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ries of people saying I had just come with my girlfriend to make a statement. The truth was that we had come to the dance together because we were dating, so of course we wanted to go with one another — just like straight couples."

A year later, it was a gay male student's turn to take center stage. Craig Mitchell, '93, was a very popular guy on campus. Intelligent, athletic, articulate, and strikingly handsome, Mitchell had become a favorite DJ at 135 Pearl, a downtown Burlington club. The Saginaw, Michigan graduate was invited to represent his class during his class's commencement proceedings as speaker, and part of Mitchell's speech was a first for an SMC commencement.

"I address you today," Mitchell told the assembly, "not as an African-American student, and not as a gay student, but as a Saint Michael's College student."

Thanks to Mitchell, the "gay" word finally made its way to the lexicon of SMC graduation lore.

So, it seemed to me that some courageous SMC students and alumni were taking the College, kicking and screaming into the 21st century. The future for lesbian and gay students at St. Mike's looked promising.

But, in the autumn of 1998, there was devastating news from Wyoming which reverberated throughout the Colchester campus.

In October, Matthew Shepard, an openly gay University of Wyoming student, was beaten with the blunt end of a .357 magnum gun by two young, homophobic men who had been tweaking crystal meth for nearly five days. Shepard's brutally beaten, unconscious body was tied to a cattle fence a few miles from Laramie. Shepard was left to die alone in near-freezing temperatures. Shepard's face and head had been so brutally smashed by the assault that even his parents had difficulty recognizing their comatose son in the hospital, where he died four days later.

A few weeks after the Shepard murder, *The Defender*, in an article about SMC student reaction to the Shepard case and homophobia at SMC, Theresa Krieger, '99, identified herself as a lesbian.

In that article, Krieger told *The Defender* that "every now and again I get a reminder maybe you're not safe (at St. Michael's)."

That reminder was reinforced in the form of an anonymous message left on Krieger's school voicemail account soon after her *Defender* interview. According to College Security reports, a "very lewd and sexually graphic" message was left on Krieger's voicemail by a male SMC freshman.

That freshman student was suspended for the remainder of the academic year after he admitted that he had left the message.

"This didn't happen in a vacuum," Krieger told *The Defender* after the incident. "Either passively or actively, there were people condoning this. In some sense we are all responsible for what kind of environment we create on campus."

At the time of the voicemail message episode, Krieger was president of Ally. Krieger's experience demonstrated, at least to me, that it was still risky to be openly gay at SMC.

Is it any wonder, though?

To put it bluntly, the Catholic Church hasn't exactly embraced their gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers.

As with other contentious issues in the Catholic Church, such as abortion, birth control, or the roles of women in the Church, and now homosexuality, the Church often appears to take two steps forward and one backward,

leaving sexual minority living in a perpetual Catch-22.

In November 1998, an American Catholic bishops' committee released "Always Our Children," a pastoral message that urged fellow Catholics to be more tolerant of homosexual orientation as something not "freely chosen."

However, the National Conference of Bishops regards homosexual acts (sex) as "intrinsically disordered." So, the bishops contend, with Vatican approval, that homosexuals must remain chaste (i.e., no sex) for as long as they're unmarried — and, presumably, for as long as they're not heterosexual.

Heterosexuals who are married get the green light from the Vatican to have sex. But, what if homosexuals want to marry? That's a moot question because no jurisdiction in the U.S. currently recognizes same-gender marriages. However, Vermont is currently the only jurisdiction in the U.S. that sanctions a same-gender "civil union."

However, as most Vermonters know, a civil union is not a marriage.

Based on several media accounts, one would guess that The Most Reverend Kenneth A. Angell, the Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Burlington, is not exactly a supporter of same-gender unions or of sexual minority folks.

"I will be praying in solidarity with supporters of traditional marriage throughout Vermont, our nation, and indeed the world, that someday we shall celebrate a constitutional amendment to preserve the sanctity of marriage," wrote Bishop Angell on the Burlington Diocese's web page.

Pressure such as Bishop Angell's can take a heavy toll on those at SMC who are bound by Church and Vatican dictates.

And, just to seemingly make matters worse, the conservative Cardinal Newman Society for the Preservation of Catholic Higher Education maintained that "the essential elements of a Catholic education has been discarded for the sake of the mistaken notion of academic freedom," and urged that Catholic colleges ban openly gay staff.

If this often contradictory stuff is as confusing to you as it is to me, consider what all of this might mean to contemporary Catholic college gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender students who are trying to be otherwise faithful stewards of and to their faith. Specifically, given those sometimes confusing and contradictory messages from Church, government and college authorities, one wonders where it leaves gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender Catholic students, specifically those at Saint Michael's College.

I tried to get answers to some of my own questions born of confusion by asking mostly recent St. Michael's gay alums what campus life was like when they were students. Frankly, I was absolutely certain that my respondents would tell me that, out of frustration, they've disassociated themselves from Saint Michael's College, if not the Roman Catholic Church. I was also absolutely sure that they had become cynics, feeling that their College and Faith had deserted them.

Fortunately, I was also absolutely wrong.

It seems that many of the positive changes toward LGBT students at St. Mike's have been brought about, in large measure, by courageous SMC students, young men and women, who feel very strongly that they can be loyal to their faith as well as to their divine gifts of sexuality.

Along with the several students who've managed to light the way for others, faculty and staff have also often served as beacons for LGBT students during some very stormy and dangerous times — perhaps jeopardizing their own personal or professional lives.

According to many current and recently graduated students, Dr. Dave Landers, the Director of the Student Resource Center and Linda Hollingdale, the Center's assistant director, are two of those beacons.

"Dave became, and remains, a counselor, a friend, a mentor, a father ... and is among a small group of the most influential people in my life," said William J. Rogers, '98, a former counselor with the SMC Admissions department, and now the current Executive Director of OutRight Vermont, a Burlington organization dedicated to counseling and directing gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth.

Landers said that if Michael Ward and I were now attending SMC as openly gay students, we'd probably find it a comfortable and safe experience, and that we'd probably be able to feel that way without encountering many of the problems and hassles that would have most assuredly hit us a generation ago while we were students.

"More and more current students are being educated about sexual orientation issues earlier in their experiences here, and so the difficulties you experienced here are not the same today," said Landers. "Now I speak at