

# A question of orientation

## Homosexual support group hopes to help break down stereotypes

Coming out of hiding  
Homosexuals at UR

PART 1 of 3  
Myths and Stereotypes

By Kevin Kendall

Editor's note: Because of the sensitive nature of this subject the names of the four University of Richmond students and one Virginia Commonwealth University student interviewed have been changed.

Jennifer, a senior, listened to a guest speaker in her class make broad and what she felt were completely false generalizations about homosexuals. She was offended, but she sat in silence.

Joseph, a business school senior, often listens to his fraternity brothers making gay jokes. He doesn't say anything to them, but he doesn't laugh.

Caroline, a senior, always finds it humorous when she hears the comment, "I've never met any homosexuals," when she is standing right there.

Michael, a sophomore, said if he were a senior he would use his name in this story, but for now he is still somewhat afraid of how his peers would react.

All these students are homosexuals, and they all feel uncomfortable on this campus. Their feelings are a mix of fear, frustration and anger.

"I'm really afraid of discrimination on this campus," Jennifer said.

"I don't have much contact by and large with the more conservative majority on this campus," Michael said, "and I've never really had a bad personal experience, but there is always a fear that if someone else finds out, you might get beaten up or something."

So the students choose to keep that part of themselves hidden and tell only their most trusted friends. But they are frustrated with having to be so careful.

"It's just ridiculous and pointless," Joseph

said. "It shouldn't have to be like this." "I don't want to lie to people any more," Caroline said. "I feel like I'm putting myself down every time I lie."

Jennifer said, "I feel like I'm being such a hypocrite by not using my name in this article. I believe that the only way to make people aware of this issue is to confront them with it, but I'm still afraid."

Most of the students believed it was difficult enough to come to terms with their own sexuality, much less having to pretend something completely different. So these four students and several others have come together to try to create a foundation for change.

They are all members of the Lambda Coalition, a social support group for gays, lesbians, bisexuals and supporters of their rights, that is applying to become an official campus organization. The Richmond College Student Affairs Committee will review the organization's proposed constitution and by-laws Feb. 8 to make a recommendation to the faculty of arts and sciences. The faculty will then vote to decide whether or not the coalition will be made an official organization.

The Lambda Coalition has two basic goals, Joseph said, first to provide support for other gays, lesbians and bisexuals on campus who have felt that there has been no outlet for them to "come out," and second to educate the campus in general about issues of sexual orientation.

"We're not here to threaten anybody or to do any damage," Caroline said. "We just feel that we have a right to be here, too." Joseph has been surprised and encouraged by the support of faculty on campus, he said. "I think the liberal arts faculty and the administration is more liberal and open-minded than the students."

"We had people beating down our doors to be our [faculty] advisee," Caroline said. The group selected David Braverman, the new assistant dean of Richmond College, as its advisee.

Students provided more than 50 signatures on their petition to create the organization when they only needed 10, but there is still a great deal of peer pressure that leads many students to keep their true feelings about the issue hidden.

Warren Hopkins, director of Counseling and

Psychological Services, said he always assigned his Abnormal Psychology classes to write, as an informal experiment, responses to an article describing a homosexual family. "I always receive a good number of papers that state their support for the rights of homosexuals," he said. "Most of them are from women, but occasionally they're from men. But the next day, after I've read the papers and know what students really feel, I ask how many people are in support of gay rights and everyone starts looking around to see how their classmates will respond, and very few hands go up."

One of the big problems on campus is that the issue of sexual orientation is seldom discussed in classes, except in cases like "abnormal psychology" and "deviant sociology," Caroline said, and leave most students with the idea that there is something abnormal and wrong about homosexuality.

"I understand that there are classes where this type of discussion would not be appropriate," she said, "but there are numerous opportunities in literature classes and political science classes without attaching some kind of stereotype or stigma to the discussion."

In one English class Caroline said she was asked to write about her first love. When she did, her professor was surprised that she was writing about another woman. "But she was very open about it," she said, "and when she came to talk to me about it she said that she would be more aware of those possibilities when she was designing her assignments. But many times in classes faculty members will use gender-specific terminology like, 'When a man loves a woman,' instead of 'When one person is in love with another.'"

Jennifer said there is big problem with stereotypes on campus. "People have an idea that lesbians are all jocks," she said, "but I'm in a sorority and I wear dresses. I just had a big problem with choosing a date for my formal. The person I was seeing was really upset that I wasn't going to take her."

"I talked to my roommate about it, and she said it would probably have some negative effects on Rush if I showed up with her, so I ended up asking one of the guys from the group. But she threatened to come anyway."

Jennifer said she could never think of walking around campus holding her girlfriend's hand or displaying any type of affection in public because the campus is so conservative. "It doesn't validate the relationship at all to have to exist like that," she said. "I know [heterosexual students] will not all accept my lifestyle, but we're not asking for anything more than they already have. They say we're being blatant when we do it, but they do it all the time."

The stalls of the men's bathrooms across campus are often covered with homophobic graffiti. This is occasionally in response to a message requesting an anonymous meeting to satisfy sexual needs. However, these messages are usually written in such vulgar terms that some of the members of the Lambda Coalition said they may be written by gay bashers hoping to lure a gay man into the bathroom.

"Personally, I have never written a message like that, and I would be afraid to respond to one," Michael said.

"It is a shame that some people have to resort to such anonymous meetings," Joseph

said, "because it just promotes a stereotype largely promoted by Hollywood that all gay men hang out in bathrooms."

"I guess part of my hope for the Lambda Coalition is that we will provide healthier ways for gay men to meet one another, so that these things don't have to stay so much in the closet."

Caroline said, "I think it is fair to say that in general this campus is very homophobic. That's based on the cracks I hear and some of the people I've encountered. But it has the potential not to be."

Rae, a VCU student, currently dating a member of the Lambda Coalition said she

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found the University of Richmond's campus rather stifling. "But then I'm an art student and I guess I tend to stick out in general," she said. "Still, everyone seemed so much the same that it's uncomfortable."

Richmond is frequently compared to VCU because of the difference in size and in atmosphere. But the main difference is the diversity of students in general, Rae said. "There are blacks and hispanics, the campus is completely accessible for the physically handicapped, and there are many other minority groups in the student body," she said. "Anyone can walk through our campus and feel accepted, and not hear many comments. But

bring those same people over to the University of Richmond and they will definitely stick out."

The Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Student Alliance frequently holds dances and other events in their university commons. On national "coming out" day, the group built a closet and had people jump out of it and have their pictures taken. There was no interference with the event.

"Imagine trying to do something like that in the Commons here," Caroline said. "If the group is granted organization status, it hopes to begin putting up banners and flyers and distribute information about the issues of sexual orientation."

"If we put up a banner, I don't want to see it ripped down," Caroline said, "but I kind of expect that."

Rae said this is the first year that the flyers from the group at VCU have stayed up regularly. "I would expect flyers on the [University of Richmond] to come down immediately and I expect an uproar when this story hits the paper. But there are a lot of good people here and this campus really has not had much exposure to these issues. They really don't know what the issues are or how to deal with them. But the campus needs to learn that these are just normal people involved in all the same activities they are."

Joseph said, "I don't want to come back to campus and have the only thing people say about me is, 'Hey, there's the gay guy,' but if that's what happens I will just have to deal with that." "But the main thing I would like people to learn is that we're people they see every day. We're their fraternity brothers, their teammates and their classmates. I know of several former athletes that were afraid to come out in college because they were afraid it would hurt possible professional career options. There is a false impression that gay people are all in theater and singing groups, but only one of our current members is involved in the arts. We're just everyday people basically."

One of the fears the group has is that it has a large number of seniors in the group and they may not have many members to continue the organization next year, but there is hope.

"I think it will continue; but even if we fail, it is a start. It will be enough for someone to realize that they are not the only one on campus," Joseph said.

"Coming out is a one-a-day process," Caroline said, "and the circle gets larger every day. But it's getting to the point that I can feel more comfortable for me to walk around and see people and say to myself, 'He knows ... she knows ... and they are.' Once you come out to yourself and you realize that there are others on the campus, it is a much more fun campus to be on."

All the students interviewed said that if given the same choice of schools again they would not have chosen the University of Richmond a second time, but all hope that their efforts will make the University a more comfortable place to be.

"I meet gays and lesbians in the Richmond community all the time that say they are University of Richmond graduates and how much they wished they had a group when they were on campus," Joseph said.

Rae said, "Coming out on this campus must

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—“Jennifer”

be a hellacious experience without a group here."

"People need to realize that there are a lot more of us than they think," Caroline said. "I don't think it is the national average of one in 10 people are gay, but I would guess that it's around one in 12. I know our group is just the tip of the iceberg. I know people who are afraid of coming out and others that just don't like joining groups."

One of the most important changes for the group will be the separation of its roots in the Counseling and Psychological Services division of the University. Joseph said it took him two weeks to get in contact with the group when he joined three years ago because of the confidential screening process.

Hopkins said he never received an insincere phone call, but he said the four students held about homophobia on campus were probably legitimate. "For a while it was the stigmatized protecting the stigmatized," he said.

The American Psychological Association officially declassified homosexuality as a mental illness in 1973. The Lambda Coalition believed it no longer needed to be a support group for therapy, but would become more of a social and educational organization. Those that are still in the questioning stage will be able to contact the group through CAPS.

"I think it's good to develop a group independent of counseling," Rae said, "because you

don't want to give the false impression that any of these students are any less capable or less sane just because of their sexual orientation. There are just normal people with normal pressures that just need to find some place where they can feel comfortable talking."

Those interested in contacting the Lambda Coalition can mail a postcard with a name and phone number to RC Box 11.

"I look forward to the day when we don't have to worry about labels, when everyone can just be," Caroline said.

Next week:  
PART 2  
Recognition and discrimination

Feb. 14:  
PART 3  
Coming out: Effects on friends and family

*'The main thing I would like people to learn is that we're people they see every day. We're their fraternity brothers, their teammates and their classmates.'*

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The Lambda Coalition