

## **Co-ed Queers: A New Kind of Dorm at UMass Amherst**

**by Wendy Darling**

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Gay men and lesbians may be settling into their separate corners in Boston, but they make good neighbors at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. The 2 in 20 Floor for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Students and Their Heterosexual Allies is the inclusive name of the school's three-year-old experiment in dorm life. For many participants, this communal experience may be limited to the few years they spend in college, but it can influence the political views and social attitudes, that they'll hold for the rest of lives.

The floor is home to 36 students, evenly divided between men and women. Some have arrived from areas where it was difficult to meet another gay person at all, let alone one of a different gender. Some didn't know quite what to expect of the dorm floor.

"I had the perception that it would be a very sexual floor," says 'Moe,' a resident who didn't want to use her real name. Soon, however, she found a place where she could move at her own pace. In fact, she spends most of her free time with a gay-male neighbor.

Moe seems genuinely baffled when asked about separatism on the floor and in the larger community on campus. "I think it's generally a myth about the lesbian separatists," she says. "The media likes to play that up, but that's not where's it's at, at least not here."

Here on the 2 in 20 Floor, there's an even mix of men and women, and they do lots of things together, from eating in the cafeteria to going to clubs on weekends.

According to resident Kristina Nygaard, that mixing is partly a matter of necessity. "It can't be avoided, especially since it's a relatively small community. If they're going to have anything happen on this campus, they can't just rely on gay men doing it or on lesbians doing it," she says. "How can they not be friends?"

Another resident, Robert Van Gieson, says that without the 2 in 20 Floor to bring them together, gay men and lesbians would probably exist in a lot more isolation. When he was a student at the Rochester Institute of Technology, he says, there was nothing like the 2 in 20 Floor and, as a consequence, no interaction between the two groups. The UMass program is helpful, he says, simply because "you get to meet all the lesbians."

Several people on campus say things are far different from the way they were in the 1970s, when gay men and lesbians operated with different clubs, political organizations, and living arrangements.

"I've read lesbian history with ... 'penises are bad' and this whole crazy ideology of a lesbian utopia," Nygaard says, "and it just seems like that whole idea might still be alive in a few people living in Northampton, but it's not alive here at UMass."

Pointing to his relationship with Moe, Van Gieson says, "I think I would have been an oddball 10 or 15 years ago, but I think our generation is living and saying 'Why'? Why do I have to follow that rule? Why do gays and lesbians have to be separate?"

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For all its success in getting gay men and lesbians used to each other, the 2 in 20 Floor has not eliminated differences between the two, especially when it comes to politics and activism.

"The community in the [Pioneer] Valley is mostly lesbians and bisexual women," says Joy Richard, who lives at the end of the hall.

In nearby Northampton, Nygaard says, "it's the women who run the scene and the guys that just kind of tag along." Most of the lectures, concerts, and support groups are oriented toward lesbians and bisexual women, she says, and at UMass, the gay-and-lesbian studies courses are filled almost entirely by women. Nygaard points out that this is unique among gay-and-lesbian communities, where men dominate almost without exception.

Brian Lepper, another 2 in 20 resident, feels that women come to activism more easily. "I have a feeling that women are a little more concerned with anything to do with violence, especially Ann Marie [the floor's resident assistant], who's always putting a concentration into rape and stuff like that," Lepper says.

Moe agrees: "I don't see much enthusiasm in the gay-male community about protecting women ... There isn't much interest in talking about, say, battered lesbians."

Another female student admits to some puzzlement over the emphasis on women by the UMass Program for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Concerns.

"I see a lot of *lesbian, lesbian, lesbian*, and not a lot of gay or bisexual," she says. "It makes me wonder what the gays and bisexuals go and see, and what's out there for them."

At a recent meeting of the UMass Lesbian Bisexual Gay Alliance, a male student pointed out that while there are several places where women can go for support against sexism and homophobia, there are no such resources for men. "There's an Everywoman's Center, but there isn't an Everyman's Center on campus," he said.

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One thing that still sets gay men and lesbians apart is the way they socialize.

"A lot of the reason why I would go to [any GLB event] is to see if there are [men] I can meet," Lepper says. "From what I've heard from women, they go more to have fun or to get what they're going to get out of the lecture or whatever."

Brett Chiarello, who lives with her partner, Joy Richard, concurs: "I don't think men – especially gay men – are really socialized to want to go to a lecture series... Sex is a much bigger topic for gay men than it is for lesbians."

Chris Salvastano, facilitator for the Lesbian Bisexual Gay Alliance, says that because LBGA meetings tend to be social, they often attract more men than women. A recent meeting had a male-female ratio of roughly five to one. Some lesbians and bisexual women are put off by the preponderance of men, but, for the most part, they don't take it personally.

"I don't think it's bad that there are a whole lot of men, but I think it would be a whole lot nicer if there were a whole lot more women," said Rachel Tanenhaus at a recent meeting. "I've never felt like I'm not wanted, but there is still a kind of gap."

Men still dominate the LBGA Steering Committee. (Before I resigned my position earlier this year, I was the only woman in a group of six.) Steering Committee members agree that this isn't the result of deliberate sexism; a room five-sixths full of men is simply bound to yield more male volunteers.

But the phrase "majority rules" means different things in different situations, Salvastano says. When he goes dancing at the popular North Star in Northampton, he often finds himself in the minority, even on "boys" night out.

The nearest bar with a predominantly male crowd is David's, about 20 miles from campus, in Springfield. Lepper says it has a different atmosphere from the North Star or mixed clubs, with much more emphasis on sex. "You go to David's, and you know everyone there is just looking around to stalk people," he says. [Shortly after this interview, David's was closed because of damage from a fire.]

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Thanks in large part to the 2 in 20 Floor, separatist rhetoric seems to be dead or dying in Amherst. When gay men and lesbians gather in the halls and classrooms, they easily reach a consensus that unity is the best course. Behavior, however, is often difficult to change, and there is still plenty of evidence here that gay men and lesbians can find comfort in their separate groups. The 2 in 20 Floor is always going to be affected by the attitudes of the outside world, but if its graduates, in turn, help to shape those attitudes in any way, this experiment can be judged a success.

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