

Pass or fail

Jodi Mardesich

Students at religious schools often have to give up their safety for their sanity when they come out of the closet

When Matthew Grierson reached for his boyfriend's hand as they walked through an Orem, Utah, shopping mall last January, he had no idea the simple act would lead to his getting kicked out of Brigham Young University. Turns out someone saw the two men holding hands and reported Grierson to BYU's honor code office.

Because Grierson was already on probation for kissing another man on campus--a charge Grierson denies officials at the Provo, Utah-based school determined he wasn't serious enough about overcoming his same-sex attraction and gave the 21-year-old two options: Withdraw from the university or be suspended. A premed major on full academic scholarship, Grierson chose withdrawal and was not allowed to finish that semester's classes.

Grierson says the school's action surprised him, especially since the Mormon Church, which owns and directs BYU, had recently held out an olive branch to gay members--saying they were welcome as long as they remained celibate. And while BYU's honor code clearly prohibits "homosexual conduct," it doesn't specify what that prohibition means. "I didn't think you could be kicked out just for being gay," says Grierson, who is from Plano, Tex. "I thought [the prohibition] had to do with sexual acts."

Another reason for Grierson's confusion is that BYU is more lenient with single, straight students--almost encouraging them to hold hands at many church-sponsored "young adult dances." "It's a complete double standard," he says.

"Certainly men can have fun with one another," BYU spokeswoman Carri Jenkins said when asked to clarify the school's policy. "We take into account that in some cultures men and women hold hands, in some cultures men and women greet each other with a kiss.... [But] if it is done [by two men who are] dating, that would be considered inappropriate."

Another BYU student, Ricky Escoto, was suspended just weeks after Grierson, when his roommates complained that they had seen him kissing another man on their couch. Escoto also had received flowers from men, talked about dates with men, and spent hours in gay Internet chat rooms, the roommates charged.

The 22-year-old Escoto denied his roommates' accusations. But a school official decided it was "more probable than not" that Escoto was violating school rules. BYU asked the political science major to leave campus right away. But after his story was covered by the local media, he was allowed to stay long enough to finish his final exams. Escoto says he knows of 13 other BYU students who were kicked off campus last year after being caught watching the Showtime series *Queer as Folk*.

"The church teaches how to be Christlike," Escoto says. "Jesus Christ would not kick me out of his university because I'm gay. There's just no way."

Escoto contacted the Salt Lake City office of the American Civil Liberties Union, hoping he could challenge the suspension. But he was told BYU's actions were not illegal. The state of Utah has no law that protects gays from discrimination, and even if it did, religious schools are protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution and are free to discriminate based on their religious beliefs,

"[Escoto doesn't] have a constitutional or statutory claim against the university based on sexual orientation," says Stephen Clark, legal director for the ACLU's Utah chapter, who is Mormon and gay. "It's a private institution. Unfortunately, there is no national or state antidiscrimination law in Utah that protects gay students."

If you apply the theory that 10% of the population is gay to the 1.5 million students the U.S. Department of Education says will attend religious schools this fall, there are about 150,000 gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students who could face the same turmoil that Grierson and Escoto endured last spring.

For many of these students, coming out is not an option. School officials don't welcome openly gay students because their religion tells them that homosexuality is a sin. According to students at schools such as Bob Jones University in Greenville, S.C., and Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va., students who are suspected of being gay are immediately expelled, regardless of whether they're sexually active. Officials at Liberty University disputed such claims--saying that only sexually active gay students are expelled--while Bob Jones officials refused to comment on the school's policies.

Even at religious schools that adopt an outwardly more tolerant policy toward gay students, it's not easy to be gay. Leaders denounce the evils of homosexuality from the pulpit. People are also taught to "love the sinner, but hate the sin," a message that implicitly teaches people to hate each other--and themselves, according to Marc Adams, who heads HeartStrong, a support group for the gay students at antigay institutions.

Last year, the Mormon Church contradicted its olive-branch offering by openly promoting California's Proposition 22, which now prevents the state from recognizing same-sex marriages. Escoto, who was at home in Glendale, Calif., at the time, says church leaders handed out lists of registered voters--encouraging members to make telephone calls in favor of the proposition--and even passed around "Yes on 22" signs. Escoto says that on Election Day he was so conflicted, he didn't vote either way on the proposition. "I was putting myself through hell because I was gay," he says. "I should have voted no."

Calvin College, a liberal arts school in Grand Rapids, Mich., doesn't have a policy regarding homosexuality, but Benjamin McCloskey says that when he was in his senior year in 2000, not one of the school's 4,200 students was out. That is, until he came out to the whole school, which is affiliated with the Christian Reformed Church, in a letter to the editor of the campus newspaper.

"Being gay at Calvin College is waking up each day and wondering if God made a mistake when he made you," he wrote. "Being gay at Calvin College means struggling with serious depression. Being gay at Calvin College sometimes makes a person wonder if life is worth living. Being gay at Calvin College is the most unpardonable, the most untouchable, the most unspeakable thing to be."

His letter led one student to call him "fag," but McCloskey says he never felt threatened. Now 22, he says coming out--and therapy--have helped him get over his self-hatred. "My faith in God does not contradict my sexuality anymore," he says. "I simply disagree with Christians who say that it isn't OK for me to be gay."

Gay students who come out are often asked by straight students, "Why did you come here?" Some say they choose religious schools because their parents won't pay for them to go elsewhere. Others are there because they hope they can overcome their homosexuality through faith. Still others attend religious schools because it's a family tradition.

"I never even considered going to a public school," says Monica Kaufman, a 1999 graduate of Goshen College, a Mennonite school in Goshen, Ind. "I have a long history of family that have taught and have been students at Goshen College."

Homosexuality was a hotly debated topic both at church and at school when Kaufman was at Goshen. Hoping to move the debate forward by associating her name with what was, for many, an impersonal issue, Kaufman came out in the school paper. "I don't think it was something I had really thought out," she says.

After the article was published, Kaufman posted it on bulletin board in the student union, where students had continued to debate the issue. But over the Thanksgiving holiday, someone broke into the student union and torched the bulletin board. Nothing else in the building was touched. And although the police investigated the incident, they never found a suspect.

The ordeal left Kaufman very frightened. The school paper had published her photo along with the article, and people started treating her differently. "I became the center of that issue, and people didn't see me as a person, but rather homosexuality in general," she says. Instead of finishing her last three semesters at Goshen, she took courses in Chicago and at Indiana University to complete her Goshen degree.

Now 26, Kaufman says, "I'm thankful and glad I went to Goshen College, but I could have saved myself a lot of grief and crap if I had gone somewhere else."

When Grierson and Escoto left BYU, they were given letters detailing nine steps they must take to be readmitted. Besides having monthly contact with their honor code counselor, they must convince their ecclesiastical leaders and counselors that they are abiding by the honor code--and that they are no longer gay. They are also required to "totally refrain from inappropriate same-sex behavior, including but not limited to dating, holding hands, kissing, romantic touching, showering, clubbing, etc., as well as regular association with homosexual men."

Probably not surprisingly, both men have decided against returning to the Mormon university this fall. Escoto plans to take classes at a university in Southern California, and Grierson is going to the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. For Grierson, the decision was an easy one. "Love is one of the strongest things in my life," he says. "For me to give that up would be an impossible task."

Mardesich also writes for The New York Times and The [San Jose] Mercury News.

Safety net

A Seattle couple counsels gay and lesbian students at antigay religious institutions

Marc Adams decided to attend Jerry Falwell's Liberty University because he knew he was gay--and he desperately wanted to change. His choice of an evangelical Christian school upset his father, a fundamentalist Baptist preacher, because he considered Falwell "too liberal." But Adams, who had been told that if he chose to be gay, he would become a child molester, get AIDS, and die, had heard Falwell preach that homosexuality could be "cured."

Adams didn't find a cure at the Lynchburg, Va.-based college, though. Instead he fell in love with another male student. When his boyfriend's mother found out about the relationship and pulled her son out of school, Adams tried reparative therapy and counseling--again to no avail.

Finally convinced there was nothing he could do to change his sexual orientation, Adams dropped out of Liberty in 1987 and reunited with his boyfriend, Todd Tuttle. The two have been together 13 years.

Four years ago the men, who now live in Seattle, started HeartStrong, a nonprofit group that provides counseling to gay students at antigay religious schools. The youngest person they've helped was 13 and the oldest 68.

"Our mission is not to change the schools or the leaders--it's to reach out to the students," says Adams, 33. "They're the ones who are committing suicide emotionally, spiritually, and physically every day."

He and Tuttle, 36, say they have heard hundreds of shocking stories, including one about a biology student at Carroll College in Helena, Mont., who earlier this year was attacked with a bottle, beaten, and left unconscious with the words "die fag" written in ink on his body. Or the time a lesbian student was sent to a camp for three weeks and forced to pick plums for 13 hours a day as punishment for having a same-sex relationship.

Of course, incidents like these are still taking place on campuses across the country, but Adams and Tuttle are convinced HeartStrong is making a difference. "We've helped 815 students come to terms with who they are," Adams says. "A lot of people come to us who were never able to talk about this anywhere else." --Jodi Mardesich

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