

# Group Profile

## Groups Increase Gay Visibility at Middlebury College

Ask anyone who's been there: it's not easy being gay and "out" in college. Most gay and lesbian students on campuses remain closeted for much or all of their four-year stay, afraid to face the social pressures that coming out would entail. At Middlebury College, that means that nearly 200 gay, lesbian, and bisexual young people will suppress their true sexual orientations into their early twenties.

It is facts such as these that the Middlebury Gay/Lesbian/Straight Alliance (MGLSA) hopes to teach the campus community, and in so doing foster a more receptive and comfortable environment at the College for gay and lesbian students.

The group's regular meetings provide an outlet for students to discuss their experiences, both in the dormitories and the classrooms, and offers a means by which to bring to the campus films, speakers, and events of interest to the gay and lesbian community there.

MGLSA Convener Jeffrey Spencer was impressed by the large turnout at the group's initial meeting this year. It was the largest gathering in the history of the organization, which began in the late 70's as "Gay People at Middlebury" and then disbanded, later to be reborn as MGLSA.

In order to increase awareness on campus, several members of the group sent a letter to the campus newspaper proclaiming their existence and addressing issues of homophobia in the academic setting.

MGLSA recently attracted an even more significant amount of attention by sponsoring Middlebury's first "Gay Jeans Day" to coincide with National Coming Out Day on October 11. Students, faculty, and staff at the College were asked to wear jeans on that day as a sign of support for gay and lesbian rights.

Though the event met with mixed reactions from the student body, it did inspire a great deal of conversation and was thus deemed a success. An open discussion was held that afternoon, drawing a crowd of approximately forty people, and an exchange of letters in the campus newspaper signalled that the issue would not fade away overnight.

MGLSA has also helped to sponsor and organize other events at the College surrounding gay issues, including the recent visit of Rev. Kim Harvie, who is herself a Middlebury alumna. Other gay and lesbian alumni of Middlebury College will return to the school on November 4 for a panel discussion on being gay and lesbian, both at college and beyond. Members of MGLSA will have a chance to dine with the panel participants following the event, thus affording a chance for continued dialogue.

Though somewhat less prominent, another group has formed on the Middlebury campus to discuss and address issues confronting gay men and lesbians in that academic setting. Comprised of faculty and staff members, the group began in February when four staff members decided to meet on a regular basis to share their experiences in working at the school.

Several faculty members subsequently became interested and began attending meetings and social events. The group has also met with MGLSA and continues to support the students' initiatives.

In order to in-

crease dialogue with the administration at Middlebury, participants in the faculty/staff group invited newly-inaugurated President Timothy Light to meet with them at one of their evening gatherings. The invitation was quickly accepted, and the group looks forward to sharing with the President their thoughts and feelings on the experiences of gay people at Middlebury.

Members of both MGLSA and the faculty/staff group have, by their very existence, sent a strong message to the Middlebury College community, and in so doing have affirmed the value of their presence. In a recent article in the school newspaper, MGLSA member Scott Smithson commented on the beneficial effects of this visibility by saying "It has been a long and uphill battle, and now it is my last semester here and I have the chance...to say to everybody at Middlebury that I am gay."

Both MGLSA and the faculty/staff group hope that more and more students, as well as staff and faculty members, will feel comfortable enough at Middlebury College to echo Smithson's words in the not-so-distant future.

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