

Calling all Queer Women!

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PEER FACILITATORS for the Adult Coming Out Support Group.

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fax 802-453-6685
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every orientation and one of my standard lines is, 'Saint Michael's College doesn't just accept differences, we celebrate them. We are a better place because we have gay and lesbian and bisexual students here.'

And it appears those sexual minority students, as well as those who are questioning their sexuality, often describe Saint Michael's as an excellent place to discover themselves and their sexuality.

Rogers said that he came out at Saint Michael's. "I came here a fairly independent, well-traveled, 'non-traditional' transfer student who knew something in his life needed a change," Rogers said. "I happened to meet a group [at SMC] of the most caring, supportive, nurturing, challenging, wonderful people I have ever had the good fortune to know."

Susan Wilson, '98, said that she found SMC a great place to define herself as a lesbian because of the sustenance given her by the College and staff.

"When I came out my sophomore year, there were only two other out lesbian students on campus," Wilson said. "I was able to come out because of the openly gay and lesbian staff and faculty on campus. They were good and helpful people, and I looked up to them. In cliché terms, they were my role models."

Wilson, as with many of SMC's openly-gay students, assumed student leadership roles on campus. Wilson, then a theatre major, served as a Resident Assistant, co-chair of Ally, and was an active participant in the Emerging Leaders Program. She said that it's not just gay faculty and staff who provide support and guidance for LBGTQ SMC students; several heterosexual faculty and staff members have served as unofficial, but strong, LBGT "allies."

"Especially [associate professor] Diane Lynch," Wilson said. "Can I say her name? She rocks!"

Still, as at many colleges or universities, life for openly gay or bisexual students at SMC isn't always a piece of cake, as the fall '98 voice-mail episode clearly demonstrates. Being other than heterosexual at St. Michael's often comes with a price for many.

"I think that it is still hard to be gay on campus today," said David Grenier, '97 of Burlington. "Especially with the recent marriage debate. It has sort of split the college."

In 1999, in a case that Vermonters know all too well, a case which has national implications, the Vermont Supreme Court ruled that the Vermont State Legislature had to afford same-gender couples similar legal protection as married couples currently enjoy.

In 2000, the Vermont Legislature and Governor Dean followed the state Supreme Court directive and created the now-famous "civil union" statute for same-gender couples.

Coincidentally, the *Baker et al. v. Vermont* case has a rather significant Saint Michael's College connection. Two of the successful petitioners in that case were Peter Harrigan, '83 and his partner, Stan Baker. Harrigan is currently a popular SMC associate professor of Fine Arts.

Although it appears that most at St. Michael's has been supportive of Harrigan, there are, undoubtedly, many forces and personalities both in and outside the College who have not been nearly as supportive. And some are particularly non-supportive in a rather public way.

Harrigan told *The Defender* in a March 2000 interview that he has walked a fine line on campus. "It is difficult because the Catholic Church has certain beliefs of teaching about homosexuality," Harrigan said. "Yet, at the same time the College has a strong commitment to social justice and civil rights, so I can't see why it would be difficult for people in the community to reconcile these two things or figure out how to respond based on that dichotomy."

So, despite—and probably in some cases, in spite of—official Church and Diocese policy, life goes on for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and questioning faculty and staff at St. Michael's College.

But there's some irony about how life goes on for sexual minority students at St. Mike's: Students have reported that those in the Office of Campus Ministry — one of the dwindling number of official links that the College still maintains with the Catholic Church — have been significantly helpful

"Campus Ministry is wonderfully supportive and open to having gay students be part of the Masses and other programs they have," Joe Kelleher, '01, said.

Kelleher knows the campus well. He's held several leadership positions while a student at Saint Michael's: a resident assistant, MOVE core team member and co-chair of Ally. Although he was born without a right arm, Kelleher was part of the 3,000-plus riders in the 2000 annual Boston-to-New York AIDS ride. The ride raised \$7 million; Kelleher personally raised \$2,500.

Still, as altruistic, intelligent and gutsy as Kelleher is, he and millions of others like him continue to be the objects of debate, derision, and disgust simply because they're gay.

Yet Joe and all the rest move ahead with their lives, doing the best they can, all the while hoping and praying that society, and those who form the greater Roman Catholic community, will soon come to realize that each person has value and dignity "which should be respected in full," and that a person's sexuality, whatever orientation, is an integral part of that value and dignity.

Then those of us who comprise the Saint Michael's gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender alumni family might look back on our experiences at SMC and muse as gay alum Bob King, '84, recently did: "I treasure my memories of St. Mike's and am thankful for the time I spent there. I made some life-long friends and learned a great deal — not the least of which was about myself."

My guess is that my classmate, Mike Ward, and all the other gay alums of Saint Michael's College who preceded, as well as those who will follow us at the Happy Hilltop, are nodding their heads in agreement.

Because, as with folks such as Joe Kelleher, Bob King, Peter Harrigan, Sue Wilson, David Grenier, Randy Orso, Jennifer Calkins, B. J. Rogers, Theresa Krieger, Jen Matthews, Craig Mitchell, Allison Davis, Peter McDonough, Paul Leduc and countless other SMC alums, Mike and I weren't really alone at Saint Michael's — although some of us didn't know it at the time.

Perhaps that's the "deeper meaning" that I've been missing all these years.