

An English professor's life outside the closet

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Collegian Editor

Melissa Capers knows what it's like to be out of the closet.

She knows about getting denied for a promotion at a past job. She knows about "don't ask, don't tell." She knows about hate crime. And she knows, only too well, the pindrop silence in the classroom when she tells her students she's a lesbian.

Despite all this, she hasn't lost her sense of humor in the face of a frightening reality. When she describes how some men threw bricks at her and her friends as they were leaving a "women's bar," she pauses a moment and then smiles.

"I'm assuming it's because we're gay and not because we're women — but you know, it's a toss up."

An adjunct professor in the University's English department since the fall of 1991, Capers has been out of the closet almost everywhere except the University of Richmond since she was 15.

This September, the 29-year-old teacher and writer decided to change that.

In the wake of the Sharon Bottoms verdict, which ruled that lesbians were unfit mothers, Capers wrote a letter to The Collegian, revealing her homosexuality to the University.

Overcoming reservations that she had too little job security as a part-time instructor, Capers wrote: "The truth is neither a year's contract nor a full-time position nor even tenure is much security when our children can be taken from us.

"Gays and lesbians are not just strangers on the news. We are people in your classrooms, on your campus. We are people you know.

"So if you believe we are immoral, believe that to our faces."

But so far, few have believed it to her face. "If somebody's upset, they haven't let me know, so I don't know if they're there or not," Capers says of the University's reaction to her openness.

People in her classes at both the University and VCU have dropped and Capers doesn't necessarily know why.

Still, it doesn't bother her, and if students would feel more comfortable in someone else's class, she says that's fine.

Once she revealed her homosexuality, Capers never felt that "making a lot of noise" put her job in any danger.

As an adjunct, she is hired on a semester to semester basis. And if she wasn't rehired, she wouldn't necessarily be told the reason.

"My greatest fear would be that something would happen that I wouldn't get rehired and I would never know [why] for sure," she says.

But so far, this hasn't happened — she was rehired this spring.

Friends and foes

Those who have responded to Capers' openness have been positive. Some said "they thought I was pretty cool or it was the right thing to do or even brave," and others who weren't even in her class sent her notes of support through campus mail.

It seems almost universal. Those who don't like her homosexuality don't say anything. Those who support her say so.

"If nobody knew I was gay," she admits, "it would be easier for me to find out information about how much people hate gays. They don't tell me that information now."

In fact, most of her supporters are her friends — those who know there's more to her than her sexual preference. And those who reject her seem to be strangers who know her only as a lesbian.

"It's pretty unconscious for me to make friends with people who accept and support me," she says.

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body accepts being gay."

But this world doesn't exist, as Capers well knows. When one of her friend's car windshields was smashed because a pink triangle hung inside, the vandals took the symbol to commemorate the hate crime. No, everybody does not accept being gay.

Sometimes even her heterosexual friends are not entirely supportive, despite good intentions.

"It's harder to care for people that still sometimes don't get it," she says.

"It would be easier if they weren't my friends, and I could say, 'Oh, close-minded assholes.'"

But when they are her friends, she can't say it. Straight friends often try to protect her and tell her not to "come out" to strangers.

"It's inappropriate in the classroom setting," they say. "People don't walk in and start announcing their heterosexuality."

But Capers says they do. Actions like wearing a wedding

ring or displaying family pictures show students their professors are straight and proud of it.

"Nobody ever flinches when a professor says my wife or my husband," she says, "but I have yet ... to say 'my girlfriend and I.'"

UR's reaction

Still, Capers formally comes out to all the English classes she teaches, both at the University and at VCU.

As many would guess, there's been a difference in how students at each university perceived Capers after she revealed her homosexuality. But it isn't as cut and dried as many might think.

At the University of Richmond, Capers says, there is a much stronger sense of community, whereas VCU is more scattered and diverse. "I felt like the reaction at VCU was much more contained to the classroom," she says.

"I have had much less said to me at VCU. But [at the University of Richmond] ... the response that I got was a matter of hospitality.

"I had said something that might make me an outsider and therefore people had to offer me an invitation back into the community."

At both schools, she admits: "The reaction is a lot of frozenness. People not knowing how to respond or even if they had to respond. And," she adds with a laugh, "a lot of relief when we get back to coursework."

Making students uncomfortable is far from Capers' goal. Instead, she seems to go out of her way to ease the tension — to bridge the gap between gay and straight, teacher and student.

Often she brings her "exceptional" dog, a Border Collie named Hannah, with her to class or to conferences.

At the start of the semester, she said, "It made it more relaxed. I didn't know them [students] and they didn't know me, but we could talk about the dog."

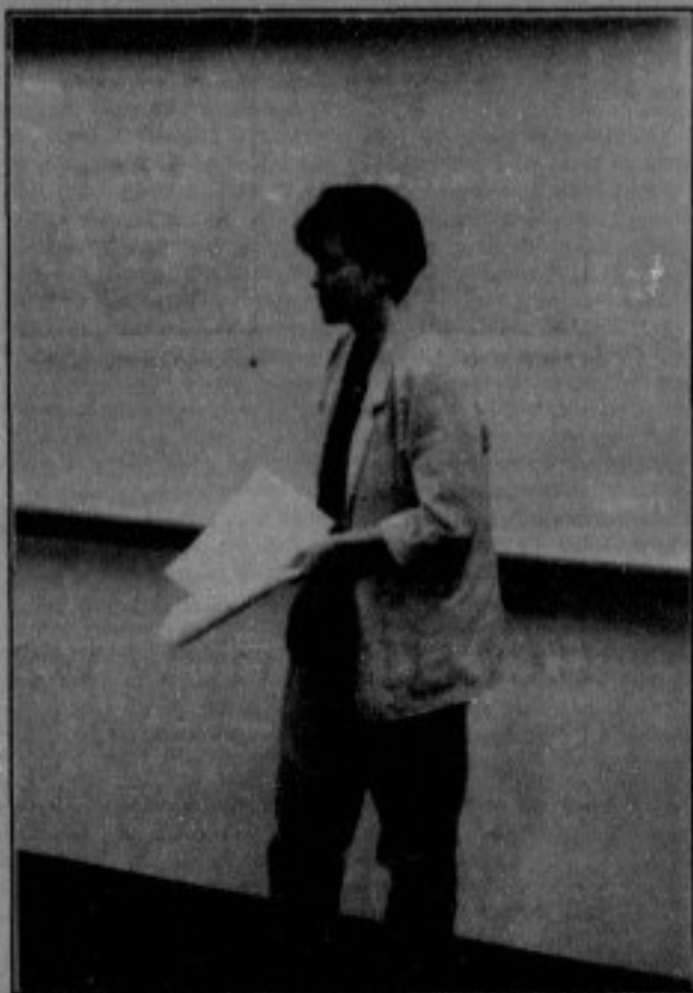
A professor and a writer

As a teacher of freshman English, Capers says many professors dismiss first-year students too easily. "I really learn a lot from my students," Capers says.

Mostly, she learns about the expectations they bring to college. Many freshmen view teaching as adversarial, she says — the teacher is the enemy, the grade is the weapon. Capers is out to disprove all this.

"Students assume in writing that they want an A," she says. "In fact, they want something more. They find out they don't want to sound, on paper, just like everyone else."

And Capers doesn't sound like everyone else on paper either. A published author of both fiction and non-fiction, she is currently working toward



ROSS CRAWFORD/THE COLLEGIAN

Melissa Capers instructs her English 103 class yesterday.

her master's degree in creative writing at VCU while writing a novel.

A project this long is a struggle, but she says, "Once I find out that I can finish it, I'll like it more."

She admits that none of the fiction she writes is based on her life. Two boys on a sheep ranch in Montana, a farm family in Arkansas — creative topics for a woman raised in fairly urban settings.

Although she's lived in Richmond most of her life, Capers is the youngest daughter of an Air Force man — mov-

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ing was a way of life before he retired. She holds on to "fuzzy memories" of Mexico, Panama, Hawaii and Alabama.

While she hasn't ever lived in the Western settings she's written about, she has visited twice. Amazingly, when she saw Western landscapes, they were exactly as she'd pictured them in her stories. Still, she wouldn't want to make her home out there.

"I got used to the idea of getting far away from Virginia to remind myself what it's like

here," she says.

"Several weeks without trees is somewhat disconcerting. I really am a Southerner."

But as a gay woman, being a Southerner isn't always easy for Capers. Some ask her "Why do you live in Virginia. You should move to Colorado where we have a gay rights ordinance."

Still, she says Richmond tends to be pretty hospitable toward homosexuals, although she admits "the Sharon Bottoms case definitely is a good argument against that."

With respect to this case, she sees the danger to homosexuals as coming from strangers. "My parents probably wouldn't try and take a child away from me," she says, "but my next door neighbor might."

In general, Capers' parents haven't yet accepted her homosexuality. "When I was in high school they were sure it was because I was confused and because I knew gay people," she says.

"When I was in college, if I was dating somebody, my communication with my parents would break down. And the times I wasn't so obviously gay, we would get along better."

Although Capers says her parents were the only real friends she lost because of her homosexuality, she regrets limiting some potential friendships in college, especially among straight women in her sorority. She didn't believe their attempts at friendship were genuine.

Now, she understands that "they didn't want to be my friend because I was gay, they wanted to be my friend because they wanted to be my friend."