

COMING OUT OF THE CRIMSON CLOSET

*Gay students have always been part of IU.
As alumni, some are choosing to be open about their lives.*

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By [Steve Sanders](#)

I remember the gossip in the *Daily Student* newsroom about various members of the staff. Nothing malicious, really. Just the sort of thing that goes on in any workplace. What was up with that male opera critic? That tomboy sportswriter? Or those women on the student affairs desk who were always together?

Who was gay, who might be gay? Even if the public didn't have a right to know, I guess we thought we did.

I don't know whether people talked about me. I was, I knew at some level, a member of the club. Only it was a club where even if you knew you belonged, the membership rolls were a well-kept secret. And I don't remember knowing any of the rules.

Ann Wesley, BA'92, was one of those people we wondered about back in the early '80s. Ann, who left school to work at a local newspaper and returned several years later to complete her degree, is now project manager for a Bloomington Web-design company. We got reacquainted over lunch a few months ago and compared notes on fellow classmates.

Some of us have come out, others haven't, some never will. For Ann herself, getting her parents to accept her as a lesbian involved an awkward five-year estrangement. It helped that the family is fond of Ann's partner of eight years, Amy Harrison.

Times change, and we along with them.

Gays and lesbians have been, until recently, IU's invisible alumni. Invisible because most, in school and in the closet, could "pass"; invisible because, even for those who were out, there were few ways to meet others, and certainly no university-sponsored help for their struggles or recognition for their achievements.

Some 400,000 men and women have graduated from IU since 1820. The most conservative estimates of how many humans find themselves wired a bit differently would mean 2 percent, or 8,000, were homosexual, whether or not they ever came to terms with it. A more liberal and realistic estimate would be 10 percent, or 40,000.

You knew them, of course. They were varsity athletes and Singing Hoosiers, partiers and quiet guys at the end of the hall. Individually they have brought glory and honor to Indiana University, disgraced it, adored it, hated it. They drank with you at Nick's, and cried when you didn't get a sorority bid. Some were preppy; others did weird things to their hair. Some failed calculus; others graduated summa cum laude. They are lawyers and medical students, accountants and graphic artists, journalists and social workers, musicians and marketers. Some have been married, divorced, raised children. Some found a life partner; others died single.

They are, on the surface, not very different from all the rest of our alma mater's children. Except for one thing. And that one thing is both nothing and everything.

As a student in the late '30s, "Phillip" (a pseudonym), BA'39, remembers confiding his secrets to Alfred Kinsey, back when IU's most famous zoologist was amassing data for his groundbreaking work on sexual behavior. By debunking myths and hypocrisy about what Americans did in the bedroom, how often, and with whom, Kinsey would, among other things, pave the way for society's gradual acceptance of homosexuals.

Phillip -- "begotten to be a farmer and carry on the family name," he says; "you can see why I'm a failure" -- grew up in central Indiana, about as remote as a Hoosier farm boy could be from any influence that might have caused him to turn out a bachelor professor. After graduate study and more than a decade at another university, he returned to IU, where he taught for almost 25 years.

Coming out has been a gradual process over the last six or seven years. Even with age and wisdom, such things don't necessarily get any easier.

With a perspective longer than most, Phillip doesn't remember Bloomington as particularly enlightened or especially repressive. If there were bars or other places where gay students and faculty gathered, he says he was unlikely to have known about them. Still, people found each other.

"We knew," he says. "We knew by all kinds of subtle signs. When we suspected it and wanted to make contact, we 'dropped a bead' made some kind of subtle, equivocal hint: clear to somebody who was also gay, but not to somebody who was not. Something like, 'I like your shirt. It's the same color as your eyes.' "

Things were getting better -- at least if you knew where to look -- by the time Paul Chase arrived from Chicago's northern suburbs in 1973. A chapter of the Gay Liberation Front had taken hold in Bloomington; the sexual revolution was in full swing. Paul's memories of Bloomington in the '70s are idyllic.

"I had the most incredible time," says Paul, BA'77. "I came out in a big way my junior year. I was 20. We had this big gay and lesbian community, and it was partying every night and having a blast, and I just loved it."

That same year, Paul and Terry Briner, BGS'94, caught each other's glances while studying in the South Lounge of the Union. Today the two share a home in Brown County. Paul is an attorney, Terry an artist.

Almost from the start, their families accepted them as a couple. But acceptance isn't necessarily the same as understanding. It wasn't until 1987, when Paul and Terry returned from a march on Washington, D.C., for lesbian and gay rights, that Paul decided to have a talk with his parents.

"We had one bed," he says. "They'd come and visit, and they knew we both slept in that bed. It was known --"

"They'd give us sheets for Hanukkah!" Terry adds.

" --but it wasn't discussed. They didn't bring it up, and I didn't bring it up. We sat down. I said, 'We know that you know that we're gay, but let's just talk about it. I want to be able to talk about it in my life with you, because it's important. I want to be able to be comfortable talking about the fact I'm gay.' "

If there were gay meetings, support groups, or socials on campus when he arrived from rural Illinois to start his doctorate in political science in 1982, they weren't on Michael Jogerst's radar screen. But by his second or third year, feeling more comfortable with himself, Michael, MA'84, PhD'89, began edging out. "I went to Bullwinkle's, which I think is the first gay bar I ever went to. But of course I didn't want to be seen going there."

One day, the late Jim Christoph, a professor of British politics who was Michael's mentor, decided to have a talk with him. "When I got an earring after my second year -- and I had it in the left ear, like straight people do -- we were having a long conversation in his office," Michael recalls. "I was ready to leave, and he shut the door, sat down across from me, and said, 'I need to ask you, Michael. Are you gay? It doesn't make any difference to me. But I need to talk to you about how it will hurt you in the profession.'"

"I can tell you what I was wearing. I can tell you what he was wearing, where he was sitting. It's so clear. And as close as I was to him -- I adored him -- I told him I wasn't gay. That is the most shameful thing I can remember ever doing -- not being honest with him, because he only cared about me. He made it clear it wouldn't make any difference to him. He was trying to be helpful. And I said no."

Christoph's concern was prescient. After finishing his doctorate, Michael took a job at another Big Ten university. After six busy and successful years, during which he published a book, won the university's teaching award, and gave the commencement address, he was turned down for tenure.

Discouraged by what he saw as the homophobia in much of political science, Michael chose to leave teaching altogether. He's now happily working in a new job as director of career services for the School of Social Services Administration at the University of Chicago.

Michael is certain that being gay -- or more accurately, the way his being gay colored his

colleagues' perceptions of him and his work -- was the reason a simple vote of the department's faculty ended his academic career. After all, job discrimination against gay people happens all the time.

"It's one of those things we all get if you're gay," he says. "You know it. You have a feeling. You're not looking for it, but it's there."

Fall 1994, her senior year, found Sally Green on the front lines of the culture wars. After a decade of study, IU had announced plans to open a support and information office for gay, lesbian, and bisexual students. But Woody Burton, a state legislator from Greenwood, disapproved and threatened to cut IU's appropriation by half a million dollars, 10 times the office's initial budget. President Myles Brand, just weeks after arriving on the job, found himself in the midst of a PR meltdown.

"It was exhilarating," remembers Sally, BS'95, who was president of the gay/lesbian student group OUT. Sally recently finished a master's at the University of Michigan and is looking for a job with a gay advocacy group.

"Sometimes I can't really believe all the things we did: meeting with Woody, all the press," she says. "I remember the rally we had in front of the administration building. In hindsight, I was impressed by how supportive the university was, especially Dean (of Students Richard) McKaig (EdD'82) and (IU Bloomington Chancellor) Ken Gros Louis. It would have been easy for them to compromise or back down."

In the end, the university took a different approach. Brand funded the office through the IU Foundation rather than with public dollars. Some didn't like the message: Gay people pay taxes and tuition, but aren't good enough to draw from the same pot that supports programs for everyone else. But things settled down, and the office has thrived.

Today, says Doug Bauder, the office's coordinator, "The most consistent comment I hear from alumni who visit the office is that they wish something like this had been here when they were here. I think people feel a real connection, and for some it seems like a way to re-connect with the university."

In June 1997, after more than a year's work by Bauder and Jeff McKinney, BA'92, MA'97, to recruit a core group of members, the IUAA's board of managers officially approved a new affiliate group: the [Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual Alumni Association](#). (Transgendered people were later added. The group currently numbers 186.) Both IUAA Executive Director Jerry Tardy, BS'62, and John Walda, BA'72, JD'75, who was at that time president of the IUAA and the IU board of trustees, turned up at the meeting where a committee would need to give the go-ahead. They figured at least one member would fight the idea and a few others would be, at best, unenthralled. Their presence sent a subtle but unmistakable message.

"All in favor, say IU," Walda said. "All opposed, say Purdue."

In an alumni world that seems to revolve around football games, barbecues, and boosterism, many gay and lesbian graduates, especially younger ones, are less enchanted than their

classmates with the idea of coming back for Homecoming. Some are ambivalent about their college memories; some feel various degrees of alienation, unable to imagine a place for themselves within what they see as a social whirl of white-bread rah-rah -- with a subtext of traditional ideas about gender roles and sexuality -- that generations of crimson-clad alumni have created.

Which makes the open-arms embrace the IUAA has given its gay alumni seem all the more remarkable. And which explains why the new group decided to call its newsletter [*Reaching Out*](#).

How does sexual orientation create the sort of bond alumni would want to celebrate at a tailgate party or an annual picnic? To say it's a shared sense of outsidership or oppression isn't right. After all, who would want to celebrate that? Perhaps for those who have come out and claimed the identity -- still a minority of the minority -- it's something closer to what unites survivors of any experience that seems difficult at the time (and hellish for a few) but from which one ultimately learns and grows.

For many, being different has meant pain, heartbreak, rejection, even violence. For others, it has meant joyful self-discovery, awakened creativity, and new possibilities for friendship and love. For most, it's some combination of all these. Being gay is a complex mix of personal identity and collective experience. But who's to say we have less in common than the I-Men, or the Business School graduates, or the Dance Marathon alumni?

Trent Thornley grew up in Zionsville, studied religion and philosophy at IU, and was elected president of his fraternity, Pi Kappa Phi. It's an open secret that the greek system has its share of gay men. "To the extent it is accepted," says Trent, BA'92, JD'96, now an attorney in San Francisco, "it's don't ask, don't tell."

Coming out during law school changed his life. "Living in the closet is like living in a box," he says. "You can be happy within that box, those limits that you and society have placed on you, because you adapt. But you will never know how truly happy, how much happier you can be until you break out of that box. The feeling you have when you do is the most ecstatic feeling I have ever known."

Even if they had been in school at the same time, it's unlikely Trent would have crossed paths with Marvin Taylor, BA'85, MLS'87, who came out shortly after he arrived as a freshman in 1980 from Cottage Grove, Ind. (population 109). Marvin recalls "there was such a large gay population in the Music School that it was a fairly supportive environment."

Marvin actually found IU a bit tame. "There was such a force to be homogeneous in Bloomington queer culture that I had a nagging sense I didn't fit into it. I was more comfortable with the whacked-out drag queens and the punk kids."

After switching to comparative literature, Marvin began dating one of the graduate students, Michael Gillespie, MA'81, PhD'87. Both now work for universities in New York. Seventeen years later, they're still together.

Cindy Stone met Donna Payne, who would become her partner of 20 years, when she was secretary of the student government in Wright Quad, where Donna managed the office. One day Cindy needed help running the mimeo machine.

"So I went in," recalls Cindy, BS'78, "and this nice soft-spoken woman said, 'I'll show you.' And a friendship developed. We were dating for two years before I knew we were dating."

Cindy earned her degree, taught school, returned to work on a master's degree, and went to work as a training coordinator for the IU Physical Plant. Long a believer that both women and staff needed a stronger voice in the university, she ran in 1993 for alumni trustee, challenging Joseph Black, BA'41, MD'44, a physician from Seymour. For some, Black had become a symbol of a board dominated by a certain generation of white males.

Cindy won the election but soon found herself in a maelstrom. Donna had been diagnosed with brain cancer and needed constant care. With the help of sympathetic supervisors, Cindy cut back to half-time work. But there was another problem. No longer employed, Donna faced a tenfold increase in the cost of her health insurance.

Had IU recognized the two as domestic partners, as a growing list (if still a minority) of more than 80 colleges and universities and 475 private companies and organizations have done, Cindy could simply have added Donna to her own coverage. Partner benefits would also have made it easier for Cindy to take time off to care for Donna and guaranteed her a three-day bereavement leave. But despite a 20-year committed relationship and 45 years of combined IU service, the couple's official status was no better than that of freshman roommates.

Cindy says the university's human resources staff treated the two "wonderfully." But their hands were tied. Only leadership from top administrators and action by the trustees could enact benefits for same-sex partners.

Donna died early in the morning of Jan. 19, 1995, the day Brand was to be officially inaugurated as IU's new leader. Taking a pause from funeral arrangements, Cindy ventured out to the inaugural luncheon and found herself attracting a remarkable receiving line. First Brand and his wife, Peg, then other administrators, fellow trustees: All expressed sympathy for her loss of the woman everyone understood had been her life partner. It was a very public coming-out.

How to explain how so many people could care about, reach out to, an individual gay person, yet do nothing when couples like Cindy and Donna are denied benefits married people take for granted? Stone remains optimistic that IU will achieve the potential for appreciating diversity that she believes is the true legacy of Herman Wells. It will just take time. She tells a story.

"The men on the grounds crew next door to my office, when Donna died, wrote me the most wonderful sympathy card. They all signed it, wrote personal notes on it. I bet they had never given a sympathy card to a gay person in their lives, but they did it for me. And they did it because I had helped train them. I had helped type resumes when they had job upgrade opportunities. And I think for them, accepting gay people is done one person at a time. And I bet some of them are saying, behind my back, 'Well, I don't like gay people, but I like Cindy, because Cindy's worked hard for me. And so what if she's gay?'"

Like Cindy, Tonia Matthew has started dating again. Only for Tonia, BS'80, now 60, that has meant rediscovering and exploring feelings she had for women going back to boarding school days in England, feelings she suppressed in favor of marriage.

Tonia, a published short-story writer living in Bloomington, raised five children while earning her education degree. After ending an 18-year marriage in 1982, she got to know other women by volunteering at a Bloomington feminist bookshop. At first she called herself a "political lesbian." But eventually, she says, "I decided, this is stupid. If I ever was to have another romantic relationship, it would be with a woman. Why shouldn't I just call myself a lesbian?"

The growing number of men and women like Tonia who reckon with their sexuality in middle age face a unique set of struggles. "Emotionally," she says, "you're going back to being a kid again. All of a sudden you've got these new feelings, and you're sort of stumbling around. There's different etiquette that you don't know anything about. So it is unsettling. But it's exciting at the same time."

In politics, pop culture, and everyday life, gays and lesbians are finding visibility and acceptance that would have been hard to imagine 10 years ago, and unthinkable 20 or 50 years ago. Still, at IU as at most places, anyone determined to avoid gay people and gay life can easily do so. Gay students will always be a small minority; the loneliness and struggle of coming to terms with being different haven't changed. But for students and alumni who seek them out, there are more resources and role models.

Phillip, who volunteers along with other retired faculty for IU's Student Advocates Office, recently worked with an undergraduate who needed help declaring financial independence and getting his academic career back on track. The young man had come out to his parents and been disowned. In the ensuing turmoil, he had failed a number of classes.

At first, Phillip says, the student was hesitant talking about his life.

"But he gradually opened up. And at the end of our conversation, he said, 'You really do seem to understand.'

"I said, 'Yes, I do understand. I'm gay too.'

"He asked, 'Well, why didn't you tell me?'

"I said, 'I didn't tell you earlier because it was not pertinent. Now it is.' "

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