

UVM Course Offers Open Discussion

For years Jim Barbour has taught a course called Human Relationships and Sexuality at UVM. Every year he devotes a lecture to the discussion of homosexuality. This year, UVM's newly revived GLSA was on hand to coordinate efforts to find volunteers from the gay and lesbian community to sit in on the discussion groups that followed the lecture. The volunteers as well as the students learned from the experience. Following are some reactions from some of the volunteers to their experience in the groups.

They asked everything. What was my family like? Did they know? When had I come out? Who was dominant in my relationships? Did I have the "normal" urges to have children? Did I want to be straight? And then someone asked "Why do you do this (talking to groups)? To know more about yourself and feel more secure?" I thought with astonishment, do I make it look that easy? I smiled and said, "No. I do this for you."

At the end of one the groups, someone asked me, "If you're gay, can you tell if other people are, better than a straight person can?" I laughed and explained some of the components of gay radar, haircuts, labryses, clothes, walks. When we were leaving, I drew aside the most unhomophobic member of the group and said to her, "You know I didn't want to embarrass you but I thought of using you as an example. Short hair, no make-up, Birkenstocks, etc." She grinned and said, "Actually I am bisexual." Dyke radar strikes again!

Before I went to each of these groups, I couldn't help worrying- What should I wear? I should at least wear something that matches, or even a dress? No not that far. After all it's quite a responsibility to represent all lesbians, gay men and bisexual people of all ages, races and experiences. In the zoo they at least try to display one animal of each species. Many of these students said I was the first openly gay person they had met. Gayness is certainly the easiest thing for me to be an expert in. If only these groups paid like talk-shows!

Ruth

I sat there with seven well-scrubbed faces blinking back at me. They were curious, but nervous. I was determinedly friendly and open, but it was a thin veneer over my defensiveness. I wanted to appear balanced and in-control, but I also wanted to portray a vivid sense of the unjust and unprovoked hostility and discrimination I experience as a lesbian.

I wanted them to ask me questions, but the questions were so hard to answer I found myself in long monologues. "Why does it matter to you that other people know you are gay?" "Why are lesbians so

angry towards men?" Of course there were a few easy ones like "Do you feel fulfilled in your sex life with a woman?"

I left after the hour and a half feeling jumbled. What had I said? What did they think about me, about homosexuality? Had I made any impact? What could I have said better? I wished I had a chance to do it again. And then I realized that what I really wanted was a chance to change all people's minds everywhere. I remembered that I can only afford to care so much about what the rest of the world thinks about me. I am beautiful just the way I am.

Dot

The students, eight women plus the "leader" who was a man, were not confrontational. Some of them did have very little information about lesbians and gay men. Most of them seemed eager to talk and learn.

At times I felt the students wanted definitive answers to their questions about homosexuality. I tried, but things just can't be explained as black or white.

I felt good after the class. I hope the people in the group felt less confused-- more accepting. I wish I had such a class while in college that dealt with subject. It might have made my life easier!

Phillip

Last week I was asked to participate as a guest in a human sexuality group. The topic - homosexuality. My immediate, thoughtless reaction - no, refusal, I would not accept.

Why was I saying no? No...one of a child's first words - an easy response. Fear.. I didn't know, the group, what would happen?

But I want to be accepted. Why don't "they" just accept me? No...an easy response. Fear...they don't understand, me, us, what would happen?

How do you know, understand?

I went to the meeting. It wasn't easy. I was uncomfortable and nervous. The group was uncomfortable and nervous.

Initially the students talked among themselves. They had questions they couldn't answer. Of course, that's why I was there. There were several hesitant glances in my direction. My cue? Ohh I was scared. I said something, who knows what, but it was a start. They continued to try and ask, I continued to try and answer.

Something did happen. We helped each other.

I think they understand a little more. I know I'm a little less afraid.

When volunteers from the gay community were requested to participate in a class on human sexuality at U.V.M. recently, the challenge appealed to me. Here was a golden opportunity to dispel false

Most Common Questions

Following are questions the small groups considered and discussed.

To me, the word homosexuality means that...

As best as I understand it now, a person develops a homosexual orientation because...

As I was growing up, my parents conveyed directly or indirectly to me that homosexuals and homosexuality were...

When I see gay men expressing affection toward one another, I feel...

In thinking about whether it's alright for homosexual lovers to hold hands or display affection publicly, I feel...

Messages I received from my parents while growing up that may have implied that I should not become gay were things like...

Some things I learned from my peers about homosexuality were...

Some of the things that a gay person must think about before coming out to their friends and family are probably...

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information and to demonstrate by our very presence that gays are real, honest-to-goodness ordinary people.

So I joined the several gay men and lesbians who became "guests" in the small evening gatherings at students' apartments all over the city. Since there were far too few of us to cover the 400-plus class taking this popular course, each volunteer was assigned a separate group.

After the initial mutual distance and discomfort, we slowly got to trust each other and then the questions became more interesting, honest, and amazingly open-minded. Some students answered others' questions at times. Only one person seemed to hold any inward prejudice, but he was extremely civil and pleasant to me.

At the end of a very rewarding session, the facilitator asked me to join the group for their last gathering on the following week, the session ending up at Carbur's.

Gilles

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