

Homosexuality at Davidson: accounts from our community

By Ashlyn Dannelly

Until recent years, homosexual members of the Davidson College community have been exceptionally discreet in revealing their sexuality. While homosexuality is not currently accepted by everyone across the board, there appears to be a rising sensitivity to the issue within Davidson.

A faculty perspective

One homosexual faculty member says that, "neither the administration nor the faculty is interested in my personal life. Davidson is a very private place. However, I don't mean that anything goes." The teacher adds, "The highest emphasis here is placed on the quality of one's teaching and research."

That faculty member finds it interesting when

sexuality issues come up in the classroom, saying, "Those students who know someone who is gay have a deeper grasp of how complicated sexuality is. I also have students who say they don't know anyone who is gay or lesbian. I tell them that they just don't know that they know those people."

Speaking about being "out of the closet," the faculty member says, "I don't feel that I must try to hide my sexuality; at the same time, I don't mention it to people in passing. It doesn't come up in every conversation."

In terms of being the subject of gossip, the teacher says, "I'm not aware of having been the subject of discussion by other faculty members or administration... People seem non-discriminatory, open-minded, fair, and compassionate."

Referring to student attitudes toward homosexuals, the teacher says, "It concerns me that other schools with whom Davidson likes to compare itself have made more progress on this issue... here there is debate and uncertainty... I would like to see that students could be 'out' here without fear of harm, discrimination, and ostracism... Davidson sets itself apart from

other small, elite, private, liberal arts colleges when it allows its students to suffer."

The teacher says, "The material I teach is important, not anything about my life. At any rate, I wouldn't and couldn't be a spokesperson for all homosexuals. That would be presumptuous... I really believe in students talking to students and students educating students about sexuality issues."

An alumni perspective

One alumna, who graduated in the mid-80's, says that Davidson at that time "was not a good place to be if you were gay." Six or seven people in my class who came

hasn't changed anything at all."

The student perspective

Junior Hal Dougherty and senior David Nutant came out publicly at Davidson's Sexuality Forum in March. According to Dougherty, he did it "to promote understanding and acceptance." He also hoped to "pave the road for others to come out." Nutant says, "For me, [the forum] emphasized that I might be on this conservative campus, but there is no reason I should hide this fact."

Nutant's and Dougherty's openness differs greatly from the attitudes they had when they first arrived at Davidson. Dougherty transferred to Davidson as a sophomore, then took two years off before returning this year as a junior. Upon his initial arrival, he says, "I basically said that I wasn't going to deal with my homosexuality when I came to Davidson. I wanted to fit in... I didn't feel like I had

any outlet to pursue dealing with my sexuality."

Nutant says, "It wasn't until sophomore year that I realized how hard it would be to deal with that here. Anything dealing with sexuality was criticized on this campus... it's a very homogeneous campus." Dougherty adds, "On this campus, gay culture goes over as well as big hair. But Charlotte is progressing."

During his sophomore year, Nutant became more open about his homosexuality because he "had a fairly openly gay friend... it was sort of realizing something that was always there and owning up to it. It wasn't going away, and I shouldn't repress it." Nutant opened up even more after spending his junior year in France. He says, "[friends there] knew from the start I was gay. After living a year like that, where it wasn't even an issue, I came back and said, 'This is who I am, accept it.'"

Similarly, after two years away from Davidson, Dougherty had "good friends with whom I felt comfortable. They helped me feel safe. When I came back, I had faith in the school and in the people. Somehow, I found a niche." He adds, "My homosexuality is not a

choice."

Regarding the faculty's treatment of homosexuality as an issue, Dougherty says, "There has been a lack of interest. [The faculty] have all these interests in campus life, yet they don't really deal with homosexuality." Nutant says, "When there was all this debating about FLAG, (in the fall of 1991) [the faculty] kept a low profile... it should be part of the education process. People should be more aware of it."

In the classroom, Dougherty encountered situations where the teacher assumed, when asking a question, that he would date a "novia," which in Spanish means a girlfriend. "They assume you are going to say the opposite sex." He says, "Even an innocent mistake in gender translation elicits juvenile giggling."

Nutant encountered one public display of homophobia at a Patterson Court party, where someone screamed, "freak" and "fag." Nutant attributes the incident to his different method of dressing. "They were harping on him because he was different," Dougherty says. "I understand the fear of the unknown, but I don't understand the hatred."

Referring to Davidson's progress with the homosexuality issue, Dougherty says, "This place has progressed. Dave and I are very optimistic. We're not angry at the campus. We're understanding." Nutant adds, "It would be interesting to be a freshman and be part of the change that will happen." He encourages students to "not deal with homosexuality as this abstract thing because we're everywhere [snap. snap.]"

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Hal Dougherty

out after graduating... that is probably only one-third of the actual number of out alums."

She says that there are "tricky politics" to coming out of the closet. As a professional, she says, "I suspect that job security is a large concern for Davidson alums... so many of us have high profile jobs... it can make you vulnerable on a professional level."

She did not realize she was a lesbian until shortly after graduation. She made a point to return to Davidson and tell some of her former teachers they "have been tremendously supportive."

She speculates that she and the other gay members of her class "may have just poured a lot of energy into doing other things. At Davidson, lots of people spend more time on academics than interpersonal issues."

She had an almost entirely positive reaction from her friends to her coming out of the closet. "In countering prejudice, it is important that you know people well... of all my close friends from Davidson, only one has rejected me."

She gives "so much credit to Davidson for the close ties formed with professors. My coming out



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