

# Karen Thompson on Coming Out in Higher Education



Karen Thompson photo by Sage Russell

Sage Russell

For the second time in a row, Vermont Women in Higher Education included a workshop on lesbian issues at its semi-annual conference, held in Burlington on November 15. The workshop, entitled "Lesbians in Higher Education: Is It Safe to Come Out?", was led by Karen Thompson, Associate Professor of Physical Education at St. Cloud State University in Minnesota. Thompson is better known for her tireless efforts to secure guardianship of and appropriate medical care for her partner, Sharon Kowalski, who was severely injured in an automobile accident in 1983 (see accompanying story).

Thompson believes strongly that it is to everyone's advantage to come out, saying that if lesbians and gay men were to come out all at once, "they couldn't fire all of us."

Thompson herself didn't walk out of the closet; she was pulled out by the publicity surrounding her legal battles, and as she came out, she had to deal first with her own internalized homophobia. She says now that, "Even if all my fears of coming out had materialized, I'd still be telling groups to come out, because what I have gained from coming out is much greater than anything I could have lost. I came out to fight for Sharon's rights and for our rights as a couple. In the process, I have learned to like and respect who I am."

Thompson believes that she protected herself by coming out — that if she had not, the rumors and innuendoes surrounding the case could easily have cost her her job. "It's a myth that we're safer in the closet. It's a glass closet. So many people see into it anyway, and it's so easily shattered. It's a very vulnerable place to be." By coming out, she not only survived, but she has decisively changed her work life for the better.

Thompson has made it in her university's best interest to support her, and St. Cloud has gone from grudging tolerance to genuine support of her activities. She speaks all over the country at places like the American Psychological Association's annual convention and Harvard Law School. Since coming out she has been promoted, and the letter notifying her of her promotion mentioned the educational value of her speaking out. She works a four day week, enabling her to travel without missing classes, and the University has never denied her permission to leave campus for a speaking engagement.

Her job has expanded as well. Thompson has become an adjunct professor of human relations, and she includes as a course objective the elimination of homophobic and heterosexist expression and behavior in all her classes, including racquetball and volleyball. She has become a catalyst for change on her campus, helping to establish a lesbian/gay faculty caucus at St. Cloud, which recently expanded into a network linking G/L faculty groups throughout the Minnesota state system. Lesbians and gay men are a protected class at St. Cloud, and they are now pushing for domestic partners' benefits. She has presented workshops on heterosexism and homophobia for faculty groups, and her visibility has enabled her to serve as a mentor and sounding board for lesbian and gay students.

Ironically, the progress that she notes at St. Cloud, a conservative university in a conservative town, has been slowest in her own department. Thompson attributes this to the fear caused by the negative stereotyping of women in physical education. Some faculty members and students in her department are afraid to be seen with her. She is considered to be a detriment to recruitment and coaches bringing prospective athletes to campus are not allowed to be seen with her.

After Thompson's presentation, the approximately 25 workshop participants, primarily but not exclusively lesbians, discussed the issues she raised, focusing on value of this type of workshop, the importance of mentoring students, and the advantages of coming out.

A networking/discussion group is forming for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals in higher education in Vermont. If you are interested in participating or would like additional information, contact Thelma Stoudt at the STEP Learning Center at Castleton State College in Castleton, Vermont 05735. ▼

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