

Indifference, intolerance

Bill: They came in to the Bull one night.

Henry: What, some fags?

Bill: Yeah, there was five—five guys sitting at a table and all of a sudden they all got up and danced together, like to a fast song.

Henry: Really?

Bill: And a slow song came on so these two got up and danced close.

Henry: What, all of a sudden they were holding each other?

Bill: Yeah, they were dancing close. So this one guy on the dance floor, he turns around and says, "You fucking fags" and the one guy turns around and says "You're damn right" and he hits him. Like he really hits—

Henry: What, the gay?

Bill: Yeah, knocked him right on his ass. Started a big fight.

This is part of an actual conversation between York students, recorded by film student Dave Wiechorek for a class assignment. It raises many important questions: how tolerant is the York community of its gay and lesbian members? How do gays at York feel about the University?

On the surface, York tolerates the freedom of sexual choice. Most seem to be indifferent. Yet in fact there appear to be undercurrents of intolerance.

The place where York's Gays and Lesbians face the most discrimination is in undergraduate residences. Stephen Hutchings, an ex-resident, says living in residence means "living in close quarters with one or more people who are difficult with homosexuality."

According to Bernie Stellino, a Campus Connection counselor who specializes in gay-related problems, there are "mind games" in residence. "People suspect you are gay and you get funny looks. If you are always receiving phone calls from your girlfriend or boyfriend, you have to explain who it is or lie. I know people who make up a lot of stories. The trouble is keeping your stories straight."

Keith Seniuk, who lived in Founders for two years in the late 1970s says "For the first year, no one knew I was gay. During my second year I told everyone I knew. All were supportive, but it got around. I found most people, especially males, extremely homophobic."

"There was nothing physical, just words and name-calling. People made me feel uncomfortable if I tried to participate in residence activities. Some made direct remarks to me, others talked about me in the halls." Seniuk says this type of behavior caused him to move out of residence.

Alan O'Connor believes that it is "tougher to be gay at York than at U of T because York is isolated and has an atmosphere more like that of a small community. There's not the variety (of people) that you'd find downtown."

Bernie Stellino agrees that it is more difficult for gay students who go to school at York than for those who go downtown. "A lot of gay bars are downtown. All kinds of groups, like those for lesbian mothers or gay men, hold their meetings downtown. More gays hang around downtown."

CYSF President Chris Summerhayes thinks "Probably the collective attitude at York is ambivalent, though I know there must be groups that are against them. It's a non-reaction; people are not saying no, not saying yes, just not saying. Why would someone be interested in someone else's sexual activity? Should we be positive or negative about heterosexuality? Who cares?"

On the other hand, psychologist Sandra Pyke, of York's Counseling and Development Centre, estimates that York is "somewhat more benign than the general population" towards homosexuals. Pyke says "homosexuality is not seen in my profession as a problem requiring treatment. It is deviant in the same sense that being married and having ten children is deviant; that is, it's not the predominant lifestyle." People at York tend to respect these educated opinions, she says.

In early January, the Gay Alliance at York (GAY) set up their first Central Square booktable in ten years. According to Alan O'Connor, Bethune Residence Tutor and GAY member, the public reaction was positive. "There was a constant stream of people stopping and chatting," says O'Connor. The table with the pink triangles is now present in Central Square every Wednesday.

Another sign of York's acceptance of homosexuality is the fact that the new Sexual Harassment, Education and Complaint Centre is willing to deal with the reports of gay people who are being verbally abused on the basis of their sexual orientation. This type of complaint falls under the section of the Centre's definition of harassment which describes it as "Sexually oriented remarks and behavior which may reasonably be perceived to create a negative psychological and emotional environment for work and study." (The Report of the Presidential Advisory Committee on Sexual Harassment)

On the other hand, last year when the Gay Alliance at York tried to reserve the Bethune Junior Common Room for its Valentine's Dance, it met with direct opposition. Dave O'Sullivan, who plans reservations for the room, was reluctant because, as he purportedly said, "there might be a lack of staff" to handle the possible violence. GAY complained of discrimination and, at a public meeting, O'Sullivan apologized for remarks he made to GAY about the college's policy and reputation. At the same meeting, the Master of Bethune College, Griff Cunningham, confirmed that a petition against the dance was being circulated in the adjoining residence. When the Bethune Students Council voted on the issue last February 10, an anti-gay delegation was present at the meeting. However, the council voted

unanimously in favor of letting GAY book the common room.

"There is a variety of attitudes at York toward us," says David Blair, President of GAY, "but most people are indifferent. There is no organized opposition to us. No one is making public statements to oppose gay rights."

"The price of tolerance is total silence," he says. "Those who oppose gay rights have no one to aim their statements at. If more people were openly gay a lot of those who are indifferent might develop opinions."

Blair admits that GAY has been a part of this silence. "The Gay Alliance was laying low for a couple of years. It hasn't gained enough visibility to become the object of a reaction." The club is not listed in the 1983-84 *Manus* (York's Student Handbook) nor does it appear in the Undergraduate Calendar or the York telephone directory.

Mike Kelly, president of Gays and Lesbians at the University of Toronto, says "Every so often I get calls from York students looking for the Gay Alliance at York. They can find me, but they can't find GAY."

Blair insists this will not remain the case for long. "We are attempting to gain support by breaking the silence. To that end we are increasing our visibility." He uses the appearance of the GAY booktable in Central Square as an example.

As individuals, "Gay people are more closeted at York than U of T," says Alan O'Connor. "With most gays (at York), maybe their best friend knows." In a questionnaire filled out by 17 members of GAY, 10 declined to give their full names.

Recently, GAY requested that their membership list be removed from the public access files of the York Archives. A memo from a number of years ago made the same request on the basis that the "publication of any of the names given in this list may, since we are not protected under the Human Rights Code as yet, endanger the basic rights of the person listed."

Though many GAY members claimed they would reveal their sexual preference to anyone who asked, one visa graduate student said he would conceal it from "officials or professors who are likely to keep a record which may be passed on to immigration authorities or future

employers. This may be a paranoid attitude, but it's based on the belief that being gay is not accepted in society. I become fearful of how these attitudes are going to manifest themselves. I've considered becoming a professor; who knows, maybe at York. There are members of the faculty who are 'out,' but the position of foreign students is more precarious."

Atkinson Film professor Robin Wood, who has expressed his sexual preference by wearing "gay t-shirts and badges" on campus, says: "A lot of gay people invite discrimination. They present themselves as victims. There is a great deal of paranoia, not without reason, among gays about discrimination. They have a half-ashamed, apologetic attitude. You've got to show that if someone disapproves, you couldn't give a fuck."

One member of the Alliance blamed the York Community as a whole for the silence. "If people are so permissive here, why don't we have more participation in GAY events? (The average attendance at a GAY meeting is 25). If everyone's so peachy keen, why all this silence? Is this a warm, loving atmosphere? Not enough people are 'coming out' to show this is true."

"The price of tolerance is silence." But the silence itself suggests that perhaps there isn't as much tolerance as we think. "This circle must be broken," says Dave Blair.

By Julia Steinecke

GAYS FIFTEEN YEARS AGO

The results of a survey conducted of 153 York students in 1969 found that:

- 17% said they consider homosexuality to be wrong or sinful.
- 7% said homosexuality is physically or mentally harmful if engaged in too frequently.
- 27% said homosexuality is not a good idea, although it is not sinful.
- 19% said homosexuality is all right for adults under certain circumstances.
- 5% said homosexuality is quite natural.
- 23% said they were uncertain how to regard homosexual relations.

In 1984, students have mixed feelings as to whether these attitudes have changed. Dave Blair, President of the Gay Alliance at York, believes the attitudes he calls "extremely negative," such as the belief that homosexuality is inherently wrong, are less prominent today. Blair thinks more people would reply that homosexuality "is not a good idea, though not sinful."

Peter Bartlett of the Osgoode Gay and Lesbian Caucus thinks the "bulk" will answer that homosexuality is "all right for adults under certain circumstances."

Keith Seniuk, a member of GAY, says "Not enough has changed to make any difference. Ideas like that take an awfully long time to change."

ORGANIZATIONS FOR GAY STUDENTS

Gay Alliance at York

This group meets weekly for discussions, films, lectures, and socializing. The purpose, says President Dave Blair, is to bring together "all sorts of gay people and members of the York Community at large. We want to create a comfortable atmosphere for them to meet and a forum for the discussion of gay issues."

GAY has approximately 50 members, including gay and lesbian students, professors, and university staff.

Osgoode Gay and Lesbian Caucus

The Caucus shows films, invites speakers and acts as a "presence at Osgoode" according to member Peter Bartlett. The main event of the fall term was a panel discussion on gays in the legal profession. There are about 15 contacts and members.

Gays and Lesbians at the University of Toronto

Spokesman Mike Kelly says this is a "support group." They hold coffee houses, lectures, and regular meetings. Events at their recent Gay and Lesbian Awareness Week included a showing of *La Cage Aux Folles* and a "Homo Hop" dance. The average attendance at their regular meetings is 40.