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ARCHIVE

Columbia Daily Spectator, Volume CXII, Number 37, 4 November 1987 — 20 years after first homosexual student group is founded, Columbia gay men and lesbians still an invisible minority [ARTICLE+ILLUSTRATION]

20 years after first homosexual student group is founded, Columbia gay men and lesbians still an invisible minority

By Miles Pomper

When gay students banded together to form the Student Homophile League 20 years ago, it seemed that the establishment of a strong homosexual community at Columbia was just a matter of time.

But even though the number of the students who've come out of the closet has increased dramatically since Columbia students organized the nation's first homosexual student organization, gay students are still isolated from each other and the University as a whole.

"Things are splintered here," said Thom Chu, CC'89, "I just hide in my compartment in East Campus and don't see that many people."

Chu's story is not an unusual one. Gay students at Columbia are an invisible, alienated minority—a minority whose members are usually not known to each other and who are shunned or ignored by most other people at the University.

While it is painful for gay students to be rejected by their heterosexual counterparts, they said it was the lack of interaction with their homosexual brethren that makes life at Columbia particularly difficult for them.

Gay students said they are forced apart by the social pressures of a small campus and the easy escape route of New York City.

Kate Holum, CC'88, said the "conservative atmosphere" of the University prevents her from meeting people at the usual campus social spots.

"I don't feel like going to fraternity parties, I don't want to deal with certain social situations, because I won't fit in," Holum said.

Mario DiGangi, CC '88, agreed that the social set-up at Columbia discourages gay people from meeting each other.

“There’s not a whole lot of places to socialize at Columbia in general. But it’s even more difficult for gay people because homosexuality is something people won’t reveal unless they can talk to you and trust you,” DiGangi said.

He added that if he meets someone in class who he is attracted to, but is unsure of their sexual preference, he doesn’t feel comfortable showing his interest.

Instead, he opts for downtown bars and other nightspots where gay men congregate.

“It’s a lot easier to push in a situation where someone is gay, because it’s just too awkward otherwise,” DiGangi said.

Michael Kaminer, CC '88, said this problem is particularly bad for people who have not publicly admitted their homosexuality.

“If I were closeted, it would be impossible to have any kind of social life here. You have to have come out and be plugged into a network to have a social life here,” Kaminer said.

“It’s very difficult to come out here. You can see if someone’s black a mile away, but

in order to see if someone’s gay you have to spend some time with him. And it’s very difficult to connect with people here,” Chu agreed.

Paradoxically, another problem that students said they face is the intimacy of the Columbia community. Since the undergraduate population is so small, rumors travel fast, and it is hard to “come out” to one person without other people on campus hearing about it.

Gay students also said that campus social life suffers because New York’s large homosexual community entices people to leave Morningside Heights and head for nightspots.

“It’s so easy to say ‘forget the frats, forget the parties. I’m heading downtown,’ ” said Margarita Suarez, CC '89.

This interaction between Columbia students and the New York gay and lesbian scene is also evident in the most popular campus event for

homosexuals, the monthly dances sponsored by CGLA.

These dances, held on the first Friday of every month in Earl Hall Auditorium, regularly attract crowds of about 800 people, of which no more than about 200 are Columbia students, according to CGLA officials.

While these dances raise money for CGLA (the group clears between \$2,000 and \$3,000 a dance), they also serve a vital function.

“The dances allow Columbia students to meet people without leaving campus and allow other people to meet somewhere other than downtown bars,” said CGLA Dance Committee Co-Chair Harrison Brace, CC '89.

Although the dances are especially popular events for gay men in New York, gay students said they do not foster a sense of community for homosexuals at Columbia. Indeed, many students avoid the dance because they are afraid of being labelled as homosexual by their heterosexual counterparts.

The small number of lesbians who attend the monthly dances, Barnard and Columbia lesbians say, indicates the even greater difficulties that that group finds in fostering a community. Although CGLA allows women to attend them for free, fewer than 20 lesbian students, and only about 10 female undergraduates, come to most dances.

“Obviously there’s got to be more than 10 gay women on this campus,” said Suarez, “I just don’t know where they are.”

The AIDS crisis has also made it more difficult for gay men to meet each other. Students said they were now more likely to pursue monogamous relationships because the disease made them apprehensive about meeting new people.

“AIDS has made us all grow up much faster, made us all think more if we want to go bed hopping and satisfy ourselves, and then dying because we are not responsible,” said

Joe River, CC '89.

Most of the students said they now practice "safe sex" to cut down on their chances of getting the disease.

Still as CGLA Co-Chair Rodrick Dial, CC '89, said, "AIDS has made a lot of people who thought they were invulnerable, who thought they could never die, feel very scared."

AIDS has not only frightened gays but also heterosexuals who sometimes use the disease as an excuse to insult homosexuals.

"AIDS allows the few people who have something against me being gay to say I don't want to drink out of the same soda bottle, I don't want to be near you, I don't want to sit on the same toilet seat," said Seth Galanter, CC '90.

Heterosexual students have even used the disease as a reason to reject lesbians, the group which has the smallest chance statistically of contracting the illness.

Paul Douglas, an engineering doctoral candidate who helps organize the Columbia Gay Health Advocay Project (GHAP), said there has been an increased number of violent threats and fights against homosexuals since AIDS has caught the public eye.

"We were all on the same playground and when people got angry they called us faggots. Now they just throw AIDS at us," Douglas said.

To try and eliminate some of the fear around AIDS, GHAP has published a manual about the disease and ways to avoid it which has been marketed nationally, and will be conducting floor discussions in freshmen dorms about the illness this year.

On November 17, Gay Health Advocates will be sponsoring a symposium on possible ways of treating AIDS before an individual is ill. Douglas said the gathering, which will include some of the leading medical experts from around the nation, will help dispel myths about AIDS.

"There is a great, great deal of misplaced anxiety out there which we're trying to do something about," Douglas said.

But it is not enough to just say that.

But it is not only the anxiety that heterosexuals feel about AIDS that worries gay students. They are also frightened by prejudice that rarely flares into violence or outright denunciations, but nonetheless underlies many of the students' relationships with the heterosexual majority.

As Richard Schimpf, CC '89, remarked, "Many people who are my acquaintances aren't my friends simply because I'm gay."

CGLA Co-Chair Lynn-Marie Zerbarini agreed, "I think there is a lot of homophobia on campus. It's not cool to say homophobic things but it's definitely there."

The students cited a nearly endless litany of offhand remarks and tasteless jokes condemning them for their sexual orientation. CGLA posters are regularly torn down or defaced. In one case, a straight student sarcastically blew kisses at a gay student while he was in the Columbia Bookstore. And year after year, homosexual students are virtually driven from their rooms because of the antipathy of roommates.

To combat homophobia, CGLA sponsors "floor raps" at the end of the first semester every year where two gays and two lesbians visit first-year student floors in Columbia and Barnard dorms, answer questions, and talk about their experiences.

Chu, who organizes the discussions, said while he and the 25 other students in the project often are subjected to insults from floor members, most people seem genuinely interested in learning about gay and lesbian life.

"People have asked some really good questions like 'have you ever been in love with somebody,' 'have you had any problems with schools?,' 'do you want to have kids?'" Chu said.

The floor raps, which the organization has sponsored for the last 15 years, have served as a powerful brake on homophobia, he added.

"I think it's a really effective way to teach both gay and straight people without any stigma."

And he added, "it's really important for

people to know someone who's gay that's a real-life person that you can talk things out with."

Students said these efforts to unite Columbia's heterosexual and homosexual communities have not been helped by the University administration, which they claimed has kept itself aloof from gay students.

The administration has particularly angered gay students by its tepid support of GHAP. Douglas said while GHAP has pressed the administration to directly fund the group, the organization has been forced to obtain funding from University Health Services and private foundations.

And although Douglas said the health services had been helpful, it is restrained by a limited budget, which does not account for GHAP financing. Therefore health services can only offer limited resources to the group.

In fact GHAP has had such funding woes that CGLA is planning to sponsor a dance to provide them with the funds needed to sustain the operation, Douglas said.

"I think it's ludicrous that we have to go to CGLA for money, but this university operates on a principal of grand inertia. Even though we need them a lot, they don't see any necessity, they don't see it affecting the population as a whole," Douglas remarked.

Dial agreed, "A lot of the problem is that administrators aren't affected by it. This attitude is killing people off; they don't have a sense of urgency about this. They don't realize that people are going to die unless something gets done."

Dial also criticized the progress of a committee set up by University Senior Vice President Joseph Mullinix to establish a University policy regarding AIDS and AIDS victims. The committee, which was established nearly two years ago, has yet to issue a report.

Dial termed the committee a "tragedy" and said, "Columbia has a certain moral and social obligation to not only the immediate community, but the whole country. Columbia could be doing so much and they're engaging in

bureaucratic nonsense.”

Douglas said that the committee’s failure to issue guidelines may leave the University unable to cope with certain crisis situations.

“What are they going to do if a cafeteria worker gets AIDS? It makes no more sense to say this person has AIDS therefore he can’t be a cafeteria worker than to change someone’s employment status because he has a limp. But there is no policy against saying that,” Douglas said.

Dial said that if progress is not made by the committee soon, CGLA may start trying to force a change through protest demonstrations and other confrontational measures.

“If we’re not satisfied with what they’re doing, it’s our obligation to pressure them,” he said.

Getting CGLA to mount any political demonstrations may be difficult, however, according to members of the organization. While it is estimated that nearly one fifth of Columbia students are gay, and homosexual groups at other campuses have become a political force to be reckoned with, CGLA has remained curiously mum in recent times.

The group’s only major political demand the last few years—that the Columbia prohibit the military from recruiting on campus because the armed forces discriminate against homosexuals—was rebuffed by the University Senate last year. Otherwise, the group has sat silent as it has been besieged by organizational and leadership problems.

“People are politically interested, but they haven’t been organized into actual demonstration very well. That’s our job and we’ve been very bad at it,” said Schimpf, a member of the CGLA executive board.

Students also said that gay activists can’t count on the same network of supporters as other groups. They said that while white students often march with black students to demand racial equality, heterosexual students don’t join demonstrations for sexual equality because they are afraid they will be identified as gay or lesbian.

“Straight people who support us are afraid to speak up, afraid of making a fuss, afraid of being called gay,” Holum said.

Another group which has been resolutely silent is the University’s faculty—both homosexual and heterosexual. The faculty, most notably during the 1985 divestment demonstrations, has been a source of support for other student movements.

While student may hear rumors about instructors who are homosexuals, none has stepped forward to admit his or her homosexuality, or to publicly champion the rights of gay students.

Students said they thought that some teachers had submerged their homosexuality to guarantee that they receive tenure.

“Professors are allowed to be gay, but they’re not allowed to be loud about it,” Suarez said.

She added that the lack of vocal support from faculty members made the lonely fight for gay civil rights even lonelier.

“Things would be easier if we could have professors say ‘hey you’re doing a great job’ or ‘keep it up’ .”

Some of the group’s political difficulties stem from the same sources as individual woes, Dial said. Since gay students tend to be isolated socially at Columbia, they may not have the degree of solidarity that is needed for effective political organization. And since Columbia is in New York City, politically active students find citywide gay organizations, such as the Gay and Lesbian Task Force and ACTUP, a group fighting for increased AIDS research funding, to be worthwhile outlets for their energies.

In fact, many students who are more than willing to participate in city-wide or national demonstrations, are not willing to show their faces in actions on Columbia’s campus.

They said that because Columbia is such a small community, they are afraid that they will be recognized by people who are not aware of their homosexuality, and who will then automatically reject them.

"I want the nation to notice that I'm marching, but I don't want anyone I know to notice," Suarez said.

This situation may be changing, however. Last May, about 35 CGLA members protested the University's decision to invite Roman Catholic Archbishop John Cardinal O'Connor to speak at last year's baccalaureate service because of the church's preaching against homosexuality. And three weeks ago more than 50 students associated with CGLA joined a national demonstration for increased AIDS funding and a gay civil rights bill in Washington, D.C.

As Jamie, a Barnard senior who asked that her last name not be used, said, the march was a turning point for gay students in terms of political activism.

"This years going to be a whole new ballgame. Now people seem to have politcal activity on their minds," she said.

A new sense of political activism, of course, only means that the voice of gay students will not be silenced. It does not guarantee that gay students will be able to win the acceptance they want so badly from either administrators or their fellow students.

But in walking out of the closet and unto the street, gay students may finally be able to convince others—as well as themselves—that they belong at Columbia.

And perhaps it will not take another 20 years before gay and lesbian students are an integral part of Columbia life rather than an isolated minority fighting for their rights.



SPECTATOR/LESLI ALLISON

FIGHT FOR YOUR RIGHT: CGLA traveled to Washington D.C. last month for a national gay rights rally.