

## Commentary

# Acacia: The Lesson to be Learned

Winston Brathwaite is a gay activist. He refused to accept the discrimination that was leveled against him and went public with his fight for justice. He has spoken about homosexuality to students in the classroom and worked to dispel the myths they might have. He was interviewed in the campus newspaper, in the *Burlington Free Press*, and even in the *Boston Globe*, letting the world know that what Acacia did was wrong and that gay people are good people. He has become a symbol of courage and pride for gays and lesbians here in Burlington and around the Northeast.

Not everyone thinks that what Winston did was a good idea. Some complain that he brought too much attention to the gay community and that he should have kept quiet. Others say that while fighting for our rights is important, demanding them from bigoted institutions like fraternities is a waste of time. Finally, there are those who feel that while we should try to end bigotry everywhere, using legal means (i.e. "forcing people") is counterproductive.

These are valid concerns, but they fail to see what it is that actions like Winston's accomplish. With the first concern it is obvious why this is so. All of the gains made by the gay community in recent history have come about because we fought for our rights, because we refused to keep quiet. To say now that we should hide and hope the hets forget about us is to deny our own progress and jeopardize what gains we have made.

### WE WANT YOUR PHOTOS OF PRIDE DAY FOR OUR NEXT ISSUE!

Send us your best black-and-whites with your name, address, and phone number lightly written on the backs by July 10 for consideration. Drawings and written artifacts and observations are also welcome; same rules apply. Mail to: PO Box 177, Burlington, Vermont, 05402.

The second concern, while telling us that we shouldn't get our hopes up too high, is no reason not to try to live whatever kind of life we want to live. The first black pledges at all-white fraternities surely didn't think they had much of a chance, but they pledged anyway, and now at last we have integrated fraternities. During our lives we might be denied certain opportunities because of our sexual orientation, but we shouldn't do the denying ourselves. Leave the bigotry for the bigots. Who knows? We might even be wrong about them.

The third concern is the most convincing. Because of this, we must think more carefully about it before we can see why it too misses the mark.

In addition to those who wrote for or against Winston's actions in UVM's campus newspaper, the *Cynic*, there were those who took a more neutral stance to the whole affair. These students were in favor of positive social change, but were also concerned that criticism of the fraternity would be counterproductive. They wanted us to realize that the individuals were not entirely to blame, and instead see that society and the times we live in also contributed to the problem. They asked us to "give it time," warned that "forced compliance will only cause resentment."

While this last point could be true, what we'd accomplish in the long run by "giving it time" would really be much less valuable to us than working with the law now in order to "force" people to respect our rights. When we as gays and lesbians demand justice from people in power (be they campus administrators or judges and legislators), the object is not so much to ascribe blame or guilt to the bigots who have hurt us. It is not so much to change people's heads or to make a major political statement. Instead, its purpose is to end discrimination. Laws can't end prejudice, but they can stop the prejudiced from hurting other people. If we are appealing to the law, that should be our goal.

Now it might be true that demanding justice is not the most effective way to educate the straight population, but doing so is certainly much more attractive than the alternative of simply ignoring acts of bigotry until this group has matured enough to police itself. Give someone a choice of thirty years of discrimination during which

they are refused job opportunities, housing, medical care, and are beaten up every now and then and a choice of fifty years of resentment during which they cannot be denied any of the above basic rights and have legal recourse against hate crimes, and they'll take the fifty years of resentment.

This is why we shouldn't be afraid of demanding our rights even though it might be considered "too pushy" or "politically untimely." Education to end prejudice is important, but not when it's at the expense of those who are the victims of that prejudice. Justice under the law is our right as American citizens and we shouldn't treat it as though we were asking for a favor. This point is especially important to realize now as the Gay Rights Bill becomes more and more of a possibility. The passage of that bill will mean nothing if no one is willing to stand up for the rights it will grant us. Many detractors of the Gay Rights Bill claimed that we had no need of it - the current laws were enough, they said. Not to use that Bill once we have it would prove them right.

Not everyone can be an activist. Many of us can't even admit to our families and friends who we really are; to expect every member of our communities to stand in front of a judge demanding equal treatment is unreasonable. Some of us are in positions where we can actively fight against discrimination. When we are at so much risk of having our rights violated, it is very dangerous not to make use of that position. In a democracy, we have an obligation to be political. If we aren't, we allow those who already have the power to make the decisions about us for us. And if we allow this, we get what we deserve - more of the same.

## Letters (from page 4)

rewarding and wonderful as my association has been with the Boston group, it is just too far away.

If you live in this area (Keene to White River Junction) and are interested in discussing the formation of some kind of Christian community, please call me. We could discuss the formation of a Dignity chapter or some other type of formal organization, or we could simply talk about how we relate to our own churches and set up occasional meetings for mutual support.

Charlie, (603) 542-6837