

The University of Maine

DigitalCommons@UMaine

---

Social Justice: Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion

Special Collections

---

4-23-1999

## Bodybuilder recounts struggles of being gay

Debra Hatch

*University of Maine*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/social\\_justice](https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/social_justice)



Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Gender Equity in Education Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

---

### Repository Citation

Hatch, Debra, "Bodybuilder recounts struggles of being gay" (1999). *Social Justice: Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion*. 372.

[https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/social\\_justice/372](https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/social_justice/372)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Social Justice: Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact [um.library.technical.services@maine.edu](mailto:um.library.technical.services@maine.edu).

# 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.

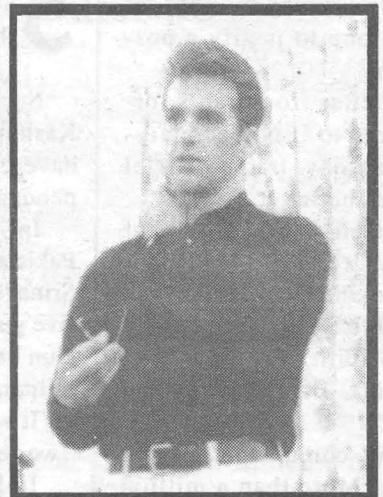
He was virtually blackballed out of the sport. Two

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

**See ATHLETE on page 5**



Bob Paris, former Mr. Universe, spoke of being a gay bodybuilder on Wednesday night at the Damn Yankee. (Jacob Peppard photo.)

## Athlete

from page 1

aren't is the completion of humanity and allows you to act truly in the name of love."

Coming from an alcoholic, abusive and broken family in a small town in southern Indiana, Paris had always felt that he was different, so "queer," he said. It was an overwhelming feeling for him to know that he was so different than other people around him, and even in his own family.

His strong southern Baptist upbringing also didn't help him feel he could be a total person. He said he grew up learning that people like him would burn in hell, and even asking questions about homosexuality would send you to hell.

"I felt like there were curtains, a brick wall, barbed wire and guards around how I was, that I had to protect myself," Paris said. "To recognize that I was different was very disturbing and it intertwined in my life in a really complicated way."

The defenses Paris talked about were present in his life even before he began bodybuilding. As he struggled with his identity and accepting who he was, he began to abuse alcohol and made several suicide attempts.

Coming out to his family was as difficult as coming out in Ironman. They were unaccepting and almost violent at first, but have since come a long way.

Paris believes that to overcome hatred and injustice, people have to learn to love themselves and others for their similarities and differences.

"You can hear it in the voice of a person screaming out against equal rights," Paris said. "Hatred in people's hearts can only mask the seeds of love in anger and hate."

Understanding 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.