Fall 2008

Fusion Fall 2008

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CONFESSIONS OF A NORTHEAST OHIO PRETTY BOY
ANTHONY TELLS ALL

VICTORY!
THE TIME IS NOW FOR DOMESTIC PARTNER BENEFITS AT KENT STATE

YO & FRIENDS & OTHER WAYS OUR LANGUAGE IS CHANGING

AND MORE
$25K FOR LGBT, THE INTERBELT TURNS 20 & THE MAN WHO PUT OBAMA ON BRIEFS
We congratulate Fusion Magazine for its contribution to the literary arts in our communities.

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www.pflagcleveland.org

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Monthly Support Group,
The Next Step Group &
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(330) 342-5825

Monthly meetings, 7:00 PM
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PFLAG promotes the health and well-being of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons, their families and friends through:

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4 WHAT’S IN YOUR CART?
The HRC’s Equality for Buying guide can help you make more LGBT-friendly shopping decisions

6 HOW THE COUNTRY WENT
See how the states with the highest percentage of same-sex couples voted in November’s election

6 NOT JUST ANOTHER MUSIC LABEL
Sony’s Music With a Twist targets LGBT artists to give them better promotion in the industry

7 $25K FOR KENT STATE LGBT
Akron’s Harry Jackson is giving Kent State up to $2 million to benefit LGBT students

8 10 QUESTIONS WITH ANDREW CHRISTIAN
The SoCal underwear designer catches up with our managing editor

PERSPECTIVES
11 A YOUNG SOUL IN SEARCH OF OLD LOVE
False hopes of old movies have left Nicholas DiSabatino searching for a man he may never find

25 GOD LOVES ME TOO
Marchaè Grair explains her struggle between being a lesbian and a devout Christian

UPDATES
12 STILL NO BLOOD
A decades-old policy still prohibits sexually-active gay men from donating blood, though many feel the regulations are discriminatory

14 VICTORY AT KENT STATE
After years of pressure, Kent State will become the ninth Ohio university to offer domestic partner benefits in January

FEATURES
18 A SENSE OF COMMUNITY
Six Kent State professors share their coming out stories and agree the attitude toward the LGBT community has improved over the last 30 years

26 THE INTERBELT AT 20
The popular Akron club celebrates a milestone

32 WHO YOU ARE
Eight Kent State students share their outlook on the university’s LGBT environment and issues affecting the community

37 POSITIVE
One Columbus teen explains how he discovered he was HIV positive and the effect living with it has had on his life

THE WORDS WE SAY
39 ‘WE NEED NEW PRONOUNS’
As transgender issues take their place in the movement toward equality, it’s time to consider how our language answers the question of gender

42 THE EVOLUTION OF AN IDENTITY
LGBT is a buzzword, but it’s also a social, political and cultural identity that’s been years in the constructing

LAST THOUGHT
44 FROM MEXICO
A decades-old policy still prohibits sexually-active gay men from donating blood, though many feel the regulations are discriminatory

2 CONTACT US
3 FROM THE EDITORS

ON THE COVER
29 ALL ABOUT ANTHONY
Junior psychology major is known throughout this part of the state for his job dancing at local bars, but there’s more behind those pretty ringlets

COVER PHOTO
of Anthony Leonette shot by Leslie L. Cusano
FUSION

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MISSION
According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, fusion is “a merging of diverse, distinct or separate elements into a unified whole.” Fusion magazine addresses sexual minority issues within the general university population. The magazine strives to unify people of different backgrounds through education and awareness.

DONATIONS/SUBSCRIPTIONS
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KENT STATE STUDENT MEDIA = EXCELLENCE in Action

Congratulations to all students involved in producing print and electronic media. Your creativity, integrity and inclusiveness make us proud.

President Lester A. Lepton
and the President’s Office Staff
FROM THE EDITORS

I never thought I'd be rewarded with such a wonderful team of writers, columnists, editors, photographers and designers, as managing editor of Fusion magazine this semester. I hope this issue of Fusion enlightens you, the reader, because our team is breaking bias, blurring stereotypes and blasting ignorance with a vehicle as bold as their stories.

I consider myself to be an informed member of the community, but as I read the stories and saw the pictures, I kept yelling, “Yes! Yes!” Our staff accomplished a way of storytelling that makes it easy for you to put yourself in someone else’s shoes, to understand their lives and hopefully to make you say, “Wow, I never would’ve thought that.”

We’ve worked together to bring you an issue that is a groundbreaking first for all of us here at Fusion. This is the first full-size, full color issue. Keep your minds open as you read our stories. Consider that everyone around you deserves to be treated just as you would prefer to be treated – without bias, without hate or abuse, without a cloud of judgment blocking potential friendships. We are all in this world together as one race made up of many unique individuals. I encourage you to read on to learn more about just a few of them.

—Robert Checkal

I waited until after the last corrections were made on this issue to consider what I wanted to say here. Looking at this, the second issue under my editorship, it’s amazing to see how far the magazine has come.

Five years ago this fall, students came together and produced the first issue of Fusion. It was 2003, and 11 states were preparing to vote on the first constitutional amendments that would prohibit same-sex marriage. As I write to you now, five years later, our nation has spoken again and raised the stakes in the push toward equality for all people. Proposition 8’s success in California last month means 18,000 married, same-sex couples may soon be illegitimate in the government’s eyes. Two more states passed marriage amendments, and one state specifically banned adoption by same-sex couples. (Read more about this on Page 6.)

It seems as if the fight for equal rights is coming full circle. Prop 8 was denounced by President-elect Barack Obama and California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and companies such as Google and Apple contributed to the No on Prop 8 campaign that fought against the ballot item. The idea that LGBT people will overcome the ignorance they face without getting our hands dirty is a comfortable approach we need to leave in the 1990s.

Protests sprung up across the country after Prop 8’s victory because no nation can hope to move forward while suppressing its own people. Equality is about recognizing we’re all in this together.

We have made strides since Fusion’s inception, but we have so much further to go. This semester, I wanted to raise issues that make you question long-held ideas that inherently discriminate against a particular aspect of the LGBT umbrella. Each of us can affect change in our own way, and I hope when Fusion celebrates 10 years in 2013, change will truly be a reality.

Guess we’ll wait and see.

— Adam Griffiths
These brands, along with those pictured here, are among those rated highly by the Human Rights Campaign:
BUYING LGBT-FRIENDLY IS EASIER THAN YOU’D THINK

The HRC’s Buying for Equality guide gives new meaning to putting your money where your mouth is.

How LGBT-friendly will your next shopping trip be? Consult the Human Rights Campaign’s Buying for Equality guide to find out.

The Buying for Equality guide serves as a yearly report card for corporate America on gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender equality in the workplace — examining everything from health care to partnership benefits to treatment of LGBT customers. And it’s all done in the hopes that you, the consumer, will make a more informed decision about what items you place in your shopping cart.

This year, a record 195 companies surveyed, including household staples like Pfizer, Apple and American Express, scored a perfect 100 rating based on their treatment of LGBT employees and customers, according to the organization’s Web site.

HRC communication coordinator Rachel Balick said with the lack of equal-rights legislation for LGBT workers, much of corporate America has taken the initiative to protect employees from discrimination.

“For business, it’s about the bottom line: They’re looking to attract and retain their top employees, so it’s in their best interest,” Balick said. “There’s no federal law that prevents LGBT workers from discrimination. Business has led the way where Congress hasn’t.”

— Jenna Staul
Matt Farber, the founder of LGBT cable network LOGO, is extending his Midas touch to a new record label. Farber created Music With a Twist, an imprint under Sony Music/Columbia Records and the first label pledged solely to signing and promoting LGBT artists. The label is a joint operation with Wilderness Media & Entertainment, also headed by Farber and dedicated to creating and assisting LGBT media entertainment properties and start-ups.

So far, the label has signed The Gossip, a punk band from Portland, Ore., headed by an out lesbian, and comedian Kathy Griffin. The label released The Gossip’s “Live in Liverpool” CD/DVD in April, and the band is currently working on their next studio release.

One goal for the label is to release various compilations. “Music With A Twist: Revolutions” is a CD featuring ten indie LGBT artists under consideration to be signed to the label. Music with a Twist also released a compilation of songs from or inspired by Showtime’s popular “The L Word” in January 2007.

“These artist signings and compilations represent the vision for TWIST … to create a home for gay artists of all genres to experience mainstream success without having to compromise any part of their identity,” Farber says in a press release.

— Laura Payne
A DOOR WIDE OPEN

Kent State LGBT students have one Akron entrepreneur to thank after he gave the university $25K for their benefit

For what 22-year-old Harry Jackson lacked in experience and business savvy, he more than made up for with keen foresight and blind ambition.

It was four decades ago, while enrolled as a business graduate student at the University of Akron, that Jackson did a favor for a friend who owned Green Gas House, a small novelty and tobacco shop on the outskirts of the campus.

Putting his degree to use, he studied the business’ books and found the quaint shop in deep financial turmoil. If only he owned the place, he thought, things might be different.

“Are you kidding?” Jackson quips. “My father thought I was a nut to buy the store.”

From there, Green Gas House, maintaining its signature inventory of pipes, tobacco wares and hard-to-find oddities, was re-incarnated as the Odd Corner, a now 35-year staple of the University of Akron community. Jackson demonstrated a knack for looking ahead and investing in the future, and it’s that same incisive forward thinking that lead him to make the first major investment in the LGBT community at Kent State.

In the spring, Jackson endowed the largest LGBT-specific donation of its kind in Kent State’s history — $25,000 to be used toward scholarships and LGBT-oriented programming on campus. What’s more, this initial investment is part of $2 million from a trust fund to the university in the hopes of funding both the education of LGBT students and raising awareness of the community’s issues.

“I don’t expect some rich heterosexual to give back to our community,” Jackson says. “It’s up to us to help our community. It’s important to help out our future.”

Jackson’s résumé is as diverse as Odd Corner’s cache of eclectic items — listing him as everything from a tax attorney for BFGoodrich to an owner of a gay bar in Cleveland, and he says his lengthy professional background that has enabled him to give back so generously to his community, something for which he feels deeply fortunate.

Jackson’s contribution marks a milestone for Kent State, says Joe Macedo, associate vice president for gift and estate planning for the university.

“It’s a bit of a first for us,” Macedo says. “It’s the first time (LGBT students) were able to have those kinds of funds available, and he left a pretty widely opened door for the use of those funds.”

Macedo says he hopes others follow Jackson’s example. “We’re hoping this will attract other philanthropy like it,” he says.

Jackson, an Akron native, says it was the Odd Corner that ultimately led him to contribute to Kent State. Initially, Jackson opted to award money to his alma mater, but after Akron took Jackson to court to acquire the original Odd Corner location while constructing its new InfoCision Stadium, Jackson felt it was time to donate elsewhere.

“Akron made some promises they broke,” Jackson says. “I did some research, and Kent State is an excellent university and extremely diverse.”

For Jackson, who says he’s “old enough to know better but too young to resist,” writing a generous check to Kent State seemed natural after spending much of his adult life dedicated to gay activism.

He’s made multiple donations to various LGBT causes, served on the Board of Governors for the Human Rights Campaign and fought to raise AIDS awareness.

“I want them to be proud of who they are,” Jackson says of the lasting effects of his donation on Kent State’s LGBT students.

“That’s my community. I wasn’t really out that much in college, and I truly believe in giving back now.”

— Jenna Staul
ANDREW CHRISTIAN

The underwear designer talks inspiration, how to get into thousands of guys’ pants and the ‘larger-than-life’ Janice Dickinson

You started Andrew Christian in 1997. After 11 years, what has been your most memorable experience? Probably working with Janice Dickinson. It was my first time working on TV, and she’s just such a larger-than-life personality.

What inspires your designs? I’m inspired by lots of different things: lifestyle, the way that I live; fabrications, like bamboo fiber; and sometimes just general themes, like policemen or firemen.

You’ve not only designed amazing underwear, but you’ve also done it using innovative and eco-friendly fabrics like bamboo fiber. What other fabrics do you plan to implement in the future? I’m working on organic cotton underwear. A lot of people ask me why I’d use organic cotton, and the answer is because 75 percent of the world’s pesticides are used in the growing of cotton. Our new tagline is, “Soft on you, soft on the earth.”

You’re helping the environment every day with your line, but what kinds of things do you do in your everyday life to help the environment? I definitely recycle, and I use reusable bags in the grocery store. I’ve really made a conscious effort in the last year to reduce the amount of electricity that I use. I just try to turn off lights when nobody is using a room, and I try not to run the air conditioner unless it’s absolutely necessary.

Can you tell me about the upcoming ready-to-wear Black line? It’s all stuff that I would wear personally to an event, and it really was inspired by a need for things to wear at events. If I wouldn’t wear it, it didn’t make the line.

Will the “Music to Wear Tour” become an annual event? I think so. We’re toying with the idea. It’s been a lot of fun.

What do you do or where do you go when you want to get away from a hectic day or week? I like to go hiking a lot and get away from everything and just chill. That’s something that I like about the city. You could feel like you’re in middle-of-nowhere wilderness within minutes.

What’s something that’s quirky about yourself? I have a really weird, eclectic taste in music. I can listen to anything from Rihanna to Amy Winehouse, to Madonna, to Goldfrapp or Ladytron.

How many pants do you think you’ve been in? And by that I mean, about how much underwear do you think you’ve sold over the years? Hundreds of thousands of pants.

You covered musician and disc jockey Samantha Ronson’s booted car with a string of clothing from your personal line. What inspired you to do so? I just wanted to do something to show solidarity with her in the press. It’s hard to be in the spotlight all of the time, and they gave her a lot of negative coverage over the boot. So I figured that I cover booties all day with my underwear, so I’d cover that booty, too.

— Robert Checkal
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CARL'S TEA DANCE
Sunday 5-9

Monday—Saturday
4:30 p.m. til 2:30 a.m.

Sunday
4 p.m. til 2:30 a.m.
YoUnG Man With a Case of oLd SoUL

NICHOLAS DISABATINO

Man a Saturday night I’ve popped in the movie “Summertime.” Most haven’t heard of it because it came out in 1955. As I lie on my bed, I watch a lonely Jane Hudson (Katharine Hepburn) travel to Venice in hope of finding what she’d always been missing: some “mystical, magical experience.” When she says this to an Italian woman, the woman responds, “You know Miss Hudson, those miracles can happen, but sometimes you have to give them a little push.” She does find it in the arms of a married Italian man, Rossano Brazzi, but it comes at an expense: it’s a mere few days of happiness, but it’s what she’s been missing her entire life.

It’s there, at that very moment, that I realize I need my little push — a little push away from what I’ve been engulfed in for almost five years: A world of black and white images where everything ends with the lighting of two cigarettes or in the words “I do.”

The root of the problem is what my mother calls the old soul syndrome. I can’t just read the Harry Potter books like every other English major. I have to read “Jane Eyre” or “The Age of Innocence.” I don’t care about the latest Will Farrell movie. I’d rather sit back in my room and watch “The Philadelphia Story” or “His Girl Friday.”

But they don’t make men like Edward Rochester, Newland Archer or Cary Grant anymore. And therein lies the disappointment. It’s easier to want these men than it is to want the men I’ve found in my short 20-something lifetime. Charlotte Brontë knew what she was doing when she created Mr. Rochester, the brooding, 40ish, dashing man. So did Jane Austen when she created the epitome of all young female English majors’ wet dreams — Mr. Darcy. Jane Austen will never know the tremendous amount of heartache and disappointment she created in the hearts of women and gay men.

Reading and watching, reading and watching is all I’ve been able to really do for these past few years. Oh sure, I’ve dated. Sure, I’ve fooled around, but it all comes back to the books. It all comes back to the glossy old films. They’ve cast a spell over me, one that I have no hope or desire to overcome.

When I sit down to read a Jane Austen novel or watch a Bette Davis film, I don’t just desire such a life. I yearn for a man found in those classic media. But life doesn’t work so easily. In fact, my dating scene has suffered considerably at the hands of it. I’ve become like Dorothea Brooke from George Eliot’s “Middlemarch.” I’ve always lied to myself. I’ve always told myself that men are better than they appear. It shouldn’t matter if they’re stupid closet cases, bitter 30-year-olds or insecure balding men. There must be something beneath it all. They must want to really sweep me off my feet. They have to meet me out in the rain such as George Peppard meets Audrey Hepburn at the end of “Breakfast at Tiffany’s.”

But they can’t. These men aren’t from the pages of books. They came to me through more unromantic means — the Internet, my parents, mutual friends. Of course it’s not completely their fault. I’ve some part to play in all of this. Yet, I still keep watching. I still keep reading. And I still keep hoping for that mystical, magical moment to happen. But do I keep reading and watching?

I’m sure there are many other old souls out there. But in Ohio? Ha! I’ve seen love. I’ve seen it pure and unfiltered. I’ve even been privileged to see it in the faces of my friends and family. But experience it? Live it? Not yet.

He doesn’t have to be a Darcy, a Cary or even a Rochester; he just has to love me. And if it can only last for a brief span of time, I’ll be grateful. And when he leaves me, I’ll echo the words of Katharine Hepburn at the end of “Woman of the Year.”

“I was sort of hoping you’d kiss me goodbye,” I’ll say.
And he’ll respond, “I was sorta hoping you’d ask me.”
THERE STILL CAN’T BE BLOOD*

FACT: MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH OTHER MEN ARE NOT ELIGIBLE TO DONATE BLOOD. BUT THERE IS A CONTINUOUS NEED FOR BLOOD. AND LESS THAN 5 PERCENT OF THE ELIGIBLE POPULATION DONATES IT. STORY BY KRISTINE PHILLIPS

*DONATIONS
Fresherman visual communication design major Cody Wallis tried to donate blood in high school. He was surprised, however, to find out that he could not donate because he had had sex with a man.

“I was shocked,” Wallis says. “This is completely unwarranted. They test the blood anyway. It just looks like a form of discrimination.”

According to the Food and Drug Administration, men who have had sex with other men are banned from giving blood for their entire lives due to the likelihood of HIV/AIDS infection, regardless of whether that person has actually tested positive for HIV. The ban is effective for all men who have had sex with other men since 1977, when HIV first began to appear, according to the FDA.

“We believe that a lifetime ban from donation for men who have sex with other men is unwarranted,” says Lisa Mayles, director of public relations, marketing, communications and development for LifeShare Community Blood Services, the organization that organizes blood drives at Kent State’s Tuscarawas, Stark and Kent campuses.

“I think that, unfortunately, the FDA’s logic on this is there is a significantly higher rate of HIV in this group,” she says. “The blood supply is safer now than it has ever been.”

Mayles notes there are other cases that qualify potential donors for permanent deferment, including clotting hemophiliacs, intravenous drug use with a prescription and travel to certain countries including the United Kingdom for more than five years since 1996.

Those at risk for problems in the short-term future are also given deferments from blood donation. A one year-deferment is required for someone who has been potentially exposed to the HIV virus, and people who had major surgery, acupuncture, tattoos or body piercing are banned for six months.

The screening process for potential donors loosely guarantees the safety of the blood supply. Those who wish to donate undergo medical history screening, including recent illnesses or conditions, such as anemia, that makes people ineligible to donate. Blood is examined for traces of viruses, including HIV, Hepatitis B and C and syphilis, according to the World Health Organization.

“FDA uses a multi-layered approach to ensure the safety of the blood supply,” says Karen Riley, press officer for the FDA Office of Public Affairs. “This approach includes donor screening, blood testing and other measures. The approach is designed so that if any one of these layers fail to ensure the safety of the blood supply, the blood will still be safe.”

The FDA licensed the nucleic acid test, which can detect HIV and Hepatitis C antibodies in the blood within 22 days of infection, according to a Feb. 2002 FDA press release. This was an improvement on former tests which took 82 days from the date of infection to detect the virus. While the window period has substantially decreased, there is still a timeframe during which the body does not know it has the virus and it’s nearly impossible to detect, putting potential donors at risk. According to an August 2004 study in The New England Journal of Medicine, nucleic acid testing has improved the standard of testing so much that the risk of blood infected with HIV passing into circulation has been reduced to one in two million.

Statistics from the Centers for Disease Control still show men who have sex with men are the group with the highest rate of new HIV infections. Approximately 17,500 new cases of HIV in 2006 were diagnosed in males who have sexual contact with other men, according to the CDC. Compared with more than 4,000 new cases diagnosed in the same year in men with high-risk heterosexual contact, men who have sex with men are much more likely to contract the virus.

That high risk for HIV infection is the reason David Verhas, graduate student in computer science, believes the ban should stay in place, for now at least. Verhas received a blood transfusion nearly six years ago while he was undergoing treatment for Ewing sarcoma, a rare soft tissue cancer. Even though testing is available for those who donate blood, Verhas believes there is still a risk factor in donations.

To the FDA, “no donor eligibility questions that address such issues as monogamy or safe sexual practices have been shown to reliably identify a subset of men who have sex with men who do not still have a substantially increased rate of HIV infection compared to the general population of currently accepted blood donors,” Riley says. “In the future, improved questionnaires may be helpful, but this evidence does not exist yet.”

Freshman nursing major Darren Stevenson has never donated blood but will have to handle blood when he becomes a nurse.

“They use those facts to marginalize an entire group,” Stevenson says. “Promiscuity can be anyone. I don’t strictly associate that with any one group.”

Freshman geography major Andrew Lang agrees with Stevenson. Even though Lang is gay, he has never had sex with a man, still making him eligible to donate blood. So far he has given blood six times since he turned 17 last year, knowing someday he will not be eligible to donate.

“I like giving blood,” Lang says. “It makes me feel good about myself, but the policy makes me not want to give blood. I hope everyone realizes this is discriminatory.”

Most blood donors on Kent State’s campuses are Caucasian and female, with 444 donations from males versus 602 donations from females in the past year, according to the donation statistics, provided by Diane Van Tilburg, LifeShare’s donor recruitment representative. These numbers speak to the high number of donations from men, considering men make up only 38 percent of the total student population in Kent State’s eight-campus network.

Victoria Rothacker, regional communications lead for the American Red Cross, notes the average donor is male, tends to be college-educated and aged 30 to 50 years old in the region, which includes 19 counties in northern Ohio.

“We’re disappointed that the FDA has chosen not to revisit this policy because we are always looking for blood donors,” Rothacker says.

Both Rothacker and Mayles say their organizations have worked with national groups such as the American Association of Blood Banks to push for policy updates.

“We would like the FDA to adjust the deferral period so that it’s more in line with other kinds of activities,” Mayles says. “It’s frustrating when you see people who want to donate but cannot.”
Kent State cultivates minds through liberal education and furthers the bounds of knowledge through research.

Blockbuster’s got movies.

Despite the disparity, Jay Sloan, assistant professor of English at Kent State Stark, could never insure his partner, Herman Guy, with Kent State’s employee benefits. But for years, Guy could have insured Sloan and their pets with Blockbuster’s benefits.

“I had this huge problem with the notion that, having worked all these years for a Ph.D. and having joined a major university, I couldn’t give my partner benefits, but he’s working at Blockbuster, and he can insure our cat,” Sloan says, with exasperation in his voice. “This is an institution devoted to thought and inquiry, and they’re dragging their feet on this?”

This January, Barack Obama’s inauguration won’t be the only event making history. Kent State will join eight other Ohio colleges when domestic partner benefits finally become a reality for faculty and unclassified or unrepresented employees. It’s a milestone that hasn’t come easily and that’s taken two administrations to see take effect.

BY BENJAMIN WOLFORD
But on Aug. 27, they stopped dragging. Kent State joined eight other universities in Ohio, and Blockbuster, to offer domestic partner benefits for faculty when the Board of Trustees and tenure-track faculty of the Kent State chapter of the American Association of University Professors agreed on the latest contract.

Eligible faculty, unclassified employees and unrepresented classified employees can begin receiving benefits for their domestic partners, same-sex or otherwise, Jan. 1, 2009. Those benefits include medical insurance, dependent life insurance, voluntary Accidental Death & Dismemberment Insurance and tuition fee waivers.

A contract like this at Kent State was 14 years in the making, and for faculty with uninsured partners, “it’s been a terrifying ride,” Sloan says. He says a colleague at the Stark Campus took months off of work to care for his wife who suffered from a major stroke. If something like that happened to his uninsured partner, Sloan wasn’t sure he’d receive the same support. “It would have destroyed us financially,” he says. “I would have probably left Kent State in a few years.”

And some people did.

Robert Johnson was chair of the sociology department for four years and helped to found the LGBT Studies minor program at Kent State until he resigned in 2004. Now he’s a professor and chair at the Department of Sociology at Florida’s University of Miami.

In his resignation letter to Joseph Danks, then dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, he wrote, “I have known many former colleagues who left Kent State University with this issue as one of the factors that made other universities more attractive. Personally, I have been treated professionally and accorded dignity by my colleagues and most students, but the second-class status that is ascribed to me by this university’s policy on domestic partners has long been a source of great disappointment.”

Johnson says the absence of domestic partner benefits wasn’t the only reason he left. The prospect of chairing a department at a top-tier, highly-selective, private institution was difficult to pass up. But the University of Miami offered domestic partner benefits when Kent State didn’t, and that made it even more difficult.

“Carol Cartwright (former president of Kent State) promised that she would bring domestic partner benefits to Kent State if another university did so. She didn’t do that,” Johnson says. “And so it makes you look around. It makes you keep your opportunities open and look at other possibilities. The University of Miami was not the first one that came along, but it was the best one that came along. Both because it was a better university and because it offered domestic partner benefits, I decided to leave.”

Cartwright told about eight faculty proponents for the benefits at a meeting in 2001 that Kent State would immediately offer them if another Ohio public institution did so first, and to stop lobbying for them in the meantime, says Molly Merryman, associate professor of justice studies. Miami University of Ohio and Ohio University got them in 2004. Six others followed suit before Kent State did.

“To a roomful of us, (Cartwright) promised that would happen, and we took her at her word,” says Merryman, who came to the university in 1996 and immediately began rallying support for domestic partner benefits. In subsequent meetings with Cartwright, Merryman says the faculty representatives reminded her of her promise to offer the benefits. “Usually the meetings would end right after we would bring up the issue,” Merryman says.

Cartwright, now interim president of Bowling Green State University, did not return calls to her office. But Willis Walker, vice president of human resources, was chief legal counsel for the university under Cartwright and still holds that position. He says much of her reluctance was on advice from his office and certainly not from any personal reservations. Issue 1 had just passed, which amended the state constitution to exclude unmarried people from receiving legal status equal to marriage. And in 2006, Miami University went to court over a lawsuit regarding their domestic partner benefits, which was dismissed later that year.

“At that time, it was kind of novel, at least in the state of Ohio, and significantly more controversial than it is today,” Walker said of the benefits. “It was just a question of whether or not the university wanted to be involved in a situation that was already at the Ohio Supreme Court and that had already had a constitutional amendment passed on. It was the advice of the counsel’s office that we thought it was better to wait.”

Cartwright resigned from Kent State, still
Kent State University
Affidavit of Domestic Partnership

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Declaration

We, the undersigned, declare that:

1) We are at least 18 years of age and have the capacity to enter into a contract; and
2) We share a permanent residence (unless residing in different cities, states, or countries on a temporary basis);
3) We are the sole domestic partner of each, having been in the relationship for at least six (6) months, and intending to remain in that relationship indefinitely;
4) We are not currently married to, or legally separated from, another person under either statutory or common law;
5) We are responsible for each other’s welfare.

The employee’s payroll contribution is generally taxable income to the employee unless the domestic partner is a qualified tax dependent of the employee.

3) Kent State University’s cost for providing domestic partner benefits and the employee’s payroll contribution is generally taxable income to the employee.

4) The employee is responsible for notifying Kent State University by submitting an Affidavit of Termination of Domestic Partnership Status form within 31 days of the date that he/she no longer meets the eligibility requirements for domestic partner benefits. We understand that eligibility for domestic partner benefits ends on the last day of the month of termination of the domestic partnership.

6) We understand that Kent State University establishes this plan with the intention of maintaining it for an indefinite period of time; however, the Kent State reserves the right to amend or terminate this plan at any time subject to any changes in laws and policies.
Lester Lefton became president in July 2006.

“I had a meeting with him that very first summer,” Merryman says. “He promised me that (faculty would get domestic partner benefits), and it has turned out to be true. He was a man of his word.”

From the beginning of his tenure, Lefton says he supported bringing such benefits to Kent State. “I saw this as an equity issue,” he says. “We live in a society that shouldn’t discriminate. Committed partners who are in a long-term relationship should be treated similarly to married individuals.”

For two years, though, Lefton balked on offering them at Kent State, citing Ohio’s post-Issue 1 constitution and the legal problems that might come from it. The administration did, however, offer domestic partner benefits in late March as part of a one-year contract extension that would postpone negotiations. The faculty union voted against accepting the offer in part because they thought the three percent wage increase it included was not enough.

Lefton didn’t say why the administration overcame their trepidation, but he did say he had always been in support of the benefits. “I’ve only been here two years,” he says. “It took me two years. That’s not long. I told Molly Merryman and other faculty members who came to see me about this that I was intellectually committed to doing so.”

The move was motivated not only by ideological concerns but also by human resources considerations.

“This becomes important in the recruiting of faculty and the retention of faculty,” Lefton says. “When you are in a competitive situation to hire or retain a faculty member, and his or her partner cannot be extended benefits, you are at a competitive disadvantage.”

Walker says Kent State’s administration saw its competitive edge dulled. “I think there was recognition that we weren’t as competitive,” he says. “Ultimately, though, I think we had more people stay than leave, though I don’t know how you would evaluate that impact.”

Cleveland State University was one of the first few Ohio universities to offer domestic partner benefits. Gerry Modjeski, director of benefits there, says he can’t be sure whether that has made any more faculty members stay or go than normal. “There’s no specific way to measure that,” he says. “What we’ve done is responded to a need. There was a need for it among certain members of our workforce.”

M.V. Lee Badgett, economist at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, has had trouble tracking down concrete statistics, as well, coming up mostly with hearsay.

“But there have been some studies that show that people who get domestic partner benefits do feel closer tied to their employer, they feel more loyalty to them and they’re less likely to think that they’ll be looking for a job soon.”

The research Badgett has done mostly involves trying to determine the actual cost to employers. One study she worked on in 2006 found only a minimal increase — less than three percent — in the cost of health coverage for employers who offered domestic partner benefits to both same-sex and different-sex domestic partners, as Kent State will do. And in some cases, she says, the universities got some of that money back. “Better recruiting and better retention of faculty could actually save the university money,” Badgett says. “It’s hard to put a real dollar value on that.”

But for many faculty members, the real gains of having benefits for domestic partners have no dollar values anyway.

“It’s simply the right thing to do,” says Patrick Coy, associate professor of political science and director of the Center for Applied Conflict Management. He was on the faculty bargaining team in 2004. “Any time we take a step towards decreasing discriminatory practices in our university, it’s a good thing. It is part of a larger movement to change how our society thinks about people who choose a variety of kinds of living arrangements.”

Now whether Sloan’s old cat, Tuppence, will ever reap Kent State employee benefits is perhaps up to a new breed of equal rights activism.
Patti Swartz has no idea what her life would have been like if she hadn’t come out as a lesbian.

“I can’t imagine being in the closet,” she says. “I simply can’t imagine it because I was so unhappy there. I like working with kids, and I can’t imagine a better life for myself, really.”

Swartz, along with five other Kent State professors, agreed to speak with Fusion magazine about their coming out experiences.

For them, coming out was not easy, in part, because there was little information available. They didn’t have easy access to information or networking on the Internet. They didn’t have any openly lesbian or gay role models. They didn’t know they weren’t alone.

But with an interdisciplinary LGBT studies minor on campus, students can learn how sexual orientation impacts other aspects of everyday life. They can also learn about a few teachers to whom they can talk.

Kristen Precht says she didn’t know anyone who was gay when she was younger.

“There was no hope,” she says. “It was extremely lonely, and it was extremely scary. It was hard.”

She says college didn’t offer much, if any, support for coming out. Precht attended Concordia University in Ann Arbor, Mich., which she called a small liberal arts school.

“If you are found to be gay or lesbian, then they ship you off to the president’s office, pack your belongings, call your parents and you’re sent home in the middle of the semester,” she says.

But Precht says her college years and the situation at Kent State today are worlds apart.

“Kent just seems so warm and inviting,” she says.

Now that all six professors say they feel comfortable, they are working on making Kent State their home.

In the end, Swartz says the best thing a person can do is make a family for himself or herself.

“I think you make family,” she says. “You make family with people you care about.”
Dan Nadon says he didn’t have the luxury of choosing whether he would come out on his dorm floor at college in the early ’80s. His roommate, whom he calls “a good friend,” made the decision for him about a third of the way through his first term at Michigan State University.

“He seemed like he would be pretty cool with the whole idea,” Nadon says. “It turned out that he was extremely religious and mortified when I came out to him.”

Before moving out, Nadon says his roommate “made it a point to tell everybody.” Nadon’s roommate opened the equivalent of Pandora’s box before switching rooms, leaving Nadon to deal with the aftermath.

Nadon is now an associate theater professor for Trumbull campus. He is also one of the co-coordinators for the LGBT studies minor. He says he first realized he was gay and came out to his high school friends when he was 15 and living in a post-Stonewall society in Detroit. “It was a very exciting time but also a very scary time because most people were not out,” he says, adding that the remnants of so-called conservative times were still visible.

Nadon says he didn’t face any opposition to his lifestyle until he was confronted with the challenges of dorm life, namely living on a dormitory floor with all men and sharing a bathroom. “Walking into the bathroom, people would have a fit because I was (in) there,” he says.

His floormates expressed their frustration through their actions, too. Nadon says his room’s door was constantly defaced. In addition, his floormates also attempted to run Nadon off the sidewalk. “A bunch of people from the dorm saw me on the side of the street, and they drove their car up over the sidewalk as a sort of warning,” he says, demonstrating the car’s proximity with his hands. “I had to rush off to avoid being hit.”

While frustrated with his floormates, Nadon was even more frustrated with the university’s lack of support for LGBT students. He says the more he turned to university administrators, the more they kept sending him back. The university’s theory back then was that people needed to learn how to get along with each other. Nadon says he was harassed “quite regularly and pretty brutally. Their idea was to make them deal with me, but, in fact, it was making me deal with them.”

Throughout this time, he had the support of other LGBT students on campus. Almost immediately upon arrival, Nadon says he started attending a group where students could air their grievances. “It was a sort of therapy session slash social interaction group,” he says, laughing. “They helped us through problems that we would have on the campus.”

Finally fed up with his floormates, he says he “just got up and moved elsewhere” near the end of the school year. He moved off campus for the summer and was not enrolled as a student at that time. Nadon’s dorm days weren’t over, yet. The university’s policy at the time required students live in the dorms for at least two years.

“After this first year, I had to re-sign up,” he says. “Even though I found roommates who were compatible … we were in a (similar) situation on the dorm floor, and it just became uglier and uglier and uglier.” Nadon and his roommates chose to live in a different dorm. Soon after, Nadon found many other members of his previous dorm floor chose to live in the building as well. “They began to reignite the fire.”

But times have changed since his college days — for the better, he says.

“People are far more understanding of (the LGBT community), and it’s what I will call normalized a lot more,” he says of the Intro. to LGBT Studies course he teaches. “It’s not a big shock when you discover that somebody in the room is gay or not gay or whatever. It’s kind of like, oh, OK, and we move on.”
Kristen Precht remembers standing in church at age 18, wearing a long, flowing peach-colored dress with Candie's high heels, knowing she was going to hell.

“I knew that I was the only person in that church who was going to hell because of this horrible thing that had been bestowed upon me — being gay,” she says.

Precht, an applied linguistics professor, is currently on sabbatical researching a new paper, a continuation of her findings about how men and women communicate.

She says she knew she was gay when she was about 10 years old. Growing up in a strict family, Precht also knew she would have to keep her sexual orientation a secret.

“It just seemed obvious to me that everyone would keep that a secret because that was the way I was brought up,” she says. “Fundamentalists see the world in a huge dichotomy: there’s good and bad, there’s right and wrong and there’s heaven and hell. They’re not real gray thinkers.

“I had this horrible secret that I couldn’t tell anybody, but I felt …” she says, her voice trailing off. “I hate to keep talking about things in terms of heaven and hell, but that was my life then.”

Now she sits at a bar-type table in Jazzman’s in the lower level of the Student Center and shares her life story. Precht says things finally started to come together for her in her 20s. She worked as the acting director of graduate admissions for the law school at the University of Michigan. She came out to her friends. She went to graduate school.

The next step was to come out to her family, which happened about 12 years ago. It was by no means an easy decision. “I’ve always been really close to my family, so I felt like I had to give up my family to come out,” she says. “I had to choose. But when it comes down to it, you just can’t choose against yourself and survive in this world.”

“My parents were just horrified, and they said things like, ‘I don’t know how we can be in heaven and to not be sad knowing you’re in hell,’” she says.

The conversation was so awful that Precht didn’t speak to her parents for more than a year. “There’s just no way,” she says firmly. “There’s just no way. I just can’t go back through the ‘you’re going to hell’ conversations again. I just can’t do it. It’s very painful.”

While talking may have been painful, she says not talking was even more painful. They started talking again but never about her sexual orientation “(Not talking) was the worst,” she says, in part because Precht and her mother, who died a few years ago, had been best friends.

As much as Precht misses her mom, she knows her dad is having an even harder time because her parents spent so much of their days together. Precht's dad was a teacher and principal, and her mom was a teacher at the same school. They worked together. They ate together. They vacationed together — they were together for 46 years.

Since her mother’s death, Precht visits her dad at least once a month at his home north of Detroit. She says she visits to keep “his mind off of it” and was present the first time he laughed, months after the funeral. She loves seeing her father, but can’t help wondering if her visits force him to question his long-held religious beliefs.

But Precht says she knows her father is not going to change. He is mellowing as he ages, though. Twenty or 25 years ago, he would have fought with her about the issues, but she says she thinks he’s willing to compromise to have peace.

She pauses to reflect on what her story should be about and what matters most. “Being gay is … a part of my identity, my vision, the way I see the world and everything,” she says. “It’s everything. It’s a deep part of who I am.”
Marilyn Norconk likes the freedom within the confines of the university. “I guess there’s something of an ivory tower here,” she says. “Some things seem to be more acceptable inside the bounds of this university — or any university — compared to being in the community at large.”

Norconk has been a faculty member in the anthropology department since 1992. She studies primate behavior in South America, which includes ecology and conservation. In academia, she says people tend to be more diverse and are more receptive to diversity in others. “I’m very comfortable in the academic environment, but Home Depot might be a different matter,” she says, laughing.

Despite her comfort here, Norconk didn’t come out to her family until she was in her 40s. She says she was convinced for a long time “that there was really no point to me being out, necessarily, and taking the risk of being out.” Norconk took that risk as a graduate student at UCLA in the 1980s — a risk she says she later regretted.

At the time, Norconk and her friend were both graduate students and shared an office. When Norconk told her friend, the response was less than what Norconk desired. She says her friend felt threatened, something Norconk did not anticipate. “Frankly, we haven’t seen each other since then,” she says, her voice quiet as a whisper.

Then again, that’s the risk of coming out, she says, adding the risk varies by person and situation. The people who don’t accept you are people you probably don’t want to be friends with, anyway. “I mean, you probably want people who are more open and accepting for who you are as an individual,” she says.

Still, Norconk didn’t take the risk of being out again until she says she felt comfortable at Kent State. There was a point when she realized there was no reason to stay in the closet, she says. By this time, she had tenure and was in a committed relationship with Jean Engle, assistant director of marketing and communications at Youngstown State University. Norconk first introduced Engle to her coworkers at a department party. Although she says she can’t remember anyone’s exact response, she remembers “nobody collapsed on the floor.”

“Maybe anthropologists are good friends and colleagues to have, given that they are so in tune with diversity, whether it’s biological diversity or cultural diversity,” she says, sitting in front of a poster of a gorilla scratching his chin. “Maybe that just happens to be a good group to be a part of.”

While she doesn’t hide her sexual orientation, Norconk says she doesn’t flaunt it to her students, either. “I teach a number of courses that don’t really require me to expound on my sexual orientation,” she says, with a slight laugh. “I don’t come out to students necessarily, but they probably figure it out. I mean, students are pretty savvy.”

She says students who are LGBT occasionally talk to her more than the average students, particularly students who are outside of anthropology and approach her while students in her Human Evolution course. “I think there is a comfort level that is extended unconsciously among LGBT&Q students and faculty — a sixth sense, maybe,” she says.

While she thinks openness about “important personal characteristics help to enhance friendships and relationships among colleagues,” she says she understands being in the closet can be comfortable at times. Still, she says she thinks students are generally more OK with being different.

“I believe that many students today are more gutsy than kids were when I was growing up, and I commend their courage,” she says. “There are risks associated with being different, and I do think ‘courage’ is the right word here.”
When Eric van Baars sees the musical “Hairspray,” he sees a reflection of himself in lead character, Tracy Turnblad. “I go to see ‘Hairspray’ because my inner Tracy just wants to kiss the boy and win the dance contest,” he says.

The idea of seeing oneself on stage is the main reason van Baars said he thinks so many people came to see the “The Breakup Notebook: the Lesbian Musical,” which finished a six-week run at the Beck Center for the Arts in Cleveland in the spring of 2007. Van Baars is an assistant theater professor. He played the role of sidekick, Bob Sullivan.

The story begins when Helen, a 33-year-old lesbian, gets dumped. Van Baars said Bob, a fairy godmother character of sorts, helps Helen through a difficult time and a series of bad dates.

While each audience responded differently, he says the audiences related to the reality of the musical. “I think a lot of gay women came just because they felt they were given the authority to come,” he says. “They were welcomed. It’s like we’re presenting this about you and for you.”

Van Baars says one of the gifts he got from the musical came just before Bob made an entrance through the back of the theater. He says he watched the lesbian couples in the audience and could see the pride in their faces. Near the end of the musical, two of Helen’s friends have a commitment ceremony. The crowd grew reverent because they became a guest at the couple’s ceremony. “I would just watch couples get closer to each other … like this ownership that this is our story,” he says. “I would just cry every night because it was just so heartfelt.”

Although he doesn’t usually mingle with the crowd after a show, he says he noticed the “intergenerational aspects” of the audience such as women his age with their mothers and daughters. Van Baars says people felt they could bring their family to it, as if to say, “this is my life. My life is good, it’s valuable and it’s appropriate for theater.”

He says he attributes the diversity of the audience to the aspects of the story that “everyone found universally true and valid.”

“Yes, it’s about this one specific woman who happens to be a lesbian, but the things she goes through are universal,” he says. “I think that’s why people just kept coming to it because … anyone could enjoy the story.”

Since the musical first garnered critics’ attention, van Baars says there has been a surge in lesbian plays and musicals. Musical theater is reaching out to an audience that hasn’t really been represented on stage before, he says. “The Breakup Notebook” reminds him how Tyler Perry, creator of “Diary of a Mad Black Woman,” re-energized theater. He says Perry’s plays were a driving force for black representation on stage and brought people back to the theater in droves. “People like to see their life on stage,” van Baars says.

He’s glad to have been involved with “The Breakup Notebook” because he was able to work on something new — something that doesn’t happen very often for actors. “A lot of things (actors) do have been done before, and you kind of do a canon,” he says, making circles with his hand to symbolize the cyclical play revivals. “The opportunity to work on something that for me was brand new and for the area was brand new … was really rewarding.”
Patti Swartz was tired of pretending to be something she wasn’t: straight. She knew she was a lesbian when she was 13 but didn’t come out until much later, in part because of her surroundings. She grew up when the House Committee on Un-American Activities was investigating disloyalty among government employees.

Although the information was political, much of it focused on homosexuality, she says. There were constantly newspaper stories about people losing their jobs because they were homosexual. “I was terribly afraid that someone would realize who I was,” she says, over faint jazz music playing in the background at Susan’s Coffee & Tea. “I was a real chameleon, trying to take on all kinds of protective coloration.”

Swartz is now an associate professor of English as well as the English and women’s studies coordinator at Kent State East Liverpool.

Under her family’s pressure, Swartz married and adopted three children. She says she didn’t come out until she was in her 40s.

“I was in love with someone, and I was tired of trying to hide who I was,” she says. “It takes a tremendous amount of energy to do that — more energy than I wanted to spend anymore. I decided I was going to be who I was, and if people didn’t like it, that was too bad.”

After a sip of coffee, Swartz reveals it wasn’t as cut-and-dry as she described. When she came out, her sons were 15 and 14 and her daughter was 12. She says they were mostly worried about what their friends would think.

Swartz says she thought it was particularly hard for her daughter because “she was emerging as a young woman, and it scared her.”

“She asked me at one point if I would give up the person that I was in love with for her,” she says. “I tried to explain to her that there were very different kinds of love. But she didn’t — she wouldn’t accept that.”

Swartz’s daughter asked to move to her father’s. As part of the arrangement, Swartz’s daughter lived with her while the boys lived with their father. Shortly thereafter, Swartz says she broke up with her girlfriend because “there were just too many problems.” It was at this point that Swartz decided to go to graduate school in California.

While at school, she continued restoring her relationship with her children. “It wasn’t that we ever broke ties, because we didn’t, but it took them a little time to accept who I was,” she says. “I think within a year, we were pretty much back in a relatively good relationship.”

Swartz says she now has an excellent relationship with her children. She exchanges e-mails a couple times a week with her son who lives in Cincinnati. Swartz’s other son, along with his two children, live with her. As for her daughter, Swartz says they are very close.

“She finds it hard to believe now that she acted the way she did when she was younger,” Swartz says, adding her daughter was simply growing up. If anything, Swartz says coming out has benefited her children because “they are much more open to lots of different ways of being.”
Molly Merryman was always eager to resist. Growing up, Merryman admired anti-Vietnam war protestors and early feminists for resisting the cultural norms.

“There hadn’t been anything, any kind of movements in the early ’80s,” she says. “I think I had been hungry for something to come along that would resist social oppression.”

She says she first learned about others challenging the status quo as a graduate student at Ohio State University, where she first came out as a lesbian. Merryman is now an associate professor of justice studies at Kent State Trumbull, as well as campus coordinator for justice studies and women’s studies.

In addition to working on her master’s degree, Merryman was also writing for a publication that uncovers alternative bands. She met some of the founding members of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power New York, an organization that protested against indifference toward the AIDS epidemic, while on assignment in the late 1980s.

“I was just really taken in by how they were doing activism because it was a lot of street theater and a lot of very innovative ways to integrate art and media in with the message,” she says. “I just found that really appealing.”

Once Merryman got back to Columbus, she says she looked to see if there was a local ACT UP chapter. There was, and she soon got involved. She says activism was a positive way for her to deal with coming out and resisting unequal treatment. “It was important to be an activist as part of my coming out,” she says. “I really resisted the idea that I not be treated equal simply because of my sexual orientation.”

If she hadn’t gotten involved, Merryman says she may have “bought into the idea that I wasn’t deserving of equality.”

While working with ACT UP, Merryman and some of the Columbus chapter’s founders realized the LGBT community needed an organization to address homophobia and sexual discrimination, she says. Their focus had been fighting AIDS and issues of people with HIV, but “there was also the recognition that there were issues related to sexual orientation that also needed to have an activist attack.”

Together, Merryman and the others then founded the Columbus Queer Nation Chapter. Queer Nation was founded in New York City in 1990 by members of ACT UP New York in response to anti-gay and anti-lesbian violence. In Columbus, however, Queer Nation was formed largely to confront homophobic news stories and to raise the visibility of LGBT people.

“I was the media director for ACT UP Columbus and became acutely aware that the largest problem confronting us in educating people via the media was the homophobic response of the media,” she says. “Our first actions were protests against the local media. Those protests resulted in the city’s newspapers sitting down with us to develop a style guide of proper terminology and treatment of LGBT subjects.”

Through her activism, Merryman says her goal has always been to integrate the LGBT community into mainstream society, partially in response to the close-mindedness of the late 1980s and early 1990s. There was a tendency of society to exclude LGBT people, as if to say “we don’t want you in society,” she says. “It absolutely did bother me that there was so much discrimination … and that it wasn’t being framed in terms of this being a necessary social movement.”

That movement has accompanied Merryman to Kent State as well. Merryman was one of the four faculty members who helped found the LGBT Studies minor. She says she sees what it means for “students of all spectrums of sexual orientation and gender identity” who minor in the program.

“For students who are LGBT, I think it serves an even better purpose in terms of connecting to those students’ individual processes of coming out,” she says. “The program is also invaluable for straight students to learn about the constructions of sexual orientation and gender identity in order to better understand marginalization, oppression and the lives of others.”
For the past two-and-a-half years, I have been in a love triangle. The two greatest loves of my life cannot and will not co-exist, and each day I wake, I make an unconscious decision to live a double life. I am not a cheater; I am not a liar. No one would call me a villain, and most would call me a victim.

This split devotion does not divide my loyalty between two people. Instead, this love triangle is a struggle for identity between two lifestyles that most would not dare to mix.

To understand my battle, there are two things to know about me.

First, I am an active member of a Pentecostal church I have attended since birth. Religion is a driving force in my life, and the people who attend my church are like my extended family.

Second, the person I have dated for the past two and a half years happens to be a woman.

I am an LGBT member of the Christian community, a feat that is no easy reality. LGBT people and the Christian church are no strangers to years of private and public conflicts. Most Christian sects believe being gay is a sin punishable by eternal damnation and is no lesser a crime than murder or adultery.

Leviticus 18:22 is the basis for the fundamental disagreement most churches have with a gay lifestyle. The scripture in the King James Version of the Bible reads, “Thou shall not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is an abomination.”

According to Leviticus 20:13, the punishment for being LGBT is a gruesome death: “If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them.”

I sit through countless sermons denouncing gays as perverse and morally lacking. Christian leaders speak publicly against the LGBT community on a regular basis, especially in opposition to the contemporary gay rights movement.

Sometimes, Christian defenses against the LGBT community are downright ludicrous. The late Rev. Jerry Falwell, an outspoken Christian leader, declared “… the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle” as the reason for the terrorist attacks on America in 2001.

Most assume I should denounce Christianity as it denounces me, but I refuse to give up my faith because of people who choose to misrepresent it. I cannot believe Jesus would despise any kind of love, including the love I have for my girlfriend. The respect we share for each other and the effort we put into maintaining a healthy relationship is anything but an abomination.

Those who use one or two scriptures as a basis for demeaning and attacking LGBT people not only shame themselves, but the Christian religion’s purpose. There are some faiths that embrace the LGBT community, and these establishments encourage the tolerance that religion should demonstrate.

One such congregation is the Unitarian Universalist Church of Kent, where the Rev. Melissa Carvill-Ziemer presides.

Melissa is part of the LGBT community but does not allow her sexuality to distance her from strong religious beliefs. Her church opens its doors to a diverse congregation.

“We believe there are many ways to commune with that that is larger than ourselves,” she says. “Unitarian Universalism is a free religious tradition in which each person is encouraged to tend to their own spiritual lives.”

Ministers such as Melissa allow people to incorporate religion into their lives without losing their senses of identity. “If religion is about wholeness and bringing our whole selves to God, I think it is difficult to accept there is a part of us that is unacceptable to God,” she says. “That is not the kind of God I affirm. God loves all people. There is no one God created who God abhors. Each person was born a blessing.”

It is this thought that keeps me coming to church each Sunday and allows me to worship God in my own way.

I have not officially come out to any members of my family other than my mother and sister, but I am sure they know about my girlfriend and me. I never feel comfortable sharing anything about our relationship with my family because they all attend my church and believe being gay is a sin.

Religion should not be so divisive.

I realize many Christians do not have the same traditions or lifestyle as I do, but I choose to serve God knowing that he loves all men and women, black or white, young or old, gay or straight.

“There are people who endeavor to embody the best parts of their own traditions,” Melissa says.

The love I have for both my religion and self-identity will not die. I may choose to be a part of a congregation that is more inclusive, but I refuse to stop loving a God who never stops loving me.
Perhaps the building at the corner of North Howard and Beech streets was always meant to be at the peak of entertainment.

Maybe this old building was intended to draw in those who were never completely accepted by society, not to mention the curious bystanders, hungry for the chance to let go the way those inside were able to. Despite prejudice, controversy, the economy and any other roadblock it has faced, the scene inside the old Ritz Theater has managed to continue swirling into a lovely frenzy night after night as the Interbelt Nite Club.
A s far as a stereotypical gay bar goes, the assumption is good music, better dancing and a hopeful connection with someone you meet in between — here and now things. But the Interbelt holds onto its history like it holds onto visitors — it brings them all back home.

The Interbelt operated in the 1940s and 1950s as the Ritz Theater in the heart of Akron’s black community. It was an entertainment getaway, and as jazz grew more and more popular across the country, the theater’s doors most likely opened to curious white folk lusting after the music that flowed through black culture. The Ritz eventually closed and faced demolition until Vernon Baker bought it in 1988 and transformed it into the club it is today.

Baker has been the sole owner of the Interbelt since its opening 20 years ago. He started it because he felt Akron lacked a solid joint to welcome everyone, not to mention it had been his dream for a while.

“I kind of always wanted to own a club, since when I was younger. There was always something I really thought was enjoyable,” he says. He explains around the time he opened the Interbelt, much of downtown Akron was merely empty buildings. He chose the empty building which once housed the Ritz, and, at the time, it had been closed for about four years. When the Interbelt opened in the late '80s, Vernon was ready to welcome anyone and everyone, regardless of sexual preference.

“Anyone can come and not be judged,” says security officer Charles Queen, in his eighth year working at the Interbelt. He started working at the club when an agency he worked for was hired after a shooting in the club’s parking lot. He got to know his coworkers, and he chose to stay at the venue after his contract with the agency ended.

“This place has such a diverse atmosphere,” Queen says, adding that he’s straight and met his wife at the club.

The club is known for welcoming gays, bisexuals, transsexuals and straights. Anyone can be anything. Sexuality, really, is a myth at the Interbelt as long as you can enjoy yourself.

“Some people are intimidated by the Interbelt, or any gay bar for that matter,” says Scott Kenimond, a.k.a. D.J. Skotty K. But the Interbelt’s open-door policy, he adds, can really help those still-closeted gays enjoy the lifestyle without necessarily being perceived as either gay or straight.

“Really that’s what I think makes a good club, makes it last longer, is when you get that mixture of people,” Baker says, clearly pleased with his variety of customers. “People like to go where it’s fun and where there’s that energy level. I think that’s why we’ve lasted 20 years.”

The club keeps on chugging, relying on theme parties, weekly events and the right marketing to stay afloat. Two dance floors, three bars and an outdoor patio don’t hurt, either. Plenty of celebrities have stopped by, too, from Tiffany to RuPaul to Crystal Waters and even Will Smith on a promotion tour in the 1990s with DJ Jazzy Jeff.

But you can’t mention entertainment without mentioning Danyel Vasquez.

Vasquez sits in her dressing room above the bar and dance floor preparing for her Monday night routine. She’s surrounded in the small room by sequins, feathers, satin and every other flashy button and zipper that makes up a good drag queen. Interbelt’s house entertainment director listens to questions as she applies her makeup, approaching both with delicacy and a hint of amusement. Vasquez is a star, infamous in her own right, but one thing that separates her from every other spotlight-chaser: You feel as though she is performing just for you. Vasquez lives her act.

The club is known for welcoming gays, bisexuals, transsexuals and straights. Anyone can be anything. Sexuality, really, is a myth at the Interbelt as long as you can enjoy yourself.

“People like to go where it’s fun and where there’s that energy level. I think that’s why we’ve lasted 20 years.”

She explains that people have come from all over the country to experience the Akron club, and a few have even brought their grandmothers.

She quickly dismisses any suggestion of the Interbelt being anything too extraordinary. Sure, everyone working there has become close, but there is always an internal dispute between one person and another.

“We have our good and bad nights,” she says, “but we’ve kept up with the times.” Vasquez describes the first few years of the Interbelt when it was mainly older men and how she watched as more and more young people flocked to the club. She’s watched fashions come and go and music styles flow in then out. Times have been tough, but the club has continued through it all.

“We’re blessed to still be here, especially with the current economy,” Vasquez explains.

Part of that staying power has been the club’s outreach to the community. The Interbelt staff has helped raise money for efforts such as Hurricane Katrina relief, Toys for Tots and breast cancer awareness. (“We’re not just all about AIDS research,” Vasquez says.) These
open arms have resonated far beyond raising funds, and she’s seen first-hand the effects of the club’s social reassurance.

“I’ve seen kids in wheelchairs dancing here, and I’m not sure if other places, other straight bars, would be as accepting as the Interbelt is,” she says, explaining for many visiting the club, it’s become something of a second home.

“Kids are constantly coming up to me and saying it makes them feel good to see my performances. I’m kind of a mentor to them. I don’t drink, do drugs or smoke,” she proudly states. Vasquez says she doesn’t believe she would have gotten as far as she did if she gave in to peer pressure, and in turn her decision has rewarded her with celebrity and the good life. “I wouldn’t trade it for the world.”

Baker can’t seem to say enough about what Vasquez has done for his club and its customers. He says she has always been a source of comfort and advice for those struggling with their sexuality.

“She’s mastered her craft of what she wanted to do, she feels good about it and she feels good about herself,” he says. “You know, that’s a big thing, and this bar has kind of been her anchor as far as working out of a situation and being comfortable and being able to do it.”

The Interbelt experience has opened many eyes in Akron. The nightclub, sitting smack-dab in the downtown district, has forced a lot of people to take notice. Sure, there are the occasional slurs hurled by passersby every so often, but Baker feels, overall, the area has come to accept the bar.

“Akron’s pretty much in the Bible Belt area, and there’s been a lot of conservatives here,” he explains. “I think that because of the people that have come in there and have been exposed to the gay community and this segment of it, it has opened their eyes a little more,” he says, calling Akron a little more accepting than other cities.

Baker has seen many come and go from his club. His clients may be getting younger over the years, but in a way, so has he.

“We’ve got a good situation, and I don’t see anything in the new future that’s going to change. Except we just get better, and we appeal to a different crowd of people. But that’s what we’ve always done,” he says.

Bartender Kevin Rhoades offers what should easily pass as the Interbelt’s philosophy: “I just try to be everyone’s friend,” he says. “We’re all in this world for such a short time, we might as well get along.”

F
ALL ABOUT ANTHONY

STORY BY STEVEN BUSHONG
PHOTOS BY LESLIE L. CUSANO
Before we met, I assumed — I think within reason — Anthony might be a quixotic, profligate man, but the truth is the contrary. In setting up our meeting, Anthony talked quietly on the phone and was amenable about our meeting time and location. And at Starbucks, where we first met, he wore a wide, jovial smile and extended a hand for shaking. He might even be modest.

Once I asked him, “What do you make of your popularity?”

“I don’t even try to be, it’s just what happens,” he says. “People know me. I think it has to do with my distinct characteristics … the hair, that’s what people notice me by.”

Anthony is known for his dancing, though, which he considers both playtime and hard work. “It’s just expressing myself … being sexual and more open and out there and not holding back.”

He considers himself shy and says dancing is a release. But his life winds beyond the bar. He likes to stay at home and watch movies, go out and see concerts — OneRepublic was the last — and, of course, go clubbing with friends. The man is single, and it’s likely to stay that way.

“I have too much going on in my life that I don’t think it’s possible for me to have someone,” he says. “It would be hard to find someone who could cope with my lifestyle.”

Anthony hails from the conservative town of Chesterland, about 20 miles east of Cleveland. His six-piece family includes parents Paula and Louie and three brothers, one younger and two older. Anthony’s younger brother, Joey, 18, is straight. But both Paul, 25, and Louie, 27, are gay.

“It’s very gay,” Anthony says. “No, it’s — my parents are very nice. They’re very open. They accept us. We’re also Italians, so we’re very family-oriented … I tell my mom everything.”

But for a long time there was one thing he didn’t tell Paula, and it was something he wasn’t ready to tell himself, either.

Not that Anthony was ever oblivious to the idiosyncrasies that set him apart from other young men. He didn’t play sports, liked Britney Spears, thought guys were cute — it’s just his sexuality wasn’t a matter of fact.

He had considered he might be gay, but declaring himself as such was difficult. To begin with, he thought his attraction to men was typical, that everyone thought the way he did. And his best friend, also his girlfriend, Melanie, had to be considered. “I didn’t want to hurt her,” he tells me. And there was his family and how they would react.

Time for consideration ended abruptly at about 2 a.m. one fall morning when Anthony was in high school. Police found a car in a church parking lot, and its window was open. Inside, an officer found a wallet belonging to a 16-year-old boy on the seat. The officer called the boy’s residence. Anthony’s mother answered.

Police asked her, “Do you know where your son is?”

“He’s sleeping.” But when she opened his bedroom door, he wasn’t there.

The church was near a house belonging to Anthony’s friend, so his mother knew just where to call and where to direct the police. The phone call brought a revelation: Yes, Anthony was there, and, yes, he was with a 22-year-old man, a friend-of-a-friend whom he had been talking with online.

Paula waited for Anthony at the police station. The first thing she said was, “You’re gay? Fight it.”

“I’ll never forget it,” Anthony tells me. After that, Paula received him with silence, even during spaghetti dinners on Sundays. That lasted for months. His father, surprisingly, joked about it. “He has a good sense of humor, so he didn’t really care,” Anthony says.

At this point in the story, you have to wonder why his brothers’ sexuality hadn’t made his mother more understanding by then.

“Paul wasn’t out yet. They had no idea,” Anthony says. “Paul was the star football player in high school, had all these girlfriends ... Louie was out, but he never really talked about it. He came out as he was moving out, so it was like, ‘Hi. Bye. By the way, I’m gay.’ I was the only one who really talked about it.”

But after months of silence reinforced by Paula’s Catholic beliefs, his parents eventually
gave way to an amenable understanding. “With the majority of my brothers being gay, they either have to accept it or hate themselves for it. They’re really cool about it.”

In school, Anthony stayed on the honor roll, participated in a singing group (in fact, it was partly his recollection of a singing group he saw during a campus tour of Kent State that persuaded him to attend here) and, during March of his sophomore year, organized a gay-straight alliance. “It was a safe haven for gay students to just chill after school and talk about problems,” he says.

The lead-up to the first meeting was deluged with contention. The jocks of West Geauga High School, who by the end of first period on the day of the first meeting had torn down all the promotional fliers, were threatening some kind of interruption. The pressure forced two organizers to recede, leaving Anthony in charge. Fortunately, “it went fine,” he says. “We had like 30 kids come to it. We were in a little classroom, and it was packed. We just talked.”

It was Anthony’s only acquaintance with LGBT activism, as politics is not in his nature. “I think people should be treated equally and not different because of their sexual orientation. That’s about it. That’s the only thing that concerns me.”

Anthony’s experience at West Geauga was at first an ominous event, but, “I thought it would have been a lot worse,” he says. “Especially, like, realizing I was gay the summer before and how I was going to deal with that in high school. I had a lot of fear and apprehensions.”

As I talk to him, I subsequently forget — by wonder of his unpretentious demeanor — that this kid is popular in another world. I become inquisitive to the nature of his dual personality. I know him, during our coffee shop talks, to be a quiet guy — not as the porn-acting, bar-dancing, heavy partier that has created his notoriety. He is curious about himself, too. He majors in psychology partly to understand who he is.

“I think my mom’s more of a shy person, and I picked that up from her,” he says. “My dad’s not so shy. He’s more extroverted. So I have a little bit of both of them in me,” he says.

There is the genetic aspect. But in a life dotted with defining moments, it’s likely none rival the impact of his near-death experience, the physical memory of which lies slanted on skin beneath his T-shirt.

Pains in his back and blood in his urine led doctors to believe Anthony had cancer. Doctors told him it could be one of three types — two would mean imminent death. At age 16, he had a 30-percent chance of survival.

The surgery was eight hours long. The medical anomaly turned out to be a tumor on his kidney. He was in the hospital for a week and in recovery for a month. He would never be the same.

“That was just a crazy time. That was a big point in my life,” Anthony tells me. “It changed how I looked at the world. I guess it could describe how I’m so adventurous and crazy and do things that are out of the norm.”

But Anthony says his wild lifestyle plateaued after freshman year in college, during which time he took full advantage of independence.

Still, he says, “I do things that normal people don’t do, like stripping and this magazine thing. A normal person would not want to bring this stuff up again and put it out there and public, but something in me makes me want to do it.”
One of Fusion magazine’s biggest charges is to find a way to best represent its direct target audience — LGBT students at Kent State. Last semester, we told your coming out stories. This issue, we wanted to get a pulse on how you perceive our campus and what matters most to you. This is the space where we let you speak for yourself, and we’re proud to introduce these eight members of our university’s minority community.

INTERVIEWS BY KELLY PICKEREL
PHOTOS BY DANIEL R. DOHERTY

>> If you’re interesting in being a part of this feature for our Spring 2009 issue, please e-mail kentfusion@gmail.com.
Charlie Olivo
Freshman exploratory major from Parma Heights

Were you out in high school?
Around my sophomore year, I started to come out to my close friends and some of my family. I never really made a big deal about it. Some gay people like to flaunt it and make huge statements, and I never really did.

How do you think college will be different than high school?
Coming from my high school, I was used to being accepted. And now, here, should I get used to being so open with people, or is it going to be different where I kind of have to watch? I think it’s going to be fine.

What issues concern you?
I’m not very strong with my issues, and I hope college will make me decide what I stand up for. For example, adoption. I’m for it where same-sex couples should have the right to have kids. But can two gay men have a daughter? How are they going to have a female role model? I see both sides.

Asa Cormier
Junior musical theater major from Mt. Vernon

How does college life differ from high school?
In the high school setting, everyone’s more close-minded and younger. They haven’t been through as many experiences. In college, I think that being so exposed to so many different people, you just learn to embrace people for who they are.

What’s one bit of advice you’d offer to Kent State?
Be who you are. It doesn’t matter what other people think. Look at people for the person (they are), not who they sleep with.

How is the dating scene?
I’ve been in two relationships. I was with a girl for four years (ages 15 to 19) and a guy for two months (age 20). I’m fairly new (to dating). At Kent, a lot of guys are pretty open, but I haven’t been looking.
Cody Wallis  
**Freshman visual communication design major from Richfield**

**Were you out in high school?**  
Two weeks into my freshman year. It was kind of impulsive. I really, really wanted to (come out), but you grow up with this fear of it as if it’s going to change your life somehow in this really drastic way. And it did change my life, but in a really positive way. It’s really important to me to have an identity.

**What’s one bit of advice you’d offer to Kent State?**  
Straight men should know that their girlfriends don’t like it when they make fun of gay people because they most likely have a gay best friend.

**What issues concern you?**  
Politically, I’m all for gay marriage, but I know we need to take it in steps. If it’s going to happen, the first thing to do is get civil unions legalized. Marriage, like religious marriage, is really up to the person. It shouldn’t be up to the state to define that.

Kelly Cooper  
**Senior electronic media production major from Nelson**

**Is PRIDE!Kent an important part of campus?**  
Definitely, especially for people who are just coming to Kent. They feel like they can have a place to talk about issues and stuff.

**What are your thoughts about life after Kent State?**  
I’d like to go on the radio or at least work at a radio station, possibly with an independent one so I can talk freely. I’m afraid about the hiring (process). Somebody might judge me or remark about the ‘lifestyle.’

**What’s it like having a twin sister who is also a lesbian?**  
It’s great because you can share feelings. We have the same things going on. We both were figuring out life together at the same time. We were like, ‘Hey! You’re like that too?’ I know some other twins where only one is gay. I think it would be fine (if we both weren’t gay) because we’re both open-minded.
Tabitha Roberts
Sophomore exploratory major from Ravenna

Does Kent State accept the lesbian population?
I don’t have that many problems at Kent State. I mean I don’t feel like people are staring at me or anything like that.

What’s the one thing that bothers you?
I’m the same person that I was when everyone thought I was straight as I am now that I’m gay. I think that’s one of the worst things — how people judge you (for) being gay. There are people I have problems with now that I never had problems with before, just because they feel uncomfortable or think that I’ve changed.

What issues concern you?
Obviously, the whole gay marriage thing is an issue, but I don’t plan on getting married any time soon. I won’t end up staying in this state unless things drastically change, which I don’t see happening. We’ll probably be one of the last states to convert to anything.

Taylor Zigo
Senior managerial marketing major from Norwalk

What are you thoughts about life after Kent State?
I’m kind of nervous about it because I’m going into the business world, and I’m not classifying, but a lot of people who are gay are in other fields or areas. I’m kind of nervous about getting out into the world and seeing how everything actually is.

What’s one thing that bothers you?
Just because I’m a male and I’m gay doesn’t mean that every guy I run into is like, ‘Oh, he’s cute, that’s a prospect.’ It doesn’t mean I’m going to go hit on him or anything. I have a type just like everyone else does. I respect people who are straight, I respect people who are gay, who are bi, who are transgendered.

What issues concern you?
I think domestic partner benefits are definitely an issue right now. Marriage (is) not so much important to me. A lot of people are, ‘Marriage! It’s sacred!’ but I’m fine with a different term, with the same rights, with the same benefits.
Angela Huffman
Sophomore visual communication design major from Bellbrook

What’s it like to be a lesbian at Kent State?
Kent’s LGBT community was the main reason I ended up here. I researched, and this campus is a lot more liberal than OU, and I figured even if there weren’t a lot of other LGBT people, I’d be more accepted here. So I feel very comfortable being out on campus.

What’s one thing you’d say to people who judge the LGBT lifestyle?
We’re just like everyone else. We have monogamous relationships, just like everyone else. We want to get married, have families together, fall in love. It’s just what we’re attracted to, really.

What are some important issues to you?
I think that I’m really lucky to have been born in the U.S. being gay, because I know of a country (discussed at a PRIDE!Kent meeting) where they wanted to send all LGBT people to an island and just let them die. I just feel extremely lucky to be here.

Aaron Hanlin
Junior applied communications studies major from Malvern

How has your sexuality affected your work as a Resident Assistant?
I honestly don’t know how many of my residents know I’m gay. It’s not something that I went out and said. I feel like being gay shouldn’t infringe upon my authority. There’s no reason I can’t do the job as well as everyone else.

How is Kent State’s dating scene?
All the gay people at Kent State know all the gay people at Kent State. You either meet gay people through friends or you meet them online or at the club. It’s easy to meet gay people here as long as you’re out on the scene with other people.

What issues concern you?
I had always been against gay marriage, but once I started dating my current boyfriend, I kind of changed gears on that. I think marriage is related to a religious institution; however, in this country marriage is more of a legal institution — for tax purposes, for children. I think gay people should be entitled to the same rights.
Eric Michael knew something was wrong when it took his doctor more than a week and a half to get back to him, rather than the customary one or two days after being tested. Now, after sitting at the doctor’s office for more than three hours — with no check-in and no co-pay — the wait was finally over.

“Positive.”

The 18-year-old from Columbus was the office’s first HIV-positive patient, and the doctor “took it really hard,” thus the long wait. The doctor needed time to compose himself.
Testing had become routine for Michael, now 19 — every three months since the age of 14, he would get in, get out and wait for a call. There were scares, but never like this.

“When I got the test, it was a total of nine or 10 days that they hadn’t called,” he says. “I had that feeling.”

Michael says he and the man he contracted HIV from don’t speak anymore.

“I actually liked the guy a lot, and he hadn’t taken the initiative to get tested, which I didn’t know,” he says. “He put me in that much harm and knew that.”

Afterward, Michael had to call everyone he had had sex with in the last two years, including a friend who slept with the same man and later found out he also had HIV.

Now, one year later, Michael says his counts are good — T cells are high, and virals are almost undetectable. He has the 2A strain, which he says is very weak, and doesn’t expect to need to take medication for another five years.

Still, Michael takes care to not make life more difficult than it has to be. He eats a lot of vegetarian food and stays away from all the “little drugs” like Aspirin because he doesn’t want to build up a tolerance to medications he’ll need down the road.

Over the past year, Michael had to teach himself and his family about his disease, which he admits he knew nothing about before his diagnosis. “I researched everything I could get my hands on,” he says. “It’s just a matter of knowing what’s going on with your body.”

His family is supportive but sometimes misguided, Michael says. They listen and learn with him, he says, but not everyone is as understanding. “When you tell a gay guy ‘I’m positive,’ they’re like, ‘Oh, don’t call back.’ So dating is really difficult.”

Still, “I can understand what people do to me because I did it when I was negative,” Michael says. “I already know that I’m no different from anyone else. I just have HIV. I know I’m no different.”

SUPPORTING WOMEN THROUGH ADVOCACY AND EDUCATION

Women’s Resource Center, Carriage House
Phone: (866) 339-3699 & (330) 672-9230
Web site: www.kent.edu/wrc
Hours: 8am-5pm, M-F

Special events by appointment
Gender isn’t something we like to talk about. But as transgender issues emerge as the new front in the liberation movement, the search for a neutral identifier gets some renewed life and real hope. **BY NICOLE STEMPAK**
THE WORDS THAT FAILED

Yo isn’t the first gender-neutral pronoun that’s been offered up to answer the call for a more general term. Here are some others that have been suggested during the past 150 years, taken from Dennis E. Baron’s 1984 Grammar and Gender”:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Pronouns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1884</td>
<td>thon, thons; hi, hes, hem; le, lis, lim; urux, tallis; vans, hizer, himer; hyser, hymer; ips, ips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890-1891</td>
<td>e, es, em; hizer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>ha, hes, hem; hesh, hizer, himer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>tay, term, tem; him/or-her; it, shis, shim; shems, shimself; ze, zim, zees, zeeself; per, pers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>ha, hor, hos, homself; he or she; she, herm; hs; it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>he, his, hers, her, herself; he or she; she, herm; hs; it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 1927 | she, shis, shim; himorher; hes, her, hem; his, her

W hen Kayden Healy took Spanish in high school, he didn’t pay much attention to the role of gender in nearly all the words he learned. Healy, a junior psychology major at Columbus State Community College, says he has since developed heightened gender sensitivity, as he has begun the transition process from female to male. “At that point when I took it in high school, transitioning wasn’t really a thought in my mind,” he says. “It didn’t really occur to me that ‘Oh, everything’s like male-female.’ Everything’s gendered, regardless of what it is.”

But some youth in Baltimore may have found a way to circumvent gender. A number of middle and high school students at certain urban schools have created a pronoun to address one another, according to a study conducted in 2004. Several middle and high school teachers, who were enrolled in a graduate linguistics class for teachers at Johns Hopkins University, noted students used the word yo instead of he or she. The study is the collection of surveys the teachers wrote and administered to more than 200 students in two separate predominately black schools in Baltimore. Limited follow-up exercises were conducted in the spring of 2007. Troyer now teaches in Washington, D.C., and has not heard yo; however, she says as far as she knows, students are still using yo in Baltimore.

“I just overheard it,” says Margaret Troyer, a co-author of the study. “I heard them saying things like ‘yo said this’ or ‘yo threw stuff back at me.’ I wasn’t the only person who mentioned it in the linguistics class that I was taking with Elaine Stotko (the other co-author, who died in October after a year-long battle with brain cancer) at the time. She got excited about it because it’s rare to have a new pronoun come up.”

Troyer says pronouns and prepositions belong to a group known as closed class because these words are not easy to invent or incorporate into language. (In comparison, parts of speech such as nouns and verbs are considered open class because new words are continuously invented.)

Although people invent words constantly, only a small fraction enter the mainstream vocabulary and even fewer are added to the dictionary, says Tom Pitoniak, associate editor at Merriam-Webster. “Some people do coin words,” he says. “We wouldn’t come up with new words if people didn’t do that. But to coin a word as basic and generic as a pronoun, someone might have their work cut out for him or her.”

The search for a gender-neutral pronoun is not new, though. Troyer and Stotko’s study, published in the Fall 2007 volume of American Speech, found more than 80 forms have been proposed or invented since the mid-19th century. Some pronouns have been suggested more than once, including ne, nis, hes, em, shis, shim, shem, se, sim shem, hir and e.

Troyer says past attempts were unsuccessful because people usually don’t use words unless they are considered convenient and necessary. “People don’t follow the (grammar) rules in their everyday speech, and so people aren’t necessarily going to use new words that were invented by people of very specific contexts,” she says. “It’s just unusual because all of the other gender-neutral pronouns have come from the top down — from linguists, from professors, from people who are trying to create language change — whereas ‘yo’ is a bottom-up kind of thing. It’s just teenagers talking in the way that they talk and happening to mention a gender-neutral pronoun.”

While gender-neutral pronouns aren’t new, junior photojournalism major Trae Ruscin thinks they are gaining popularity at the right time. “I think that it’s not long overdue because it didn’t have a necessity yet,” he says. “Yes, there are people that were gender queer or somewhere between male and female but not to the scale and to the visibility of now.”

Healy says gender-neutral pronouns would make his job both easier and more difficult at the same time. He spends his days on the phone addressing customers and activating credit cards. “You don’t almost know what to use if you can’t tell a person’s gender through their voice,” he says. “Gender-neutral pronouns could alleviate that awkwardness but also then point someone’s differences out.”

Associate English professor Kevin Floyd says he thinks the difficulty with pronoun usage is a reflection of the shortcomings of the English language. “We still are stuck in this language that obviously has a very old history, and that is the product of a long context in which people just didn’t think it was a problem to use ‘he’ to refer to the universal human being,” he says. “If we can’t just sort of tinker with our language in order to get past this problem, then for me that’s an indication of just how much there is in the way of assumptions about gender that are embedded in the language itself — embedded just not in pronouns, but in grammar.”

One example Floyd gives of the pronoun problem is through pronoun-antecedent
agreement. “You can’t just change the pronoun to a plural to try to encompass everybody without having reverberations elsewhere in the sentence,” he says. “If you think about the way in which Spanish or French or Italian have gendered nouns and in German, there are three genders. I think this isn’t insignificant. Different languages make different kinds of distinctions. I think that probably has an impact on the way that we see the world.”

Harold Fry, associate professor of German and assistant to the chair of modern and classical language studies, says a gender-neutral pronoun may help to tone down the perceived problem. “In the Romance Languages, such as French, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian, things that we think of as things and ‘it’ are either masculine or feminine,” he says. “Similarly in German, they have the additional neuter (or neutral).”

As an example, Fry says that in German, a spoon (der Löffel) is masculine, a fork (die Gabel) is feminine and a knife (das Messer) is neuter. “(Germans) won’t say it; they will use the appropriate gender pronoun,” he says. “Similarly in German, they have the additional neuter (or neutral).”

Pitoniak stresses ‘yo’ may be more difficult to detect because it’s currently rare in print sources and isn’t used outside of a particular speech community. “Sometimes it takes a good deal of time for a word to make its way from the more confined group into broader currency,” he says.

Floyd says members of the LGBT community may want to use gender-neutral pronouns to identify with their own community. But by doing so, they are emphasizing they are different from everyone else. “A familiar dynamic, connecting yourself to one group while also distinguishing yourself from another group, seems to be part of what’s happening when you get this constant process of linguistic differentiation and innovation,” he says. “They’re saying these pronouns we already have are inadequate. We need new pronouns.”

Healy says he’s hopeful for today’s schoolchildren and envies their lack of distinction between gender. “I think one of the great things about elementary school kids is that they don’t have to worry about gender presentation,” he says, adding that if they do notice, they just don’t care as much. “… as those kids get older, maybe it will slowly start being introduced, and maybe the gender-neutral pronouns will catch on.”

“A FAMILIAR DYNAMIC, CONNECTING YOURSELF TO ONE GROUP WHILE ALSO DISTINGUISHING YOURSELF FROM ANOTHER GROUP, SEEMS TO BE PART OF WHAT’S HAPPENING WHEN YOU GET THIS CONSTANT PROCESS OF LINGUISTIC DIFFERENTIATION AND INNOVATION.”
LGBT. It rolls off the tongue, sounds like something you’d order at a deli, and you basically know what it stands for. Basically.

But there’s a complicated meaning behind the straight-forwardness of the acronym. The letters don’t just stand for words — they stand for people and identities. And as simple as that concept may sound, as hard as that acronym tries to represent groups of people, it doesn’t satisfy everyone. From LG, GL, LGBTI to GLBTQ, groups have tried to be all-inclusive with their titles. Some acronyms even include an I for intersex, a Q for questioning or a U for unsure. But it’s difficult to find one acronym with which everyone can identify, so it’s no wonder the letters keep changing.
LGBT acronyms were used in an attempt to be more inclusive of sexual minorities because the word gay didn’t apply to everyone, says Lori McGee, a lecturer who teaches LGBT courses at the Kent State Stark.

Sarah Chinn, executive director of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies, calls the LGBT acronym organic and says organizations added letters to their acronyms as different sexual minorities pushed for representation.

“It’s part of a community saying, ‘Look, we’re members of this community, and we don’t want to be excluded,’” Chinn says. She adds that organizations feel a need to respond to those requests when they come from members of the group of people they aim to represent.

CLAGS was the first university-based research center in the nation when it was established in 1991. Chinn says college campuses tend to be on the cutting edge of issues of identity and sexuality, so Kent State’s LGBT acronym may be where other such programs are heading.

When faculty developed the LGBT minor at Kent State in the same year, they had to decide on a name for the program. As the first of its kind in the state, the program would set a precedent and have to pass scrutiny from the Board of Regents. The name would be important, and it was difficult to come up with.

Molly Merryman, an associate professor of justice studies at Kent State Trumbull who helped found the minor, says the group that developed the program took its cue from emerging organizations across the country. “With that in mind, use of the word ‘queer’ would not be good in terms of raising the eyebrows of the Board of Regents,” Merryman says, adding that there’s really no right or better name for programs of the kind.

LGBT and GLBT were common at the time, as were GLB, LGB, and LG. The group knew it wanted to include T for transgender, but it didn’t know where to stop. “That’s why you reduce it down,” Merryman says. “It really doesn’t flow for people who aren’t familiar.”

Merryman says the group at Kent State didn’t want to make things any more difficult by discussing the order of the letters they finally agreed to include. So when it came down to that decision, the group took a more hands-off approach.

“We flipped a coin,” Merryman says.

Outside the world of academia, the acronym still differs. “There is this tension with identity categories,” Merryman says. “It isn’t simply a naming. It has political meaning behind it. It makes it very difficult.”

And so even when an acronym includes the same letters, the order sometimes differs. L sometimes comes before G and sometimes follows it — a trend some say is related to gender sensitivity issues and the idea of women first.

Kevin Floyd, associate professor of English, finds the instability of the acronym and the fact that the categories themselves are always contested, interesting. As a professor of LGBT courses on campus, he’s watched the acronyms of other organizations change. “This is identity politics,” he said, adding that the term queer would be useful in including all sexual minorities, but the word’s history as a derogatory term makes it a controversial choice.

Merryman says the term gay was first used in the 1960s. It replaced the term homophile, which had been used until that point. As the lesbian movement emerged in the 1970s and ’80s, the term gay was no longer sufficient. Merryman says the two movements began coalescing more in the ’80s when academic courses were first offered and more discussion of orientation began.

Transgenderism was adopted into the overall gay rights movement by the ’90s, around the same time universities began establishing programs centered on the topic. Merryman says queer, at that time, was used as a derogatory term. “There were efforts, in mostly activists circles, to reclaim the word,” she said.

Queer Nations, an offshoot of the Aids Coalition To Unleash Power, which worked to secure equal rights for gays in response to the country’s crisis involving AIDS, was the first to use the term positively.

“It pushes the name,” Merryman says. “It’s meant to take advantage of the derogatory nature of the term.”

So while many find queer to be the most effective in including members of all sexual minorities, gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, asexual, having multiple partners, and any other non-hetero normal behavior, it’s traditionally negative connotation sometimes overrides that effectiveness. As Floyd sees it, it also forces everyone into one large category and doesn’t allow individuals to distinguish themselves. “People are critical of the notion of identifying themselves with a group, but they know mainstream hetero doesn’t work,” he says. “By embracing queer, it’s like embracing something negative.”

Chinn disagrees. She said the word queer avoids the rigidity of individual classifications. “People’s sexuality is not set in stone,” she says. “(Queer) allows for a sort of fluidity that gay and lesbian don’t.”

She says many are hesitant to identify with a group because, in doing so, they indirectly adopt the political beliefs and rigid assumptions with which that group has been associated.

But Floyd says people seem to need the terms and the acronym, and while they search for a word that encompasses their own identity, they’re struggling against limiting themselves as individuals to the context of a single term. “We live in a world where sexual orientation is such a basic understanding of how we view ourselves,” he says. “There are always obviously generalizations where you try to sum up that group. Queer violently erases differences within the categories.”

When an all-encompassing term isn’t used, all that’s left is a list of letters, an acronym that tries to be inclusive without blurring the groups. “I don’t know if it’s good or bad,” Floyd says. “This is sort of where history has put us.”

It may be that having these differing acronyms is as good as it gets.

“It’s absolutely impossible to find an acronym that covers it all,” McGee says. “I think the acronym is better than nothing because I don’t think you’re going to find something that covers it all. Some people don’t want to be labeled anything. They just want to be.”
According to the 2001 National Survey of Political Culture and Civil Practices, 66 percent of the population in Mexico would not share a house with a gay or lesbian, and 71 percent of young adults would not support rights that benefit the LGBT community. With the second highest number of murders against gays in Latin America — 420 reported murders between 1995 and 2006 — how is the Mexican LGBT community developing? Regina Garcia Cano asked Manuel, a 27-year-old gay native, for his view of the situation.

**How do you see the Mexican LGBT community compared to other countries?**

I think first-world countries always adopt a model of what “should be,” and third-world countries tend to copy those models. As a result, the same social phenomenon is reproduced all over the world only with some local adjustments. The big picture remains untouched: Gays have to be handsome, attractive, muscular, promiscuous, or, on the other hand, effeminate, funny and fashionable.

**Has television played a role in promoting stereotypes of the LGBT community?**

I believe that television and advertising have been promoting an idea in which a gay is a very feminine person who only speaks about beauty and has nothing else to contribute to society. However, I also believe stereotypes have a lot to do with the way we open to society. Diversity exists within our community. If we give the Mexican society the opportunity to discover us, people could change their paradigm on gays and finally understand that we are humans, only with a different sexual preference.

**What is the LGBT community missing in order to eliminate the common “don’t ask, don’t tell” idea that prevails in Mexican society?**

We are missing individual activism. I think members of our community should not be afraid of expressing themselves in every field in which they are involved. A guy expresses himself at a gay nightclub, a party or to a small group of friends, but he is not gay with his family or at his job.

**How do people around you react to your sexual preference?**

I have incorporated this practice in my life: The more normal I treat the topic, the more normal people treat it, too. I believe if one deals with the subject as something forbidden, people will take it the same way.

“A GUY EXPRESSES HIMSELF AT A GAY NIGHTCLUB, A PARTY OR TO A SMALL GROUP OF FRIENDS, BUT HE IS NOT GAY WITH HIS FAMILY OR AT HIS JOB.”
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