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A sanctuary from intolerance

By Guy L. Gerbick

I appreciate Michael Lane's column "Sensitivity U." in the Feb. 12, 1996 edition of the *Maine Campus*. His points are frequently well researched and written, though I frequently disagree with his interpretations of events. Such is the case with his views on the residence hall Safe Zone for lesbian, gay, bisexual students and their allies. Contrary to his anticipation, I do not consider him a homophobe, I support his freedom to speak his mind. I also think his understanding of the experience of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals and the First Amendment could be better informed.

First, the proposal for the Safe Zone wing was initiated by students. Campus Living did not design this wing to "compartmentalize" the campus or serve as an educational, "diversity" tool. Lesbian and gay students from our halls who wanted to feel more comfortable to be themselves and free from harassment in their living arrangements asked for this wing.

Mr. Lane often writes of the freedom of speech. Indeed, I greatly respect his right to hold, speak and write self-centered views that ignore the difficulties non-heterosexuals have in learning and developing a positive identity in a homonegative environment. He chose the issue of the Safe Zone

to heap all his animosity for regrettable overzealous advocates for diversity. Unfortunately for him, the Safe Zone is not about diversity education. It does not take a sensitivity "nuance" to realize that "Top 10 Reasons All Fags Must Die" written anonymously on your door, as one gay student here had last year, will develop fear. Until there is a time when all people can be respected, an environment of intolerance will compel those different from the prevailing majority to seek sanctuary.

If the case for compassion isn't compelling, perhaps the case for justice is. The First Amendment to the United States Constitution is "the right of the people peaceably to assemble." Since students asked for recognition of their right for association, the university was under a legal obligation to recognize that right. In *Gay Lib v. University of Missouri* (1977), the courts found that student groups have association rights that cannot be curtailed "simply because it [the university] finds the views expressed to be abhorrent." Further, based on the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Healy v. James* (1972), all cases since brought against public universities by lesbian, gay and bisexual groups which were denied recognition, services, or, as in this case, equal rights to associate, were won by the student groups (I have the references if you want them). Would Mr. Lane

deny First Amendment freedoms he so cherishes?

Finally, I agree with Mr. Lane on the unequal treatment in denying the heterosexuals the opportunity to live in co-ed rooms. I have frequently laughed at and relished the consequences of the assumption of heterosexuality in segregated living and bathroom facilities. Lesbian and gay college students have always been able to officially shack up while heterosexual students have not. It isn't fair.

Conversely, Mr. Lane speaks of the "sanctity of the bedroom" from sexually "emotional baggage." For whom? Do first year students realizing they are homosexual find "respite" by discovering they are sexually attracted to their roommates? Perhaps the best roommate option for a homosexual student is a person of the opposite sex.

The case for co-ed rooms would be hard fought. Parents' protective instincts would kick into high gear and the legislature would have a cow. But maybe the time has come for this option. It benefits both heterosexual and queer students and accommodates a significant chunk of students who move off campus to build loving relationships.

See, there is still common ground.

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