



Student groups discuss gay rights issues at Florida State U.

Article from: [University Wire](#) | Article date: [September 29, 2005](#) | Author: [Lauren Walleser](#)

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University Wire
09-29-2005

(FSView & Florida Flambeau) (U-WIRE) TALLAHASSEE, Fla. -- The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Student Union and Theta Nu Xi Multicultural Sorority at Florida State University hosted a panel discussion last Wednesday, Sept. 21 regarding the issue of homosexuals in the United States military and the "Don't ask, don't tell" policy that is currently the rule for homosexuals that are members of a military branch.

The panel consisted of members from both organizations, including Jamonique Holt and Letoya Stairs of Theta Nu Xi and Jeremy Lighter, Jenna Berger, and Thomas Kester of the LGBTSU, all students of FSU who expressed that they have had positive experiences with homosexuality in their lives.

Holt, whose father is an officer in the military and spent much of her life abroad, said that she did not encounter any people who were out as homosexuals in the military.

"When someone becomes an officer, they give a handbook to everyone in the family telling them how to act," Holt said. "If you get to become an officer, they will find out everything."

Lighter, who said he has been out since the age of 18, also has a father in the military, but as an enlisted man rather than an officer. He expressed that his experience was rather different, as he did know many soldiers who were openly gay.

"There are a lot of things that the enlisted men do and know about each other that doesn't necessarily make it all the way up to command," said Lighter.

All of the panelists agreed that it is difficult for men and women in the military to be themselves and express who they are if they are gay due to discrimination they would face if they revealed they were gay.

"For me, the discrimination against me can't be erased," said Holt, a black woman. "That has made me sensitive to other people being discriminated against, and that is why when it comes to issues like homosexuals being able to get married, I'm like, 'Let them go ahead,' because right now you might not be discriminated against, but when it happens to you, you will feel differently."

The discussion expanded to cover issues such as the differences that culture, location, race and religion play in people's experiences with, and exposure to, the homosexual lifestyle. Many of the panelists were from South Florida and discussed how open that community is in comparison to smaller towns in the country. Others said that in high school they were less likely to come out as being homosexual because of the immaturity of classmates, the smaller environment, and the fact that they still lived with their parents.

"People feel that people grow to be gay, and that myth is perpetuated because people usually don't come out until they get into college. That means that people are thinking that all those years you are straight and happy," Holt said. "I think that really has a profound effect on how people look at homosexuals, because if we find out that you are born gay or that it is certain chemicals, then that will blow a hole through every theory."

Stairs said that she believes it is the diversity and open-mindedness of college campuses that allow students to come out or realize how they truly feel about gender issues.

"In college, we are exploring a whole new community and really learning and educating ourselves about sex, about gender, about what our social roles are as women and men, and what we are expected of as social beings in our environment, and you really start taking a look at yourself and start figuring out who you are, and for those reasons we start to think about where we fit in the world and what our preferences are and what we do and don't like, and it is really that exploration of self that brings people to the point where they become comfortable enough to place themselves in the world," Stairs said.

Another topic that was discussed was the over-classification of people and their sexual orientation. Lighter and Berger agreed that rather than labeling people as being gay,

straight or any other category, love is what should be the emphasis for relationships.

"I think that realistically, if you genuinely believe in the power of love, that you could fall in love with someone of either sex," Lighter said. "Love is a power beyond measure. To say that I'm only going to fall in love with tall, white, gay men is completely irrational. You can't stop someone from falling in love with someone else."

Others, such as Siria Serrano, the moderator for the panel discussion and member of Theta Nu Xi, told of the trouble some people have with trying to support homosexuals, even if they themselves are straight.

"I like men, but anytime that you speak up about something or you say that something is wrong or today I don't feel like wearing heels or mascara, or you speak out in a certain way about sex roles, people are like 'Oh, you are a feminist,' or 'You are a lesbian.'" Serrano said.

While college campuses are known to be more accepting environments, there are still groups and individuals at universities who do not agree with the idea of homosexuality, and there are those who will discriminate against individuals who are open about their orientation.

Kester told the group that he experienced discrimination when he tried to run for a position in student government at his former university, the University of North Florida.

"I stood in front of their student senate there, in which they made fun of me and voted not to appoint me," Kester said.

Dustin Hinzman of the FSU LBGT SU said that the organization tries to reach out to other organizations on campus and get together with them in order to promote diversity and get information to students about LGBT issues. For example, Hinzman said that in the coming months the LBGT SU will join together with the Jewish Student Union in order to discuss issues such as the fact that homosexuals, along with Jews, were persecuted during the Holocaust.

"Diversity movements have focused on how we are all different and accepting, but the newest thing in diversity movements is looking at how we are all the same. Co-sponsorships help with that," Hinzman said.

To learn more about the LBGT SU or how to get involved, visit www.fsu.edu/~activity/sga/lgbtsu/. To learn more about Theta Nu Xi Multicultural Sorority, visit www.theatnuxi.org.

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