



U. Pittsburgh forum targets homophobic notions

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(The Pitt News) (U-WIRE) PITTSBURGH -- When Monica Higgins, president of Rainbow Alliance, decided it was time to tell her mother that she was a lesbian, her mother reacted calmly.

"I had a feeling," says Higgins's mother to her daughter. "Monica, you went through an entire phase in fourth grade when you wore nothing but sweat pants."

Higgins' mother's accepting response was followed by a statement of concern -- she feared for her daughter, according to Higgins. Her mother wondered what Higgins would encounter in a society where "people make assumptions based on everything but who you are."

Theta Nu Xi, a multicultural sorority at the University of Pittsburgh, presented a forum on Wednesday to discuss the "societal ill" of homophobia. A collection of diverse panelists discussed with students their experiences with the hardships of coming out, or being openly gay.

Elise Delong, a lawyer and board member of The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, labels herself as formally transsexual. Delong remembered a "particularly nasty" custody case when, the very night before a key testimony, a client called her to confront her sexuality after the opposing lawyer had told her client that Delong used to be a male airline pilot. The next day, Delong approached the lawyer to straighten things out.

"I just wanted to clear up a few misconceptions. I wanted to let you know that I am not a pilot," she recalls telling him.

Delong shared other stories about her 15-year transition into transsexuality and recalls the prices she has paid.

"I still remain an outsider to my family, and that's a shame," she says.

Delong says that after she sent out hundreds of applications, prospective employers ignored her based on her transsexual reputation.

She also lost five close friends to suicide because of their inability to deal with their sexuality, she adds.

"It would be lying to say that I'm immune to the feelings of hatred and rejection," Delong says.

The term homophobia, according to one panelist, covers all forms of ignorance and discrimination toward homosexuals.

Homophobia felt like a disease, says Helene Gosselin, a member of Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, or PFLAG. Only after it is cured, she adds, do you realize that you had it.

Gosselin spoke of her son, Phillip, who after one semester at college told her he was gay. She reacted with shock and denial, which led to depression, she says.

Her son realized his mother's ignorance of homosexuality and referred her to PFLAG, an organization that "promotes the health and well-being of gay, lesbian and bisexual persons."

Upon leaving her first support group meeting at PFLAG, Gosselin concluded that gay people were normal people.

"I understand the injustices that they endure," Gosselin says, referring to the gay community. "We must not wait to affect change."

Sean McCarthy, of Rainbow Alliance, says a homophobic person can break through the perceived notions and false portrayals of homosexuality through educational events like

Wednesday's forum.

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