't think we are the cure, but I think we are doing everything we can to shed some light and show men and women how it is hindering them, their relationships, and society."

One way the show tries to fight toxic masculinity is by visibly and confidently normalizing behavior that isn't traditionally masculine or feminine, said Bobby.

"I'm literally wearing a woman's coat from J. Crew that I bought yesterday," he said, before raving about the customer service at the Country Club Plaza store.

Jonathan, the show's clear standout, often wears women's high heels. Known for his extreme fashion choices, he wore a pink see-through top and carried a purple handbag to this year's Emmys (where *Queer Eye* took home three awards).

"As a byproduct of the show, we're able to show by being loving with each other, open with each other, that this is an alternative way of life that actually should be *the* way of life," Tan said. "It doesn't matter if you are a man or a woman, gay or straight."

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Unlike the original Bravo production, Netflix's *Queer Eye* included the first makeover of a gay guy in season one, and the first makeover of a woman and a trans man in season two, both filmed in Atlanta.

"We have our first lesbian on the show this year," Tan recently told Hasan Minhaj on his show *Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj*. "Yep, and she's formidable. And what we do with her, I think you're going to love."

During the last five months, *Queer Eye* has stealthily shot the third and fourth seasons in the Kansas City area. As they traveled to rural towns, residents were told not to reveal the production's locations in Kansas and Missouri.

“Let me tell you, though, Kansas City, Kansas, is a lot more brutal,” Tan told Minhaj. “Apparently, they don’t love us out there.” (Ironically, Tan appeared at the library wearing a “Wizard of Oz” t-shirt displaying Dorothy of Kansas.)



The cast complimented Missouri throughout the library’s event, even Bobby who grew up in Mount Vernon, MO, where he attended an Assemblies of God church in Amish farm country. Initially, Bobby admitted he was not happy to hear that the show was filming in Kansas City.

“I literally thought to myself, ‘I spent 17 years of my life trying to get the hell out of there and now I have to go back,’” he recalled. “But I couldn’t be happier having come back.”

The homecoming created a healing opportunity, he said. And he fondly remembered Missie B’s, the midtown gay bar he visited as a youth.

“Kansas City is a much more loving, accepting place than when I left when I was 17,” he said. “People are just a bit more open-minded here.”

Despite *Queer Eye*’s rave reviews, IndieWire recently called the show “regressive and reductive.” The film industry website labeled the show as “faux-progressive” because the Fab Five propagated **Support Us** and reinforced gay stereotypes.

“That’s ludicrous,” Tan said. The Fab Five share their personal lives on the show, he explained, and flesh out three-dimensional characters that don’t fit into stereotypes.

When they aren't on set, the cast is busy promoting their own books and marketing partnerships. Jonathan landed lucrative deals with Target and Hotels.com. He also hosts the Emmy nominated web series "Gay of Thrones" and the relaunched podcast Getting Curious. Tan wrote a memoir and worked with Men Warehouse's suit drive. Antoni opened a Manhattan restaurant in October; partners with Hanes, Wholefoods, and Excedrin; and is writing a cookbook. And Bobby operates an interior design service in Los Angeles. Karamo, who is a single parent, announced that he recently became engaged and is a "bridezilla."

Jonathan agreed that many male hairdressers, interior designers, and chefs are gay, but the film industry has a responsibility to provide more platforms to allow gay people to flourish in varied roles. And he insisted that much of the criticism comes from inside the gay community.

"Unfortunately, I think internalized homophobia effects a lot of gay men because of the toxic masculinity that we have been forced to deal with and carry on our shoulders our whole lives," Jonathan said. "So, if they think *Queer Eye* is furthering the idea of stereotyping, I would say watch it and open your minds."

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