

Beyond the Silence

BY ELLEN H. BROWN

"Some people wonder why we have to make a big deal out of this. They wonder whether I'm looking for a banner welcoming [gay] students. I'm not looking for a banner. I'm looking for equal treatment."

—David O'Malley

From a distance, they looked like any other swarm of college students, celebrating the first heat of spring. Sprawled out on the grassy oval outside Kelvin Smith Library. Most clad in shorts and T-shirts. Many barefoot. Some chatting. Playing Frisbee. Or paging through textbooks.

The only sign this group was "different" was the flier announcing their event: Live Homosexual Acts.

What are live homosexual acts?

Students reading and talking and flinging Frisbees. Students laughing and embracing and worshipping the sun.


If that answer surprises you, CWRU undergraduate Jean Broughton, for one, is pleased. Ms. Broughton, who quits a Frisbee match to be interviewed, says the name of the event, staged at colleges throughout the country, is intended to be provocative. Part of its premise is to obliterate the myth that "being gay is all about sex," she says. "The fact is that gay people do what everybody else does. We read. We hang out. We talk. We go to class. We do schoolwork."

Live Homosexual Acts was sponsored by Spectrum, the University-supported

undergraduate student group for people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT)* and their straight allies. Ms. Broughton, the driving force behind the event, had almost called it off. She was fearful that few supporters would show up and concerned that the group would face harassment from fellow students. But she's glad she persevered, thrilled that so many people—thirty—attended, and that others didn't hassle them.

Ms. Broughton admits that the success of Live Homosexual Acts was a rarity on campus, where attendance at GLBT events is often scant. A week earlier, for example, Spectrum sponsored the annual Day of Silence, an event that promotes awareness of anti-gay harassment and discrimination. On that day, GLBT students and their supporters don't talk. Instead, they hand out cards that say, in part, "My deliberate silence echoes that silence which is caused by harassment, prejudice and discrimination. I believe that ending the silence is the first step toward fighting these injustices." Only four students turned up at the end of the day for the Break the Silence rally, a decompression session for participants.

* For readability, this article uses "gay" synonymously with "gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT)."



To be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender at CWRU—a look at what life is like and what the University is doing to make the campus a more accepting place.

Come Out, Come Out, Wherever You Are

By all accounts, very few gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students, faculty, and staff are “out” and visible on campus. This applies particularly to women, many of whom declined to be interviewed for this article or requested to remain anonymous. Many describe the environment as unsafe and isolating for people who are GLBT. And some suggest that a “don’t ask, don’t tell” mentality exists, which helps reinforce the impression that there isn’t a gay presence at CWRU.

In September 2001, the CWRU President’s Commission on Undergraduate Education and Life reported there are “signs that the campus environment is unsupportive of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students. Events sponsored by gay and lesbian students are, for example, routinely greeted with bigoted graffiti on the sidewalks.” Examples of the graffiti have included “Hitler Was Right,” “God Hates Fags,” and “Die Fags.”

The commission advised CWRU to increase the diversity of the undergraduate student body, in such areas as race and ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. The report also encouraged the Office of Housing and Residence Life to continue training resident advisors to be aware of GLBT issues, and suggested that the University follow the lead of other campuses that have implemented measures to address this problem. Noting that other institutions have offices to provide programs for people who are GLBT, the report recommended that the University create a liaison officer position for GLBT issues. (For more information about programs offered by peer institutions, visit this story in *CWRU Magazine* online.)

Though it’s impossible to know how many people on campus are GLBT, most studies suggest that 10 percent of a

population is typically gay, which means that about 1,500 faculty, staff, and students at CWRU could fit that category.

Jes Sellers, the director of University Counseling Services, believes there are a significant number of people on campus who are GLBT, but that few are out. Dr. Sellers, who co-founded the Cleveland chapter of PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) with colleague Jane Daroff in 1985, counsels a large number of students who are GLBT. And of the couples he works with, more are gay and lesbian than heterosexual.

When people are asked why they believe so few members of the campus community are out, a jumble of possibilities tumble out:

- The University administration isn’t supportive enough of people who are GLBT;
- CWRU is a conservative University in a politically conservative state;
- Certain incidents make the campus appear unsafe or intolerant;
- People who are uncomfortable with their GLBT identity may be hesitant to come out, fearing repercussions.

Though a few people interviewed for this article insist that the campus is homophobic, perhaps Dr. Sellers best captures the sentiments of many GLBT people. “I don’t think it’s a mean-spirited campus,” he says. “It’s more of a benignly neglectful atmosphere. It’s not what you’d call friendly or supportive; it’s tepid.”

Undergraduate student Sarah Baker notes that the campus is “friendly enough if you find the right people,” but believes the University is reflective of Ohio’s mentality—a mentality, she says, that is behind the times. “If a potential student were looking for a campus that is accepting [of people who are GLBT], they wouldn’t choose Case,” she says.

But what makes CWRU less than accepting, as Ms. Baker suggests? People point to signs of intolerance and hate. Consider these incidents, which occurred on campus:

- When a short-haired woman was walking across campus, a male student hurled these words at her across an open green: “You’re a f***ing dyke!”

- Two years ago, a student who lived in a suite adjacent to Spectrum President Paul Valentine placed a poster on his suite’s door that said, “Silly faggot, dicks are for chics.” Though Mr. Valentine repeatedly removed the poster from the other student’s door, he kept replacing it;

- When Sue Pearlmutter, an assistant professor in the Mandel School of



Applied Social Sciences, requested that domestic partners be included in the school’s directory, which lists the names, addresses, and phone numbers of faculty and staff and their spouses, her suggestion was ignored until a straight ally insisted on including the names of partners (regardless of whether the couples are heterosexual or homosexual);

- When Karl Hawkins (LAW ’02) first arrived on campus, he met in neighboring Little Italy with a few fellow law students. Over drinks, he asked one of them why he chose CWRU’s School of Law. His response? “Because there are fewer queers and fags at this law school than at other schools.”

While such incidents are not unique to CWRU, they help shape people’s perceptions of the institution.

According to Jane Daroff (SAS '85), a social worker in University Counseling Services, such incidents can also undermine the self-esteem of students who are GLBT or questioning their sexual orientation. Adds Dr. Sellers, "Being called a fag or dyke can impale students who are figuring out who they are."

Proof Positive

But the news is not all negative. There are positive stories to relate. For example, last year, during orientation, Jes Sellers noticed a small group of male undergraduates hanging out near Thwing Center, some on skateboards, some on bicycles, two holding hands. "I didn't observe a single person flinch as they walked by [the couple]," he recalls. "It was really amazing that they felt comfortable enough to do that."

Later that year, when undergraduate Fred Bachhuber came out to his fraternity brothers in Sigma Alpha Mu, they thought it was a joke, he recalls. But once they realized Mr. Bachhuber was serious, they were "fine with it," he says, "and I haven't suffered any repercussions."

While many GLBT activities are less than triumphant, others, such as this year's Live Homosexual Acts and the Lavender Ball—an annual spring dance, sponsored by Spectrum, for GLBT folks and straight allies—are, by comparison, grand successes.

At this year's Lavender Ball, the crowd was still sparse at 9 p.m. (attendance eventually topped off at 119) in the Thwing Center ballroom, but no one appeared to mind. "People seem to be loosening up," said one young woman, gesturing toward a few couples and threesomes who'd taken to the dance floor, their bodies shimmying against the spin of the rainbow light show. A few feet away, CWRU undergraduate Kristen Conrad and some female friends were seated at a round table, all volleying



SPEECHLESS: CWRU STUDENTS RAVI PATEL AND APRIL TORONTALI (RIGHT) ACCEPT A DAY OF SILENCE CARD FROM SPECTRUM PRESIDENT PAUL VALENTINE (LEFT) DURING THE EVENT. THE CARD EXPLAINS WHY THE STUDENTS CHOOSE TO REMAIN SILENT ON THIS DAY IN APRIL.

balloons. When Ms. Conrad was asked what she thought of this year's Lavender Ball, a serene expression appeared on her face: "There is so much positive energy here tonight," she said, acknowledging that the University isn't the most comfortable place to be out. "I feel very free here. It's a great feeling. The whole thing is like a burst of fresh air."

Around campus, a number of men and women interviewed for this article suggested that pockets of support exist. "I think the level of support depends a lot on where you are in the University," said David O'Malley last spring. Dr. O'Malley (SAS '01) was an assistant director of housing at CWRU who left in July to become an assistant professor of social work at Cleveland State University. "A lot of it is about leadership and who your dean or VP is and how supportive they are. My division [student affairs] is very welcoming, and I'm very grateful for that. Counseling services and campus ministries are also very supportive."

Karl Hawkins, who graduated from the law school in May, echoes Dr. O'Malley's sentiments. Mr. Hawkins, who was a resident director, offers nothing but praise for members of the residence life staff, who "make a substantial effort to talk about diversity,"

including issues related to being gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender. The staff's "openness makes it easier for me to be out and for students to come and talk to me," he said last spring. "Residence life has been my savior and safe harbor. Being an RD has been a lot of work, and they expect a lot, but Res Life has been a gift from God for me."

While Ellie Strong, a conservator at Kelvin Smith Library, believes the campus could be more supportive of GLBT students, she's "found it pretty easy to be a lesbian on staff at the library." She adds that she hasn't encountered any barriers or discrimination on the job.

Support from the Top

In recent times, the University, as an institution, has shown signs of support. In 1989, CWRU added sexual orientation to its nondiscrimination policy, which states, in part, that the University "does not discriminate on the basis of race, religion, age, sex, color, disability, sexual orientation, or national or ethnic origin." Ten years later, the University decided to offer benefits to domestic partners (both same-sex and opposite-sex) of CWRU employees. Though some people on campus disputed the proposed policy in public

forums, the benefits took effect in January 2000. Supported by the Staff Advisory Council, the Faculty Senate, and then-President Agnar Pytte, the policy made healthcare and dental insurance available to domestic partners (DPs).

Earl McLane, CWRU's associate vice-president for human resources, says the move "was part of the University's position as far as diversity is concerned. It was a collaborative effort across the whole University. And it was something whose time had come."

For their part, many GLBT people on campus believe that, after years of reticence and apprehension about how such a policy would be perceived, CWRU agreed under pressure to offer the benefits. Nevertheless, many gay faculty and staff express appreciation for the University's willingness to extend benefits. Among them is Ellie Strong, whose partner has been able to use the University's benefits plan.

Some people, meanwhile, believe the University should make the benefits equal to those available to spouses of University employees. A number of people noted that certain benefits such

as tuition waivers and dependent life insurance—which are available to employees at some of CWRU's peer institutions—are not available to domestic partners of University employees.

Mr. McLane says the University is working to make benefits equal. Beginning this fall semester, domestic partners will become eligible for CWRU tuition waivers. And next year, he says, the University will attempt to identify life insurance carriers willing to cover DPs.

Hopes and Dreams

When members of the campus community are asked what would make CWRU a friendlier place for people who are gay, the answers flow freely. More services and support. A stronger commitment to educating students—and the entire campus community—about GLBT issues. More faculty members who are out and supportive of students. And a more powerful pledge on the part of the University administration to making CWRU a more accepting place, in general. (To learn more about the

University's perspective, see the sidebar "A More Welcoming Place.")

Undergraduate Fred Bachhuber, like many of the students interviewed, insists that providing a "safe space," where GLBT students could gather, is key. He also advocates the creation of a Safe Zone program, in which faculty, staff, and students (homosexual and heterosexual) offer support to GLBT students, some of whom are questioning their sexual orientation or working through the coming-out process.

CWRU undergraduate students James Rodgers III and Edward Payabyab, on the other hand, are lobbying for the University to open a GLBT center, staffed with a person who would coordinate programming and offer guidance. The University talks about "being Ivy-League caliber," says Mr. Rodgers, "but if they want to be considered Ivy League, they need to develop programs that put them in that league."

Many contend the campus community needs to become better educated on issues of diversity, in general, and GLBT issues, in particular. The University, some suggest, should launch a

A More Welcoming Place

It's 1:30 on an April afternoon, and Glenn Nicholls has just returned to his office after breaking bread with incoming President Edward Hundert and a group of CWRU students. During the informal luncheon, explains the vice-president for student affairs, an officer from Spectrum talked about what the University could do to make the campus more welcoming for GLBT students. The student, he says, described the environment as "pretty good" but claimed it would be friendlier if GLBT students were provided with a safe space and a liaison. The response of President Hundert "was very affirming, just as you'd expect," says Mr. Nicholls.

While Mr. Nicholls concedes that the campus isn't especially "gay friendly," he insists that it isn't a hostile place, either, pointing to the University's anti-discrimination policy and domestic partner benefits as signposts of its support. Still, Mr. Nicholls says that CWRU could listen more attentively to students' concerns. "It makes sense," he says, to assign a liaison from his staff to help GLBT students. And it

makes sense to create a Safe Zone program, which would serve as a reminder of the University's support, he adds. In programs at some colleges and universities, faculty, staff, and students are trained to offer support to GLBT students. Given the concerns raised by students and the recommendations of the CWRU President's Commission on Undergraduate Education and Life, he believes both of these notions merit an examination this academic year.

Mr. Nicholls notes that a number of staff members in student affairs have already placed "safe space" posters on their doors, announcing that it's a safe place to talk about a variety of topics, including homosexuality. But a Safe Zone program would be more comprehensive.

On a similar note, Mr. Nicholls and Mayo Bulloch (GRS '80, education) support the idea of establishing a place on campus that would provide staff, programming, and advocacy for GLBT students. "It's a group that's isolated and could benefit from having a place" where they could congregate, says Ms. Bulloch, director of educational enhancement programs at CWRU.



RAINBOW BOB: STUDENTS DANCE IT UP AT THIS YEAR'S LAVENDER BALL. IN THE PHOTO AT LEFT, MEMBERS OF THE PHI KAPPA THETA FRATERNITY SPIN THE TUNES.


comprehensive, ongoing effort to introduce members of the campus community to people from different cultures and lifestyles. "Part of what an education is all about is to learn about other people, to learn to be accepting and realize that people are different," says Jane Daroff. "This campus doesn't do enough to make that happen."

Kent Smith, director of multicultural affairs at CWRU, says that, in his experience, "Students here are above and beyond others in terms of maturity. But our campus isn't the most conducive to exposing our students to different cultures and lifestyles. Students, for the most part, operate within their own sphere and don't reach beyond their comfort zone, and that's too bad."

Most people interviewed insist that CWRU should take a stronger stand when anti-gay incidents occur.

Says staff member Ellie Strong: "I think it would be helpful if, when there are derogatory chalkings or harassing comments made, the University would take a stand and say, 'This is unacceptable' or 'We do not want this type of behavior on our campus.' That would go a long way in making people here feel supported, especially students, who are the ones who really need that support."

Shan Mohammed (MED '97) is one of several people who believe the University has an important role to play. A clinical instructor in the School of Medicine, Dr. Mohammed says, "I think the University's role should be to create

an environment in which people can be who they are and to create a community in which people can be challenged and supported, and can grow and be nourished. It takes commitment and energy, but it makes the University a greater place for everyone." 

See the online version of CWRU Magazine for three additional story components: "Voices from the Past," in which former members of the campus community describe what the GLBT climate was like at the University; and descriptions of GLBT programs put in place by CWRU and other colleges and universities.

Associate Editor Ellen Brown thanks the people willing to be interviewed for this article. Though many of their names were not included, all their perspectives helped shape the story.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JANINE BENTIVEGNA

She admits that it's difficult to teach students to accept differences in other people "without seeming preachy and turning people off." But she believes it's a crucial endeavor, and one that needs to begin when students come together at freshmen orientation. Orientation, she says, also allows CWRU to discuss academic freedom and freedom of speech.

A campaign called Share the Vision, launched in 1990, has also played an important role in educating students, according to Ms. Bulloch, chair of the Share the Vision committee. Originally part of an orientation program introducing students to values embraced by the University, such as diversity and mutual respect, Share the Vision works toward building a humane campus community.

Four years ago, the committee began sponsoring programs throughout the school year, as well as during orientation. One such event, a candlelight vigil in memory of Matthew Shepard, was fueled by a nationwide reaction to the brutal murder of the gay college student in Wyoming. The turnout for the vigil was high. "People talked very personally about how they had been touched by his death," says Ms. Bulloch. "I think because he [Matthew] was their age, it really captured

the spirit of the student body." In recent years, the committee has planned other GLBT-related events, including a forum focusing on law, religion, and homosexuality.

The residence halls provide another venue for discussing sensitive topics, according to Sue Nickel-Schindewolf, associate director for residence life. The Office of Housing and Residence Life does its best, she says, to integrate GLBT-related perspectives into programs. Sometimes, though, those discussions take another shape, she notes, referring to a recent incident in which students defaced a poster with hateful speech, some homophobic. Oftentimes, the residence hall assembles students to discuss such matters. "You can't necessarily change people's ideas," she says, "but we have a responsibility to challenge hateful speech."

As for the hateful chalkings that appear on the pavement, Mr. Nicholls says, "We try to get someone out there to remove them as quickly as possible." But, he adds, the University is also obligated to protect free speech, even if that speech is hateful. And striking that balance, he concedes, can be difficult.

E. H. B.