BGLAD panel focuses on safe sex

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Contributing Writer

Bisexual, Gay, and Lesbian Awareness Days (BGLAD) activities continued last night with a panel discussion titled “Coming Out in the ‘90s,” that focused on safer sex.

Approximately 25 students gathered in Schermerhorn Hall to talk about the challenges of remaining disease-free while sexually active.

Laura Pinsky, coordinator of Columbia Health Services’ Gay Health Advocacy Program (GHAP), organized the event with Spencer Cox, a consultant for the organization, at the request of Gay, Bisexual, and Lesbian Employees and Supporters (GABLES).

The discussion examined the reasons why risky sexual practices are becoming more common again, after the cautionary years that ensued after the dangers of AIDS became widely known.

“There was an initial adherence to safer sex and then a drop-off, so again, more gay men are being infected,” Pinsky said, adding that most newly-infected people are either gay men or women who had had sex with infected men.

Ken Harlin, a member of GABLES, said he was concerned that the generation of gay men that is coming out after the discovery of
AIDS during the early 1980s is failing to acknowledge the importance of safer sex.

“A lot of younger people have friends who are HIV-positive or who have died from AIDS,” he said. “A lot of the older people, like myself, have had half of our friends die.”

Much of the discussion focused on defining the meaning of safe sex and on how successful the discussion group participants have been in incorporating this knowledge into their own sexual habits.

Several women who attended the discussion expressed concern over the lack of information available to lesbians about the likelihood of transmission of the disease through unprotected oral sex and other sexual activities.

Pinksy said that in most cases in which AIDS was transmitted through sexual contact, the disease seemed to be spread through either vaginal or anal sex.

However, she and other educators were unable to state that the virus could “never” be transmitted through oral sex between lesbians.

The sexual transmission of Hepatitis B was also discussed. According to Cox, Hepatitis B can be passed along in much the same way as HIV, through blood, cervi-
cal and vaginal secretions, and semen, but that it is much more easily transmitted.

He also said that 10 percent of people who develop Hepatitis B develop chronic hepatitis, which can lead to liver cirrhosis and liver cancer, which can be fatal.

Cox expressed dismay that more people do not take the Hepatitis B vaccine, which consists of three shots over a period of three weeks to six months.

"It's something we can do something about," he said. "Not all things are as easily prevented."

The organizers of the program said they hoped that the recent increase in unsafe sex would eventually be reversed through widespread education programs.

"The figures aren't that different from where they were fifteen years ago [before the AIDS crisis]. We know the information is out there; we know how to have safer sex. The question is, why aren't they?" Cox said.

Wayne Steward, CC '97, a member of the Lesbian, Bisexual, and Gay Coalition (LBGC) said that there is a tendency among certain gay men to use sex as "the icebreaker."

"The conversations about safe sex often comes after the sex itself," Steward said.