



Rushing to come out



Back in the 20th century, the Greeks didn't mix with "freaks." Now many fraternities and sororities welcome out pledges and support members who reveal they're gay or lesbian

BY ADAM E. VARY

At the start of the 2003 spring semester at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Ryan Miccio was in knots. The sophomore had already told four of his most trusted Alpha Tau Omega fraternity brothers, including the chapter president, that he was gay. Now, on this balmy January day, as they all packed inside the off-campus home for an informal meeting, Miccio realized it was time to tell the entire house.

"You guys," the chapter president said, "Ryan has something that he'd really like to talk to you about, and I need everyone to sit down, be serious, and pay attention." He then handed the chapter's gavel—a sign of respect—to Miccio.

"I made it very, very brief and very to the point," Miccio remembers. He touched the chapter badge he was wearing over his heart, stood up, and said, "I just need you all to know that not only

Travis Shumake (foreground) and his Sigma Chi fraternity brothers at Arizona State University

am I a member of this fraternity but I am a gay member of this fraternity."

At first his fellow brothers stared back blankly. But then the gavel was passed around, and just about everyone took the time to voice their support. After the meeting adjourned, a few guys—the kind who Miccio thought might have trouble with his sexuality—invited him out for drinks and burgers. "I thought, *Wow, this is great!*" he recalls.

A similar scene is playing out in universities elsewhere as openly gay and lesbian members of the notoriously conservative college Greek system are finding acceptance among their straight brothers and sisters. Deciding whether to accept a fraternity brother who comes out is really no longer an issue, says Shane Windmeyer, coeditor of *Out on Fraternity Row* and coordinator of the Lambda 10 Project, a clearinghouse for fraternity and sorority issues concerning gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people.

Beyond the common credo of "once a brother, always a brother," several major national fraternities have added sexual orientation to their nondiscrimination policies. Even those houses that don't go that far keep a supply of ►



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Sophomore Ryan Miccio stood up and said, "I just need you all to know that not only am I a member of this fraternity but I am a gay member of this fraternity."

gay-friendly literature on such topics as what to do if a brother comes out of the closet. Meanwhile, during the past decade university administrators and the national Greek organizations have cracked down on hazing, which all too often has involved some sort of homophobic humiliation.

What is much less certain, however, is whether any given Greek house will accept an already openly gay student into the fold. "Rushing openly gay is still a huge problem," says Windmeyer, "because people get to know you not as an individual but as that 'gay' label."

Take the tale of Travis Shumake, whom Windmeyer will feature in his book *Brotherhood* (due out next year from Alyson Publications). As a freshman at Northern Arizona University, Shumake was an out cheerleader and freshman class president. When he first met the men of Sigma Chi, most of them were immediately won over.

He was a lock for a bid into the fraternity, they told him, and anyway, Shumake's father was a Sigma Chi; Travis thus was a "legacy"—essentially entitled to a bid.

Except he didn't get one. A handful of seniors voted against Shumake because, he says he learned a few weeks

later, "they didn't want to become known as the 'gay' fraternity," and all bids must receive a 100% vote. *OK, Shumake thought, who needs Sigma Chi? So the following spring he rushed Phi Delta Theta, got a bid, and started the pledging process. But after six weeks a senior brother gave the frater-*

When Greek and gay are one and the same

A few years ago Joanne Martens, a music theater performance major at Arizona State University, noticed an information table for the campus's local gay fraternity. "I was like, 'Hey, how can I join?'" she recalls. "They're like, 'You can't.' So I was like, 'Oh, OK, is there a [lesbian] sorority?'" They told me nobody had actually started one."

Martens had no intention of joining any of the established sororities—"there are certainly some molds that you have to fit into, and I am certainly not

one of them"—so she leaned on the gay male friends she made that day at the table for support and advice, e-mailed all the lesbian and bisexual women she knew, and by last spring Martens and her fellow sisters had made history. Along with their brothers in Sigma Phi Beta, the women of Gamma Rho Lambda (or GRL—get it? Girl?) at ASU are part of the only undergraduate Greek system in the country that has both a gay fraternity and a lesbian sorority.

"I had a lot of straight

friends when I came to college," says senior and Sigma Phi Beta treasurer Carlos Galaz, by way of explaining why a gay fraternity appealed to him more than a traditional one. "I didn't really have gay friends." But Galaz also stresses, "We're not a hook-up group. We don't want guys to join to look for a boyfriend. That's not what we're about."

To that end, pledges are forbidden to date other pledges or any of the fraternity's 23 active members, one of the many rules the women of Gamma Rho Lambda adopted in trying to win over the support of the National Pan-Hellenic Council, which oversees all campus sororities.

"I think [the council accepted us] because the fraternity did so well," says GRL vice president Janette Elias.

"They're a great organization." While the school has had its share of antigay harassment, everyone says the campus is safe and the student body more or less open-minded. Besides, the chapters are more than enough of a haven for their members. Galaz, who moved out at 17, came out at 18, and hasn't spoken with much of his biological family in five years, says, "My fraternity—they're my family.... We're not just close friends who party together. We support each other in anything and everything." —Adam B. Vary

COURTESY RYAN MICCIO



nity an ultimatum: The gay pledge goes, or I go. Since Shumake wasn't yet a full-fledged brother, the Phi Deltas gave him the boot.

After such an ordeal, one might expect Shumake to wash his hands of the entire Greek system, and he did—for a year. By this past spring all the Sigma Chis who'd been against his membership had graduated, so the fraternity approached Shumake, wishing to make amends with a bid into the brotherhood. (Ironically, Shumake just so happened to be dating a closeted Sigma Chi brother.) He accepted the offer this time around, he says, because that relationship meant he "started hanging out with everyone [in the fraternity] and realized that these guys were amazing."

Indeed, it is this desire for a strong bond with like-minded same-sex friends that interests so many gay and bisexual men in the Greek system. The same, however, cannot quite be said for gay and bisexual women. "They aren't as interested in the sorority movement as [gay] men have been [in fraternities]," says Windmeyer, citing a trend he's observed since he founded Lambda 10 Project in 1995. He also notes that only two national sororities, as far as he knows, include sexual orientation in their nondiscrimination policies. "It's not to say there's not value in that sisterhood; it's just that there [are] huge stereotypes [lesbians have] of sororities being nonfeminist organizations," he says.

For example, that they're just "a bunch of 'Yay, boys' [and] 'Let's go watch the rugby team play' kind of girls...wearing the exact same thing." Such was Lara Doolan's initial impression of sororities when she first arrived at Arizona State University. Doolan would go on to be a founding member of Gamma Rho Lambda, ASU's first lesbian sorority [see sidebar].

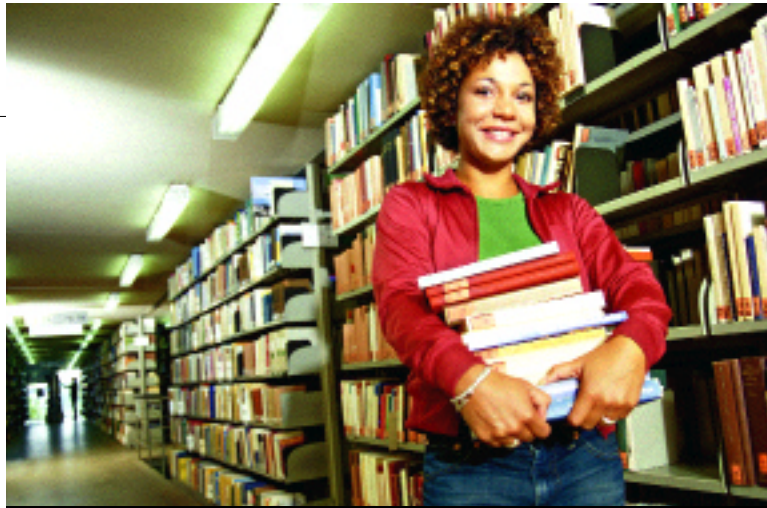
Mandy Stephens of Kappa Alpha Sigma, however, speaks of her traditionally straight sorority with glowing praise. "I completely love it," she says. "We all feel like family." Now a junior at University of Wisconsin-Platteville, Stephens says she joined the sisterhood because she "didn't really have a lot of girl friends. I was always the tomboy into sports." She was outed last spring as bisexual after some of her ►

sisters, suspecting she was dating an out lesbian pledge, confronted her in front of all 35 members. "I didn't think [my sexuality] was that big of a deal," she says. "I was in tears sitting on the floor.... Like, they were pointing fingers at me saying 'You, you, you.' It wasn't like, 'How do you feel about this?'"

Stephens says she and the pledge, who have remained good friends, have since helped educate their sisters on how to be more sensitive with regard to sexuality, and her sunny Wisconsin nature cannot accept Windmeyer's conviction that sororities hold little appeal for most gay and bisexual women. "I think it's the campus," she asserts. "We have a very small campus here, about 5,500 students, and I know that my [lesbian] friends who go to bigger schools would never join a sorority.... I think it's a lot of where you are and how conservative or liberal people are in that town."

Tell that to the newest members of Delta Lambda Phi. This year the country's only national gay fraternity started a colony at Mississippi State University, smack in the center of the Deep South, as part of a major wave of expansion that the social organization ("for gay, bisexual, and progressive gentlemen") has enjoyed over the last four years. "We started off with a group of about 11 men in 1986 in Washington, D.C.," beams Dusty Garner, Delta Lambda Phi's vice president for outreach. "Now we're serving over 2,000 brothers nationwide with about 20 active chapters." Five colonies are set to become full chapters this year and as many as eight more in 2005-2006. Garner credits much of the surge in membership to the increasing number of gay students who arrive on campus already out and hungry for a social network yet are wary of joining a fraternity where they may not be entirely welcome.

Garner is especially proud of his brothers at MSU, who spent a tenacious two years fighting alongside the gay faculty and student groups to get sexual orientation included in the university's nondiscrimination policy. Once that was on the books, the school's interfraternity council had no choice but to allow Delta Lambda Phi to charter its colony there, but that still didn't stop students from openly taunting Michael, the fraternity's founding member, saying "queer" and "faggot" to his face when he wore a shirt



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AU is the first place I have been where it doesn't matter I'm gay. Deans, faculty, staff, and students all are accepting. During a recent student orientation, a parent stood up and said that they were not in favor of a gay presence on campus. The school president politely but poignantly told the parent that if they were not comfortable with having their child attend a school with a gay presence, then this was not the school for them. —Janine Hackett, 31, psychology major

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY EAST LANSING, MICH.

MSU is home to 10 support or advocacy groups for gay students, including a queer students of color group, a queer student newspaper, and a queer Democratic group. What's troubling about MSU is the inconsistency with which LGBT students feel welcomed. Some go for years without a problem, while others feel so harassed they move off campus. As the chair of the Alliance of LGBT Students, I have spoken about queer issues, done sensitivity trainings, and lobbied for gay rights to the highest levels of administration, all without incident. I have felt challenged but not threatened. —Jon Hoadley, 21, social relations and women's studies major

OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY STILLWATER, OKLA.

We have a very prominent, active gay group called the Sexual Orientation Diversity Association. One can scarcely walk around our campus without seeing its "chalkings"—announcements or statements written on the sidewalks with chalk. It's an effective and colorful way to get noticed. A few semesters ago some antigay chalking appeared, but for the most part OSU is a surprisingly gay-tolerant campus. There have been openly gay faculty here as well. —James Kent, 20, philosophy major

bearing his Greek letters last spring. (Michael, a senior, asked *The Advocate* to withhold his last name due to his job with the military.)

If this seems like an undue amount of hardship for what amounts to a social club, Michael, who first discovered Delta Lambda Phi while trying to buck up a deeply depressed friend who'd just been kicked out of his fraternity for being gay, doesn't care. "It's time for Mississippi to wake up and re-

alize [being gay] is not a problem, as most people here seem to think," he says resolutely. Other gay students at MSU who've been kicked out of their fraternities have already expressed an interest in pledging next spring. Students straight and gay have been going Greek for 200 years now, so maybe that not-so-old adage is true: If you build it, they will come. ■

Vary writes for Entertainment Weekly.

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