

# Letter to the Editor: From a trustee to closeted students

As an alumnus of Richmond College and a current trustee of this great university, I offer my own voice to a recent dialogue on campus sparked by the "Letter from the Closet" from Anonymous and by the online response from Amicus last week. It has been quite a long time since I've had the pleasure to forward a letter to the editor of *The Collegian*, and I celebrate this occasion to say directly to the entire university community that I am openly, proudly, happily gay.

Yup. You heard me.

The University of Richmond has had an openly gay trustee for more than six years. And before that I was an openly gay member of the University of Richmond Board of Associates for two years.

To my knowledge, the university has not suffered any catastrophic decline since my appointment. In fact, quite the contrary. The university has truly moved onto the national stage, beginning to fulfill Mr. Robins' vision of Richmond as an academic heavyweight, a "hot" liberal arts school for international studies, a great reputation for community service and even national football champions.

And during my tenure, not once has a single member of the university administration, staff, faculty or any of its students whom I've met made me feel uncomfortable or unwelcome.

Now that is NOT to say that I think life on campus is a piece of cake for queer students. I understand the offensiveness, the obnoxious rudeness many of you find in the sophomoric taunt, "It's so gay." And as for the vile effrontery of "faggot," there are few words that can come close to describe how outrageously harmful that is.

But ask any of your African-American friends how long it has taken for our society to finally make the "N" word absolutely verboten in any kind of civil conversation. They will tell you that it takes patience. It takes courage. It takes steadfastness. It takes a sense of humor. And yes, it takes forgiveness.

If you have had the chance to see Sean Penn in his latest movie, "Milk," you will get some semblance of what life was like a gazillion years ago in the 1970s and '80s when

being openly gay really was in many cases a struggle of life and death. The examples of brutality, blatant harassment, horrific abuse and even murder were not hyper-dramatized in the movie. That stuff was real. Skeptical? Give me a buzz sometime. I can curl your hair with some seriously scary stories from that period.

Slowly, painfully, this country has become more tolerant, more accepting, better educated, more understanding of who we as gay people are. And it has finally begun to dawn on most Americans that they've got queers living everywhere, in all communities. Richmond has been no exception.

I crack up every time I watch "Little Britain" with its hilarious spoofing of social conventions, especially with its character "the one village queer" who carps that there can ONLY be one queer in any village. Gone are the days in which the only openly gay person in any particular community was some stereotypical queer or lesbian. We are literally everywhere. As Amicus pointed out, we're even at the University of Richmond!

Our slow collective epiphany in this country didn't happen by chance or whim. It happened when closet doors everywhere eventually, intentionally and deliberately opened. THAT is why it is important for you, Messrs. Anonymous and Amicus, to not only speak up in written forums but also to live your life openly, naturally, fearlessly on campus as the normal, centered gay person you are, showing one and all that you're very cool with that. And if a few folks are not, that isn't your problem. Let them react as they will. That is THEIR issue. Be brave. This is how the world evolves and changes. One little gutsy step at a time.

I DO know that it is easier said than done. But it's got to be done.

It might be difficult for you to see the university's progress over the years in making life a bit more welcoming, a bit more comfortable, and a lot safer for LGBT students on campus, but trust me when I say that what is available and present today at Richmond was unheard of just a few decades ago. The university offers support and space

on campus for a queer social group "New Directions;" there has been the remarkable work of "Safe Zone;" there is the fully funded initiative, "Common Ground," which serves as a clearinghouse, watchdog, training resource for all kinds of diverse expression on campus; there are same-sex benefits for staff and faculty; there are openly gay dorm counselors and staff who live openly with their partners on campus; and there is the written promise in the university's policy statements and vigorously embraced by the last three administrations for not just tolerance but acceptance of all students including LGBT students, faculty and staff on campus.

Not to say that we're NYU or anything. But I'm just sayin'...

You might think that it is easy for me to "come out" now at my "advanced age" (hey, you'll be old some day too, bud!) in the comfort of my life as a successful entrepreneur. But humbly I would say that you'd be mistaken. There are still so many judgments that I, too, have to deflect, ignore, disregard. I've had my own encounters with ugly intolerance and abuse over the years. And yes, there are still many alumni at Richmond who cannot get their heads around this whole issue, who judge it, who condemn it for a whole host of reasons.

But that's ok.

Because if we as a university are serious about this chronic issue of "diversity," then we have to walk the walk. And for my part, I think we are. It hasn't been easy, or smooth, or cool, or wildly successful — yet. But please believe me when I say that you have leaders at this university who work very, very hard to make Richmond a place where all kinds of brilliant, hard-working, talented, erudite, "totally fabulous" students want to come and study. The rector of this university, George Welde, walks the walk. Ed Ayers walks the walk.

Every dean walks the walk. Your professors

are walking the walk. And I bet you some serious coin that the majority of Richmond students are walking the walk as well.

Still don't believe me?

Then take a deep breath and come on out. Really.

I know. Setting yourself up for judgment and perhaps even ridicule ain't fun. But that is how you make a difference at Richmond. That is how you heal the world from ignorance and abuse. And when you do let folks know who you are, I think you will be amazed at the number of people on campus who will react with a smile, or shake your hand, or give you a hug, or give you a head noogie, or slap you on the back or just simply shrug. It's all good. And for any others, release them to have their own experience. Their anger and judgment and ignorance and hatefulness are not part of your paradigm. You're simply way cooler than that.

You need to know, too, that you live on a campus that has shown time and again that it will not tolerate ugly attacks or abuse if it is reported and will act quickly to correct the situation. You have my personal pledge that if you are ever assaulted, physically harmed or verbally abused by anyone on campus, they will be prosecuted and dealt with quickly and firmly. Promise.

But if you decide not to crack open that closet door, that's O.K. too. You will be given many opportunities in your life to choose again. Just know for the time being that you have a lot of prospective friends throughout the University of Richmond community who will welcome you and embrace you as the wonderfully gay Spider that you are.

Promise.

With my very best wishes for your continued success in all endeavors,

I am Sincerely,

Guy A. Ross

RC '73

Trustee

This Letter to the Editor has been re-printed from last week's edition of *The Collegian*. We apologize for the odd typing that appeared in Mr. Ross' article. It occurred after we sent the page to our printing agency and we have been working to discern the cause.