

'There's No way I'd change. No way in the world.'

A firsthand account of what it's like to be a homosexual on the University of Richmond campus. A support group offers help, but more than support is needed.

By Laura Paffilo

"There are no gay people on this campus!" they said, laughing. "I'll be sitting right there," she said, "and in the back of my mind, in my heart, I'll be laughing at these people who are so naive as to think that 10 percent of the population does not exist on this campus. That doesn't make sense. So I'll just say something like, 'Well, I bet there are.'"

Yes, Virginia, there are homosexuals here. Yes, this conversation took place on the campus of the University of Richmond. And yes, the two students are a gay man and a lesbian.

These two people, who wish to remain anonymous, are seeking to form a support group to help solve the special problems faced by gay and lesbian members in the University community.

"We try to understand the problems of other minorities," he said. "We have the Minority Student Union for blacks, we even have a Catholic Student Union and a Baptist Student Union for people just so they can be reinforced by people who have the same feelings that they do."

"So I think it's necessary [to have a support group] because a lot of socialization has to happen in order to come out of the closet comfortably. There's only so much you can question yourself. Until you actually talk to someone and straighten it all out, you don't, it just doesn't happen."

The group has placed a notice in The Collegian's briefs section for several issues. If a person calls the number there, the man said, he will reach Jeff Clausel of Counseling and Psychological Ser-

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vices, who is acting on behalf of the group as a "clearing house."

Clausel determines through conversation whether the caller is genuinely interested, he said. If he is, Clausel then passes the names on to him, he said, and he contacts the callers about the time and place of the meeting.

The student emphasized the strict confidentiality and closed nature of the group. He said he wanted people to feel that it was a safe place and wanted them to know that only other gay people would be there, that no one had to talk and no one was obligated to come. There is no reason for a person to even tell his name to the other members if he doesn't want to, he said.

"It's a little bit hard to understand or relate to, if you're not a gay person, why it is so important to see other gays around or just know who they are," he said. "All I can say is that when you're gay and you finally find a gay 'community' it's like finding a family. You feel for the first time a real positive feedback. For the first time you can feel good about your sexuality, which is not you, but it's a part of you."

"And people can go for years denying their sexuality and still living lives... I personally tried to date women, and the relationships I had with them were good. They were good friends, but I know deep down that it was just a further denial. That's very common."

She said, "The worst part is having to live a lie when you don't feel like you ought to have to. I hate not being able to be honest with my friends. That's hard. I mean, that's a whole part of my life, of me, but it is just a part. Some people will label you so quickly. I can say: 'I'm a student, I'm a daughter, I'm a granddaughter, I'm all these different things,' and then I'll go, 'and I'm a lesbian,' and that's like, 'Bloom! There it is! That's the whole me, right there, encompassed in that word.' And that's wrong."

"The hardest thing to do is to come out to yourself. I was lucky. I came out with my lover, so that made it easier. But if you're just alone, that's not so easy."

"And I think I've now been confronted with a little bit of that by coming here because I am alone, and I'm feeling that whole process of having to reconfirm that I'm OK with myself when everybody around me is saying, 'You're not OK. You know it's almost like 'You are not OK' or 'You are not normal' every time you walk across campus or turn on the TV, the music, everything."

"I think all people find stages in their lives when they're alone. And I think that if people don't understand what we're going through, maybe they

need to reflect on when they were alone or felt alone. They were alone for a different reason, but they were still alone."

He said, "Gay people are people and they need friends, too. And they need roommates... I don't want people to think when they read this that I'm some kind of queen; I hate that word, but it illustrates [what I mean]. I'm a normal person. I'm not flamboyantly gay and I'm certainly not oversexual or psychotic about my gayness. I'm just, you know, normal."

"I also don't think gays are superior, but there are a lot of negative stereotypes I'd like to address. One is that gay people must be unhappy. That's not true—there are very many happy gay people."

"A second is that gays are striving to be different, to stand out, and that they're using their sexuality as a tool to do so. Again, that's ridiculous; there are gay people who are very introverted and some who are very extroverted."

"Yes, there are gay people in the theater and the arts, but there are gay accounting majors and electrical engineers, too."

He said he thought many people were afraid of homosexuals because of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. AIDS is not something to fear but something to understand, for both homosexuals and heterosexuals. He has known AIDS victims who died, he said, but none of them were close friends of his.

"This may sound harsh," he said, "but if AIDS helps make the straight community aware of our problems, it may be a blessing in disguise. I mean, if you can't sympathize with their societal struggles, maybe the fact that they're dying will make a difference."

The woman said the argument that AIDS existed because God was punishing the gay community was ridiculous.

"There are lots of straight people who have AIDS, too," she said. "Even little babies and children have it now. Sleeping around and unsafe sex are the problems; it's not a moral thing. If it is, then lesbians must be the most moral people in the world. God must really think we're great, because we're at almost no risk of catching it."

Although the methods of contracting the disease have been well publicized, the man said, he wanted to remind and reassure people that they could not catch AIDS from casual contact. It is also unfair to use AIDS to justify prejudice, he said.

Homosexuals should not laugh at gay jokes, whether their friends know they're gay or not, because that just reinforces the stereotypes, he said.

"I don't want to appear invincible. No, I'm very human. This is scary for me to do, to talk to you and put these things in print. I want to put myself back two or three years and think, 'If I were here I was then, would this encourage me to attend a meeting, to have a relationship, or would it just make me feel like, "If I'm going to come out, I'm going to have to do something like that and there's no way I'm going to [talk to The Collegian].'"

"I'm not saying it's all roses because it's not. I mean, there are going to be people who will give you a hard time. There are going to be family members who are just not going to accept you. There are many people who lose their jobs either formally or unofficially because of it... If you're religious you may have to rethink your

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faith or find another church or religion bend a little.

"But it's OK to take some risks. At most you're not really fit to you're some friends, but I didn't. Some people are discussing it, but they're hush on me. In fact, it's sending a lot closer."

She said she had a gay male friend who visited her here on campus and pretended to be her boyfriend. She describes her friend, says she's gay, and introduces her significant other to people as her boyfriend on weekends and on other occasions.

"Instead of being able to say 'I love you' at the end of a phone call," she said, "I have to say 'Well, my roommate knows I'm your friend. You can't discuss dates or things that are romantically linked. When she visits me down here we have to be sure we walk a part."

"I hate the whole 'This is my friend.' Anybody else in the world could say, 'This is my girlfriend.' This is my friend.' And that totally magnifies the relationship. And you don't get your friends because they don't even know that it's a friend."

She said she had told her friends about her relationship, but she was careful only to tell those she felt were ready to hear it. She has also told her brother and sister, but not her parents.

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"They're always asking me 'Do your friends think I'm gay?' I'm dating, but I just can't tell them the rest of my life with her. They'll probably have to learn to deal with that."

She said she thought it would probably hurt them to know that they would be legally, not just symbolically, married. She said, but American attitudes aren't likely to change enough to allow that to happen, she said, and hopes her

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Gay support group founded at UR

Valerie Goughly
Copy Editor
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Reporter

Peer support groups help people feel more self-assured, whether they are members of Alcoholics Anonymous or a grief counseling group.

One male University of Richmond student has taken the initiative to begin a peer support group for gays on this campus.

Gay people have the same feelings of insecurity that everyone does at least once in their lives, he said.

A peer support group is not a counseling group, he said.

"Counseling makes it sound like someone needs help," he said. "I don't see gay people as having problems. They just need support."

The student said he had been attending a gay peer support group at Virginia Commonwealth University but decided to begin one at the University because of the reinforcement he received at the VCU group.

"It's hard to put into words the reinforcement you can get from your peer group," he said.

Many students are at various stages of coming out of the closet, he said. The peer support group would be a reminder that there are others at the University who do understand and support them, he said.

The group, which will hold its first meeting sometime after this publication, has a prearranged meeting place, he said.

Jeff Clausel, a psychologist at Counseling and Psychological Services, is the liaison for the group.

Clausel said he screens the calls of those wanting to become affiliated with the group. If the student sounds interested and sincere, Clausel said, he tells the support group organizers the student's name and number.

"Most of this is done so the students can preserve their anonymity," he said.

"I don't even go to the group meetings," Clausel said. "I'm not a therapist for the group."

If members of the support group think a person needs counseling, Clausel said, they should ask him to reconsider attending the group meetings and refer him to CAPS.

The meetings will be similar to those at VCU, which include speakers and projects, the student

said. As far as the projects go, the student said, they will be informative.

"The VCU group has presented programs about gay residents to the RAs," he said, and they've also had informative sessions to make sure the administrators understood the specific needs of the gay population at VCU.

"VCU's support group is more advanced—it has more speakers and projects," he said. "We're going to be playing it by ear for a while depending upon what the students [here] need."

At least six homosexual students have come to CAPS for counseling, Clausel said, and he knows of more who are gay.

"Some of these people are in relationships," he said, "but they still don't feel comfortable in this environment."

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On the national level, Clausel said, 3 percent to 10 percent of the male population and 2 percent to 10 percent of the female population are homosexual.

"If it goes in line with the general population," Clausel said, "20 to 40 students [on this campus] are

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—Jeff Clausel

gay." The male student attacked the fact that many gays on this campus may not be ready to become a member of this support group.

"I'm probably one of the few who is ready for this," he said. "Maybe I'm not. I hope I'm not because I want to help."

Clausel said: "It's sad to think of people who could be happy but don't want the environment and are too afraid to take the risk to come [to the meetings]. They could find a lot of support."

parents will consider them grandchildren just as they would her sister's or brother's children. The man said his family was one of the best sources of support he had found. He feels fortunate to have understanding parents and friends, he said, and he felt a burden had been lifted when he finally told them.

Both stressed the importance of a source of support. They met initially at a support group meeting at Virginia Commonwealth University and were prompted by their experiences there to begin one at the University.

All campus organizations should be open to the idea that they may have gay members and that they may need to help those people, he said.

"Fraternities, sororities, religious groups, whatever," he said. "They all need to be there for those who need them so much about."

He said he advised those who were contemplating coming out to think about why they were telling this particular person and what that person's reaction might be, and to be sure they expressed it in such a way that their friend knew they were sincere and happy about it.

"There's a lot of people who are just not ready to tell you they're gay," he said. "If they truly are your friends, they will want to see you happy."

A straight person should not be afraid to

approach the subject with gay friends or with friends he thinks may be having problems dealing with the decision to come out, he said.

He wants straight people to understand that the decision these people have to make is not whether they are gay, but whether they come out, he said.

"Everyone has homosexual thoughts at some point in their lives," he said. "That's normal, and just because you have them doesn't mean you're gay. That's why seeing publicly affectionate gays is threatening and scary, or maybe just unsettling, for some people. If you're really gay, you'll know. There's no choice about it. It's just a matter of confronting it."

A straight person should ask his gay friends how they want to handle the topic in conversation, he said, and he should find out if his friend wants his homosexuality to be public knowledge or even a publicly discussed issue. He said he should be sympathetic and work to communicate and share the responsibility that comes with the knowledge.

"It's hard for people to know how to deal with gay friends here," he said, "because there is none of that going on openly. They can't just say, 'Oh, so-and-so is gay and his friends do this, so this is what I'll do.'"

"Do not feel betrayed when an old friend tells

you they're gay. They're the same person and obviously think a lot of you. Don't think 'Well, they didn't tell me last month,' because they did tell you this month."

The woman said support from friends on campus was something she missed because she had told so few people.

She said, "There's a lot of things you can't relate to. It's tough when girls sit around talking about dates, birth control, fraternities, dances, things like that. It's hard not to just scream 'I'm so tired of straight people!' Not that I don't like them. I just want to be able to sit. I went out with this woman last night and she was so great."

Both said they wanted to use this support group to give homosexual students a place where they could feel free to talk and work through their problems without the fear of being judged.

"One gay I told asked me, 'If you could take a pill and change, would you?'" she said. "I looked at him and I said, 'You like women, why would you change?' He said he wouldn't. I said, 'Then why would I want to?'"

"Yeah, it's a hassle and there's a lot of problems in society, but it's not problems with me. It's problems in society. There's no way I'd change. No way in the world."