

Letter from the closet

ANONYMOUS*

As a closeted non-heterosexual male at the University of Richmond, my experiences on this campus are drastically different than those of heterosexuals.

People stay in the closet for many reasons — family, religious, financial, profession, social and safety. The Gay Lesbian Straight Educational Network found that nine in 10 LGBT teens report having been verbally harassed during the past school year, and almost half have been physically harassed because of their sexual orientation. In 2007, 16.6 percent of hate crimes were motivated by a sexual orientation bias, according to the FBI.

Richmond is not free from prejudice against non-straight students. We've seen our cars keyed, whiteboards defaced and derogatory remarks — both verbal and electronic — hurled our way. Once, residents in my dorm said they would rather have a barn animal as a roommate than a gay one.

I distance myself from the hatred, confusion and distrust by altering the ways I talk, walk, dress and look, lest I be accused of being a "fag." What if I look at males too much or my clothes match too well? Instead, I look down and intentionally mismatch my clothing. What if I sit with a guy too often at lunch or what if I listen to the "wrong" genre of music?

Weekend parties are no different. A straight male can easily saunter up to a girl and dance, but a gay male cannot do the same with another male. Two females are encouraged to dance together, but two male dancers are not. Recently, one fraternity forced their pledges to serve drinks in shirts that said: "Punish me. [I'm] gay".

Those examples highlight the campus's

widespread heterosexism, defined as bias in favor of opposite-sex sexuality and relationships. Heterosexism includes presumptions that heterosexual or opposite-sex attractions and relationships are the norm, bathrooms should be segregated by sex and rules about inviting guests to socials, among others.

My confidants wonder why I won't come out of the closet, but I see no reason to introduce myself as a non-heterosexual. If you don't introduce yourself as straight, why should I introduce myself as homosexual? Staying in the closet offers protection from a world where homosexuals are executed in Iran, banned from military duties, outlawed from donating blood and barred from marriage.

Coming out is a process as endless as its audiences, a point made by Yoshino in the book "Covering". I don't need to be an icon of homosexuality just as others don't need to be the representatives for their minority or majority classifications.

I would come out of the closet if I knew I was entering a mildly safe world. In this community, discontinuing the use of derogatory remarks such as "that's gay" is a reasonable start. It's often said in the context of negativity, implying that homosexuality is bad or stupid.

Promoting education and openness does not rest solely on the shoulders of the LBGQTPOPATQITBA (sexual minority) community. The heterosexual majority also carries responsibility, and I find it disheartening that the Richmond community does not respond to heterosexism and phrases such as "that's gay" as it has done with other instances of bias.

Eliminating those words from your vocabulary not only supports tolerance, but also exhibits intelligence. And tolerance, not necessarily acceptance, is all that I ask of people.

*The Collegian reserves the right to publish anonymous articles only in the case that an author's well-being is at stake and the message of the article is worthy of print.