

UVM Student Receives National Award

Larry Wolf

Shane Katzman-Rooks graduated from UVM this spring. In addition to the education he received as a student, he provided an education for others. His workshops on homosexuality, homophobia and heterosexism won him an award from the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators. The award was in recognition of his commitment to combating oppression by sponsoring events and interventions to educate others about racism, sexism, heterosexism, anti-semitism, classism and ableism. One other student and one student organization also received this award this year.

Shane spent his first undergraduate year at Oberlin College where, he says, "I just slammed the closet door wide open." After that year in a supportive environment, he returned to Vermont to continue his schooling at UVM. "I found that UVM is a very straight campus. You get the impression that it's 99% straight -- which I know for a fact it isn't. There are certain departments that have gay people in them. There are other departments that don't know that they have gay people in them. The faculty advisor for the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual Alliance is not gay. That gives you an idea of how closeted it is."

During that first year at UVM, he started talking about being gay as a guest speaker for a human sexuality class. Shane found that he didn't like the guest-queer speaker format. He decided to change the focus from himself to the students in the class. He became a facilitator rather than a lecturer. He asked the participants to risk something of themselves, to make them aware of their own behavior: What were their attitudes? What were their experiences?

His workshops were a chance to break the taboo that you can't speak about homosexuality. He created an environment where it was safe to talk, to acknowledge feelings -- positive and negative. The workshops were a chance for people to stretch their comfort levels, where they could explore their feelings on homosexual issues without fear of repercussions. He had people say the

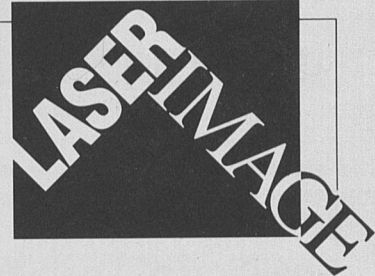
words -- pornographic, degrading, and uplifting -- which are used to name lesbians, gays and bisexuals. He usually broke the ice with some of the stronger words: "I'd say the really hard ones, the graphic ones, to define the limits. Then they could fill the space in between."

Over the last two years, a dozen people approached Shane outside of his workshops to seek his support as they dealt with their own sexuality. One person was so shy that when he initially wrote to Shane he didn't sign his letter.

Shane was able to find pockets of support within the larger institution. He became a Resident Assistant because the Residential Life department actually encouraged diversity. He'd like to see a real act of support from the administration and faculty on gay, lesbian and bisexual issues. He says "people pretend there aren't any of us on campus, and that there isn't homophobia or heterosexism. It's been left up to the students. There needs to be active administrative effort to sponsor events on campus. There needs to be research into the issues on campus -- people's experiences and the attitudes they face. There should be an advocate for gay, lesbian and bisexual issues -- a paid, administrative position -- to actively work within the University to educate, to challenge instances of discrimination, and to keep people informed about what's going on."

"I think the workshops made a difference. I managed to open some eyes." Shane continues to work within the system, looking for ways to make UVM a more supportive place for gays, lesbians and bisexuals. He says "being a college student is a transition time before becoming a full member of the community. The University should be doing more with social issues."

Shane plans to go to graduate school in music composition -- he has received an award for "Excellence in Composition" from the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers. ▼



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