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Bodybuilder recounts struggles of being gay

By Debra Hatch
Maine Campus staff

Bob Paris' image as "Mr. Universe" and "Mr. America" depended on his masculinity, but it all changed when he announced he was gay.

Paris had intended his statement to Ironman magazine to be one speaking about love and commitment, not to draw attention to himself and his sexuality. Instead it destroyed his career and four-year run of popularity. No athletes in the mainstream have ever come out during their career to say they were homosexual.

"I became a professional gay person after that, which was very disorienting," Paris said. "My life was literally taken over with about 300 days a year on the road talking to people."

Paris began making public appearances to talk about his homosexuality at colleges across the country. Sometimes he needed a security team of SWAT agents and police to keep the crowd at bay. Paris also appeared on "Oprah."

Bodybuilding was a chance for Paris to focus on something to mold his identity. He said it was an odd sport to do and allowed him to exercise his bizarreness in an accepted way. He was virtually blackballed out of the sport. Two years after he came out in the media, he began to lose his endorsement contracts as well as three-quarters of his appearances. In addition, Paris was also placed lower and lower on the competitive circuit, which made career development very difficult.

He said myths and misconceptions about homosexuals have scarred and hurt them, but allows homosexuals to challenge common misconceptions.

"Truth in lives changes everything and should be what people strive for in their lives," Paris said. "To learn who you are and understand and tolerance is what Paris sees as the most important part of acceptance and equality. He said in order to understand what it is like to be gay, people should talk to gay people.

David Hartley, a junior marketing major and Hilltop Dining Commons supervisor, said Paris' lecture pushed against the stereotypes that surround the gay community.

"He has a lot of interesting analogies comparing bodybuilding to the pressures of society," Hartley said. "Rather than pushing self-pity he encouraged being honest with yourself, your goals and keeping yourself in tune to draw from."

Sarah Smith, a first-year political science major and Wilde-Stein member, said Paris expressed his views very articulately and would help student athletes to brush off stereotypes.

Paris wrote six books and is working on three more. His most noted one, "Generation Queer," is a culmination of his activism, dispelling the negative myths about homosexuals.