

# The History of Homophobia at Lafayette College

Cat Leschin

WGS 340: Sexuality Studies

In 2002, Lafayette College Archives began an "Oral History Project" in which they interviewed Lafayette alumni who attended the school during key times of social change. The goal of the project was to document the life experiences of African-American and women students from the 1960's to the 1970s. These interviews opened up a trove of information that was previously missing from the history of Lafayette. A good example of this was Riley K. Temple, class of '71, who was asked in an interview if he ever encountered any racism on campus. He responded to this saying "Good Lord, yes. And homophobia let me add." He goes on to recount a story from his freshman year when a student who lived across the hall from him said, "You know, I thought you were here on a football scholarship, until I saw you walk down the hall." Temple's manhood, purpose, and sexuality were all called into question by one 'mistake' in his gender performance.

This may just be one example, but it was not an isolated incident. In 1993, The Princeton Review, a college admissions services company, deemed Lafayette College the number one school in which "gay students are ostracized" in their annual "Princeton Review Student Access Guide-The best 286 Colleges." Their poll was substantial and included 286 other colleges and universities. At least 100 students at each individual college were polled randomly (Schweidel, 1). The Princeton Review has continued to track the "most homophobic school" trend on it's yearly lists since, saying their methodology includes on campus surveys in which students are asked questions about the school's academics,

administration, student body, and themselves. Unfortunately they did not describe any specifics about the questions. The Princeton Review then uses a five-point Likert scale to convert qualitative student assessments into quantitative data ("LGBTQ Nation" 1) The college was also ranked number six for both "Major Frat and Sorority Scene" and "Lots of Beer" (Schweidel, 1).

While the original Princeton Review list crowning Lafayette with it's most dubious title is now untraceable, the designation has lived on through the *The Lafayette* newspaper. Thanks to the archives of Lafayette College, there is a digital collection of the student newspaper stretching back to 1870. Known as "the oldest college newspaper in Pennsylvania" it has served as an outlet for news and opinions for the college ever since. I will be looking at the history of homophobia on Lafayette's campus and the ways in which the institution contributed to this, primarily through use of the digital collection of *The Lafayette* newspaper. Without this newspaper, most of Lafayette's Queer history, like much of the world's Queer history would have disappeared. I will also use other forums that allowed for unregulated student discussion. While this is informal, I believe unedited student comments will provide the most insight into how homophobia plays a role on this campus.

I think it is worth noting that the year before Lafayette was deemed the most homophobic campus, Lafayette College had begun to address the problem of homophobia on campus to a certain extent. In a "Letter to the Editor" submission from November 6, 1992 Jennifer Kosmela, a Lafayette student, wrote that she attended a forum at the college that discussed homophobia.



Unfortunately, the event was far from perfect. In a quote from her piece she said: "One of the interesting points brought out by the discussion was the discomfort many people feel towards being labeled homosexual. Even people who spoke at the forum often added some sort of comment of disclaimer which implied their heterosexuality." She goes on to say that the use of derogatory terms such as "fag" or "queer" had been widely used and accepted on Lafayette's campus (4), thus reaffirming the infamous title given to Lafayette in the Princeton Review.

Also in 1992, students and faculty from Lafayette College tried to create awareness and compassion by participating in the National AIDS Memorial Quilt project. Documented in the *The Lafayette* on April 10, 1992, "they read the names of people who died of AIDS during the display of the AIDS quilt and invited other community members to participate" (2). The committee that brought the Quilt to Lafayette was co-chaired by Deborah Hoff, assistant director of student residence, and Dave Unanue '92. The goal for the campus was "That students will become more compassionate towards people with AIDS, and, in general become more tolerant of differences (Gabbay 1). It is unclear if the Quilt Project drew enough student participation to be deemed successful, but it should be noted that on May 8, 1992 *The Lafayette* stated the AIDS Quilt won an Aaron O. Hoff Award for "Project of the Year" (2).

Broader efforts to educate both students and faculty continued to expand on campus. According to a 1993 article in "The Morning Call" by Tim Blangger, after [The Princeton Review] bombshell landed with a very public thud, "students held an informal brown-bag lunch where homophobia was discussed." That

brown-bag lunch prompted several attendees to form Friends of Lesbians and Gays, or FLAG (2). (This group added Q later on, becoming Friends of Lesbians, Gays, and Bi-sexuals.) Elizabeth McMahon, a mathematics and women's studies professor at Lafayette served as FLAG's first faculty adviser. Herman Kissiah, the Lafayette College Dean of Students at the time, was also interviewed for the "Morning Call" article and responded to the new group saying: "I think the group that has been founded really is going to be useful in a significant way to our students and to our college. I think we need the group (FLAG). I think there are students here who ... dislike students who are different from them" (2).

In its first month, Lafayette's new FLAG group invited Margarethe Cammermeyer to campus to speak. Cammermeyer was a colonel in the Washington State National Guard, but was publicly discharged after 26-years of service because she openly acknowledged she was a lesbian. This was an especially controversial topic, and the invitation came at a time where conversation had reached national levels thanks to President Bill Clinton and his newly introduced "Don't Ask Don't Tell" policy.

While Cammermeyer's talk sparked many individual students to share their opinions with the newspaper, it also forced Lafayette College to finally and formally address where it stood on matters of sexual orientation. In 1992, Lafayette College still did not have a statement on "sexual preference" in its non-discrimination statement. The article from "The Morning Call" by Tim Blangger claimed that a "Lafayette spokeswoman said the school doesn't add sexual orientation to its anti-discrimination policy because the school also has an active

ROTC unit on campus" (2). ROTC, which stands for Reserve Officer Training Corps, prepares young adults to become officers in the U.S. military. Due to the military's strict stance that homosexual individuals could not join the military, the college was in a tough place. However, the "Morning Call" article did not fail to mention that Harvard University and Yale University both prohibited military recruitment and ROTC on their campuses in resistance to the military's policy on gays and lesbians (2).

I then followed a series of submissions to the newspaper sent in by students incited by the talk given by Cammermeyer. It was clear that some students at Lafayette were open-minded about the nation's new "Don't Ask Don't Tell" policy and were excited Cammermeyer was speaking at the college. For example, in a submission by student Eileen Murray made in 1993, she encouraged other students to attend the talk in hopes that listening to Cammermeyers story would clarify students concerns (5). However, many students responded with views based in homophobia and hatred. In another submission to the "Letter to the Editor", a student named Matt Hank wrote: "The presence of openly homosexual servicemen and women will be detrimental to the military's morale and discipline" (5). In another submission to *The Lafayette* from September 24, 1993, two students discussed the topic of gay parenting in an opinion column. "This new found idea of allowing homosexual couples to care for children is absurd. It is something that will prove to be detrimental to everyone"(5) wrote student Douglas Kiker, among a variety of other choice statements about the ways in which homosexuality is ruining the United States.



The second student, Laine Fast, submitted the opposing and more progressive view to the debate saying: "who has the right to say what is and is not moral...The welfare of the child should be the main issue in deciding adoption cases" (5). These quotes give a window into the opinions of the student body at the time, and show that views on these topics were extremely polarized.

According to a reference file in the Lafayette Archives called "LGBTQ Dates in Lafayette College History", Lafayette College established a faculty-run Committee on Diversity in 1989 (LGBTQ Dates...). This committee was charged with forming the school's original Non-Discrimination Statement in which they excluded sexual orientation. Five years later, as the political climate changed, and attitudes began to shift among the campus community, Lafayette College faculty formed the "Associates of the Faculty and Staff Association on Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Issues". At their first meeting on November 30, 1994 the group discussed the Provost's Diversity Committee. An email was sent out by faculty member Lori Gruen the following day discussing concerns that arose at this first meeting. Part of the email illustrates their concerns: "The Provost has heard from some faculty who have expressed their desire to have the Provost limit the scope of the diversity committee so as not to include gay, lesbian, and bisexuals or sexual orientation generally." Because of the Associates of the Faculty and Staff Association on Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Issues, the recommendation to exclude them from the diversity committee was ignored. Instead, the "Policy on Equal Employment Opportunity" was approved to include sexual orientation—a landmark shift on the issue. The revised statement now

read: "Lafayette College assures equal employment opportunity in all its personnel policies, which will be administered without regard to race, color, religion, sex, *sexual orientation*, national origin, age, or disability; and further that no employee shall be subjected to harassment by any other employee because of these factors". This statement was included in the 1995-1996 Faculty Handbook in Appendix D. Following the approval of this statement, Riley Temple, the man quoted at the beginning of this paper, soon became the first openly gay individual to be elected to the Lafayette Board of Trustees in 1994 (LGBTQ Dates...)

While the college was showing some improvement as an institution in its official stance on sexuality, the same cannot be said for members of the student body. The same year that Riley Temple was elected on the Board of Trustees, a "Letter to the Editor", published in *The Lafayette* on October 10, 1994, displayed disgust for those in the LGBTQ community. A student named Marshall Tawney shared his thoughts on an art piece entitled "Come Out of the Closet" made by FLAGB that he described as "a large structure of questionable stability and craftsmanship...it became obvious to me from the word 'closet' that appeared on the structure that this was a 'statement' being made" (5). Tawney felt as though the artwork was just used to elicit a shock response, and stated: "I am against Gay and Lesbianism. Further, I am against the Skinheads, Radical Feminists who assert that all sex is rape, and every other group whose doctrine is 'We are correct, so live with it, because your rights are meaningless in our eyes" (5). In the very same issue of *The Lafayette*, a submission was made to the Staff



Editorial section called "Reaching Goals" in which the methods FLAGB used to promote acceptance of homosexuality were called into question. They stated that FLAGB's "Coming Out of the Closet" day was a failure because "Lafayette students need more education and information on the topic of homosexuality before they can reveal their preferences or show support." They made a point to say that they were not condemning the actions of FLAGB, but rather proposing better ways in which they can gain support, ending with "You can teach an old dog new tricks" (4). The critical nature of these submissions added to an already hostile environment for FLAGB. The problem here was not FLAGB's lack of educational programs or events, it was the disinterest within the student body to go to the events. Assistant Professor Jeff Poggi proved this by responding back in the next issue of *The Lafayette* giving examples of educational events such as "Tom Panniceas talk on gays in the military, Warren Blumenfeld on homophobia, the panel on coming-out stories, the spring break condom distribution" (5). "The Reaching Goals" piece was an attempt to be progressive, but in reality was a harsh critique on an already oppressed group for not doing enough to rid the school of homophobia, as if it was their job.

On September 18, 1998 student Jessica McRorie documented in *The Lafayette* that members of FLAGB officially changed their name to the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) in an attempt to increase membership and acceptance of the FLAGB club (1). According to a student named Braint Want '00, the new name was adopted "to make the group more comfortable to heterosexuals who might have been intimidated by the former title" (1). It's interesting and important

to acknowledge here that the members of GSA, individuals who have been called out and shamed on campus countless times, made a conscious effort to make everyone and anyone feel welcome in their club and they deserve praise for that. Also in 1998, six years before gay marriage was legalized in Massachusetts, the College also took a big step granting same sex partner benefits to Lafayette College Employees. An email was sent out by Leslie Muhlfelder, Vice President for Human Resources, that stated: "the same benefits provided to the spouses of the College's married employees will be made available to same-sex partners of eligible employees provided that the employee and the partner meet the criteria for such relationships as established by the College" (Muhlfelder).

Two years later, the group evolved again. The Gay Straight Alliance had now renamed itself to QUEST, which stands for "Questioning Established Sexual Taboos" (LGBTQ Dates...). The new name and the school's policy change however, still were not enough to gain wide acceptance from Lafayette's student body. Club members worked hard to try and foster discussion around the issues and to rally campus support for the club. Driving the change were growing concerns the group would lose funding because the Student Government allocated the funds for clubs and organizations, and they were struggling to gain members (Goldstein 4). The group itself still provided a safe space for the current members of the club, but they wanted to branch out, especially to heterosexual students in order to raise awareness about what they stood for and the challenges they faced. Over the next few years the club continued to try to establish themselves and worked to gain campus-wide recognition. They

succeeded. By 2006 over 300 students participated in the "Gay? Fine By Me" rally on campus, sponsored by QUEST (LGBTQ Dates...). This was a big transition point for the college as it was the first time there was a movement of this size in which students who were not part of the LGBTQ community came out to show their support.

From here the college and its student body has continued to improve. This year on April 21, 2017 Quest held an Equality Rally on the Quad to celebrate the steps Lafayette has taken in becoming a more inclusive campus, and to promote acceptance and awareness of the LGBTQ community. I asked current student Jacob Strock who attended the rally what his thoughts were to which he said "I appreciated hearing the message that the conditions of students, faculty, and other members of the Lafayette Community have greatly improved. The high turnout represents the strong developing support we have for the LGBTQ+ community."

To understand the history of an identity, you must understand the history of the institution in which it is imbedded. I believe that Lafayette's history of fraternity life is one of the main factors behind the homophobia seen within the student body. The institution, which was founded in 1826, was made up of an entirely male student body until 1970. By 1832 it was dominated by fraternities, and by 1940 Lafayette College had 19 national fraternities thriving on campus. In 1959, 70% of the freshman class pledged to fraternities (Stomber 1). Fraternities historically promote hypermasculinity, exclusivity, and simply put, they are a celebration of manhood. The meaning of manhood, while vague and somewhat



undefinable, is founded upon the idea that men and women are fundamentally different. To be a man is to be the opposite of a woman. Because of this, homoerotic desire can easily become synonymous with feminine desire, and this alone causes the shallow definition of manhood to crumble.

As we learned in "Masculinity as Homophobia" by Michael Kimmel, masculinity is a valued, unearned status and men develop ways to preserve and claim that manhood (25). One method is through the display of homophobic behavior. Fraternities are often outlets for some of the most homophobic behaviors and ideas because being hyper-masculine (e.g., having a lot of sex with women, making a lot of money, being strong) is respected. These ideas are not found solely among fraternities, but they can become amplified within the group mentality. Michael Kimmel describes homophobia as "the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men" (35). Masculinity and sexuality are deeply intertwined, and this can be seen in the idea that we can "read" someone's sexual orientation through the performance of their gender (34). An example of this was Riley K. Temple's story he told for the Oral History project that was previously mentioned. The student who lived across the hall from him that said, "You know, I thought you were here on a football scholarship, until I saw you walk down the hall" was implying that because Temple's walk was more effeminate, he was able to discern that Temple was gay.

Masculinity is so easily under threat that in response men will sometimes consciously create distance from women and gay men. This is often translated

into silence on topics concerning the unfair treatment of these individuals. These men may not believe themselves to be committing unjust acts, but silence, as the old adage goes, can speak volumes. In this case, when no one speaks up their silence can be read as approval of homophobic behaviors. As we learned from Michel Foucault's "History of Sexuality", silence gives value to what you are avoiding, and the silence around homophobic behaviors gave gay people a negative value (84). Furthermore, through Foucault we have learned that while institutions produce discourse, discourse also produce institutions (100).

Foucault describes this saying "there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy; they can, on the contrary, circulate without changing their form from one strategy to another, opposing strategy" (102). The institutional power of the student body produced a homophobic discourse, which was shown to be at times stronger than the institutional discourse of the college. The college attempted to provide rules and statements that portrayed the school as a progressive place, but this doesn't mean those rules represented or translated to the climate of the college. We must look at what is being said, and what is being concealed.

There is no doubt that things have improved on Lafayette's campus. QUEST is now a thriving campus group, and to my knowledge the newspaper has not published blatantly homophobic submissions in many years. We have made strides, but it is not perfect. The homophobia that was seen before has now translated into micro aggressions, and as a current student at Lafayette I can attest to the fact that I see it often. Homophobia is at our parties when two

women are dared to kiss each other by a group of men who think 'it's hot' to watch. Yet, two women kissing each other at a party for themselves would not elicit the same sort of acceptance. It might be tolerated, but even that depends on the makeup of the other individuals attending the party. Furthermore, the thought of asking two 'straight' men to kiss each other is out of the question. Homophobia is present when two male friends show admiration for each other in any form because it is still often followed by the comment "no homo". It's there in the carefully constructed ratios of men and women at each party in order to avoid having a room of all men, which somehow could be perceived as 'gay'. I reviewed a variety of online forums such as College Niche and College Confidential that prospective students use to get a better feel for the colleges they're considering applying to. These forums allow them to ask questions anonymously about the college that you would not be able to ask anyone in admissions or on a tour. On College Confidential, some asked if Lafayette would be a welcoming place for gay students, and it elicited a variety of responses. "Candyman92486" responded to the question saying, "Although Lafayette students are often classified as conservative, that in no way means gay students must face intolerance. In general, college is a very welcoming and open-minded place, where students can feel free to be themselves without feeling ostracized." However "Jay115" responded with a very different tone, saying "Almost every gay who's out of the closet at Lafayette College will tell you life here isn't bundles of fun...This isn't to say the college administration isn't supportive. Almost every dean and professor I have relationships with are supportive...However, as most



people know, college life doesn't fully revolve around the classroom, and socialization and affinity with your fellow college students is just as important...students here are closed minded beyond any comparison, and there's no going around that" (College Confidential).

Learning about Lafayette College's history of homophobia and where we started as a university to where we are now has been an incredibly interesting path to follow. I'm proud to say that we have improved, but I also know we have a long way to go. Discourses will continue to shape and form the campus into what it is, and hopefully the discourses of the LGBTQ+ community, women, people of color, and anyone else who faces any sort of oppression will be documented to preserve and respect their history.

## Works Cited

- Blangger, Tim. "Coming Out On Campus Peer Pressure Keeps Many College Gays In Closet." *Tribunedigital-Mcall*, 11 Mar. 1993, [articles.mcall.com/1993-03-11/features/2898298\\_1\\_bisexual-student-union-gay-student-gays-or-lesbians/2](http://articles.mcall.com/1993-03-11/features/2898298_1_bisexual-student-union-gay-student-gays-or-lesbians/2). Accessed 9 May 2017.
- Editor. "College Will Hold Events to Educate about AIDS in Preparation for Quilt." 10 April 1992. Digital.  
<<http://digital.lafayette.edu/collections/newspaper/19920410/>>
- Editor. "Reaching Goals." *The Lafayette*. 14 October 1994. Digital.  
<<http://digital.lafayette.edu/collections/newspaper/19941014/>>
- "Gay Students at Lafayette." *College Confidential*. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 May 2017.
- Gabbay, Morria. "National AIDS Memorial Quilt to be Displayed on Campus." *The Lafayette*. 6 March 1992. Digital.  
<<http://digital.lafayette.edu/collections/newspaper/19920306/>>
- Goldstein, Noah. "QuEST expresses concern about student support." *The Lafayette*. 3 May, 2002. Digital.  
<<http://digital.lafayette.edu/collections/newspaper/20020503/>>
- Gruen, Lori. Email to the "Associates of the Faculty and Staff Association on Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Issues." (1 December 1994). Coeducation. Reference Files: Association on Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Ideas. Special Collections and College Archives, David Bishop Skillman Library, Lafayette College.
- Hank, Matt. "Letter to the Editor." 12 February 1993. Digital.  
<<http://digital.lafayette.edu/collections/newspaper/19930212/>>
- Kiker, Douglas. Fast, Laine. "Opposing Viewpoints: Gay Parenting." 24 September 1993. Digital. < <http://digital.lafayette.edu/collections/newspaper/19930924/>>
- Kosmela, Jennifer. "Letters to the Editor." *The Lafayette*. 6 November 1993. Digital. <<http://digital.lafayette.edu/collections/newspaper/19921106/>>
- "LGBTQ Dates in Lafayette College History." *Association on Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Ideas*. Coeducation. Reference Files. Special Collections and College Archives, David Bishop Skillman Library, Lafayette College.
- McRorie, Jessica. "FLAGB no more, GSA takes over." *The Lafayette*. 18 September 1998. Digital.  
<<http://digital.lafayette.edu/collections/newspaper/19980918/>>
- Muhlfelder, Leslie. Email to Lafayette College Employees. (11 June 1998). Coeducation. Reference Files: Gay and Lesbian Issues. Special Collections and College Archives, David Bishop Skillman Library, Lafayette College.
- Murray, Eileen. "Colonel to Speak: yes, women in the military." 19 February

1993. Digital. < <http://digital.lafayette.edu/collections/newspaper/19930219/>>
- Poggi, Jeff. "Letter to the Editor." *The Lafayette*. 28 October 1994. Digital.  
<<http://digital.lafayette.edu/collections/newspaper/19941028/>>
- Reports, Staff. "Princeton Review Rates 20 Most LGBT Friendly, Unfriendly Colleges." *LGBTQ Nation*, LGBTQ Nation, 25 Dec. 2015,  
[www.lgbtqnation.com/2013/08/princeton-review-rates-20-most-lgbt-friendly-unfriendly-colleges/](http://www.lgbtqnation.com/2013/08/princeton-review-rates-20-most-lgbt-friendly-unfriendly-colleges/). Accessed 9 May 2017.
- Schweidel, Caren. "College Receives Another Unfavorable Rating." *The Lafayette*. 12 November 1993. Digital.  
<<http://digital.lafayette.edu/collections/newspaper/19931112/>>
- Stomber, Elaine McCluskey. "Appendix XIII. A History of Greek Life at Lafayette College, 1853-2010." *Lafayette College and the Greek Experience*. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 May 2017.
- Tawney, Marshall. "Letter to the Editor." *The Lafayette*. 14 October 1994. Digital.  
<<http://digital.lafayette.edu/collections/newspaper/19941014/>>
- Temple, Riley. Interview. 23 May 2002. Sound Recording. Oral History Collection. Special Collections and College Archives, David Bishop Skillman Library, Lafayette College.