

Brothers in Leather: The Men of ONYX [Gallery]

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Portraits by Todd Franson | Interview with Dominion ONYX by John Riley

“I think straight people assume that most gay people are a lot kinkier than they actually are because of the leather, kink, and fetish community,” says Dominion ONYX. “They assume everybody has a harness or knows about different fetishes and stuff, when most people are very vanilla in their lives.”

As the pledge master and one of the original co-founders of ONYX Mid-Atlantic, a D.C.-based leather fraternity for GBT men of color, Dominion is determined to better educate people and dispel negative myths or stereotypes. “The leather/kink/fetish community, and ONYX in particular, is sex-positive, but it’s not all about sex,” he says. “Frankly, most of us aren’t having sex with one another within our brotherhood.”

Founded in Chicago in 1995, ONYX was formed to provide a space for a segment of the population that did not necessarily see itself reflected or embraced in traditional leather clubs. “The founders weren’t finding opportunities to get the mentorship that they wanted,” says Dominion. “They started with that sort of kernel that there needed to be a place where we could go and feel free to explore this community, and learn about it without that eye on us.”

As word spread about ONYX, and its members began establishing a regular presence at leather-themed events such as Mid-Atlantic Leather Weekend, the organization expanded, with chapters opening up in New York, Atlanta, Washington, D.C., Fort Lauderdale, Los Angeles, and other cities across the country.

“What happens is that people come to events like MAL and see the brotherhood we have,” Dominion says. “They see that when we are together there is an ease and a comfort that goes beyond ‘Hey, we’re all into whips and chains,’ or whatever. They want to take that sense of brotherhood back and replicate it wherever they live.”

See Also: [Mid-Atlantic Leather Weekend 2019 Event Guide — Every party and event!](#)

For Dominion, coming out was a slow process. While he realized at 13 he was attracted to men after flipping through mail-order pornography catalogs, he had few resources to consult about his feelings.

“This was 1984,” he says. “There was no internet and we had had sex ed class, but there certainly was no talk of homosexuality. I grew up in Clinton, Maryland, and they instituted a restriction on the number of books you could take out from the Clinton Public Library, because I used to take out too many books. I would take out like 30 and 40 books at a time. I read everything I could on homosexuality and a lot of the readings said that it was a phase that teenage boys go through. I spent the years between 16 and 26 hoping that it was a phase, that it would go away.

“Then, on my 26th birthday, I woke up and the first thought that went through my head was, ‘This can’t be a phase. Phases don’t last for 13 years,’ and I cried. Because I was

hoping this was a phase, and then I was going to find a wife, get married, have 2.3 kids, have the white picket fence...this whole life. So I came out to myself on my 26th birthday, and over the course of the next four years I had a lot of fun. I caught up.”

Dominion eventually came out to his family at 30, which was around the same time he began getting involved in the leather community, establishing a new identity that was separate from his professional identity — which he uses only 20 percent of the time in certain formal situations.

“I told Mufasa, who is one of our most well-known founders, ‘I need to have a name so that I can separate myself from Brian,’” he says. “I’m at the point now where I’m not worried about any of that. But at the time I was, and I wanted a full hard separation, with a different Facebook profile and everything, between Brian and something else. We came up with some names, and that’s how we settled on Dominion.”

Dominion and his fellow fraternity brothers from ONYX Mid-Atlantic are guaranteed to be present — and busy — at the upcoming Mid-Atlantic Leather Weekend celebration, where they will be hosting both a meet-and-greet happy hour and a leather gear show and auction.

“If you were to talk to the brothers, you would find that probably 50 to 60 percent of them had their first exposure to the leather community through MAL,” he says. “And they ultimately decided to join and become involved because of the welcome that they received at similar events from the community in general and from the brothers of ONYX in particular.”

MAL Weekend is particularly important to those within the leather community who may not have a regular outlet to experiment, try new fetishes or kinks, or demonstrate their pride.

“MAL is a place and time where you can be free in all ways,” Dominion says. “There are people there who will protect me and be there for me. Generally, if you live in a smaller community, or even in a big city, but in an insular community, this type of event is the only place you can express yourself. You’ll see people in tears on that Monday as MAL is ending because they’re realizing that they have to go back to their [regular] lives.”



The Men of ONYX Mid-Atlantic. Dominion ONYX is center front
– Photographed by Todd Franson at the Green Lantern in D.C.

METRO WEEKLY: *When did you first become involved in Onyx Mid-Atlantic?*

DOMINION ONYX: My experience with Onyx started at MAL, of all places, in 2000. I was 29, and there were a group of guys just sitting in the corner and they welcomed me over. I always say it was the family that I never knew I had missed, and they welcomed me with open arms. But they didn't provide any of the pressure you can see in other groups, where it's almost a bit predatory, where there's pressure to join in the hedonism. I was free to do whatever it was that I wanted, and I was treated as an equal.

Over the years, my interaction with the group became deeper, and I started to learn more from some of the founders, particularly Mufasa Ali and Steve Bailous, and several other brothers. I modeled some of the things that I was learning in my own life. I've always been this sort of big dominant person, so I was able to layer this identity as a leather person, as a dominant, on top of all of those things.

Ever since 2000, I've always tried to replicate that experience for everyone I meet. I try to welcome them with open arms, and give them the opportunity to learn or participate to the extent that they want. And if they don't want to do it, they don't have to.

MW: *What do you do as the group's Pledge Master?*

DOMINION: I put the pledges through their five-month pledge program where they learn about the history of leather and the leather community, the history of men of color in that community, and provide them with academic and experiential opportunities to learn about kinks and fetishes so that they can advocate for themselves and others.

MW: *And at the end of the five months, they become a member?*

DOMINION: They become brothers, yes.

MW: *Why did you want to be a pledge master?*

DOMINION: I can't seem to be involved in an organization without starting organizations and being in leadership roles. I'm also the founder of a chapter of an architecture fraternity, Alpha Rho Chi, at Florida A&M University. I started in this chapter as the treasurer, or better known as the "bitch with the money." I was the bitch with the money for six years, and then president for three years, took some time off, and there was an opportunity where the current pledge master was retiring. I have been involved with fraternal organizations in some way since 1992, so it was a natural fit for my skill set. I am certainly a dominant person, but I'm also a nurturing person. The idea of bringing people in and helping them help us plan for the future was a natural fit for pledge master.

MW: *What are some good reasons for a person to pledge Onyx?*

DOMINION: You pledge because you want to learn more about the leather, kink, or fetish lifestyle. One of the things we say in the application is that this isn't the place where you discover if you're kinky or not, you need to come to the organization with some idea of what you're into.

Some people join strictly because they like the camaraderie and friendship, and sense of family that we exhibit. Some people join because they like the political aspect of our organization. Our organization is open to anyone who identifies as a gay or bisexual man of color, so that by definition includes trans men. One of the things that Onyx has done is try to take a role in advocating for equality of all people, regardless of their gender identification.

MW: *What to you is personally appealing about the leather, kink, and fetish community?*

DOMINION: When I first became involved in the community, I was not the person that I

am now. I was not involved in any of the fetishes that I'm involved in now. I didn't have any experience. I was sort of a nosy, kinky kid. I got the opportunity to go to events like MAL and IML and got an opportunity to meet brothers, people who eventually became my family. [The leather community] became a place where I could be 100 percent me, and not feel that anybody was judging me. That I could, to use an Oprah-ism, "live my best life."

One of the things we talk about in the pledge process is self-actualization. Many of us grew up in backgrounds where we were repressed sexually to varying degrees. Some homes were somewhat liberal, some of us grew up in very conservative homes. The leather community is a place where we can be free of those things. We can be free of a patriarchal society that demeans the feminine, so if you are the person who wants to be penetrated all the time, and if that's your idea of a good time, there are people that support you and people that want you to do that.

MW: *Why is it important for there to be leather organizations specifically for men of color?*

DOMINION: The stories that our founders tell are about going into spaces and feeling tolerated at best, looked down upon at worst, fetishized. Now, we're *all* fetishized by someone. Whatever it is that you look like, there are people that are searching for just that, and see you only as that object. It could be your red hair, it could be your goatee, it could be your chest hair.

But most people don't have to deal with that as the only thing about them, and for men of color that is often a problem. People may only see what my skin is and they make assumptions about the rest of my body and what I can do with it, and they only see me through the lens of the pleasure that I can provide them.

We see it when we have our bar nights — some people are very touchy-feely, and it's fine on one level, at least to me. I don't necessarily require you to give consent when you want a hug, but to grab or reach between my legs, or, if you assume that someone else is a bottom and grab their ass without their consent, or don't read those social clues that that touch isn't wanted, then that's a problem.



The Men of ONYX Mid-Atlantic – Photographed by Todd Franson on Jan. 12, 2019 at the Green Lantern in D.C.

MW: *How has the leather, kink, and fetish community evolved over the years?*

DOMINION: What I've seen is that it's become more inclusive of additional fetishes. When I first came into the community I remember being at the Washington Plaza Hotel and being fascinated by the pups. At that time — at least in my experience — it seemed there weren't as many people involved in the pup community as there are now. Other fetishes have also started to take more prominence, like people who are into leather and rubber.

MW: *One of the stories in the news recently was the Democratic donor in California who had two men die of apparent accidental overdoses in his home. Other black gay men have since alleged that he may have engaged in “pointing,” which is injecting drugs like crystal meth into a partner. There's been this large-scale outcry over the fact that he's not been arrested or charged so far. From your perspective, both as a person within the fetish community, and as a black gay man, what's your take?*

DOMINION: It could entirely be an accidental overdose, they could have just been hanging out and doing whatever. But the reading that I've done has said that even though those are the only two people that we know of who have died, they're not the only two people that he has done this to. That he targets young black gay men, some of them are homeless, he wines them dines them — if you have nothing and someone gives you McDonald's everyday for three days that's wining and dining — makes it seem more than an accidental overdose.

It almost seems that he has purposely targeted a marginal community because no one is going to believe them. The first guy who died was already known to have a problem with drugs and alcohol. Some of the other people who have come out with their stories were already known to have drug problems, so their word is less likely to be believed, because black lives are valued less in this community. I entirely believe that he's not going to face any consequences for this, because he's a wealthy white gay man in West Hollywood — unless there's physical evidence that comes out, like a video or something that *directly* ties him to it. Because the first guy that died was a drug addict, and the second guy that died was a porn star.

My point is is that the history of black people being preyed upon sexually by the larger community is nothing new at all. It happens so frequently that it rarely makes the news, and the only reason this is even making the news is because he's tied to Hillary Clinton. In this continuing bloodlust to bring down Hillary Clinton — although she is not running for anything at this point — anyone who is attached to him is guilty by association, where if he does something wrong, suddenly that says something about her character.

MW: *There's also the fetish angle, in terms of "pointing." At what point does a fetish go too far, especially when it starts risking lives?*

DOMINION: There are a couple of theories. There is a theory called "Safe, Sane, and Consensual." Which means that we will not engage in any activity that is not safe. That we will not do it when we are not sane, meaning that we are in our right minds and that we are not consenting. Under that theory, there is no way to engage in pointing, because by definition one of the partners isn't fully in control of their faculties when they're involved in it.

There's another theory called RACK, which is "Risk-Aware Consensual Kink," which says that we're going to gather the information about this, understand the risk and we're still agreeing to this activity. Some people may say that under that you could engage in pointing, but then that doesn't absolve you of your moral responsibility as a human being. If you are a kink player you understand that if you're playing with someone and the activity that you're engaging in puts the other person in a diminished space, either mentally or physically, then your responsibility as a person who isn't tied up is to make sure that they're safe.

MW: *So for instance the master or sir or trainer that has the pup, where the pup is getting overheated and it's a hot day, it's their responsibility to make sure that they're being properly hydrated.*

DOMINION: Right. We in Onyx talk about agency. As your perceived agency decreases, the responsibility of the dom in the scene increases. If you wanted to engage in something — I would never at all advocate for pointing, which until you said it I had never heard of it — then there is perhaps the greatest possible responsibility on the part of the dom to make sure that their partner doesn't overdose.

But again, that's a very academic argument. Because when you start talking about playing with substances that by their very nature are addictive, is there any level of acceptable risk? Those are conversations that you have with people, but I don't think, in this case, they had those conversations as two fully-aware people. At least one of these people was believed to be a drug addict, which means that his brain chemistry was already altered, so he was already predisposed to want to do anything to get that drug.

MW: *Even under the RACK theory, there are some people who say that fisting, for instance, is very problematic. It can result in health problems, anal tearing, what have you. So if two people are consensually looking at all of the information, they're understanding that there are risks associated with certain activities, is that still considered acceptable within the kink community, because they're acknowledging the risk beforehand?*

DOMINION: They're not only acknowledging the risk, because you can just say "I know that this can happen." But you have to have a plan of what to do if something does happen. And you have to establish a safe word, or check in with your partner frequently, so that the sub and dom are both on the same page about those precautions.

MW: *You mentioned that Onyx has a political or social justice aspect to it. What big picture issues would you like to see the leather community start tackling?*

DOMINION: I think that there's been a focus for so long on gay marriage, and when marriage equality was approved, people were like, "Great, everything is cool now." But I think we as a larger community need to learn from the lessons of the past. The Supreme Court said that a woman has a right to an abortion, but you can count the number of states where they manage to whittle that away. So while the Supreme Court certainly said that two people, regardless of their gender identification, have the right to marry, there are still a ton of ways around that. We cannot become complacent there.

There's also a lot of other issues that affect us: homeless gay youth, the epidemic of trans people of color who are targeted for violence, and trans issues in general. I think those are a focus of some people in the community, but there are many within the larger gay

community who I don't think are thinking about that.

Read: [MAL 2019 closing dance celebrates "Godfather of House Music" Frankie Knuckles](#)

MW: *Do you view the broader leather community as politically active, or is that something specific to ONYX?*

DOMINION: No, I think the leather community is political. Historically, drag queens, and leather men, and leather dykes, those were the Stonewall people. It's in our DNA so to speak to be a little bit more politically active.

Now not everyone in the leather community is political, because some people wanted the freedom to be gay and then they wanted to be left alone. Which I think is a perfectly fine aim, because that's kind of what I wanted, that's still what I want. If you want to marry another dude, that's your business, you want to marry a woman, if some particular fetish or kink makes you happy as long as it doesn't infringe on my right to be happy, then I'm fine with it.

But I also think a lot of people don't realize the extent to which the rights we have achieved are in danger. I think the community needs to get more political to avoid that. Like in 2017, we had Pride, and the next day we had a march. I think we need to keep up that kind of pressure because there are so many things that are being whittled away. There are states that are already chipping away at the right of gay people to adopt.

MW: *Within Onyx Mid-Atlantic, how often do you have regular meetings or events?*

DOMINION: It is not costly to join. Our motto is "Educate, Explore, and Empower," so we provide a safe place for everyone, but particularly men of color, to become educated about the leather community and fetishes. You can explore that in a judgment-free space so that you can be empowered to live your best life.

The first thing we have is monthly business meetings, we also have a number of programs. As part of living that "Educate, Explore, and Empower" mantra, several times a year we go up to Widener University, which is south of Philadelphia, and speak to classes of PhD students in the human sexuality program. We talk about fetish, we talk about kink, we talk about the leather community, and particularly people of color in that community. There is a big educational component to that. We have bar nights, we have a program called TEACH, which is an acronym that stands for "To Educate And Cultivate Hotness," which is a lecture and demo series. Sometimes we've had lectures by noted people in the leather community. Sometimes they are actual demonstrations of a fetish or kink.

MW: *You also have a regularly occurring bar night for the Mid-Atlantic chapter, correct?*

DOMINION: That will be changing because it sort of is in flux every year. It used to be

the second Saturday and so that will change, but currently the Green Lantern is our home bar, and since another major center of our energy is in Baltimore, we'll be having regular events at the Baltimore Eagle once they get back up and running, as well as at The Bike Stop in Philadelphia. That's becoming another nexus of brothers living there.

MW: *What events are planned for Mid-Atlantic Leather Weekend?*

DOMINION: We started hosting a cocktail party in a couple of brothers' rooms back in 1996. By 1998-2000, they'd outgrown those rooms, so the event changes from a few people and some beer in the bathtub with ice to one where no one can get through the hall because people have filled up the rooms. We were forced to move to a larger room. Once the event moved to the Hyatt, we went from having what was essentially a cocktail party to a charitable gear show.

MW: *How does that work?*

DOMINION: We take gear that is donated, either from the brothers, if they have pieces they have grown out of or want to give away, or from vendors who we solicit merchandise from. We dress the models up. The models can range from one of our brothers or associates who wants to see himself or herself on stage to leather titleholders. For instance this year the current Mr. Mid-Atlantic Leather is going to be in the gear show.

Anyway, the models are dressed up in the gear and they're usually fully dressed by the time they come up on stage, and I get the pleasure of being on stage, and being the auctioneer. One by one, we auction off each piece that they're wearing until they're left only in their jock. Then, we auction the jock off. All organizations have club colors, so we have a shield in club colors that covers the bits. But if you know where to stand you can see what it is that you want to see. [*Laughs.*]

The proceeds go to charity, and because we're an organization by, for, and about people of color we tend to focus our charitable efforts on organizations who don't get the big dollars. Everyone supports Whitman Walker, to a large extent everyone supports Us Helping Us, but not everyone supports this year's charity, which is the Youth Empowered Society. It is a small charitable organization in Baltimore that supports homeless youth. We supported Haitian Earthquake Relief in 2010, when we had the gear show just after the earthquake in Haiti. I happened to work for a company that doubled the donations, so we raised \$5,000, which I gave to my company, and they then donated \$10,000. So that was a great thing.

MW: *How much does it cost to attend the gear show?*

DOMINION: It's free. There'll be some pledges at the door asking for donations, and those donations typically support the travel costs for our brothers who are going to major contests such as IML or American Brotherhood Weekend, or some other events. There are starting to be other competitions that are rising to the same level.

MW: *What else should we look forward to at MAL?*

DOMINION: Wel, on Friday, from 6 to 9 p.m. is our meet and greet, that's a public event. We also have a suite that we've all collectively paid for, and so if you find out where the suite is, the suite is open at various times during the weekend, and people can always come into the suite. Now, I think because it's MAL, some visitors expect people will be having sex in every room they enter, but usually we're just sitting there chit-chatting, hanging out. Because we live all across the country and this is one of the few times we get to see one another. If you want to have sex, go back to your room.

ONYX Mid-Atlantic's annual MAL meet-and-greet is Friday, Jan. 18, at the Hyatt Regency on Capitol Hill, 400 New Jersey Ave. NW. The annual gear show and fundraiser is on Saturday, Jan. 19 from 2-6 p.m. in Congressional Ballroom A & B inside the Hyatt. For a complete schedule of MAL events, visit www.leatherweekend.com. For more information on ONYX Mid-Atlantic, visit www.onyxma.com.