

*“I Am Not a Disease; I Am Just Me and A Fun Person to Dance With”*

*A Study of Rhodes College Gay History*

**2013 Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies**

**Purpose**

This study seeks to explore the relationship between Rhodes College as an institution and its gay population<sup>1</sup>. The history of Rhodes’ gay population is complicated, as any history is—its history cannot be neatly packed in decades or waves—and its trajectory is unexpected, changing, and will continue to indefinitely change. There are a few significant factors, though, that have seemed to profoundly impact Rhodes College’s evolving position regarding its gay population.

First, I want to note what it means to be an institution and what kind of institution Rhodes College, formerly named “Southwestern at Memphis<sup>2</sup>,” is. I am concerned with institutions as entities that socialize and impact the individuals that are apart of them. A common goal of institutions of higher education is to create abiding, morally good citizens. The values and given example of good citizenship are expressed through the policies and life of the institution, revealing why it is important to account for the institution’s stance regarding specific communities and issues. Selective policies and informal rules are hardly ever arbitrary, even if they are considered neutral. Rhodes’ role as a socializing institution is especially significant as nearly 100% of first year students

---

<sup>1</sup> I am using the term “gay” and “gay population” as it appropriately describes the group I have studied. ‘LGBT’ is too broad, due to limitations of time and contacts. I do not cover the transsexual, bisexual, or questioning population at Rhodes. My research only addresses those who are gay or consider themselves gay allies. ‘Gay’ is not limited to describing men, I am also including lesbians in this description as gay women.

<sup>2</sup> Rhodes College was originally named Southwestern at Memphis. The name was changed in 1984.

live on campus—a space/territory that is mandated by school policies and social attitudes. In essence, Rhodes is what sociologist Erving Goffman termed a ‘total institution.’ A total institution is “a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life.”<sup>3</sup> Because Rhodes is an institution that shapes policy about on-campus lifestyle, this includes policies about sex and sexuality.

In attempt to clarify and loosely categorize how Rhodes functions as an institution, I am using Douglass North’s classic conceptualization of institutions. North defines institutions as “the rules of the game in a society, or, more formally, the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction.”<sup>4</sup> North’s definition sheds light on *why* Rhodes must be recognized as a socializing institution, and is relevant to how Rhodes shapes human interaction between a small community of students, faculty and staff. Furthermore, North distinguishes between the formal and informal rules of institutions. These are the policies and rules that govern the institution. This is similar to the distinction between the ‘said’ and the ‘unsaid.’ Formal rules (the ‘said’) are explicit and written down as law or constitutional, and enacted by specified actors. An example of this at Rhodes would be the school handbook, or the honor code. Informal constraints (the ‘unsaid’) are the norms and codes of conduct that are implicit of the institution and shaped by culture. Formal rules and informal constraints create the structure of an institution, some heavier on formal rules or vice versa.

---

<sup>3</sup> "[total institution](#)." *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology*. London: Penguin, 2006. *Credo Reference*. Web. 26 July 2013.

<sup>4</sup> North, Douglass. *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*, Cambridge (1990): Cambridge University Press.

Though Rhodes is always acting as an institution formally and informally, there are periods in which one has dominated in regard to the gay population. Rhodes has not always taken a formal stance on LGBT issues, and when the institution does not take a formal stance, implicit codes of conduct and culture shape the institution's stance regarding the gay population. In this sense, Rhodes's institutional position is ever evolving. Theories of institutional change point out that change happens in the interplay of formal policies and informal constraints.

Homosexuality, being the minority sexual orientation in America, is not granted normalization and basic rights in most institutions. Because of homophobia and heterosexism, a gay community forms and thrives in institutions based on allowances and rights won. For instance, the gay community at Rhodes has not always been granted the right to apply for funding, or host a Queer Resource room. The process of a gay community being institutionalized emphasizes the important institutional role that Rhodes holds.

While policy-making decisions in an institution are not arbitrary, there are decisions made that have unexpected effects. Decisions in policymaking are often deliberate, voted upon, and the outcome of policy is planned. In contrast, cultural change or even the rote mechanisms of institutions can arbitrarily change circumstances for a community. An example of this at Rhodes, and a change that significantly and unintentionally impacted Rhodes's gay community, was the change in leadership in 1999. President Daughdrill left Rhodes and President Troutt replaced him. This was a significant change for the institution, and for the gay community among many others. But the change in leadership at Rhodes was not made so that a GSA could be given the right

to organize. Instead, it just so happened that a change in leadership was a moment that opened many doors for students to organize and be recognized by the institution.

### **Context**

In order to understand Rhodes LGBT identity and life, it is important to understand the context of Rhodes. While Rhodes LGBT history is specific to Rhodes, the college is greatly influenced by its cultural location. Rhodes College is located in Memphis, Tennessee—the Mid South. Many students, faculty, and staff at Rhodes hail from Southern states. Informants commented on Southern culture and identified with Southern cultural values that restricted or delayed their acceptance of an LGBT identity. Characteristically, the South fosters Christian religious values and political conservatism that encourage a societal state of heterosexism. Heterosexism is the cultural expectation that heterosexuality is the appropriate and proper sexual orientation while homosexuality is abnormal. The familial model that dominates the South is marriage of a man and woman followed by children. Whether or not this is the reality of most Southern families, it is an image and myth that Southerners rely on, especially among older generations. The expectation of marriage and children is not related to sexuality, nor is it regarded as sexual. Sex is a taboo topic among many Southerners, and would not be acceptable conversation except within progressive circles. Already the South must be coaxed to talk about sex and sexuality, making deviations from heterosexuality much more difficult to address and ultimately accept. Many conversations that do address homosexuality attempt to reconcile with faith, or regard homosexuality as an illness.

Whether or not Rhodes actively engages with the values of Southern culture—conservatism, Christianity, heterosexism—the South creates a context in which it is

fearful to be “outed” as gay and to live a gay lifestyle. This is also why it is important for the institution itself to go out of its way to support gay students and life. In some ways, Rhodes truly does have to prove that it is beyond the traditional Southern values, and is indeed supportive of all people.

Rhodes College’s location on North Parkway in Midtown Memphis has also been a significant context for students and gay socializing. The woods of Overton Park, a large urban park across the street from Rhodes College, have been notorious for sexual activity especially amongst gay men.<sup>5</sup> Midtown is also the area of Memphis where gay bars thrived, drag shows were held, and eventually where the Memphis Gay and Lesbian Community Center opened in 1989.<sup>6</sup> Rhodes’ proximity to the Memphis gay scene has allowed students to connect and be a part of the scene.

The importance of the context of college itself has been important to consider in this study. College is often a time that students are independent and away from home for the first time, reshaping and evolving in their identity. If a student does begin to evolve in such a way that does not bode well with their family, religion, or past, there could be challenges with reconciling self. Several informants in this study did not find their coming out experience at Rhodes to be specific to campus itself. Informants spoke about their experiences before college, religious background, and concerns about family and friends.

## **Method**

---

<sup>5</sup> Buring, Daneel. *Lesbian and Gay Memphis: building communities behind the Magnolia Curtain*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1997. Print.

I chose to conduct interviews and collect archival data for my research. Both of these methods produce primarily qualitative data. Qualitative data better supports and collects specific information about complex social relations, rules, and shared meanings. For example, interviews with informants evidenced the diverse range of experience that two LGBT students at Rhodes would have, even if they attended in the same year. Though quantitative data is useful, I seek to produce qualitative rich descriptions of the past and current campus climate, which cannot be achieved with numbers or statistics.

My study is conducted in Memphis, specifically at Rhodes College. I am focusing on the gay population, though the heterosexual and ally perspectives have contributed to my research and are equally important in comparison. I chose to study the gay population at Rhodes because it is typically underrepresented on campus and the stories of Rhodes LGBT students have largely not been documented. My study also seeks to give recognition to those who have advocated for equality and progress at Rhodes. I chose to specifically study the institution of Rhodes College because I am a current student and intrigued by my surrounding environment, but also I wanted to contribute something valuable to my campus. My Southern roots (Arkansas) have also tapped my interest in LGBT life in the South, along with my own family's shifting views on homosexuality and gay family members.

My process of identifying informants and conducting interviews was informal and heavily relied on my current status as a Rhodes student. I had several resources on campus, and was able to rely on Rhodes connections and alumni to find informants that were knowledgeable on my topic and had experience at Rhodes. I used interpersonal networking and referrals to identify informants—almost all of my informants

recommended at least five more people to interview. Once again, my contact with informants was simpler as a current student, as the connection with Rhodes alum and current students, faculty, and staff is typically very friendly. Informants were almost always excited and interested in my project, as they found it relevant and relatable.

The already semi-established common Rhodes connection between my informants and me allowed for unstructured, informal interviews. Though I brainstormed and wrote questions before meeting with informants, I did not refer to a rigid interview. Instead, I built on rapport and interesting avenues of conversation, while keeping in mind the frame of information that I needed. Before meeting with an informant, I would research the specific time that they were at Rhodes, along with what was happening in Memphis during their time. This background research served as a foundation during interviews and a point of reference and understanding. In my interviews, I wanted to learn about gay experiences at Rhodes, the social climate at Rhodes, and the relationship between administration and students regarding homosexuality. I was also hesitant to read from an interview schedule because of the nature of my topic. Inquiring about one's sexuality and personal experiences is sensitive, and does not align with the format of rigid questioning. My interviews were much more like conversation—laughing, cursing, and high emotion. My informants were welcome to ask me questions, and often did question my project and suggest new ideas. And though my interviews were casual, I did use a digital voice recorder when permitted with verbal consent. I did not transcribe my interviews. I reviewed the audio recording and took notes, and then worked them into the larger narrative of my study.

It is also important to note that a majority of Rhodes students, faculty, and staff are white and belong to the middle or upper classes. My informant sample is representative of this demographic and the dominant Rhodes population. Though my study does not have an intentional critical analysis of demographic, the make-up of my informant sample should be considered throughout. Because I relied on personal networking to find contacts, informants and interviewees were more likely to recommend students and alum that they had stayed in touch with or alum that had stayed in contact with the college. This means that my study does lack the narratives of students that dropped out of Rhodes or had extremely negative experiences and disassociated with the school. Some of my informants were out while at Rhodes, were coming to terms with their identity while at Rhodes, or did not come out until after graduating from Rhodes.

I was allotted eight weeks of working time for this project, including finding and contacting informants, and setting up interviews. Though I would have liked to been able to interview every person suggested, I had limited time to conduct and review my interviews. I was able to speak with an alum or staff member from each decade beginning in the 1960s until present day.

My archival research was conducted using Dlynx, a Rhodes-based and sponsored search engine. Dlynx accesses the earliest issues of the *Sou'wester*, Rhodes's student newspaper. The *Sou'wester*, more so in the past than recently, has been an important public forum of dialogue and information, as well as a representation of Rhodes culture. Another important archival resource for information on the Memphis LGBT community at large is two gay newspapers that are now out of print—the *GAzE* (1979-1990) and *Triangle Journal News* (1990s-early 2000s). Volumes of these publications are accessible



in the Memphis and Shelby County Room at the Benjamin L. Hooks Central Public Library in Memphis, Tennessee.

### **Don't Ask, Don't Tell (and The Trendy Bisexual)**

In tracking Rhodes's gay history, there are claims of "the first out student" or the "first LGBT organization." Of course, even status of being "first" becomes murky in these claims. My understanding of Rhodes's gay history does not have a moment of "immaculate conception," but rather relies on anecdotal notions and reputations that Rhodes held before a more noticeable pronouncement of gay life at Rhodes. Because there is no "first" moment, I seek to describe the period before any distinct organizing occurred at Rhodes in the 1990s.

In fact, the lack of discourse surrounding sexuality in Rhodes-specific texts, such as the student newspaper, the *Sou'wester*, is an indicator of how sexuality was regarded (or disregarded) at Rhodes from the 1920s up until the 1970s. Layered with the context of Southern culture, it is not surprising that even Southwestern, an intellectual and academic institution, would not yet breach the taboo topic of sexuality. Without even much discourse on heterosexuality, to be sure there was not an open discourse on deviations from the hetero-normative sexual orientation.

However, the absence of policies and specific pronouncements on sexuality at Southwestern during these early times did not translate to a literal absence of homosexuality. An unsaid policy similar to the United States military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy characterized Southwestern well into the 1980s. Sexuality at Southwestern was not openly questioned, and any sexual behavior considered deviant

was allowed as long as it was kept quiet. One could be gay in private, but would not openly call him/herself so—most students stayed in the closet.

Although Southwestern did not publicly designate itself as a safe space for gay individuals, the school did maintain a reputation for being a safe space for gay men, especially during and before the 1960s. A rhyme that floated around the Mid-South region described Southwestern as such:

*“Southwestern at Memphis, across from the zoo—where girls are girls, and boys are, too.”<sup>7</sup>*

The riddle can be interpreted as painting Southwestern as a school that accepts effeminate men, with ‘effeminate’ likely alluding to homosexuality and the popular feminine gay male stereotype.

Being a “safe space” does not hold the same connotation as it does present-day. A present-day safe space would include, at minimum, comfortable public displays of affection, non-discrimination and anti-harassment policies, and public LGBT-affirmative events. A safe space at Rhodes in the 1960s and prior meant that a man could be gay at Rhodes, just as anyone could be gay in the 1960s. There were no mandated rights or protections for the gay population, but gay men were not shunned or kept out of Rhodes because of their sexual orientation. I do not mean to express that Rhodes was a perfectly ideal place for gay individuals; however, to my knowledge, gay students, faculty, and staff were not burdened with obvious, overt homophobia or violence. I am making the specification of gay men during this time period because throughout my research process, I did not encounter any information on lesbian women at Rhodes before the 1970s. This

---

<sup>7</sup> Vincent A. Personal interview. 8 July 2013.

lack of information on women, and especially lesbian women, could be due to the later admittance of women to Southwestern in 1925, and the much later on-campus housing available for women in the 1940s. Women were also the minority gender in the student population. In contrast to today, women make up the majority gender of the student population.

Even with the reputation of being an acceptable institution for gay men, it is unclear whether or not gay males chose to go to Southwestern because of this reputation. Vincent A., a Memphian and graduate of Southwestern in 1975, described Southwestern as being a place where one could be an individual. The freedom and appeal of studying and exploring identity attracted students to Southwestern. Vincent also emphasized the role and unifying effect of the honor code. Students (in the 70s) came to Southwestern to study, to have a more worldly experience and broaden their horizons. During the 1960s, like much of the rest of America, Southwestern was going through a period of liberality that carried on into the 1970s. There was no longer a dress code or mandatory chapel, and students, faculty and staff continued to make demands for the institution to be more liberal.

Vincent found his niche in the theater department at Southwestern, a wild yet studious and creative circle of students and faculty. The stereotype that the theater crowd maintained emphasized creativity and experimentation, with the assumption that students were experimenting sexually. It was a given, or didn't overtly matter what one's sexual preference was. Having this community allowed for Vincent to comfortably express himself, at one time even appearing in drag on campus. The liberal culture of the time seems to have played an important role in this creative flexibility and expression. Vincent

described the time as stylish and trendy to be bisexual and explore one's sexuality, at least until the AIDS scare in the 1980s.

Another social outlet for sexual experimentation and gay students were the abundant gay bars in Memphis and popular cruising spot, Overton Park. During the 1970s, the Memphis drag and theater community had already been organizing for equality and less harassment. This kind of organizing, however, was not present at Southwestern. Perhaps the availability of gay socializing off campus limited the perceived need for organizing at Southwestern. Vincent did not recall any student organizing or specifically stated institutional position (regarding homosexuality) from Southwestern during the 1970s. In contrast, at the University of Memphis, a larger public university across town, students were organizing for a Gay Student Union, which became a chartered, regularly meeting group in 1980.

Homosexuality was discussed, at least in an academic context, at a symposium in 1979 hosted by The Religion Commission at Southwestern. The symposium explored the "social, psychological, and ethical perspectives." Speakers at the seminar were a minister (from Memphis Metropolitan Community Church, an LGBT advocate), a psychiatrist, and a chaplain. The advertisement for this symposium, found in the Sou'wester, claims that the symposium was created because there was a need for open and objective analysis on the issue. The advertisement also quotes a woman from The Religion Commission that says students may never be able to speak so openly and objectively about the issue as they can now (1979). Unfortunately, there is not a following review in later Sou'wester issues of the symposium. But the presence of this event, which was organized by faculty and staff, does show an effort made to open the conversation about sexuality.

As I mentioned earlier, my interviews revealed varying and sometimes opposite experiences at Rhodes, even if in the same year. While none of my interviewees shared stories of hateful homophobia, the *Sou'wester* did receive violent hate mail in its 'Letters to the Editor' section in January of 1972. Texas T. Tiber, an obvious pseudonym, wrote a letter claiming that there was a "morally pernicious conspiracy" taking root in the institution through "perverted pansy fraternities."<sup>8</sup> He claimed that the brotherhoods were breeding grounds for "a bunch of damn queer-o's." Tiber ended his letter with a warning to freshman to remember the nature of these fraternities before they consider joining. It is irrelevant whether or not Tiber was giving an accurate portrayal of sex in fraternities, and more important to note the extreme homophobia and intolerance expressed in his letter.

But Texas T. Tiber did not have the last word. In the next week's *Sou'wester*, Bill Symes, a self-proclaimed 'GDI' (God Damn Independent) wrote back that he supported and defended the Gay Liberation Front, and Tiber's comments of "fag" and "queer" made his blood boil. Symes condemned Tiber's correlation of homosexuality and immorality, and concluded, "All they demand are human rights!!"

Symes' call for human rights for homosexuals was not helped by the case of the "Midtown Molester." In the early 1970s, a series of male homosexual rapes were occurring in Overton Park and in Southwestern's own Fisher Gardens, a wooded garden located on the southwest corner of campus. The rapist became known as the "Midtown Molester." These incidents prompted several students to demand better security on

---

<sup>8</sup> Tiber, Texas T. Letter. *Sou'wester* 14 January 1972: 2. Print.

campus, and of course did not give a positive impression of homosexuality. Vincent recalls the strangeness of men instead of women being afraid to go out at night.

As Southwestern moves into the 1980s under President Daughdrill who was inducted in 1973, the campus takes a conservative cultural swing moving away from its liberal period in the 1960s and 1970s. Helen Norman, who served different faculty and staff positions in the 1980s, wrote a *Sou'wester* column in the March of 1981 comparing the liberal, expressive 1970s to the already changing times in the 1980s. Norman describes a radical cultural swing to the right on campus. Though she did not fear conservatism, she is concerned with “a growing tendency to deride philosophies and lifestyles contrary to one’s own, to close channels of discussion and debate, to look disdainfully upon those who march to the tune of different drummers.”<sup>9</sup>

Despite this growing conservatism, two gay males students, Ross Weisiger and Ken Cameron, outed themselves in *Sou'wester* letters to the editor, in 1983 and 1988 respectively. Both students focused their letters on the Southwestern/Rhodes community. Weisiger suggested a gay/straight dance to be held on campus in an effort to unite students in a common fun activity. He wrote in February of 1983, “I am not a disease; I am just me and a fun person to dance with.”<sup>10</sup> Although Weisiger sometimes enjoyed the Memphis gay bars, he felt that he lacked support and a gay community at Southwestern. Weisiger also questioned whether or not students would be comfortable coming out at Southwestern. Aside from the significance of content in Weisiger’s letter, it is also published in the “prospective student” issue of the *Sou'wester*. Tracy M. Vezina, an

---

<sup>9</sup> Norman, Helen. Letter. *Sou'wester* 13 March 1981: 3. Print.

<sup>10</sup> Weisiger, Ross W. Letter. *Sou'wester* 4 February 1983: 4. Print.

editor of the *Sou'wester*, addressed this matter in her article, *Let's Dance*.<sup>11</sup> Vezina had apparently received criticism for choosing to publish Weisiger's letter in a prospective student issue. Vezina defended her decision by admitting that omission of the letter would have been a blatant act of discrimination. Furthermore, Vezina was moved by Weisiger's letter and found it appropriate for prospective students to know that there were homosexuals at Southwestern. Vezina hoped that prospective students would be ready to join an open community that would support Weisiger rather than shun him.

On February 6<sup>th</sup> of 1989, student Ken Cameron wrote a letter to the editor in the *Sou'wester* making a call to organize and ultimately to remind other gay students that they were not alone.<sup>12</sup> Cameron cited statistics about the amount of gay people in America, then deducted that there must be other gay students at Rhodes—at least 44. He referred to himself as the only “out” student he knows. Cameron suggested that those 44 students should organize some sort of discussion/support group.

Students responded to Cameron's letter in the next couple of weeks (February 13<sup>th</sup> and February 20<sup>th</sup>, 1989) through letters in the *Sou'wester*. The first response came from Steve Hines and Chuck Wade, who are appalled by Cameron's letter and feel that his suggestions violate their own rights. They feel that their rights are violated by being forced to accept homosexuality as ‘normal,’ along with a violation when they were allegedly ‘jumped by a homosexual’ in a dorm room bathroom.<sup>13</sup> According to Hines and Wade, it infringes upon their rights to have to share a bathroom with homosexuals, along

---

<sup>11</sup> Vezina, Tracy. Letter. *Sou'wester* 11 February 1983: 2. Print.

<sup>12</sup> Cameron, Ken. Letter. *Sou'wester* 6 April 1989: 2. Print.

<sup>13</sup> Hines, Steve and Chuck Wade. Letter. *Sou'wester* 13 April 1989: 2. Print.

with the threat of AIDS. They also cited Rhodes' affiliation with the Presbyterian denomination, which was opposed to homosexuality in 1989 and would supposedly contradict the affiliation.<sup>14</sup> Their letter ended with a promise to take actions of protection if their rights continued to be violated.

In the next week, February 20<sup>th</sup>, 1989, the *Sou'wester* published fourteen rebuttals to Hines and Wade's letter.<sup>15</sup> Students critiqued Hines and Wade's argument about rights and AIDS, along with extreme opposition to the 'myths' that they cite and their obvious homophobia. The rebuttals recognized that though exclusion at Rhodes is subtle, it runs rampant and the atmosphere could be improved. There was also a sentiment of agreeing with Ken Cameron, and a hope that students would be able to come out of the closet at Rhodes. Because of the volume of rebuttals and gay-affirming sentiments in these letters, it seems that the student body of Rhodes would be open to a gay organization and presence on campus in 1989.

Cameron and Weisiger are some of the first students that began to make suggestions of gay-affirming events and organizations to be held at Rhodes. There does not appear to be a response from administration to either of these suggestions.

But the administration's position on homosexuality seems solidified by another event in 1989. Steve Musick, the Southwestern chaplain at the time, was asked by student Monte Abbott to conduct a ceremony representing marriage in the Voorhies chapel.

---

<sup>14</sup> Rhodes has been affiliated with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) since 1855. Rhodes currently shares a covenant with the Church, expressing that the college is based on Christian ideals and study of the Bible is maintained in Rhodes' curriculum. Rhodes' relationship with the Church may have been even stronger in 1989.

<sup>15</sup> "Rebuttals." *Sou'wester* 20 April 1989: 3. Print.



Musick counseled Abbott and his boyfriend, researched an appropriate ceremony, and found a ceremony that would not be considered illegal in Tennessee (a homosexual marriage in Tennessee is illegal). The planned legal ceremony was a Service of Holy Union. However, two hours before the ceremony was to take place, President Daughdrill warned Chaplain Musick that he would be fired if the ceremony proceeded. Although Daughdrill did not openly condemn homosexuality, his action can be interpreted as intolerant and prejudiced. The Sou'wester responded to the incident with an editorial titled "Will Discrimination Enhance Rhodes' Reputation?" The editorial explores the intention of Daughdrill's decision, and ultimately concludes that his action was not one of tolerance or acceptance. Monte Abbott has recently (July 19, 2013) posted a reflection of the incident on his blog. He says that after the attempted ceremony, he would receive late night death threat phone calls, had things thrown at him, and generally found it impossible to live comfortably on Rhodes campus. He requested to meet with Daughdrill about this serious abuse, but Daughdrill denied him a meeting. Abbott left Rhodes after five semesters of academic success. Abbott's experience with the institution of Rhodes is a glaring example of how an institution can determine one's everyday quality of life. Daughdrill's refusal to accept the ceremony and listen to Abbott's complaints of abuse made Rhodes College an intolerable place to live and work (This is also true for Steve Musick, who left his chaplain position). The title of his blog post is: "I was kicked out of Rhodes College for being gay."<sup>16</sup>

### **Days of Daughdrill and Organizing**

---

<sup>16</sup> Abbott, Monte. "I was kicked out of Rhodes College for being gay." *Gay Pentecostal Atheist*. Blogger. Web. 23 July 2013.

The change that occurred at Rhodes in the late 1980s and early 1990s was due to progressing and intensified demands for recognition and equality from gay students, faculty, and staff. Whereas Rhodes had been able to maintain a “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy without much turbulence, the new period of asking and telling forced the college, as an institution, to respond. In other words, it had previously been “okay” to be gay at Rhodes. But being gay at Rhodes and asking for rights, support, and general recognition was met with challenges. The general response from the college in the 1990s was characterized by homophobia, denial of rights, and lack of support on an institutional level.

Tiffany F., who graduated from Rhodes in 1995, was a part of the first organizing efforts at Rhodes.<sup>17</sup> She recalls a close friend coming out to her at Rhodes, and then realizing along with other friends that there needed to be some sort of organizational support and protection for gay students. Tiffany knew one out gay male at the time, though she did not know any gay student couples. Being in the closet still largely characterized this time at Rhodes. Still, Tiffany and her friends saw the need for a Rhodes GSA (Gay Straight Alliance) and applied to be an officially recognized Rhodes student organization in 1994. The reply from the administration was a letter that said Rhodes would not sponsor, endorse, or officially recognize the group. The letter, which denied the recognition of the group, came from Vice President Harlow, who cited that the group would conflict with the college’s religious affiliation, Presbyterian U.S.A., and with the college’s values and principles as a whole. Harlow gave the group permission to meet and reserve meeting rooms, along with postage of flyers around campus. However, the

---

<sup>17</sup> Tiffany F. Personal interview. 28 June 2013.

flyers had to state at the bottom that Rhodes College did not sponsor, endorse, or officially recognize the group. The group would not be allowed to apply for funding or register as a student group at the college.

In response, Tiffany and the GSA made t-shirts with the GSA logo on the front, and on the back stated, “This organization does not sponsor, endorse, or officially recognize Rhodes College.” The t-shirts were worn everyday, including to Tiffany’s job position in the dean’s office. The shirts aimed to raise awareness about the relationship between the group and the institution. Doubtless, the statement on the shirt is in protest of the institution making a decision that blatantly says Rhodes College does not support or recognize gay students. The administration’s statement very clearly expressed that homophobia and prejudice were an institutionalized feature of Rhodes in 1994.

The GSA also teamed up with alumni and wrote a letter to the Board of Trustees, which is published in a 1994 issue of the *Sou’wester*.<sup>18</sup> The alum that signed the letter wrote that they would no longer feel comfortable contributing to the annual fund, or encouraging their class members to do so. One alumnus specifically stated that he would not feel comfortable recommending Rhodes to any potential student or professor because of its unsupportive environment. The Department of Psychology also wrote a memo to administration disagreeing with their decision, and used academic research that supported open conversations about sexuality and identity, which GSA would promote.

Jamie Bogner, Editor-in-Chief of the *Sou’wester*, wrote an article on March 16<sup>th</sup>, 1994 responding to Harlow’s decision that “the atmosphere on campus in regards to

---

<sup>18</sup> “Letter to Board of Trustees Addresses Administrative Position on Gay Straight Alliance.” *Sou’wester* 20 April 1994: 4. Print.

homosexuals is perceived as being hostile.”<sup>19</sup> Though only eight students attended the first few GSA meetings, there is evidence in Bogner’s article that there was some GSA support from students. Students described the institution’s decision as an embarrassment and blatant display of prejudice. Bogner also noted that Vice President Harlow expressed concern for Jason Cormier’s (the student who submitted the GSA application) safety. Bogner questioned Harlow’s concern, because it actually confirms the need for a GSA. If Jason Cormier was in danger, then Rhodes must have been a threatening climate for gay students. The GSA wanted to form in order to fix this threatening atmosphere.

Tiffany recounted that of the eight students attending meetings, only three were gay while the other five were supportive allies. Tiffany imagines that more gay students would have attended, however many students were coming to terms with their identity, and perhaps weren’t ready to cross the line and go to a public GSA meeting. The group talked about the current climate at Rhodes, and organization strategies to legitimize the group. It seems that the main goal of the group was to provide a context that was designated for talking about these issues in a safe space because this did not exist anywhere else on campus.

While the GSA did receive support from faculty and alumni, they still lacked recognition two years later in 1996, when the *Sou’wester* reports that the group had 122 members. At this time, GSA was fully organized, co-sponsoring events such as dances, food drives, and participation in Focus on AIDS Week. And though the GSA was still

---

<sup>19</sup> Bogner, Jamie. “Harlow Creates Alternate to Registration For Gay-Straight Alliance.” *Sou’wester* 16 March 1994: 2. Print.

denied funding, they were able to raise several hundred dollars on their own, according to Milton Johnson, a GSA director.

In September of 1997, the *Sou'wester* reports that GSA has changed its name to FOSTER in an attempt to clarify its image. "FOSTER" stands for "Forum on Sexuality to Encourage Respect."<sup>20</sup> The name change was a result of attempting to abandon the negative image that GSA held on campus. Though 'negative' is not qualified in the article, GSA seems to be responding to claims that it has been too exclusive or coercive. The name change also re-aligns itself with the Presbyterian Church's (USA) new recommendation to have open, non-incriminating dialogue (from Amendment B, Section 3 of the 208<sup>th</sup> General Assembly) and the Rhodes College Student Handbook, which also encourages open dialogue and freedom of expression. Of course, the motivation of a new image was also possibly an appeal to administration and a persistent desire to be recognized at an institutional level by the college.

But the name change did not have its desired effect. In 1998, FOSTER was fairly inactive and had lower attendance. The GSA seemed to have a more specific message and larger following, whereas FOSTER only attracted gay students. The goal of FOSTER was to have a general dialogue about sexuality, not exclusively homosexuality.

By the end of the 1990s, the few students that had been involved in organizing realized their need and right to organize. In 1999, Ashley Teal Baker writes in the *Sou'wester* that "now is the time to publicly acknowledge as a community that gay, lesbian, and bisexual people work, study, and live among us." Baker says that a dialogue

---

<sup>20</sup> Bishop, Jason. "GSA Renamed FOSTER in Attempt to Clarify Image." *Sou'wester* 10 September 1997: 1. Print.

has started on campus about the kind of atmosphere that Rhodes lacks and needs to create. It is also during the 1990s that the homophobic letters in the Sou'wester appear to decline, as there was no letter of opposition after Baker's column was published. This is certainly a shift from the 70s and 80s, when opposition would invariably be published in response to gay advocate articles in the paper.

### **Troutt Era and the LGBT Friendly Administration**

Jena B. graduated from Rhodes in 2002, and was a part of reviving FOSTER.<sup>21</sup> She remembers GSA "being on the books" but not quite being official or meeting when she arrived at Rhodes in 1998. There was some supportive counseling offered to gay students, but because Jena had already been out in high school, she was more comfortable with herself and was more interested in having a social group that met regularly. Jena made a gay friend on campus, to her surprise, and the two started working to restore the FOSTER group. Jena found faculty support from Ellen Armour, who was an out professor of Religious Studies and became the group sponsor. When President Troutt came to Rhodes in 1999, Jena saw an opportunity to have the group legitimized and recognized by the school. Jena remembers Troutt as very friendly and supportive, willing to listen and talk with her. FOSTER, for the first time, was recognized and received funding from the college under President Troutt's administration. FOSTER brought speakers to campus, watched films, and had discussions about topics such as gay marriage. It was at this time that Jena also started working on the nondiscrimination policy to include protection in sexual orientation. She first visited the dean of students on this matter and received a prompt 'no.' But after writing a letter to President Troutt, he

---

<sup>21</sup> Jena B. Phone interview. 30 June 2013.

immediately called her to discuss the request. Though Jena remembers Troutt being hesitant to work on the matter because of his newness to the school, he agreed to quietly work on changing the policy with Jena, and they did.

In the early 2000s, FOSTER typically had 20 students at each meeting, 5 or 6 being gay. Most students on campus were closeted. Jena did not agree that the campus climate was hostile, but claimed that it definitely wasn't friendly, either. Though she saw a huge change in the institution during her time, she did not witness a change climate-wise. She felt that she did not receive as much discrimination as a woman, but that gay male students faced more problems.<sup>22</sup> Her description of the gay community at Rhodes was more similar to an underground network, especially leading up to the resurrection of FOSTER.

Students that were involved in organizing typically had a different experience than those who were not. Hannah M., a Rhodes graduate of 2002, only attended a few FOSTER meetings, but she enjoyed them when she did.<sup>23</sup> During her freshman year, Hannah was coming out and exploring her own identity, so she was not quite ready to publicly attend a FOSTER meeting. Hannah was not as aware of FOSTER's struggle to be legitimated, or the administration's position on the matter. By her senior year, Hannah

---

<sup>22</sup> The 1990s are also characterized by a greater influence and presence of lesbians, in contrast to Rhodes' past of greater visibility of gay males. I would credit this shift to the stigma that developed around gay men and AIDS in the 1980s, which continues into the 1990s. By the 1990s, Rhodes had also continued its era of conservatism, and what seemed to be a return to a more masculine, "preppy" reputation, and the sort of "ivy league" image that President Daughdrill sought for the college. Masculinity is typically threatened by homosexuality, as it relies on a very polarized idea of gender. There are more reports of gay men at Rhodes being verbally abused ("faggot") but gay women were perhaps more socially acceptable.

<sup>23</sup> Hannah M. Phone interview. 3 July 2013.

had a girlfriend on her basketball team, and after their break up; she contacted Jena to find support. This was one of the several moments that the importance of FOSTER is realized. Hannah needed a safe space where she knew gay students were meeting and their ability to maintain a presence was important to her.

Hannah did recall much harassment from the athletic department, especially from the male athletes. While Hannah was dating her girlfriend on the basketball team, her coaches called a team meeting to more or less publicly out Hannah and her girlfriend. The team and coaches expressed concern of the couple sleeping together on team trips. Hannah was terrified by this experience, finding it completely inappropriate. She compared the experience to feeling like she was in *The Crucible*.

Hannah described Rhodes as having a socially conservative culture, maintained by the students that were drawn to the school. She also described Rhodes as unsupportive in regard to gay students. Hannah and Jena both mentioned the 'Hall of Fame'<sup>24</sup> at Rhodes jokingly being called the 'Hall of Flame' because every year, at least one person in the Hall of Fame was gay. Hannah remarked that gay students were in fact representing Rhodes quite well, and yet the school would not support them.

But with the arrival of President Troutt, along with an increase in national and local LGBT organizing, the administration at Rhodes has spent the last decade working with students, faculty, and staff to support and build a gay affirming community at Rhodes. FOSTER, which has since become the GSA again, has existed on campus ever since Jena gained the group official recognition in 2000. The visibility and activism of GSA at Rhodes has been dependent on the mix of students, faculty, and staff in any given

---

<sup>24</sup> The Rhodes Hall of Fame is located on the second floor of Palmer Hall. It is a group of Rhodes seniors recognized each year for their achievements at Rhodes.



year. For instance, since 2000, GSA has grown and shrunk, in both directions. The group also sometimes operates as more of a social group, and at other times seeks to promote change in policy on campus and developing new programs.

In 2004, FOSTER sponsored a drag show by Kinsey Sicks, which was well received by students, faculty, and staff. The show's success represented a definite shift in how Rhodes responded to sexual fluidity and the LGBT community. Jon David W., a graduate of Rhodes in 2004, was not involved with FOSTER, but enjoyed success as the student body president and the rush chair of his fraternity.<sup>25</sup> Though he never knew more than five out students at Rhodes, he did not think the school was uninviting or hostile during his four years. He described Troutt's administration as receptive and active. Jon David is a donor and advocate of the college today. 2004 was also the year that student Erin Hoekstra began working on creating Safe Zones at Rhodes. The Safe Zone program trains students, faculty, and staff to recognize issues such as homophobia, transphobia, heterosexism, and to be an open resource to GLBTQ students. Once a person is Safe Zone certified, they are given a sticker to place on their window, door, office, or dorm room, to signal to students that they are in a safe space. The Safe Zone program has been widely utilized by students, faculty, and staff since its availability in 2006.

In 2006, Dean Michael Drompp suggested that Rhodes change its benefit plan for faculty and staff to include domestic partners, as it had previously only included spouses in heterosexual relationships. Without difficulty the policy was changed and has been well received by Rhodes. 2006 was also the year that a GSA alumni reception began

---

<sup>25</sup> Jon David W. Phone interview. 2 July 2013.

being held at homecoming. The reception has been important for alum that would not have otherwise attended homecoming, but felt that they had a place at the reception.

An article in the *Sou'wester* by Daniel Jacobs from 2008 begins with: “When it comes to homosexuality, Rhodes College is not an open place, but it is by no means closed.”<sup>26</sup> The article goes on to say that Rhodes has seen much improvement, but that most students still choose to keep their sexual identity private. There is open conversation about sexuality on campus; in 2008 the Women’s Studies department became the Gender and Sexuality Studies department in an effort to broaden the curriculum and open students’ minds. Some low-level harassment is still reported on campus, but there is no obvious gay bullying. However, students interviewed in the article are dissatisfied with student life at Rhodes because there are not many students that are “gay, loud and proud.” A lesbian interviewed in the article describes that it is harder for her to be out as a lesbian; people assume it’s just a phase in life and men will still hit on her—whereas if a male comes out as gay, everyone believes him. In the *Sou'wester* “Student Voice” section of this issue, the question “What is the campus climate in regard to GLBT students?” is responded with all positive comments agreeing that Rhodes is accepting and only a small minority of immature/ignorant students perpetuate any harassment.

### **Present Day**

Five years later (2013), students still seem to express the same sentiments as they did in 2008. Tyler A., who will graduate from Rhodes in 2015, expressed dissatisfaction with gay social life at Rhodes though he is satisfied with the institutional changes and his

---

<sup>26</sup> Jacobs, Daniel. “Do GLBTQ students feel comfortable on campus?” *Sou'wester* 8 October 2008: 1. Print.

relationships with administration.<sup>27</sup> Tyler is a part of the LGBT Working Group at Rhodes, which is currently composed of eight faculty and staff and three students. The faculty and staff include professors, coaches from the athletic department, and members of administration. A recent initiative that the group is working on is called queer mentorship. The concept pairs upperclassmen with underclassmen to provide support in regard to their gender and queer identity. Dean Drompp and Dean Casey created the working group in the fall of 2010, with the goal of combining student and staff perspectives to create effective changes on campus. President Troutt reviews these changes and has been supportive of LGBT advocacy at Rhodes. Tyler remarked his surprise and delight that President Troutt attended the LGBT opening reception during student orientation. He found it significant that the president of the college will come out to support LGBT initiatives. Tyler has also been involved with LGBT advocacy through the Kinney program. He served as the LGBTQ advocacy coordinator, the name has now been changed to Queer Advocacy. Leah F., who will also graduate in 2015, served as the Queer Advocacy coordinator last year.<sup>28</sup> Leah described the difference between Queer Advocacy and GSA. Queer Advocacy is service-oriented (through the Kinney program) and focused on activism, while GSA has served as more of a social group. Both groups have worked with Memphis Gay and Lesbian Community Center (MGLCC)—Rhodes students received the volunteer of the year award at MGLCC in 2010. GSA and Queer Advocacy have been instrumental in developing initiatives such as Pride housing and designating and setting up the Queer Resource room, which was funded through a LGBT Community Development fellowship in 2012. Both groups also organize social events

---

<sup>27</sup> Tyler A. Personal interview. 10 July 2013.

<sup>28</sup> Leah F. Personal interview. 1 July 2013.

such as GSA prom, a drag show that was a sponsored collaboration by several groups on campus (and Stonewall Tigers, GSA at University of Memphis), and a Queer advocacy week. Pride housing did not continue after its pilot year in 2012-13. The initiative aimed to create an LGBT community that would live on a designated dorm floor and share dinners, watch movies, and have discussions. However, it was difficult to get mixed gender housing and the more preferred living spaces on campus, such as East Village. Tyler A. does not support Pride housing, as he believes that LGBT students should be integrated in their communities, not cut off in what would potentially be known as “the gay dorm.” Lack of integration has also stunted groups like GSA and Queer Advocacy. Tyler finds that the LGBT organizing on campus is quite insular, and though there is more than one organization, it is the same group of students. He worries that LGBT organizing has not been effective in the sense of transforming students’ minds on campus.

Rene S., a graduate of Rhodes in 2013, was happy to have the LGBT organizations on campus when he arrived, as he was coming out at the time and found great support and identity through these groups.<sup>29</sup> He has since shifted his advocacy interests to the intersectionalities of his identity as a Hispanic gay male. Rene is also a member of a fraternity that is LGBT friendly, and has even sought out training for its members to learn about being LGBT friendly.

Rene has been less involved in the LGBT organizations on campus, but has the same complaint that Tyler and Leah express—the gay social scene at Rhodes and in Memphis is greatly lacking. There are very few gay bars in Memphis, perhaps because

---

<sup>29</sup> Rene S. Personal interview. 16 July 2013.

society has become more accepting of homosexuality. If a gay couple can go to a mainstream bar, there is no need for a gay bar. But Tyler has not found that to be true. He gave the example of fraternity parties on campus, which tend to promote heterosexism as they are organized on polarized male and female gender categories. Tyler cannot expect to go to a fraternity party or Memphis bar where males will pursue males. It can often be forgotten in the present day rhetoric of rights and LGBT issues that this organizing is indeed about sex, sexuality, romance, dating, and friendship. It is a very human, social, and erotic issue.

At Rhodes specifically, the problem widely reported is that many students stay in the closet and there are not enough gay social outlets. This lack of visibility stunts social life and a movement. Rene, Tyler, and Leah strongly advocate for students to come out. Coming out has been dramatically effective for changing minds about sexuality because the issue is made personal. As long as the issue remains impersonal, the threat of homophobia lingers. Leah described Rhodes campus as quietly hostile—harassment is not so obviously expressed in words, but in facial expressions and reactions to involvement in groups such as GSA. Or, students claim to be “fine” with homosexuality, but are not willing to wear the GSA t-shirt or march in a Pride parade. Prejudices have moved to a more private domain, as being homophobic in public has become socially unacceptable.

At Rhodes in 2013, if students make demands and proposals with faculty and staff, they are welcomed and often implemented. But Rhodes sometimes lacks a vocal, “out” group of activists. Last year, the GSA did not have anyone that ran for board positions. Unfortunately, the change that students like Rene, Leah, and Tyler seek cannot

be achieved through policy implementation. Though Rhodes has come a long way as an institution, it is now a shift in cultural ethos that the campus lacks. Mark Behr, a Rhodes English professor, was interviewed in the *Sou'wester* by "The weekly sassy bisexual column" and commented that though Rhodes is liberal for a Southern college, "we have to acknowledge that this is an extremely heterosexist environment, characterized by all sorts of homophobic occurrences."<sup>30</sup> In order to move forward, Behr says that we must keep criticizing dominant culture and acting together in critical solidarity to keep Rhodes on a "national trajectory and national agenda."

When asked what specific improvements could be made at Rhodes, Hannah M. (graduate of 2002) expected that Rhodes would have social groups like a gay men's choir, outreach to LGBT students from the health center, and offer hormones for transsexual students. But in order to make these improvements at Rhodes, there must be demand for them. For now, the consensus is that most students are not out, and this perpetuates a culture of silence. It is impossible to maintain and promote a social presence on campus without students' participation. Hopefully, the improvements that Rhodes has made as an institution will appeal to LGBTQ prospective students as not only a solid academic school, but also an institution that could support a healthy and full lifestyle. Rhodes must keep working to attract students that will build strong and lasting GSAs, and more importantly, students that will be willing to dance together and fulfill Ross Weisiger's dream of 1983.

---

<sup>30</sup> Moore, Xany. "The weekly sassy bisexual column." *Sou'wester* 3 October 2012: 3. Print.

## References

- Abbott, Monte. "I was kicked out of Rhodes College for being gay." *Gay Pentecostal Atheist*. Blogger. Web. 23 July 2013.
- Bishop, Jason. "GSA Renamed FOSTER in Attempt to Clarify Image." *Sou'wester* 10 September 1997: 1. Print.
- Bogner, Jamie. "Harlow Creates Alternate to Registration For Gay-Straight Alliance." *Sou'wester* 16 March 1994: 2. Print.
- Buring, Daneel. *Lesbian and Gay Memphis: building communities behind the Magnolia Curtain*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1997. Print.
- Cameron, Ken. Letter. *Sou'wester* 6 April 1989: 2. Print.
- "Commission holds seminar." *Sou'wester* 2 March 1979: 1. Print.
- Hannah M. Phone interview. 3 July 2013.
- Hines, Steve and Chuck Wade. Letter. *Sou'wester* 13 April 1989: 2. Print.
- Jacobs, Daniel. "Do GLBTQ students feel comfortable on campus?" *Sou'wester* 8 October 2008: 1. Print.
- Jena B. Phone interview. 30 June 2013.
- Jon David W. Phone interview. 2 July 2013.
- Lawrence, Amy. "Gay Students Face Challenges at Rhodes." *Sou'wester* 24 January 1996: 6. Print.
- Leah F. Personal interview. 1 July 2013.
- "Letter to Board of Trustees Addresses Administrative Position on Gay Straight Alliance." *Sou'wester* 20 April 1994: 4. Print.
- Moore, Xany. "The weekly sassy bisexual column." *Sou'wester* 3 October 2012: 3. Print.

Norman, Helen. Letter. *Sou'wester* 13 March 1981: 3. Print.

North, Douglass. *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*,

Cambridge (1990): Cambridge University Press.

“Rebuttals.” *Sou'wester* 20 April 1989: 3. Print.

Rene S. Personal interview. 16 July 2013.

“Rhodes Presbyterian History and Liberal Arts Heritage.” Rhodes College, 2013-14

Rhodes Catalogue. Web. 1 August 2013.

Symes, Bill. Letter. *Sou'wester* 21 January 1972: 2. Print.

Tiber, Texas T. Letter. *Sou'wester* 14 January 1972: 2. Print.

"total institution." *The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology*. London: Penguin, 2006. *Credo*

*Reference*. Web. 18 July 2013.

Tyler A. Personal interview. 10 July 2013.

Vezina, Tracy. Letter. *Sou'wester* 11 February 1983: 2. Print.

Vincent A. Personal interview. 8 July 2013.

Weisiger, Ross W. Letter. *Sou'wester* 4 February 1983: 4. Print.