

LGBTQ Community Voices — 2 student stories

By Alan Bennett

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1) Kristina Pettegrow: Here and Queer

If you've ever stopped by the Rainbow Resource Center on the second floor of the Union, you've probably met her. She leads "LGBTTea" parties, works to create safe, accepting spaces on campus, and counsels numerous students in their times of need.

She makes it look easy. But it hasn't always been so. A proud bisexual member of the University of Maine community, Kristina Pettegrow, who is from East Machias, Maine, was raised to keep silent about her sexuality.

"I came from a really conservative, small town in Maine, so even being out, talking about anything LGBT was not an option," Pettegrow said. "For the most part, I don't tell a lot of people where I work."

When Pettegrow started at the University, a whole new world opened up for her. Between her studies in psychology, women's and gender studies and sociology, she found time to take part in LGBT activities in an environment she no longer had to fear.

"Coming to the campus and even just seeing this sort of thing, seeing that this is a place where that sort of thing can happen, and that we can have these sorts of conversations. It's really important," she said.

Quite the opposite of her hometown, where she recounts one recent experience in a gas station in which she forgot she was wearing a neon pink, "Here and Queer" shirt.

"Nobody would look at me," she said.

Which is why she works everyday to create a safe space for members of the LGBT community at UMaine. An often underrepresented group within the LGBT community — regardless of its contribution as the "B" — bisexuals tend to face scrutiny from all sexual orientations, straight and gay alike.

"That's a problem even within the community, occasionally coming across people who aren't very bi-friendly," Pettegrow said. "It makes it harder to create that safe environment even within these sorts of spaces."

And so, as the senior work study coordinator of the Rainbow Resource Center, Pettegrew works to promote an environment where everyone feels safe, welcome and accepted.

“I try to work really hard to highlight a lot of unrepresented LGBT groups,” she said.

Pettegrew described a student who came in recently who identified as bisexual, but was previously afraid of talking to anyone about her sexuality. With Pettegrew’s help, and with help from others at the center, the student began to accept who she was.

Pettegrew says self-recognition is one of the hardest parts of being in the LGBT community. She says there’s never really a good time to come out to friends and family, but remaining closeted just masks one’s true self.

“For me personally, being out is really important. When you’re not out, there’s so much just little things that you say and do that you have to tweak,” she said. “It’s exhausting.”

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2) Coming Out as trans in Russia: Aleks Queen

When one thinks of a “coming out” story, Russia doesn’t exactly come to mind as the perfect setting. The country, known for its particularly strict intolerance for LGBT rights, was the setting of one University of Maine student’s coming out story, but one less often heard.

“I’m sitting at a bar in Russia, and I come out as being trans in Russia, to two of my main colleagues,” Kaylyn Queen, who identifies as male and goes by the name Aleks, said. “It was a really interesting experience trying to be someone you’re not in a culture that doesn’t accept who you really are.”

The graduate school trip, which took place last May, was accompanied by Wayne Maines, father of Nicole Maines, the transgender girl who was now famously denied access to the girls’ bathroom at the Asa Adams School in Orono, and whose case against the school district resulted in \$75,000 awarded to Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders and Portland-based Berman Simmons, which represented Maines, [according to the Bangor Daily News](#). Having Maines on the trip served as an inspiration for Queen to open up about his identity, in Russia of all places.

“It was in Russia that I really started to accept who I was,” Queen said.

Queen, who studies business management and international business, said preparing for the trip was easy in many respects, but difficult because he had to stifle his identity.

“I knew what I was getting into. I didn’t cut my hair, I didn’t bring clothes that were strictly male clothing. I was very aware of the dangers of what was happening,” Queen said. But in describing his coming out, Queen said: “I can be emotional about this, but at the same time I have to be quiet about it.”

But that’s where UMaine comes in. Through UMaine, Queen went to Russia, and through UMaine, he found acceptance.

“I came out about it more recently in the last couple of years of finally accepting who I am. Through that, I’ve lost some friends, I’ve gained some new friends,” Queen said. “I’m supportive of those other members in the community, and it’s really just about creating a family where you might not have other support.”

Queen works to create that support among the University community by helping people understand transphobic language, and has found solace in UMaine’s active LGBT community. To him, Pride Week symbolizes self and community acceptance of unique differences.

“Embrace who you are. It doesn’t matter if your family supports you; you know you have other community members that support you,” Queen said. “[Pride Week] gives you a chance to network with other students who might have similar experiences to you, or who are going to be there and support you regardless of, ‘Oh, your gender’s this,’ or ‘Your sexuality’s that.’” “It lets you build a friendship and a family where you don’t have to worry,” he said.

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