

Sexual minorities given Safe Zones

Faculty members open doors to secure environments

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Staff Writer

There are no gay or lesbian students at the University of Richmond, according to conventional wisdom, said Kelly Maxwell, coordinator of student life.

"Of course, we know that this isn't true," Maxwell said. "Most estimations show that approximately 6 percent to 10 percent of the population is homosexual."

Maxwell is the president of Safe Zone Virginia at Richmond, which involves gathering allies to create a safer campus environment for homosexual and bisexual students and to affect positive change in the campus climate, she said.

Philosophy Professor Ladelle McWhorter is the secretary of Safe Zone, and she knows only two people on campus that have publicly stated their homosexuality, she said.

"This indicates that people are afraid," she said. "We have a serious lack of communication on this campus and a trust problem."

McWhorter and Maxwell have been working on the project since

February of 1996, and both hope to open lines of communication for gay and lesbian students and faculty, they said. Safe Zone Virginia is sponsored by the Virginia Association of College and University Housing Officers Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Issues Task Force.

Safe zones will be created on cam-

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-Ladelle McWhorter

pus in the offices of faculty and staff members who have gone through the two-hour training session, based on information from the American College Personnel Association, Maxwell said.

They incorporate the association's basic principles of awareness, knowledge, skill building and action into their training, she said.

Faculty and staff members will place pink triangle stickers on their office doors to indicate that they welcome anyone wanting to talk about homosexual or bisexual issues, Maxwell said.

The University does not have a clause that protects the rights of individuals based on their sexual orientation because Virginia law states that it is illegal to engage in homosexual sex, said Professor Irby Brown, treasurer of Safe Zone.

"To hide behind state law seems very timid for a school becoming renowned for leadership," he said. "To omit the clause is to discriminate."

The University doesn't have a policy to protect its homosexual and bisexual members, and prospective students and prospective employees notice that, McWhorter said.

"If people are gay on this campus, they don't speak up," she said. "This

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DANIEL RYAN/ THE COLLEGIAN

Supporting diversity motivated KimMarie McGoldrick to place the Safe Zone sticker on her office door in the business school.

climate of fear perpetuates conservatism, but I think that our institution is becoming more open."

One student, who wished to remain anonymous, said that she is uncomfortable on campus and in classes because she is a lesbian. "I'm afraid to tell anyone that I am a lesbian, because I don't feel that our campus is very diverse," she said. "I would like to start a dialogue about gay and lesbian issues through Safe Zone, but I don't want to change anyone's mind."

Provost Zeddie Bowen has supported Safe Zone by funding resource books and attending training sessions along with his secretary and his wife, he said. Bowen's goal is to create a university environment that is welcoming and supportive of everyone, he said. Safe Zone is necessary because not everyone on campus is

committed to this, he said.

Bowen also hopes that safe zones won't be necessary in the future, he said. "When the whole campus is a safe zone, we won't need these individual ones," he said.

Leonard Goldberg, vice president for student affairs, has also supported the project by allocating \$500 for the project to fund programming and training, McWhorter said. Twelve faculty and staff members attended the first training session, and 16 employees have signed up for the next session, Maxwell said.

Trainees have included biology professors, admissions officers, catering employees and the deans' offices, Maxwell said. "Everyone has been very supportive of us," she said. "We're just waiting for more people to come to us."