Afrikian 1

Karl Afrikian

2015-2016 Gessell Fellowship for Social Ethics

Sewanee, We’re Coming out Now:
An Exploration into LGBT Life on the Mountain
Introduction

Sewanee: The University of the South. *Of the South.* In a speech given at the Multicultural Experience Weekend that I attended as a prospective student in November 2011, Vice Chancellor John McCardell said that Sewanee was the “University of a new South.” What did he mean by that? The south and the rest of the nation for that matter has only in past decades become more tolerant towards racial minority groups, although much progress still needs to be made in that area. Yet, with its strong Christian faith, rural society, traditionalist culture, and an overall “fear of change”, the south remains a land where still many are homophobic and have many misconceptions about the LGBT community. Older generations have been raised their entire lives believing that gay people were evil sinners, and their minds are difficult to change, understandably. Young southerners are divided on this issue, and this is evident in current Sewanee culture. At Sewanee, the overall condition for LGBT people has improved in the past years as overall American culture has become more tolerant, yet there is still much work to be done.

With every coming year it is clear that acceptance of LGBT people becomes the norm in campus’ culture, especially as the University has begun to diversity its student body geographically, racially, and also regarding sexual orientation. When I started at Sewanee in Fall 2012, you could honestly count the number of out students on your hand. As of Spring 2016, the gay drinking society, ROYGBIV, has over 80 members, both current students and alumni. Students can be out now on campus with the knowledge that their peers will accept them. Yet, many students at Sewanee remain in the closet due to a variety of fears of what being gay means or may mean for them. This fear is not entirely
unfounded, especially within fraternity culture. Gay slurs are heard regularly and particularly for identities other than “gay or lesbian,” there are still misunderstandings and ignorance.

This paper will cover a variety of topics concerning LGBT life on the Mountain. I have written this in a more personal tone, as I feel that if I have to communicate such aspects of people’s lives, using first person experiences and stories heard from interviews and surveys, and I believe talking more informally would better to fully communicate what I want to say. The primary focus for the project is to present the current situation of LGBT issues at Sewanee, primarily the changes seen within the past five years or so. Do I have bias? Of course I do and I will try to acknowledge this throughout this paper. Note however that these biases are from my own experiences here on the Mountain having undergone the process of coming out and living here as a gay man. This paper explores issues in Greek Life, the way straight students interact with their queer peers, rape culture, the process of coming out at Sewanee, and many other aspects. The paper concludes with a set of proposals for the University and a list of accomplishments I was able to produce as a part of this project. Sewanee has a rich queer history yet this will not be covered in this paper. I hope in the near future someone, be it a professor, student, of another Gessell Fellow, complies a history of Sewanee’s gay past.

Sewanee: A Peculiar Culture in A Bubble

The “Sewanee bubble” is one way often used to describe our campus. It is the idea that Sewanee is isolated from much of the general society and that “what happens in Sewanee stays in Sewanee.” In many ways it is a blessing and a curse. We are a small institution, only around 1600 students when I wrote this, with an aim at reaching 1750
(Berribitsky). Everyone knows everyone. Everyone knows everything about everyone. That is one of the quirks of attending a small, liberal arts college. Before I begin to describe gay culture on the Mountain, we need to have a grasp of the Sewanee culture overall. I am sure those reading this decades from now will be experiencing a somewhat different Sewanee (although I do of course hope our campus maintains most of its traditions and customs) and to fully understand the context of this paper the general campus culture must be explored. From my personal experience and from the observations of “Sewanee outsiders” working at the University, the College is truly a campus divided into two cultures (Spurlock). This is something many on campus would deny vehemently, but it is something that has been observed by many students and faculty members. I will say that this next part may anger some and it is be no means 100% accurate, yet I believe is overall the general way the College culture operates.

One half of Sewanee consists of what you may call a “traditional Sewanee.” This culture consists of your stereotypical University Avenue Fraternities and preppy girls. Many are Sewanee legacies, often with connections to the Episcopal Church. Walk around campus, you will see swarms of “bros” wearing short shorts (Chubbies) and Chacos, Brooks Brothers or Vineyard Vines button down shirts. In many ways, this part of Sewanee culture is very gender segregated as evidenced through walking down “Frat Side” McClurg (Spurlock). Race is a clear factor in this half of campus, as the incredibly vast of the students are white, and I would put the number at over 90% if I had to estimate. There are some African Americans in this part of campus culture, although the Southern Gentry keeps them out, likely unknowingly. Primarily, you will find upper-middle class individuals in this part of campus. Homosocial interactions dominate this
sphere, and the connections between the men and the women are often just made through the hook-up culture. “Sewanee is not a school where people date.” This is just an accepted part of the entire Sewanee culture. There are some couples, but the stereotype among them is that they are often only with each other in an almost dependent basis. In this part of Sewanee culture, the conservative mindset dominates human interactions. Even if individuals are not homophobic, there is group-mentality that brings out homophobia, as the groups of straight men isolate gays as “others.” If one were to designate fraternities which dominate this “half” of Sewanee, it would be called the “University Ave” side: SAE, KA, SNU, Phi, and ATO. Sororities in this sphere primarily consist of TKP, Theta Pi, and PKE, although in my time here I have seen these organizations branch out and become far more accepting. There are of course also members in each of these organizations or people in this “half” that are very tolerant and accepting of all, yet I will only say about these individuals that to learn about someone’s personality merely look at their friends. Overall, to define this part of campus life is to note its conformist nature. This is where Southern values thrive and difference is a route to exclusion. People in the other side, which I will describe shortly, often note how “they all look the same,” and my perspective is that conformity is a central aspect to these students’ lives on campus and that this comes through on many levels, including fashion and personal ideology (Survey).

The other half of Sewanee is what many of these University Ave students actually call “the dark side.” This term “dark side” has come up on Yik Yak and in general conversations, yet many in this part of the campus culture likely know it exists. A visible way to see this is merely in McClurg. There is frat side, and “dark side.” The “dark side”
Afrikian 6

is where difference is promoted and accepted. You will see more than just white people in “the dark side.” Fraternities here are far more diverse, even if this change has only occurred in recent years. Chi Psi, DTD, Beta, Lambda, DKE, Gamma and Fiji dominate this half, although there is overlap between some of these organizations and the “frat side” half. Differences are more accepted in this part of campus, and overall I would say they have far less conformist cultures than many of the “frat side” organizations.

People in the first half described often look down on people in the “dark side,” as I recall a conversation with an ATO who once asked me “why are dark side people so intimidated by us?” Questions and statements like that explain why I often have avoided people in that the other half. In these fraternities there are openly gay individuals who are accepted by their peers; this is not the case in the frat side. Many in this half are more socially conscious, and you will find more activism, feminism, and LGBT acceptance. GDIs (non-Greeks) are more likely to be in this part of campus life.

It is not the full story, however, to say that Sewanee is entirely defined by these two halves and their overall cultures. I have friends in the “frat side” fraternities and know for a fact they are not homophobic individuals. Yet, group mentality dominates the overall thoughts. Many interactions occur between the two halves, yet overall I would argue that Sewanee is a campus divided. Many in the “dark side” feel uncomfortable even eating in the frat side of McClurg, and when “their half” of the dining hall is closed you will undoubtedly hear complaints about having to sit near the SAEs. Every time the “dark side” area is closed off, one can expect a Yik Yak about how they hate having to sit over in the long tables. Why the concern? Many feel that the frat side individuals are far more judgmental, and from Yik Yak and from personal conversations women in
particular feel very uncomfortable being stared down while walking to eat. Overall, I would believe that the campus is incredibly divided. As Dean Spurlock said in our interview, there are in many ways “two Sewanees.” I do not believe the metaphorical wall dividing campus is definite or impassible, but there is one there. A point I would like to make to wrap this section up is that people in the “frat side” perceive this divide as part of a social hierarchy. They view themselves as better than others for being in a particular organization over another, looking down on other groups and their members. This is something I have observed on Yik Yak and general conversations with members of the frat side organizations.

**Gay Space and Culture**

Since I began my studies at Sewanee in 2012, the gay culture at Sewanee has changed tremendously. Sewanee has a fairly small gay culture, as we are a small school. There can only be so many LGBT people here due to our size, although I will say the number of out students is growing tremendously. Yet, the community still has issues. “Toxic” is often used to describe the Sewanee lesbian community (Afrikian). For gay men, I can tell you from my experience, the few that are open are out and proud yet many prefer to maintain a low radar to avoid persecution and being noticed on campus for this “difference.” We fit outside of the general campus conformity, yet our queer identities are tolerated and accepted in the dark side and not respected in the frat side. I will talk now about “gay spaces” on campus. This is different than a “safe space,” as this is merely a place where queer life may find itself more prominent. A safe space implies now in our
culture that there is a fear of intimidation or questioning of one’s beliefs, that one is kept safe from all possible “persecution.” I think the original idea of a safe-space was fantastic – providing queer people a place to discuss queer issues without fear of rejection – but recently the term has been hijacked by those in a politically correct culture afraid of having people challenge their ideas. I have grown tremendously by having people question and reject my ideas, and much of the modern “safe space” movement goes against a sadly grim reality of humanity that we are not always nice or in agreement.

Regardless and off of that little tangent, gay space here is defined generally and within these spaces there is room for criticism and questioning.

In terms of having a “gay culture,” the ROYGBIV drinking society is cited as the campus’ best “gay space” (Afrikian). The group was known to be a secret originally as with many other drinking societies on campus, but I will say acknowledging this organization is important so the general Sewanee community knows such group exists. Founded in 2011 by a small group of queer individuals, the group has grown enormously and alumni returning to the events during the Party Weekends have been awed by its size. The group allows membership for anyone identifying as something other than cis-gendered or straight. ROY serves in many ways as a counterpoint to Sewanee culture by utilizing the large drinking society culture already present on campus. Many in ROY may feel isolated from the rest of campus, and ROY serves as a “queer-ification” of the Sewanee drinking institutions (Wilgus). Yet, the group’s success as the best “queer space” does highlight many issues in the Sewanee gay community, especially that we are currently a divided and conflicted subset of Sewanee culture. The gays are not united in many ways, yet Roy allows for at least several hours of the school year for the entire
queer community to come together and unite for drinking. Some members have
gotten upset however that people who are “barely queer” are joining, such as people they
perceive to “only be queer (mostly bisexual, mostly female) for social gain,” although I
will note it is important to respect their identities nevertheless.

The Bairnwick Women’s Center, or “the Wick,” is another “queer space” on
campus. The center serves primarily, however, for the needs of women’s culture on
campus, and promotes feminism to Sewanee; however, this was not always the case, as
the turn to the activist Wick has only occurred within the last five years (Berribitsky).
Feminists at Sewanee have been and are often among the most progressive thinking
people, especially in regards to queer rights, as they are able to see the issues in
patriarchal society and analyze cultural issues form this unique perspective (Berribitsky).
They can look at patriarchal society and use such to analyze its effects beyond just
women and also on queer individuals. Thus, many of them realize its issues
The Mary
Sue Cushman room has held events for years concerning queer issues, and is the most
effective space for holding such events to a larger audience. The Wick is however
perceived by many however as a center for “cis-het white women,” although this
stereotype has been challenged recently as house residents have diversified along gender,
racial, and sexual identities (Afrikian).

The Gender and Sexual Diversity House and Spectrum also serve as gay spaces.
The GSD only was brought on campus in the 2013-14 school year, and faced many
problems. The rainbow flag flying outside has been and continues to be ripped down,
although it is unknown if this is occurring by the hands of Conservative students of locals
to the area. Spectrum, which was founded as the Gay-Straight alliance in 1987, allows for
dialogue on LGBT issues to occur, yet their meetings are met with limited numbers and it seems that often they are dominated by straight, white girls who happen to be progressive. Spectrum changed their name in the 2013-2014 from the old GSA name to be more queer inclusive. I applaud their acceptance and promotion for LGBT individuals, yet it is a problem that queer people do not utilize this group setting. I hope that in the future the GSD could do more to promote overall campus inclusion and conduct more events to gain further recognition.

The Yik Yak app has created a peculiar “queer space” on everyone’s smartphones. Yik Yak is an app for smartphones in which individuals may post thoughts anonymously on a virtual bulletin board. I would say that Yik Yak is home to the good, the bad, and the ugly of campus. A quick scroll will show people the racist, homophobic, and ignorant realities of Sewanee’s students. Yet, there is some good to the Yik Yak experience, in particular for queer people. It allows people to speak freely in ways they cannot. Closeted students use it to find hook ups with other gay men. Gender non-conforming individuals can discuss their personal lives openly, and although often met with intolerance, can connect with others who are in similar positions. Yik Yak actually inspired me to broaden the topic of my project to include people other than “GLB,” the original plan for this project.

I will now transition to discussing the entire campus as a gay space. Gay people on this campus view the overall campus culture largely in terms of the University’s identity as southern. Many desire to leave the south immediately, in order to live in a more tolerant geographical location (Afrikian; Bowie). Gays are overall tired of Sewanee’s conformist culture, and hope to see change. Gays are able to see the absurd
“masculine struggle on campus to get laid” as they are outsiders to such culture. The faculty have been waiting for years for further tolerance among the student body (Berribitsky). Many LGBT students notice the ignorance many have on this campus about LGBT topics and hope that further education could help solve various problems concerning homophobia (Afrikian; Willigus).

In regards to the Admissions process, the promotion of LGBT acceptance and tolerance will help create a more rich and diverse student body going forward, but in many ways is also necessary for ensuring the survival of Sewanee. Many student cited that they feared coming here due to its apparent homophobic culture (Afrikian). One observation made by people who work in the Admissions office has been that Sewanee attracts northern conservatives and southern liberals and conservatives (Neil). In many ways, northern gay high school students would brush over an institution in the South, as they would rather avoid subjecting themselves to the homophobia stereotypically (although fairly accurately) ascribed to the region. I will of course say I was an exception to that, although I was not out at the time. College Niche, a website where students describe their university for prospective students, has on its website a section on Diversity at Sewanee, where students have written that there are “no queers” and that Sewanee is merely a school for “rich white kids.” A recent student the J Walter Thompson Innovation group discovered that only 48% of people in “Generation Z”, the group just younger than Millenials or the current high schoolers and middle schoolers, identify as fully straight (Tsjeng). Thus, 52% acknowledge the reality that sexuality is not black and white, as this generation has become more acquainted with LGBT topics. If Sewanee wants to keep away 52% of this coming generation, I say that the University
should not change at all and keep with its current love of maintaining the status quo. Of course this is a terrible idea, and Sewanee needs to act if it is going to exist as a university in the 21st century.

As previously mentioned, as a northerner this school was a shocking example of conservatism for me, despite being a registered Republican in Massachusetts. I grew up with a very different Republican party in Massachusetts, and I quickly learned that I was not as conservative as I had believed I was compared to nationwide standards. Many northerners agree, particularly the few LGBT northerners I have met. Looking on the ROYGBIV Facebook page though, there are very few LGBT northerners here. It is hard to accurately measure the LGBT population here, yet it is clear that far more southern gays attend here disproportionately even to the north-south demographic of the university as a whole. Yet, oddly enough southerners often view Sewanee as being very liberal, as northerners see the school as very conservative. This is an observation I have concluded from my experience here, and much of this is idea has been observed by faculty with whom I have talked (Afrikian; Snyder; Spurlock; Skomp). Sewanee’s actual political position is likely somewhere in the middle. However, in terms of the Institution, it is clear that much progress is to be made in terms of services provided for LGBT students if Sewanee is going to be considered supportive of gays, as Sewanee lacks significant infrastructure when compared to other universities.

**Closet Life and More on Campus**

Sewanee at its current moment, and likely in the future, does have a strong “closet
culture.” By this I mean that many gay individuals feel pressured to stay in the closet during their time at Sewanee, likely to come out after graduation. This is due to a variety of reasons, but first I would like to explore the concept of closet culture and the closet’s effect on a human. The closet is a dissociation with oneself; it is constantly denying who you are and being unable to accept oneself. At one point, it can reach self-acceptance but also lead to a fear of publicly portraying one’s sexuality. With this, it has become public knowledge that LGBT people are at higher risk of mental health problems. Why? Much of this stems from the fact being in the closet requires constant “acting,” 24/7. Whether you accept yourself or not, if you are not publicly out of the closet you are in essence acting at all moments which is very emotionally straining. In my experience, the closet was probably one of the worst times of my life, arguably ranging from 6
grade when I acknowledged my gay tendencies until sophomore year when I fully came out as gay to myself and to others. Discovering your sexuality is a challenge, and it is a personal conflict straight people will never fully be able to grasp, as they never need to come out as being straight. This is a hard point for many straight people to understand about the LGBT community, and why “coming out” can be a big deal for many. Recognizing that you just are not the normal and that for the rest of your life due to this unchangeable aspect of your life you will be discriminated against socially. I have been asked by straight people before (only at Sewanee, never at home in Massachusetts), “why are there so many gay people now? There were never this many before?” It is just now that gay individuals can come out of the closet, but they have always been there and have always been having gay sex. The difference is that now people can talk about it and be open, not lurking in a bathroom stall of some truck stop. Coming out has become a vital part of gay culture, yet to be honest, the process of coming out of the closet sucks, although it does end well for most and did for me.

Why is coming out so hard? That is definitely a difficult question to answer, and is more or less the purpose of this paper although I feel like it could not be answered in a book. Much of it is the fear of “being a gay person.” Being gay makes you different from most people who are straight. With difference comes isolation, intolerance, and denial. Many fear losing their friends, being viewed differently by others, and being lumped into a particular box with all the other gay people. For college students, coming out may mean risking losing your financial backing from your parents, which has happened before on this campus (Noffsinger). Men feel that they must put themselves under a “mask of masculinity” in order to maintain their dominance in a patriarchal society, meaning that
being gay puts you at risk of falling as you fall out of this (Messner). Coming out in the South puts you at risk of bigotry, and I have known students who have been called “faggots” before at Frat parties (Neil).

Yet, coming out creates enormous change for other people for the better, particularly in Greek Organizations. Coming out in many ways creates a rippling effect. You come out of the closet, and others will follow. People I have talked with have noted how they have had people in the closet approach them and ask for their advice on coming out (Willigus). In some cases, they can assist yet in other times they fear to come out. She noted in this particular interview that she had seen suicidal thoughts emerge over the idea of telling fraternity brothers about coming out and even saw one man vomit (Willigus). Coming out, as hard as it may be, would avoid these same feelings for future members of one’s Greek Organization. In my fraternity, there are now open freshmen that are comfortable with themselves and are willing to talk about their identities (straight or queer). I have also seen my own brothers change their attitudes enormously, as one brother went from extreme homophobia based on his childhood growing up in the local area to full acceptance of gay people, as he desired to “not hurt one of his best friends.”

In Chi Psi and TKP, having presidents come out have created enormous change as the issue was truly humanized for many members as the leader of the group was open with themselves, setting precedent within the entire fraternity (Afrikian). Chi Psi has actually had at this point three gay presidents in a row at the time I wrote this paper, from 2014 through 2016/2017. This change has made that fraternity an incredibly open and accepting place, all stemming from that one first brother who decided to tell his brothers he was gay. Coming out creates progressive change, and although there are often many
barriers to fully accepting oneself and being willing to publically display their
sexual orientation, the act itself creates an environment that betters everyone, gay and
straight.

Now it is better than ever to come out of the closet at Sewanee, as every coming
year the climate towards LGBT people improves and hopefully one day there may be no
need for this social action. For guys, coming out can remain a challenge but that depends
on a variety of issues. Being gay is a challenge to your masculinity, and the south in my
opinion worships masculinity. Even if accepting, straight men still often fear being
considered gay, as it is an assault on their own masculinity. I have seen this through my
friendships with straight men, and any gay person could probably relate to this
observation. Southern gays see Sewanee often as an open, accepting environment where
they feel free to come out (Snyder). If one was raised in a rural, Baptist home in the Bible
belt, this is logical: we have openly gay people at Sewanee unlike their hometown and a
more broad culture where more people accept differences overall and homosexuality in
particular. For northerner gays, there is fear in coming out here often sensed due to
stereotypes about the south (Bowie).

Much of my writing here focuses on the gay male experience. I should mention
why that is. Well, at this point lesbian culture at Sewanee has become fairly accepted and
queer women live fairly openly on this campus without persecution. I will explore this
topic more fully later on, particularly in regards to the way straight men treat women. Yet
I will say now that women have more freedom in their sexual expression. Unlike with
masculinity, assaulting femininity is not considered an issue, as in the patriarchy there is a
desire to be less feminine if anything. At this point at Sewanee, coming out as a queer
woman holds far less social risk than coming out as a gay man. There are queer women all around campus, in every sorority. Women tend to isolate lesbians less than gay men, allowing for lesbians and bisexual women to live more openly and freely, especially at Sewanee in comparison to gay men (Afrikian).

In regards to sexual fluidity, men are far less likely to admit their desire to experience a same-sex interaction although they often do anyways. Guys often “get horny” and things happen, although these acts are not always interpreted as sexual in nature but more in a fraternal bonding sense (Ward 189). The book cited before, “Not Gay” by Jane Ward is entirely on the topic of how straight men are having sex and masturbating with each other yet cannot admit their sexual fluidity. This book in particular inspired many of my thoughts on Sewanee’s culture. Overall, the message is that for men, labels boxes people into certain categories not allowing for any wandering from one’s real orientation, leading to straight men seeking to live out their fantasies through false hypermasculinity, the quest to get as many girls as possible, and hazing (Ward 210). At Sewanee, a “straight” man who may have some desires to experiment would fear the knowledge of this being known by others, as it puts them into a separate category. Yet, according to one gay man I know he has made out with his entire fraternity (and no, not in any of the “gay fraternities”) and they all seem to believe “they’re fully straight”, at least publically. One story I heard from an 1970s alumnus in the streets of Yerevan, Armenia was that him and his group of three best friends all came out afterwards, and had learned that each of them had slept with many guys on campus in almost all the fraternities, even with “straight guys.” One man I hooked up with here made it a strong point to ensure that I knew “he was straight, and not gay.” He made it a
very serious point that I had to acknowledge, although that is hard to accept when you are asking to have anal sex with another guy. There always has been male-male experimentation in general and at Sewanee and there always will be. From meeting some very stereotypical southerners here, they just refuse to admit it since it is merely something “not talked about.” Well, with this fellowship I am talking about it and I hope that the denial of gay life here can finally be left in the 20th century. The situation for sexual fluidity is far different for girls at Sewanee. Sexual fluidity is accepted, and almost encouraged by straight guys who enjoy the spectacle of girls making out (which is a disgusting thing I will explore later in this paper). As noted, women are more able to express sexual freedom in this regard (Mitchell).

The dating scene at Sewanee is infamous for its hardships, and this applies also for LGBT couples. Women are allowed to date within their sorority, as that is not often viewed as problematic (Wilson; Monterde; Afrikian). From my experience in a fraternity and others, guys are by no means allowed to commit “fratcest,” at least within their chapter, as brothers in other chapters are seen as more permissible (Snyder). LGBT couples fear to engage in PDA, and I have known gay couples here that have been yelled at by people for holding hands walking down University Avenue. Gay couples that I have talked to have stated that they find hiking as an ideal date, as being in the woods allows them to be free from public intolerance of their relationship. Isn’t it grand? Homophobia actually makes gay people go to the woods for safety, because walking in public is too risky for them. I have witness straight couples almost fornicating on the McClurg couch tables, and would never expect a queer couple to have that openness to do so without being publically shamed, or at least having a few mean Yik Yaks written about them.
**Intersectionality and Other Identities**

The Sewanee black community is a group, similar to gay Sewanee students, which is subjected to constant subjugation and discrimination despite what some chose to believe. Blacks nationwide are noted however for being far more homophobic than whites, much of which stemming from a different sort of hypermasculinity and strong religious culture (Demby). Yet, at Sewanee it is clear that the black culture here is far more accepting than the overall Sewanee culture (Afrikian; Bowie). Why is this? Blacks at Sewanee, like gays, do not fully fit into the stereotypical Sewanee cookie-cutter mold: white, straight, upper-middle class (Willigus). Gays and blacks are in a similar position on campus, although gays at Sewanee would say that racism on campus is worse than homophobia (Afrikian).

Bisexuality on campus has its own peculiarities as a sexual identity. For females, it is more common and acceptable in many regards. Men, however, who are bisexual often hide their sexual orientation as they can “pass” as straight and avoid being lumped in with the gay community. Girls are often viewed as “attention seeking” if they are open about being bisexual, yet men are assumed just to be “gay.” This relates back to the topic on sexual fluidity in terms of how gender changes perception of one’s expectations and the fear of being lumped in with the “gay community” and losing one’s social status. Overall, it seems that the number of bisexual students in particular has risen tremendously. However, the gender divide in this should be recognized and I do hope in the future that bisexual men on campus are able to come out more freely.

Asexuality is another identity I would like to explore, and I can relate to as I identified as such before coming out as a gay man. I came out as asexual before coming
to Sewanee. Why asexual? Many assume gay men come out as bisexual before coming out as gay. I can say that it is a struggle to be open about one’s asexuality. I would rather not go into extreme detail as to why that was my chosen identity for some time, albeit I cannot lie that it was more or less a cover for my homosexuality which is not often the case. Asexuality is often misunderstood, feared, and causes many to think that the person is mentally challenged as they do not desire sexual relationships. One asexual girl surveyed stated, “people at Sewanee understand sex without love [referencing hookup culture], but not love without sex” (Afrikian). People are confused by a lack for desiring sex as many on this Mountain make hooking up a priority for every weekend. I was originally not going to talk about asexuality or any other identity outside LGB, yet Yik Yak actually showed me several people (through the use of the different stickers which differentiate users yet still anonymously) here are asexual and their voice deserved to be heard. Many under the asexual umbrella only tell their close friends, as they do not desire to constantly be defending their sexuality (Afrikian). You constantly defending your sexuality as people have neither heard of it or desire to challenge it. Being gay is hard on the mountain, but other identities struggle more than those who fit under the “easy to understand” gay or bisexual categories.

Gay and Greek Life

Homophobia in the Greek System
In regards to Sewanee’ culture, Greek life dominates social life here, as an overwhelming majority of the students are members of a fraternity or sorority. Many come to Sewanee not expecting to join a Greek organization, yet the unique climate here makes being Greek an integral part of our college experience. There are of course many not involved with Greek organizations here, yet they are a minority. Greek Life has been a source of pride among alumni, with many believing that it “maintains Sewanee’s traditions.” I also have found it interesting how little the faculty understand the Greek Life on this campus, with many not realizing its true presence and dominance on campus. Greek Life at Sewanee is overall, in my opinion, awesome. Yet over the years issues of hazing, drinking, and sexual assault have caused more to critique particularly fraternity culture on the Mountain. In regards to the LGBT community, Greek Life can be hard to navigate for queer students. Yet, many fraternities at this point have opened up to gay members as sentiments towards LGBT people change. In this section of the paper, I will explore issues concerning: homophobia, “gay fraternities/sororities,” my own fraternity experience, how gay men and women are treated by straight people in regards to Greek life, the effects of coming out upon brothers, and changes that can be made in Greek organizations to promote a more tolerant environment.

Why are frat boys so homophobic? Are they homophobic? What does this climate of homophobia create? Jane Ward’s book Not Gay: Sex Between Straight White men discusses the reasons that cause homophobia in white men. In many ways, and in my personal experience I know I experienced this, straight men create a hierarchy in their social circles in which they are (at least perceived) to be the most dominant, or the most
masculine, based on how many women they have sex with (Ward 5). Boys entering manhood are raised being told to be strong, emotionless, and “not feminine,” as that is inferior; in many ways men police each other’s masculinity far more than women police femininity, at least in regards to how with men there is this hierarchy. Femininity policing among female friends does occur, such as when “that dress makes you look slutty” or with some “dyke-shaming,” yet with men the fear of isolation and denial based on a perception of being “less masculine” is more prevalent. Men police their own and other’s masculinity in a way that keeps many closeted, as being gay automatically makes you an inferior man due to perceived femininity. I only was able to come out after realizing the absurdity of this reality and for me while I was discovering myself I remember believing that being gay associates you with drag culture, liking “girly things,” and such, and how it is not actually the case. Albeit, it is interesting that I am more masculine than many of the straight men in my fraternity according to many members, which helped me maintain a position in this masculine hierarchy.

Gayness is treated in our male culture often as a joke, something to be laughed at, and this is seen through the idea of using slang such as “gay” and “faggot” alongside “butt slapping,” particularly in athletic settings (Ward 13). With this, heteromasculinity rejects homosexuality, viewing it with its stereotypical feminine ideology (Ward 31). Ward argues that this is due to the fact that straight men have far more rigid sexual boundaries unlike women, as women are permitted to explore their sexuality (stereotype of them making out for attention) and for men doing one homosexual act automatically makes you seem gay in the eyes of other men (12). In my conversations about this with straight men, I constantly hear that they believe that men just are not as sexually
exploring as women and that they know that if a man were to experiment with a
guy “he must be gay or at least bisexual.” That is clearly nonsense, as people are sexual
beings (minus asexual people) and many do desire some exploration. In this book, Ward
notes throughout, as the title may suggest, that straight men are having sex with each
other and engaging in same-sex sexual acts. She goes into Craigslist profiles and such,
and in my experience here I have met many “straight” men who desired to hook up with
me yet would need to affirm their straightness. One student interviewed told me how as a
driver for Bacchus (the “drunk bus” that runs on Fridays and Saturday evenings) that he
has been approached multiple times (more than five at least) by straight men who asked
him to have sex or hookup with them, and then the next day he sees them kissing their
girlfriends in McClurg (Bowie). These men are either struggling to stay in the closet or
are just curious sexually, but it is not anyone’s place to dictate that for them.

Coming out exposes gay people to a different set of standards, which carries
cultural connotations for one’s behavior, particularly for men (Ward 33). Men often have a
delicate perception of manhood within which being gay makes you lesser of or not a man
(Snyder). Being a gay man means “you are a pussy” or a “sissy.” Gay men are expected
to follow strict stereotypes where all gay men are feminine, love shopping, are sassy, and
a plethora of other cultural expectations. A lot of this is dictated by the media, and I grew
up watching my sister watch shows on the E Channel, Bravo, and TMZ in which gay men
are treated like another fashion piece; personally, this kept me in the closet longer, and
during high school in particular I did not want to come out as I did not “want to become
one of those gays,” believing all gays were like that. I have had women approach me
constantly and ask to go shopping, only to hear a clear response of “no.” This is not the
reality of gay culture by any means, and media must stop presenting it as such.

So with this, men are often afraid to come out of the closet based on these false ideas of gayness and due to fear of being isolated from their friends. Coming out means you leave the hierarchy, and as one KA actually told my friend recently, “if someone came out in our fraternity, we would probably kill him.” I say I give them some credit for being able to admit their homophobia, but the idea they do not believe entirely that there are gay men in their fraternity is preposterous: a group of 60-70 men is going to have some gay people in it, that is just statistics.

For women, some of these effects of homophobia are real and present at Sewanee, yet in many regards to a less extreme level. During my interviews and survey work, women on the Mountain reported fears of homophobia far less than gay men (Monterde; Afrikian). Many of my queer women friends have said they have reported fears of being perceived as being “too dykey” but they would agree that the policing among men perpetuates a fear, with some of them referencing readings they have done in class concerning men killing each other over gay issues. Female friendships have less of a hierarchal system in them than among male friends. Women are at more liberty to explore their sexualities and their value is not determined by “how feminine they are,” if anything it is the opposite of such.

“The Gay Fraternity and Sorority ”

Sewanee has no official “gay fraternities,” which do exist in other institutions. These fraternities, such as Delta Lambda Phi and Sigma Phi Beta, were created to foster brotherhood among queer men and allies, and they have chapters around the country. I
am unsure if a fraternity as such would succeed at Sewanee, due to our small size, and due to the “de facto” gay status of several fraternities. There are no fraternities currently in which the majority of brothers are gay, but there are several that have “gay reputations” across campus. When I call a fraternity “gay” in this regard, I am doing so to refer to its current stereotype on campus and I should note that members of these groups I have talked to would agree (and often joke) that the stereotype is accurate to at least a certain extent. In this section I will discuss two of those fraternities, while moving onto my own experience in Greek life and conclude with other fraternities on campus that are not necessarily “gay fraternities”.

Throughout my time here and for the years before my arrival to the mountain in Fall 2012, Lambda Chi Alpha has been Sewanee’s primary “gay fraternity.” Overall the fraternity is known as a safe space for women and men, straight and gay (Wilson). Brothers join this fraternity knowing it is accepting, and as “it attracts that kind of person” (Bowie). They are generally the most accepting fraternity, primarily because the men who join are very comfortable with themselves. Yet, some gay men on campus find that the fraternity is a little over the top in their “gayness” (Afrikian; Snyder). Gay men I know have told me they did not join Lambda as they thought that their sexual orientation should not be a deciding factor for Rush and that they are “more than their sexual orientation.” Furthermore, gay men and brothers within this fraternity have found that they have over time become, to an extent, self-righteous, and a close friend of mine who is a brother informed me they have discussed “being less pretentious” during a chapter meeting. This does signal in a way how campus overall is opening up, as some gay people find that Lambda uses their progressiveness for social capital (Afrikian). Overall,
however, I will say that Lambda Chi should be commended and remembered as being the first on campus to open up to queer identities and be known as being ahead of the times in regards to supporting gay brothers.

Another “gay fraternity” at least during my time at Sewanee is Chi Psi. This group has shifted tremendously in my four years here. A brother described the stereotypical Chi Psi alumnus as “Fat, Affluent, and Gay,” the acronym there being FAG of court (Greer). There has arguably long been a closet culture within this fraternity for some time now, at least going back a few generations of Sewanee and brothers have told me that many of their alumni come out shortly after graduation. Yet, the past three presidents of this fraternity have been gay men, the first of whom publically came out at one of their chapter meetings. Having three openly gay presidents has changed the overall culture in the fraternity tremendously, as one brother said they no longer use words like “faggot” anymore (Greer). Brothers join the fraternity closeted however and are afraid to come out publically to the whole group (Snyder). The mentality in this group is not that they are a gay fraternity, but as one brother put it “it’s not necessarily that we are a gay fraternity, we are just not assholes to people who are different” (Snyder). This is a model that hopefully other fraternities will take up in terms of how they treat minority groups of all kinds.

Mitchell Avenue fraternities have been able to be a “little more gay” than other organizations on campus. I have discussed the gay culture of Lambda already, yet I will go more into Beta and Fiji. I am also unsure whether at the time you are reading this there even is a Beta Theta Pi at Sewanee, as they were kicked off campus towards the end of my senior year and may or may not return. Regardless, while they were in existence
during my time here there have been open members of the brotherhood and the group tended to attract several gay freshmen every year. This is while people have heard slurs like “faggot” and “gay” used frequently (Afrikian). For this group, there is overall acceptance of gay people but they do not always fully understand the connotations of using slurs and their effects. Regardless, the brotherhood has been open and accepting for many, which is very positive. Fiji, Phi Gamma Delta, has also been overall accepting. A brother alumnus of the group told me he came out his senior year, also my freshman year, and was met with full acceptance by brothers (Neil). He said members did not really change their use of gay slurs, but that over time his coming out caused others to slowly come out over time. The group is overall accepting of LGBT people, with several of my lesbian friends reporting on positive experiences of having conversations with brothers who mistook them as a couple.

I will now talk about my own fraternity, Delta Tau Delta, and the changes I have seen within it since I have come out. I came out originally as asexual to my brothers during my pledgeship, albeit while fairly intoxicated. Not the best, but my brothers were all accepting although they all just thought I was gay. One brother in particular was very confused on the entire LGBT issue, coming from the local area. Over time I changed the vernacular of the group to remove the words “queer”, “faggot”, “gay, and etc. I came out to myself as being gay during Spring Party of my sophomore year in April. I came out to my brothers while I was abroad in Armenia that Fall on our private fraternity Facebook page (members only one). Everyone was very happy that I had finally accepted myself, and my post was “liked” by pretty much every member and alumnus. Everyone was very positive and comments included topics involving how they were happy for me, how I was
still a brother, alongside jokes like “finally you’re out.” It was very positive and I saved those messages to keep for years, as it was a very heartwarming experience for me. I came back in the spring and had to deal with an onslaught of questions, as many brothers were just confused how the “whole gay things worked.” One brother was fairly homophobic, yet changed over time due to pressure from other brothers and close female friends to the fraternity. Today we joke that he is “gayer than I am” in his actions. The brother I had mentioned from the local area who had been confused told me before he graduated in 2015 that I had changed his entire view of gay people. He had never met one before, and being one of his closest friends I was able to humanize the issue for him. He told me that he could not be against gay rights as one of his best friends was gay, and he did not want me to “not be happy.” It was very moving for me. I have had brothers also approach me and tell me that they did not identify as straight, but were not ready to come out publicly yet. It was nice being able to be an ear for these members, although I wish they could have felt comfortable to come out. The brothers that have approached me in this as well furthered my evidence for my discussions on male hierarchies based on how many women you have sex with, as they created images of themselves in which they were viewed as playboys able to get any women they want, although it seems it was all for show and helps verify Ward’s hierarchy theory. Overall, I think I helped spark great change in my fraternity, and I am glad that this year we were able to rush LGBT freshmen that can make Delt an open and accepting place going forward. Some further work needs to be made, but overall I think Delt can find a good niche of being one of the first with accepting of gay people as eventually all frats on campus open up to gay members, which is what I hope to see and expect with future generations of young
Americans with whom accepting gay people is a norm.

As I have said, campus is in many ways divided. There are often “two sides” or so in this divide, often seen as “dark side” and “frat side.” This is most evident in McClurg, as some fraternities eat in the area with the long tables (frat side) and others in the side-area. People including myself have noted they avoid the frat side as they feel like they are constantly being stared down, judged, or watched by the people who sit there. They enjoy the round tables of the side-area more as they are more conducive to discussion. And, what does this have to do with gay people? Well, if you look at the where gay men are comfortable on campus they tend to avoid the frat side area and those fraternities. There are significantly less out gay men in these organizations, although we know they are there just based on Sewanee closet culture. In these fraternities there is less ability for one to step out of a conformist culture and these groups often tend to more idealize masculinity and hook up culture. These environments are not necessarily as inclusive to gay people, and for evidence of this there are no openly gay members in many of the “frat side” organizations. I mentioned the story about the KA saying they would “kill” a gay member, and sadly this mentality keeps many of his brothers in the closet until after graduation.

In terms of sorority cultures, Sewanee’s female Greek Organizations are far more open towards LGBT students than the male groups. From my interviews, surveys, and overall impressions of being on campus, the women here are far more accepting of LGBT issues than the men are. This is for a variety of reasons that I explore later in this paper. Generally, I will say that women tend to have more sexual freedom in their exploration and in this do not judge each other as much (Mitchell). For men, one “gay act” and you
are automatically assumed to be gay. I have heard this many times in debates with straight men about queer experimenting and it constantly amuses me how this is assumed to be a reality by straight men, but not apparently by those I have met . . . Yet for women, they are allowed to make out with each other at parties and experiment more freely and not be automatically lumped into a lesbian community. If anything, they are assumed by straight men to be doing such for attention.

Concerning “gay sororities,” Alpha Delta Theta is the primary “lesbian” group. Many see them as queer oriented in terms of its membership, and many women rush this organization for this very reason. The group has many lesbian and bisexual women alongside members identifying as a variety of other sexualities. ADT has feminist leanings and attracts women who have these pro-queer and pro-women sentiments (Wilgus). They have been the “gayest” for the longest on Sewanee’s campus (Wilgus). Yet, their role as a queer sorority has shifted as other groups have opened up. Many have seen their support used in negative manners. In a debate on whether or not the group should become engulfed under a national sorority, straight, allying members claimed that joining a national group would cause the organization to become “homophobic.” This angered many of my lesbian friends, causing them to leave the group. They have told me along with other members who have left that they feel like sisters use feminist and queer support as a wedge to get their agendas passed. Furthermore, other sisters have left the group feeling that since they were not “as feminist” as their sisters were they were shamed verbally by other members for “not caring about issues.” ADT has been a long supporter of LGBT and women’s rights on this campus, yet as the school’s overall culture opens up to these ideas it will be unclear how their role will shift going forward.
Gay and Rush

One’s sexuality may or may not have an effect on one’s choice to rush a particular fraternity of sorority. It is clear that being open is not always “an option” in many of the University Avenue fraternities (besides Delt) and that openly gay members may avoid these places. But to begin discussing this topic, I will discuss the hypermasculinity present in the formal house visits during Rush Week. What I am saying primarily comes from my experience as a Rho Chi, or guide, for the rushes to every single frat house and from my on time as a rushee. At many of the houses there are events for the rushes to engage in, and it is honestly absurd to witness how many of these men try to prove themselves constantly. If anything, formal house visits solidify how fragile some men’s masculinity really is. They will ask freshmen questions such as “chill-pull ratio” (girls you hang out with to have sex with), hottest freshman girl, craziest sex story (assumed you will say a straight story), The words “faggot” are used constantly, and the entire environment is as bro-y as it is hilarious to watch sometimes. You could say that it is just “boys being boys,” but the reality is that they are just trying to show off how manly they are and establish their place in the male social hierarchy. When I was a rushee one fraternity had a man wearing a jockstrap and a cape with a dildo attached to his chin, and when asked to show my dance moves I merely slapped the dildo in his face and left.

This goes back to the idea of gayness as a joke, and in this case using the man in the jockstrap to emasculate the rushes in order to establish their role in the hierarchy. Yet, every fraternity minus a few attempts to portray a strong masculinity and gay men are often more acutely aware to see this culture with a more critical lens, as we do not follow into its more heteronormative structure of having to constantly prove ones masculinity.
Gay men often feel like they do have to prove their masculinity, which is a large issue in the gay community, yet we can see how straight men objectify women as a form to do so which is something we do not necessarily do in our attempts to be manly.

Concerning rush, many gay men have had concerns about joining Greek organizations. One interviewee stated that he did not rush because he did not even know there were open and accepting frats on campus (Bowie). Many gay men in particular see fraternities as an embodiment of straight masculinity ridden with homophobia, and that can be intimidating to enter when you like men instead of women. For gender non-conforming individuals, there has been confusion as to the ability to rush Greek organizations (Afrikian). Some Greek organizations have policies supporting trans inclusions, but genderqueer people often do not know where they have a place in the binary Greek system. I have had friends who have left their organizations as well due to homophobia, believing their organizations were more accepting than they seemed before actually joining them (Afrikian).

People I have talked to on campus have joined their organization because it was know for “being gay,” while others actively avoided the gay groups. One interviewee told me he joined Lambda as he knew it would be safe, something he wanted from his brotherhood (Bowie). Others have told me that they joined their sorority because the gay-factor was “another bonus” to what they already liked about the organization (Wilgus; Monterde). There is in many ways a culture of comfort in these places, where members join, as they know from seeing past and current queer members of the group that their peers will accept them, and not have to deal with difficulties associated with homophobia. Yet, others I know and have talked to chose their organization trying to avoid the gay
stigma of various groups. People have stated that they felt like they were “more than their sexuality” and did not want to be “just another gay” in that group (Snyder; Afrikian). My survey showed this specifically, as people felt that the gay status of various groups on campus was off-putting and caused them to look elsewhere (Afrikian). One surveyed said he felt like he would be accepted anywhere he joined at least over time, so that him being gay was not a huge concern in joining most fraternities on campus (Snyder). At this point in Sewanee’s timeline, most places would be accepting for gay members and I think the idea of a “gay fraternity” will sizzle out as overall culture continues to become more accepting of LGBT people. I think every group will have out members within the coming years and soon it just will not be an issue.

**Straight-Queer Relations on Campus**

In conducting my research, I learned some interesting aspects as to how straight people and LGBT people on this campus interact. Primarily, these are all involved with what you may call more “normal” interactions, and I am not talking about homophobia or sexual experimentation. In this next brief section I discuss how straight men treat queer women and how straight women treat gay men. These come from, again, my surveys, interviews, and also my personal experience.

I will begin by talking about how straight girls treat gay men. To begin, we must understand the trope of the “gay best friend” and its cultural significance. Growing up, I would watch what my sister was watching on TV, often Bravo, the E Channel, or one of those women’s entertainment channels. In these channels, I remember seeing gay men being led along like handbags as the newest fashion accessory. Having a gay best friend
was having someone to go shopping with, someone to talk about your boy problems, and someone to help you pick the perfect outfit. I have known that I am gay since at least 6th grade, and I remember knowing that I had no desire of being gay pretty much until I came out of the closet. I was terrible with fashion and wore dark brown cargo pants through high school. Gay men were all effeminate and liked shopping and fashion. I was not a gay guy like them, so I could not be gay, right? Well, it does not work that way, and sadly I had no idea. The trope of the gay best friend is damaging for the gay community, and it pains me when I see gay men perpetuate its stereotype. Since coming out, I have hated when women approach me and ask me to go shopping with them or assuming I can be their gay best friend. It is pure objectification of gay men and its abuses our masculinity and our personal being.

But why? Why do women find a need for a gay best friend? One of my interviews introduced me to this topic of the gay best friend and caused me to probe further. I will tell you his story now (Bowie). This gay senior told me that throughout his four years at Sewanee, he had gone to many formals, crush parties, parties, etc. as a woman’s date. Every time he asked them why he chose them, and he told me they all gave the same responses. “You will take me home at night if I get too drunk.” “You won’t force/pressure me to have sex with you.” “You won’t rape me.” That last one was said to him by most of the women. Gay men are in many ways a safer alternative of a date for women – we are men, so we can protect them need be, yet we will not force them to have sex with them if they do not want to that night.

This all ties into rape culture within straight male life, albeit not in most or many men. Straight men have this system in which they must establish a hierarchy in their
relationships based on having “strong masculinity” in which having the most sex puts you at the top of this totem pole. Women, hence, feel insecure when they feel like men are constantly trying to have sex with them based off of this. Surely, women do want sex, but often are vulnerable to sexual assault when a stronger, drunk man can physically take control of them. Sadly, this is a reality on our campus as seen in the many student emails about sexual assaults occurring. Guys are pressured to have a ton of sex by the Sewanee hook up culture, causing them to pressure women to have sex with them. Women then in turn use gay men as a way to feel secure – having a man without the desire to have sex with them.

These issues move over into the way that straight men treat queer women. There is the idea that two girls making out are incredibly “hot” to many straight men. Knowing many straight men, I have heard them discuss how attractive two girls making out at a party can be. A lot of this behavior is learned from porn, which has been notorious in perpetuating fake ideas about lesbian culture and sexual relationships. In many ways lesbian women are hypersexualized by modern straight male culture. And I have talked with women in relationships with other women who have felt uncomfortable at particular places (Wilson; Monterde). One woman that I interviewed recalls being surrounded by a group of men staring at her and her girl friend dancing at a frat party (Wilson). To begin, that is absurdly creepy. Also, it is objectification and is not behavior that should really be tolerated. Had gay men been doing the same act at the party, they could have been verbally or physically abused most likely.

This again brings us back into an ever-present rape culture. Straight men, from porn often, view lesbian relationships as an entry for a threesome. I have seen this with
my own eyes and in my conversations, and sadly this is more or less an accepted fact within the queer community. Straight men think that they can turn lesbian girls straight as their sexuality is more fluid. Sadly, from talking with queer women on this campus sexual assault against LGBT women is a real problem. Overall, it seems that LGBT women are more accepted in the current state of Sewanee’s campus culture, yet queer women still are incredibly vulnerable to sexual assault.

**Various Accomplishments and Moving Forward**

Sewanee at this point still needs to make significant progress in terms of the way it treats its LGBT community. I say this in terms of the institution itself and the Sewanee culture. With that said, Sewanee has made some significant progress in recent years. The Women and Gender Studies program was a huge step forward, becoming a minor in the late 90s and a full major in 2014 (Berebitsky). The major allows for a student to maintain a full academic program focused on discussing gender issues, although notice that sexuality is not in this portion. Interviewing Professor Berebitsky I learned that Sewanee struggles to have enough professors to go into issues of sexuality in the classroom. Overall, courses have gotten better at least glossing over issues of sexuality but often not in detail. This has to do with a lack of professors all across the school, which students will complain about regularly seeing that we can barely sign up for necessary courses such as statistics without having to sacrifice our ability to enter other courses. Sewanee needs to start investing more in the faculties and hire more professors across all departments, especially if we are wanting to increase the number of courses that deal with sexuality issues. Queer issues in the classroom should be discussed more than they
currently are, as this is a trend common at many other universities across the country although not at Sewanee. There is an Intro to LGBT studies course, a class on German Queer cinema, and possibly soon a queer literature course. Other than that there are no direct courses that deal with LGBT issues, which is falling far behind the general trends in modern academia in which queer issues are being examined across many disciplines.

The creation of the Gender and Sexual Diversity House was a large step forward as well. The house began in the 2013-2014 school year, yet was located all the way in Emory out by Hodgson. Nobody really ever got to see the house, and its isolation led to several issues. A rainbow flag hanging outside was stolen and ripped down on several occasions, sparking angry emails from Dean Hartman and showing LGBT people on this campus that Sewanee was homophobic. It was hard to say whether or not it was fratboys or local residents who tore down the flag, but the symbolism of the act being repeated over again showed the animosity on this campus towards the LGBT community.

Thankfully, the house moved into the Barnwell Apartments, although the flag was ripped down on another occasion. If the house was located in a more central location, such as in the Georgia townhouses, it is far more unlikely that the flag would continue to be vandalized.

During my time here one special event to take place was the acceptance of a lesbian marriage blessing in All Saint’s Chapel. Katheryn Kendrick (C’09) was denied a blessing ceremony in 2014 with her partner Eva Walton. Yet, in 2012 All Saints gave an official notice saying that it would accept same-sex blessings to occur in the chapel. The outrage to their denial by the Chancellor and the Bishop Regents sparked a massive
campaign called #RethinkThisSewanee started by Kendrick ’s old Sewanee roommate, Hayley Robb. A Facebook group page was made and by rallying everyone on social media, letters were sent en masse to the administrators of this University. Eventually, the decision was overturned and they were allowed to have their relationship blessed in All Saints after being legally married in Washington DC. A protest originally planned against the Chancellor’s decision was turned into a celebration as dozens of LGBT and ally alumni returned to the Mountain to rejoice in this huge milestone. In this event, we can learn that alumni and students have the power to create change at this school if we place pressure on the administration. If we want to create change, all we have to do is engage with our peers and work for what we want to see.

Yet Sewanee has much progress to make if we are going to consider ourselves to be an “LGBT Friendly institution.” Concerning trans individuals in particular Sewanee needs to implement change. There are several one-person occupancy bathrooms that merely need a label saying that they are open for anyone to use. Possibly if someone in the future were to create a map of all these bathrooms it could be helpful for future non-binary individuals. It should be noted that there are non-binary students at Sewanee. In my survey non-binary students mentioned they tend to keep that aspect of their life quiet, as there is more ignorance over the matter (Afrikian). Furthermore, the Sewanee Discrimination policy does not at this point have gender identity as a protected group. That needs to change immediately. Sexual orientation is protected as a part of the policy, yet trans and genderqueer individuals are at risk due to their lack of representation in the policy.

Sewanee also desperately needs an office and coordinator of LGBT life. This is
something that almost every other top liberal arts school in the nation has, including southern institutions such as Davidson and Vanderbilt. Sewanee would not be groundbreaking in doing such, we would be catching up to the rest of our peers in the university world. The coordinator would be important for facilitating safe space training programs and for being a physical person on campus representing the interests of LGBT students, faculty, and staff. They could organize social events, faculty development programs, alongside a plethora of other roles. Having an LGBT person on campus in this role would also provide students a positive role model and for many could be a valuable resource to talk to about issues that straight people may not just understand fully. The coordinator would allow Sewanee to also be ranked by CampusPride, which would allow LGBT prospective students to see that our campus would be an open option for them to attend school. We have a coordinator already for multiculturalism, but I believe having a specific administrator on campus focused on this issue would allow Sewanee to further progress in this regard.

I am proud to say that for my fellowship I was able to establish a framework for a future LGBT mentorship program. The program was based on one I found at Dickenson College. The program will connect LGBT students with other trained LGBT students who have a vested interest in helping the Sewanee gay community. More or less, it helps the “baby gays” meet an “older, more experienced gay” to talk about issues. They can talk about a variety of topics, dependent on the needs of the mentee. A mentee could be an openly gay freshman trying to learn how to navigate campus as a gay person, or a queer girl trying to figure out her identity, or even a straight person who may have a gay roommate or sibling and just want to know more information about the LGBT
community. The mentorship program should supplement the current lack of availability of counseling, yet is not meant to be done instead of professional help. Mentors will have training, but nowhere near that of a licensed therapist and that is to be recognized by all parties involved in the mentorship process.

I learned a great deal of information from this entire process, and not all that I learned concerns the LGBT community. There are greater lessons that I have discovered in the course of conducting my research. The first is that people at Sewanee are afraid to criticize and analyze aspects of our culture. Talking to people who came to Sewanee from “outside the bubble,” many have been attacked for voicing opinions that stray from the accepted Sewanee reality. Even during my time here I have brought up complaints about various aspects, be it the processes of the University or dining issues, and have been attacked. If you do not love Sewanee, you are wrong. I have heard too much on this campus that people get offended if you do not love Sewanee. I have heard people say that they feel ashamed when someone does not love this place as much as they do, as they believe that this is the most perfect place in the world. Well, sadly I can say that it is not otherwise there would not be so many problems here for minority groups or for sexual assault against women among other things. Second, I learned that there are some serious side effects occurring to this expansion project that the university is undertaking. Money is being cut from departments, clubs, and critical services such as counseling in order to build, build, and build. It is sad that students struggle to receive adequate counseling services, and having talked to members of their staff they are worried that they are unable to provide enough of their resources to satisfy the demand for such because the university decides to build a new dorm to accommodate future students who have not even been
admitted yet. It would be more ideal for Sewanee to focus on the needs of its current students who are struggling in many regards rather than plan an entire path forward that rips apart many of the traditions and cultural aspects of the Mountain. Sometimes I feel like this campus thinks a little too much “Yea Sewanee’s Right” rather than #RethinkThisSewanee, and I hope that over time Sewanee will learn to respect its students and be able to self recognize its problems more efficiently.

So I will now conclude my Gessell Fellowship paper with some final words. Sewanee has come a long way in terms of the ways it treats its LGBT population. It amazes me how shocked alumni and current students are here to learn that gay people are actually students on campus and live their lives openly. People in many fraternities on campus do not realize that they have gay friends, but who are afraid to come out of the closet due to a strict masculine/patriarchal culture that has been established. Queer women at this point in Sewanee are doing pretty well in terms of acceptance, yet for LGBT men there is much work to be done. I think over the coming years there will be far more openness of LGBT students as younger generations come in who are even more so overwhelmingly pro-LGBT rights and equality. The alumni and staff need to recognize these shifts however and adapt. Sewanee needs to become more accepting for LGBT students, because that is what the future is. It is a future of equality. Not one of bigotry. Sewanee is overall more accepting than its southern surroundings, but I hope Sewanee will become a place where EQB is the reality for all, because not all brethren are dwelling together in unity at this point in time.
YSR but #RethinkThisSewanee,

Karl Armen Afrikian

Bibliography

Afrikian, Karl. LGBT at Sewanee Greek Life Survey Gessell Fellowship. Survey. 15 January 2016

Berribitsky, Julie. Personal Interview. 31 March 2016


Demby, Gene. “Crunching the Numbers on Blacks’ Views on Gays.” *NPR*.

Greer, Dillon. Personal Interview. 7 March 2016.

Hagi, Bradley. Personal interview. 19 February 2016.


Monteverde, Maria. Personal interview. 26 February 2016.


Skomp, Elizabeth. Personal interview. 8 February 2016.


Spurlock, Rebecca. Personal Interview. 27 March 2016.

Tsjeng, Zing. “Teens these Days are Queer AF, New study Says.” Vice. 10 March 2016. Web.


Willgus, Katherine. Personal interview. 24 February 2016.

Wilson, Taylor. Personal interview. 4 March 2016.