

## How Safe Zone Started at the University of Richmond Written by Ladelle McWhorter

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Revised by Elizabeth Stott, September 1998

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In the winter of 1996, seven members of the UR community began to talk to each other about a concern for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students on our campus, as well as for non-GLBT students that may be dealing for the first time with a GLBT member in their families, classes, dorms, etc. These faculty and staff were worried that the students had no one to talk to, no safe place to discuss their hopes and fears, no guidance to help them sort through feelings or make decisions, and little or no recourse against harassment and violence. The original group included Irby Brown (English), Rafael de Sá (Biology), Brad Fringer (Richmond College), Kelly Maxwell (Westhampton College), Ladelle McWhorter (Philosophy), and Steve Wilborn (Admissions). They resolved to make themselves available and visible and to form an institutional support system for such students and for others who might be having difficulty dealing with their own or the sexuality of a family member, roommate, or friend. Brad Fringer and Kelly Maxwell belonged to the professional organization VACUHO (Virginia College and University Housing Officers), which had just created a statewide organization called Safe Zone Virginia. The two of them suggested that we affiliate with the statewide organization and draw on its educational resources. UR's Safe Zone chapter officially constituted itself in February, 1996.

Soon after, we were joined by two new members, Allie Mentzer, a Westhampton College first-year student, and Bob Rodgers of the university catering staff. Thanks to Provost Bowen, the group was able to buy some study materials and hire a psychologist to conduct an educational training session.

During the summer of 1996 Safe Zone accomplished two tasks. First, bylaws were written. These established the original group as a Safe Zone Board on the model of community-based non-profit organizations, created officer positions within the Board, and set up a method by which we could accept new members into the organization. Second, a training program was developed to initiate new members into the organization. At the start of the fall semester 1996, the Safe Zone Board elected officers. These were Kelly Maxwell, President, Irby Brown, Treasurer, and Ladelle McWhorter, Secretary/Historian. The Board also scheduled training sessions for new members and planned programs to publicize the existence of the network and to educate the campus community about issues of sexual diversity.

Interest in Safe Zone was much higher than expected. Before the end of the first semester,

students requested that the organization change its bylaws to allow student members. The Board debated this issue, some holding that an organization whose focus is to serve students should not have student members, and others holding that a peer network could serve an important function that a faculty/staff network might not be able to serve. A vote was taken, and the bylaws were changed to include students. In its first year of existence, Safe Zone inducted eighty new members. Many other members of the campus community expressed interest in joining as soon as more training sessions could be scheduled.

Programming and publicity through the first year were difficult, because Safe Zone (which was not officially recognized as a campus organization or a committee) had no available funds to function and carry on its activities. Board members approached various departments for contributions for specific projects, e.g. printing flyers. Chaplain David Burhans supported the printing of training manuals, as did the staff of Counseling and Psychological Services, and Vice President for Student Affairs Leonard Goldberg provided support for programming. Safe Zone co-sponsored a panel discussion on the 1996 elections, sponsored a panel of gay and lesbian UR alumni, and sponsored a social gathering in The Cellar in conjunction with the UR chapter of Lambda.

In the spring semester of 1997, the membership requested ongoing educational programming for themselves. The Board set up monthly membership lunches to give members a chance to get to know each other and learn more about sexual diversity and about how best to support those who might approach them. These lunches also provided an opportunity for members to dream up and discuss new kinds of programming and publicity, such as the sexual diversity reading group. Near the end of the year, the Board undertook two new projects. One was to survey the membership to determine how many students (and others) used Safe Zone's services. The other was to develop an inservice program for the University Police.

In April of 1997 Safe Zone held its first Board elections. Six new members came onto the Board (both to fill anticipated vacancies and to expand the size of the Board): Jennifer Cable (Music), John Downey (Richmond College), Janelle Perron Jennings (Student Activities), Princy Quadros (rising senior Westhampton College student), Michael Coe (rising senior Richmond College), and Elizabeth Stott (Counseling and Psychological Services). Over the summer of 1997 the Board lost two members, Kelly Maxwell and Brad Fringer, and Irby Brown left temporarily for sabbatical. In the fall, Judy Nagai came onto the Board as the Westhampton College replacement for Kelly Maxwell.

Safe Zone worked in the first full year of existence to establish a strong Board with clear policies and goals and created a large and stable network that could offer support and educational services. The next task was to make sure everyone knew those services were available and to improve them where possible.

During the second full year, Safe Zone officers were: Bob Rodgers and Janelle Perron Jennings, co-chairs; Irby Brown, treasurer; John Downey, interim treasurer; and Ladelle McWhorter, secretary/historian. The Board began to fear that too much growth too quickly would have detrimental effects. Therefore, during academic year 1997-98, Safe Zone decided to concentrate on educational programming and publicity rather than on enlarging the network. Nonetheless, with only four training sessions that year, SZ still took in a large number of new members, closing the spring semester of 1998 with well over one hundred members in good standing, despite the fact that many members had graduated or left for other positions. The total number of people to complete the Safe Zone training session approached 150.

To publicize Safe Zone's existence so that students and others would know our services were available, members presented a total of nine educational programs during the second year. Programs included the only Virginia satellite downlink for the White House Conference on Hate Crimes, a film series with discussions afterward, and a supportive role for World AIDS Day events. Twice during the year The Collegian ran articles on the organization. During the summer the University Police Department invited Safe Zone to do a sensitivity workshop for officers and dispatchers. Two other departments on campus--Human Resources and the Health Center--inquired about training sessions. At this point, it was easier to raise funds for our projects, because UR administrators began to know and value Safe Zone's contributions to the university community.

In the spring of 1997 a lesbian law student reported a serious case of harassment to the Safe Zone network. Through the process of working to help support and protect her, SZ learned the benefits of having a strong and positive relationship with the University Police. Subsequently, we worked with the Police to build a firm alliance to support students who are victimized or suffer from threats and harassment. Also during that spring, although as an organization Safe Zone did not initiate the effort to modify the university's non-discrimination policy to include "sexual orientation," many members of Safe Zone were outspoken in their support for that effort, including Irby Brown, who formally introduced and spoke in favor of the resolution to the University Faculty. As a result the 1998 university catalog and handbooks contained an inclusive non-discrimination policy statement. Because of this policy change, the American Baptist Church withdrew its affiliation with the University, and the Board of Trustees was reorganized.

It became clear during academic year 1997-98 that UR's chapter of Safe Zone had the potential to be a leader within the statewide network, helping newer chapters to develop and schools without chapters to establish them. We worked with The College of William and Mary to establish their program and later with VCU's School of Social Work to establish theirs. Several of our members also began to create closer ties with members of chapters at other schools both inside Virginia and in other states as well. The trans-campus Safe Zone network had the potential

to make our organization stronger and to provide us with a source of new ideas for the future. With those benefits and goals in mind, our chapter hosted a statewide retreat in the summer of 1998 with representatives from several Virginia colleges and universities.

Thanks to donations from various sources, Safe Zone ended the academic 1997-98 year financially healthy for the first time and, therefore, in a position to do more advanced planning for educational programs and initiatives in academic 1998-99. Since then contributions from alumni, parents, campus departments, and the student group New Directions have helped maintained Safe Zone's ability to respond to needs, offer programs, and publicize issues. In the fall of 1999, under the presidency of Elizabeth Stott, SZ initiated its first--and now annual--October Coming Out Festival, which was held originally to celebrate the inclusion of sexual orientation in the University's non-discrimination policy. The festival has given the organization a new visibility.

Safe Zone has continued to conduct two to four training sessions per year, and our membership has stabilized at about 120. In the new millennium, Safe Zone has concentrated more of its energies on institutional change. In the fall of 2001 a lesbian undergraduate in the School of Arts & Sciences reported to her coach that her Military Science instructor had barred her from taking the physical training portion of the Military Science course in which she was enrolled because she refused to swear she was heterosexual under the military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Pursue, Don't Harass" policy. The coach, who was a member of Safe Zone, reported the incident to the network, and SZ presented a memorandum to the Dean of Arts & Sciences requesting an investigation into the practice and an end to discrimination against non-heterosexual students in Military Science classes. Dean Newcomb took immediate action the day he received SZ memo to end the practice of having all students sign military recruitment forms in Military Science classes. During the same time period SZ learned that the Alumni Office had a policy of refusing to list the same-sex partners of alumni in the alumni magazine or in lists of donors. SZ successfully lobbied for a change in that policy and began notifying alumni of the change and encouraging them to send items to the alumni magazine. In this process, we also began to compile a list of names and addresses of LGBTQ alumni that would potentially be interested in joining SZ. SZ also successfully changed the University policy prohibiting the publication of same-sex partner names beside the names of employees in the University telephone book. Heterosexual partners' names have always been listed next to employees' names in parentheses, if the employee so requests. Over a two-year period beginning in 2002 the SZ Board worked with President William Cooper and Human Resources to create a policy to offer same-sex domestic partner benefits. This policy went into effect in 2004, with medical benefits offered beginning in January of 2005. During much of the same period SZ also worked with the Provost's Common Ground Commission to promote inclusive diversity in all facets of University life. Safe Zone representatives, usually Dan Fabian or Bob Rodgers, attended monthly staff orientation session to provide information about the organization and brochures to new

employees. In January of 2005, the SZ Board learned that about two years earlier the University had turned down an offer of an endowed scholarship for students interested in LGBTQ and German studies. SZ investigated the matter, found that the allegation was credible, and requested that the University apologize to the donor (a member of the Richmond wide GLBTQ community) who was rebuffed and make its policy explicit regarding donations earmarked for LGBTQ students, organizations, events, research, or special projects. After four months of discussion, the newly installed Vice President of Advancement, David Johnson, did contact the prospective donor, but neither his office or any other UR administrator issued explicit guidelines to SZ or to the Advancement Office's own staff regarding acceptance of donations so earmarked.

In sum, then, SZ has made important strides in its efforts to transform institutional culture, but at the same time we have also met with resistance to change and minimal support. There is still much to be done.

As Safe Zone's activities and programs have grown, it has accumulated materials, e.g. literature, training manuals, etc, and records that need a home and members have become increasingly interested in settling into a physical space on campus where SZ could host events and display educational materials. Repeated requests have been made, but Safe Zone persists in 2006 as an organization that is neither funded by nor housed by the University. In the spring of 2005 some records were moved into the new Center for Civic Engagement, and the SZ Board began holding meetings in their conference room, but SZ has outgrown the storage space available there.

In 2005 at the anonymous request of a UR community member, we began working on ways to explicitly include transgender concerns and issues in our mission, literature, and programming. Also the planning for the upcoming SZ Tenth Anniversary began. For the anniversary SZ invited author Kirk Read as a dinner guest speaker. On February 15, 2006, SZ held a banquet for about sixty members, alumni, and guests in the Alice Haynes Room. President Rafael de Sá hosted the event, Dan Roberts gave brief address on the history of Safe Zone, and Irby Brown introduced Mr. Read. During Mr. Read's two days on campus, he also met with classes in Counseling and Psychology to discuss his work as an HIV/AIDS counselor for sex workers in San Francisco and spoke at an open luncheon for all students on his experiences as editor of Virginia's LGBT newspaper *Our Own* in the 1990s. It was Safe Zone's first major event involving alumni, and we were very happy with the contacts made and the good will we inspired. We were also happy to be able to look back at ten years of service and see, despite the obstacles and remaining problems, a job well done.