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Queer Awareness Month opens with poetic performance

BY ELYSE PITOCK

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Queer Awareness Month kicked off last night with a provocative set from spoken word poet Staceyann Chin.

The ceremony brought Chin, the poet and political activist, together with Peter Awn, dean of the School of General Studies, and about 70 attendees in the Diana Center Monday night.

“I so admire the swagger with which you walk the world,” Chin told the audience members, who responded enthusiastically to her poetry.

In an opening speech, Awn, who has worked at Columbia since 1978, described how the LGBT community and the campus have changed over the past several decades.

“I care deeply about the fact that Columbia has continued to grow and evolve into a community that celebrates diversity in its most profound way,” Awn said, who described himself as “really, really old and very, very gay.”

In 1967, the first student organization in the world representing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning students emerged at Columbia. Then called the Student Homophile League, the group has since evolved into the Columbia Queer Alliance.

“In 1967, it was gutsy to even hint that you were gay or lesbian,” Awn said, adding that homophobic incidents have decreased on campus.

Awn addressed the emergence of AIDS in the 1980s, and the obstacles the male gay community faced from outsiders who believed AIDS to be evidence of moral decay.

“It was a time when the community galvanized,” he said. “Today, it may not be HIV, but now it’s gay marriage.”

Chin, who is pregnant and on bed rest, performed parts of her memoir “The Other Side of Paradise” from a couch, touching on topics ranging from reaching puberty to exploring New York.

But the performance focused mainly on her experiences as a lesbian growing up in Jamaica, in a place and time that was not accepting of differences.

“It was so dangerous to be out,” she said.

Nina Spierer, BC ’12 and co-chair of QuAM, spoke of reaching out to the broader community. “QuAM is a time for everyone to create safe spaces on campus,” she said.

Awn echoed that statement in his speech, saying, “Columbia, to me, has been an extraordinarily welcoming place.”

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PERFORMANCE ART | Poet and activist Staceyann Chin spoke at the opening ceremony of Queer Awareness Month on Monday.