An English professor's life outside the closet

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Collegian Editor

Melissa Capers knows what it's like to be the other closet. She knows about getting denied for a promotion at a past job. She knows about not being accepted for a scholarship. She knows about how it feels to be the other closet.

But so far, this hasn't happened — she was rehired this year.

Friends and Foes

Those who have responded to Capers' openness have been mostly positive. Some said they thought she was cool or that she was intelligent. Others who weren't in her class sent her messages of support through campus mail.

It seems almost universal. Those who don't like her homosexuality don't say anything. Those who support her say so.

"If nobody knew I was gay," she admits, "it would be easier for me to find out information about how many people hate gays. They don't tell me that information now.

In fact, most of her supporters — she calls them friends — those who know her's more to her than her sexual preference. And those who regard her as seem to be scrupulous who know her only as a lesbian.

"It's pretty uncommon for me to talk to anyone with people who accept and support me," she says.

"It's easy to live in a world in which I think "Oh, yeah, everybody accepts or approves my gayness." But this world doesn't exist, as Capers well knows. Even one of her friend's car was smashed because a pink triangle hung in the window, the Kakits in contemplating the hate crime. Nobody, everybody does not accept being gay.

Sometimes even her heterosexual friends are not entirely supportive, despite good intentions.

"It's harder to care for people that still aren't sometimes don't get it," she says.

"It would be easier if they weren't my friends, and I could say, "Oh, close-minded ass.""

But when they are her friends, she can't say it.

"Straight white friends sometimes tell me to protect her and tell her to come out."

"It's inappropriate in the classroom setting," she says.

"People don't walk in and start announcing their heterosexuality.

But Capers says they do.

Action like wearing a wedding ring or displaying family pictures show students' professor's are straight and proud of it.

"Nobody ever checking in when a professor says my wife or my husband," she says. "But I have yet to say my girlfriend and I."

Life's Reaction

Still, Capers formally comes out to the English class she teaches, both at the University and at VCU.

As you would guess, there's been a difference in how students perceived Capers after the revealed her homosexuality, but it isn't as cut and dry as many might think.

At the University of Richmond, Capers says, there is a much stronger sense of community, whereas VCU is more scattered and diverse. "I felt the reaction at VCU was much more complicated in the classroom," she says.

"It's harder to say something that might make me an outsider and therefore people had to offer me an invitation back into the community."

At both schools, she adds, "The reaction is a lot of freedom. People don't feel that you have to respond or even if they had to."

"I've not added," she adds, "a lot of relief when we get back to campus."

Making screening uncomfortable is a key from Capers' goal. Instead, she seems to go out of her way to not to bridge the gap between gay and straight, teacher and student.

"All the time the fire's burning, she says, "it made it more relaxed. I didn't know them (students) at all and we didn't know them, but we could talk about the dog."

A Professor and a Writer

As a teacher of freshman English, Capers says many professors discuss first-year students too easily. "I really learn a lot from my students," Capers says.

"I learn about the expectations they bring to college, the first time they're seeing being adversarial, the — the teacher is the enemy, the — the teacher is the enemy, the reasonably. Capers is not to deny all this.

"Students are in setting the way that they want an 'A'," she says. "I don't think, in fact, want something more, more, but we don't want to sound on paper, just like everyone does, Capers says."

And Capers doesn't sound like everyone else on paper either. A published author of both fiction and non-fiction, she is currently working on her master's degree in creative writing at VCU while writing a novel.

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