



# In and Out at Richmond

By DAVID GORDON  
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The homosexual community at the University of Richmond is facing a number of issues. With the push for mainstream acceptance, a subject of vigorous debate among undergraduates, the quality of life for homosexuals at all levels is being examined, from the basements of Boatwright Memorial Library to the Virginia Supreme Court.

A new campus organization, New Directions, focuses on providing help to sexual minority students in a closed, supportive environment, said sophomore Walter Cook, one of the founding members of the group.

Lee Hawthorne, one of New Directions' faculty sponsors, said the organization began after Urvashi Vaid, former director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, spoke to students last fall. The lecture inspired six students to begin organizing the support group that would become New Directions, Hawthorne said. The group currently has 15 members and meets at 5 p.m. Mondays in the Tyler Haynes Commons, room 346.

Juliette Landphair, another of New Directions' faculty sponsors, said:

"New Directions is about battling the ignorance of homosexuality that seems pretty pervasive on this campus. There is homophobia, not rabid homophobia, but more of an ignorance than steadfast opposition."

Although the group has not developed an official charter and is thus not an officially recognized club, Cook said members are working to adapt the old Lambda Coalition charter into a workable treatise for the new organization. Lambda Coalition, now defunct, was a campus support group for gay and lesbian students.

New Directions has focused on making the issue of homosexuality more prominent on campus during its first few months. Last week, the group posted signs in residence halls which, Cook said, were intended to force the heterosexual majority to see the world through the eyes of a homosexual.

The posters caused controversy when some heterosexual students viewed them as an affront. Cook said the purpose of New Directions is not to make anyone feel uncomfortable, but some people have misinterpreted the intent of the group and the posters.

While Landphair feels the message is important, she conceded New Directions should have been more clear about the posters' purpose.

"We might have strayed a little in not saying [the posters were] from us," she said. "In retrospect we should have done that. I thought it was self-evident, but I guess it just feeds right back to that ignorance on campus."

Hawthorne said, "I think the posters succeeded because certainly now people are talking about the issue."

Junior John Lee, who just began going to New Directions meetings this week, said many of the problems the group has had dealing with the heterosexual community have resulted from a lack of

involvement. "The homosexual community has resulted from a lack of participation and input from heterosexuals. Lee said New Directions is needed at the University, but it will only succeed if everyone works together.

"I definitely think there is a place for a gay-straight alliance," he said. "I just see [the tension] as a problem; people have a problem with their sexuality because the campus is so conservative. I would like to see us incorporate more straights; I think that would make gay people more comfortable to know that there are some straight people who are accepting."

For Cook and Lee, who are both openly gay, the journey out of the closet was intense. But looking back, neither is sorry about their decisions to live openly gay at the University of Richmond. Both feel compassion for individuals still struggling with their sexuality, and count supportive friends as one of the most important factors that eased them out of hiding.

"I've had a pretty decent experience," Lee said.

"I've had friends who have been supportive and have always been there. I've never had problems. On the other hand, I can totally see how people would have problems, because the campus has a reputation for being so conservative and closed-minded. I guess it's all in what you make of it. Maybe I've just been really lucky."

Cook said: "It's really different [being out on campus]. I've never heard a derogatory remark. I had a good deal of close friends beforehand, and I still have all those close friends now. I'm glad I came out. I want to be here for people. I want to talk to people. I want people to look at me and say, 'That's someone I can talk to and ask about what the gay lifestyle is like.'"

Landphair said much of New Directions' success will lie in the number of students who come out of the closet and make themselves known on campus.

"That's where the power is," she said. "We need to have a group of students who come out of the closet. We have heard all these stories about students who come out within one year of leaving Richmond. We need to find out what is going on, on this campus, find out why people are afraid to come out. Until students themselves come out, there's only so much we can do. Students need to realize there is support. We hope to bolster the confidence of students to come out. We know they're here."

One closeted gay Richmond College student described a dominant conservative attitude at the University of Richmond. He said bigots force him to remain secretive.

"It is very difficult to have to pretend to be something I am not," he said. "I deal with this by being vague in answering questions addressing my sexuality, but I wish I could just be open. Many of my close friends know about it and are equally cautious in discussing the topic."

"Every time I think this campus is more accepting than I thought, there seem to be stark reminders that it is not. There are far too many bigots on campus, which is sad, because bigotry is far from ignorance. One would hope college students would not have such ignorance, but they clearly do. Anonymous threats have been made against me, but I don't really worry about them. If they need to hide in anonymity, they are probably no threat. It is just disturbing. I have been told to be careful about who I look at. This is scary when you think about the number of people you look at and say 'hi' just to be nice. It is truly juvenile to make such threats and expect me to change because they feel threatened and are insecure."

Landphair is sympathetic to this sentiment. "[Open discussion of homosexuality at the University] is a brand new thing," she said. "It will take a long time for this campus to be like VCU or other campuses like that. Most of the homophobia does seem to be coming from the Richmond College side. We need more research on why the culture is like this."

Cook and Lee both listed the University's conservative reputation as the No. 1 reason most students remain closeted on campus, but feel the conservative moniker is a misnomer.

"There are people here who feel strongly against, neutral or strongly for 'gay rights,'" Cook said. "It's like any other place in America — there is a wide divide."

Elizabeth Stott agreed. Stott is in charge of Safe Zone, the University's decade-old program that seeks to train students and faculty to deal with students who want to talk about sexual diversity issues. Stott is a professional counselor who has worked with non-heterosexual students and has taught several courses dealing with sexuality.

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- A Richmond College Student

"Five years ago no one would be talking about [sexual diversity issues]," she said. "I think the feeling today is bimodal; certain groups favor broad tolerance and then another group is very restrictive. There are these two clumps and not a lot of people who fall in the middle."

An openly gay Westhampton College senior, who requested anonymity echoed Stott's remarks. "In the four years I have been here, there has never been this much discussion about sexual orientation," she said. "If someone had told me last year that there would be articles in The Collegian about it and gay and lesbian students [would] be on a panel at Sex for Chocolate, I don't think I would have believed it. Maybe the campus is changing, or maybe it's just because people are finally talking about it."

Stott said programs such as Safe Zone have forced the issue at the University and those recent changes, such as the University's adoption of a sexual orientation non-discrimination policy, have made open discussion of homosexuality apropos.

Stott would like to see more of this.

"Safe Zone works to make the community safe and supportive for all sexualities," she said. "It benefits us to have a community in which all individuals feel safe to contribute. Hopefully [Safe Zone] benefits not only the homosexual community but the heterosexual community as well."

Stott would also like to see Safe Zone team up with New Directions. "We're moving toward a new structure, called the Coalition for Sexual Diversity, which is open to both heterosexual and homosexual students."

The problem for sexual minority students on campus, Stott said, is the lack of positive reinforcement they receive on a daily basis from the University.

"We don't have public statements and public policies of inclusion [for faculty and staff]," she said. "There are no partner benefits and until this year there was no open group for students to discuss these issues. There is an absence of organizations that are supportive. There is an absence of inclusion. This means many non-heterosexual students can never be sure of what reaction they will get."

The Westhampton College senior said being homosexual means constant concern.

"All of the responses I've had have been positive, but I'm still not completely comfortable," she said. "I feel comfortable writing about homosexuality in papers, but not raising my hand if it comes up in class. I wonder if the person sitting next to me knows I'm gay and if that bothers him or her. I worry that I'll ask someone to work with me on a project and that person will refuse because he or she isn't comfortable with my sexual orientation. I worry that people see me as 'the lesbian' and disregard everything else about me."

Not everyone on campus is responsive to the issue of increased tolerance for an openly homosexual lifestyle. Some students, on the basis of religious beliefs and mores, find the idea of a group such as New Directions offensive and blasphemous.

"[Homosexuality] is condemned by God," junior Jeffrey Clark said. "It's revealed by His word. That's the end of the story for me. What God says goes for me."

"A lot of people say homosexuals are going to hell. That's not my place to say. It's not a question of whether you sin, but if you sin and repent, hon-



est and heartfelt. But if a person rejected Christ and just kept on in their homosexual lifestyle, then yes, I would say that person is probably going to hell.

"I love those who keep the Ten Commandments. I'm going to love my neighbor, gay or straight or not. But I believe there is a righteous hate. I hate those who hate God. If God says something is wrong and a person keeps doing it, I think that person must hate God. I will love a person as Jesus tells me to love them. But I must also realize an enemy of God."

Senior Elaine Bucheimer, Baptist Student Union president said while Clark's points are textually accurate, his sentiment is misguided.

"What he puts forth [in his letter to The Collegian on March 23, 2000] is true," she said. "But in the fact that it offends so many people it serves no Christian purpose. By the Bible, yes, [a homosexual lifestyle] is wrong. But there is room for homosexuals in the Christian faith? Of course."

"I can't speak for all Baptists, but my personal opinion is you have to love the sinner and hate the sin."

The Catholic Church has recently redefined its view on homosexuals, said senior Kevin Scotto, president of the Catholic Campus Ministry.

"The Catholic view is still that homosexuality is a sin," he said. "But the church has come out and said, especially toward parents, that homosexuals are to be treated with love and respect. It's a thin line as far as Catholics are concerned. Homosexuals are to be treated with love and human dignity, but homosexual acts are still considered sins."

Scotto stressed that the views of the Catholic Church did not necessarily reflect his personal beliefs, though he refused to define his feelings about either New Directions or homosexuality.

The question of homosexuality is not so hotly debated everywhere on campus. The T.C. Williams School of Law was awarded perfect scores in four areas of interest to sexual minority students in 1999 by the publication "Out and In: Information for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Law School Applicants," a Law School Admission Council publication. The areas were: existence of a gay and lesbian student organization, openly gay and lesbian faculty members, a course specific to gay and lesbian legal issues (Sexual Orientation and the Law) and a gay and lesbian nondiscrimination policy.

John Pagan, dean of the law school, teaches Sexual Orientation and the Law, a course taken by both undergraduate students and law students.

"The students here seem open-minded and accepting," he said. "That's my sense about the law school. I think the atmosphere is one of mutual respect and acceptance."

First-year law student Nicole Rossi, who is openly gay, said the law school's acceptance stands in stark contrast to her impression of undergraduate levels of tolerance.

"It's a great atmosphere here," she said. "There is a lot of discrepancy between the law school and the undergrads. I haven't seen the same kind of intolerance at the law school [that I have seen among undergraduates]. The faculty here harbor good will, good feeling, and help us out. [The undergraduates say things such as] 'I can't be gay. I have long hair.' From the brief encounters I have had with them, it just appalls me what people honestly believe even in this day and age."

A gay male law student agreed.

"Here at UR, the atmosphere [among undergrad-

uates] is much more stifled and closed," he said. "People seem to know everything about everyone, kind of like high school. That has produced an atmosphere where even the self-accepting gay students kind of go back in the closet where UR people are concerned. It also means that those who are trying to deal with their sexuality are not really able to out of fear of ostracism."

Although he said the law school is an environment that fosters more open debate about homosexuality, he, much like the closeted Richmond College student, feels the need to hide.

"I'm relatively comfortable," he said. "But I do find myself trying to throw people off the scent. When out with guys, I'll discuss girls and talk about them like they're pieces of meat to fit in. I think there is still a significant number of people who would not be OK knowing I'm gay. I live my life as I want, date whom I want, but I just don't talk about it at school. If people figure me out, that's fine. But I certainly would not be openly gay

here."

For Rossi, the question of religiosity and sexuality being debated among undergraduates is a non-issue. "I'm religious in my own way," she said. "I don't even consider it an issue with God. He must be cool with me or I wouldn't be here."

"I repressed for so long what I was feeling that I almost had myself believing [I was straight]. People don't realize how hard it is [to be gay]. We all want to be different and unique, and yet we all want to be accepted."

Rossi is a member of the Gay Law Students Association, known as Gaylaw, which was officially recognized by the law school faculty last year. Gaylaw meets monthly to discuss legal issues involving gays and lesbians.

Pagan is Gaylaw's faculty sponsor. He said homosexuality is a matter that cannot be ignored. "It's an issue that is on the cutting edge of law, an issue that is changing quicker than any other," he said. "There have been a number of exciting developments."

One of the developments Pagan and members of Gaylaw are debating is the Solomon Amendment. This law denies federal funding to schools that exclude military recruiters.

Pagan said, the American Association of Law Schools, the Supreme Court of Virginia, the American Bar Association and the Association of American Law Schools (AALS) all hold that sexual orientation discrimination violates ethical standards of the legal profession and constitutes professional misconduct for which a judge or lawyer can be disciplined. Since the military does not recruit homosexuals and since the military recruits on the University of Richmond campus, the decree puts the law school in an awkward position, Pagan said.

In April 1991, the University's Board of Trustees and then University President Richard Morrill ordered the law school to allow military recruiters to recruit at the law school. Last month, the AALS sent a memorandum to all law schools where military recruiting takes place.

The memorandum stated: "Member schools that allow military employers access to career service facilities are still obligated to ameliorate the presence by posting notice to the general law school community that military practices are inconsistent with the school's non-discrimination policy."

In an article in this month's edition of the law school's online newspaper, Juris Publici, Pagan said: "We respect the men and women who serve in the armed forces of the United States and welcome them to the Law School. We are pleased that representatives of Army, Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard recruit on our campus, and we make every effort to treat them courteously. Our hospitality does not imply that we endorse all of the military's personnel policies, however. . . I wish to emphasize. . . that the law school disapproves of the military's discriminatory practices. Our Law School con-

demns discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation."

Beyond campus and legal issues, the University of Richmond's gay community, particularly males, is divided on the question of appropriate sexual behavior for the closeted gay man.

Cook said: "I think a lot of the gays on this campus are relationship-oriented. But there is a segment of the population that is engaging in promiscuous sex. If you're in the closet it's very, very hard to be in a relationship. Yet you have these uncontrollable urges. For closeted guys there is this side of their sexuality they can't control, but it makes them feel dirty and unaccepted. So they engage in their proclivities in the dark."

Where do closeted gay men cruise for trysts? "It's online," Cook said. "You see it on a lot of different services:

IRC, gay.com, the AOL chat rooms. These people are insecure in their sexuality and feel rejected. They probably don't want to think they're gay,

don't want to be gay, but can't hold back their desires.

"I've heard a lot of rumors. The VCU kids talk about what goes on in Boatwright Library. Alumni who are gay have told me about things happening in the science center or the parking lot of the football stadium. It's just sex in different public places — it's always public because you don't have anywhere to go. This is their way of letting loose."

"There are a lot of bisexuals on campus. Some of them just can't deal with this dichotomy — they don't want to admit this one side of themselves."

The gay male law student painted a similar picture.

"There are a significant minority of men on this campus who live their lives as straight men while going on the Internet to seek out sex with other men," he said. "I understand there is activity in some of the Boatwright Library restrooms, which does not surprise me considering the same thing went on at Virginia Tech. When you are deeply closeted and you find a place you can get relief you sometimes take it."

"I've run across many fraternity guys who are seeking all types of gay sex. Most of them want to have sworn secrecy so that their girlfriends won't find out. The women on this campus are clueless about some of their long-term boyfriends and what happens when they aren't around. Most of these guys are masters of duplicity and even their closest friends do not know. They have these dual lives because to be out on this campus is tantamount to going to class in drag, talking with a lisp and swishing everywhere you go."

Lee said: "I understand why it happens. Guys are frustrated and don't know how to handle their sexuality. It's so hard for guys here to explore their sexuality. Straight people have The Row, where they can just go and meet and hook up with other straight people. But gay people don't have that, so they have to go [elsewhere] to find it."

The outlook for homosexuals at the University is mixed.

While the leaders of the sexual diversity organizations remain optimistic, some in the gay community have abandoned hope. All feel there is a lot of room for change.

"I think [the University is] changing," Stott said. "But I would like to see some open discussions. There has been this proliferation of boxes. We have a box for gays, a box for cross-dressers; humans are so diverse, let's just say we're all diverse and stop putting people in boxes."

The male law school student said: "The trend is toward tolerance, at least at the University level. But there is a lot of work that needs to be done to get that growth down to the student level. The key is to get people to realize we're just like them in every way except in who we love. When people with prejudices meet 'normal' gay guys, like the ones who are generally in the closet at UR, that goes a long way to breaking down barriers. As the official layers of the administration become more accepting and tolerant, that will eventually translate to the students I hope."

The closeted Richmond College student said: "I am comfortable in my sexuality. It was a long and painful process to come to terms with my homosexuality but I have completely. It is not something I have chosen, but something that I am. This campus may not accept that, but I do."

"I think the gay culture on this campus, being so small, is often oppressed. I am sure there are numerous closeted homosexuals who fear rejection if they were to be open. U of R creates a climate that fosters assimilation. Many people have the desire to fit in, and anti-homosexuality is just one of the areas in which they try to fit in. Until this campus embraces individuality, things will not change."

"I have seen many gay individuals transfer or seriously consider it because they felt they could never be themselves here. It is sad we lose so many quality students because of the culture here. It is time for people to open their minds and listen to reason."

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- Jeffrey Clark, '01