

# OF COURSE SOMEONE YOU KNOW IS GAY: UA's Gay Student Union, 1983-1984

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*“Of Course Someone You Know is Gay” tracks the first two years of UA’s longest-lasting queer student group, exploring its creation, activities, and advocacy through oral histories and archival materials. This essay attributes the group’s unusual strength and length of life to its foundationally political nature, positing that the members’ willingness to be vulnerable or exposed as queer rights advocates was vital for the group’s survival in the South, where coming out was an inherently political act. Members’ willingness to defend themselves and educate their detractors enabled the group to flourish, as opposed to other apolitical groups which died out.*

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## Introduction

In September of 2019, advocacy group GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) published an article by one of their campus ambassadors, Dorothy McIntush, about dating as a bisexual woman on a “historically conservative campus.”<sup>1</sup> In the story, McIntush relates the change in her peers’ behavior as she became more open with her girlfriend—especially public displays of affection.<sup>2</sup> The two received odd stares when holding hands, were heckled at a football game, and McIntush began to feel “‘too queer’ for a lot of [her] classmates.”<sup>3</sup> Though McIntush was bisexual before this relationship, the increased visibility of her queerness “increased [her] fear of experiencing open homophobia.”<sup>4</sup> McIntush explains that her college, Texas A&M, “topped a national ranking” of conservative student bodies, which added to her fear.<sup>5</sup> Despite this, McIntush pushed through her discomfort and continued being more open about her sexuality. She believed in the necessity of her and other queer students’ visibility to create safer communities for LGBT people, doubled by her status as a campus ambassador for GLAAD.<sup>6</sup>

Her story, despite its recency, reflects major themes running through the histories of Southern queer movements, especially on Southern college campuses. The latter half of the twentieth century, a time of major social unrest, saw the development of more sophisticated movements, by students and for the LGBT community. In his *A Queer History of the United States*, Michael Bronski describes a shift in the 1960s among the queer community as “the beginning of a new kind of homosexuality that was, first and foremost, a form of political resistance.”<sup>7</sup> By the end of the decade,

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<sup>1</sup> Dorothy McIntush, “What’s It’s Like Dating While Bisexual on a Historically Conservative Campus,” *AMP* (blog), *Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation*, September 20, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 204.

queer people had been designated, using Marxist theory, as a distinct cultural group experiencing oppression, contributing to the development of queerness as being part of an identity, rather than solely being a marker of sexual attraction.<sup>8</sup>

### The National Queer Movement

Over the next decade, the queer movement placed much higher importance on “coming out,” explained by Carl Wittman in his “A Gay Manifesto” as “free[ing] ourselves; [to] initiate self-defense and political activity.”<sup>9</sup> In the same year, 1969, the famous Stonewall Riots occurred, a sect of gay rights activists who preferred a more anarchist, rebellious, physical kind of resistance developed. This sect, represented by the Gay Liberation Front, despite being “more of a process than an organization,” spread quickly across the country, especially in cities and on college campuses.<sup>10</sup> Soon after, the more practical Gay Activists Alliance also formed, intended to increase cooperation with other major civil rights movements of the time. Though both would die out by the mid-1970s, the GAA and GLF exerted a major influence over the direction of the gay rights movement, in particular distinguishing it as its own, important political movement and establishing “the template” for later activism, preferring to reform, “not overthrow the system.”<sup>11</sup> For LGBT youth, the GAA and GLF provided a “political and social framework in which to declare and celebrate their identity.”<sup>12</sup>

The latter half of the 1970s and the early 1980s further expanded upon the creation of this framework. Hollywood stars came out or were outed, the American Psychological Association officially removed homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, and the movement experienced both legal wins and losses.<sup>13</sup> Nearly half the states in the union had repealed their sodomy laws by 1980, but the backlash against such repeals resulted in some backtracking by governments, such as in Arkansas and Florida.<sup>14</sup> In particular, the fight *against* the gay rights movement became distinctly moral and religious, best exemplified by the title of a book by Anita Bryant, a prominent figure in repealing a Florida ordinance decriminalizing sodomy: *The Anita Bryant Story: The Survival of Our Nation's Families and the Threat of Militant Homosexuality*.<sup>15</sup> Ironically, attempts to repress people with queer identities turned more aggressive around this time; Bronski highlights a fire-bombing in 1973 that killed 32 people in a New Orleans gay bar and the assassination of Harvey Milk in 1978.<sup>16</sup>

The early ‘80s dawned without major news for the gay rights movements, but not for lack of new developments. The AIDS crisis, which would not hit in full force until the second half of the 1980s, was first sighted in 1981.<sup>17</sup> First called pneumonia, then cancer, then GRID, AIDS took 121 lives in that first year, but received little to no media coverage. Bronski points out that *The New York Times*, one of the biggest and most significant news publications in the country, ran only *three* stories about AIDS in 1981, and another three in 1982, in sharp contrast to the *thirty-one* stories run on the infamous Tylenol poisonings.<sup>18</sup> 31 stories for 7 fatalities in the month of

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., qtd. on 208.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 216-218

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 225.

October 1982.<sup>19</sup> For the gay rights movement, the early '80s were a period calm between the tumult of the '70s and the fear of the late '80s: the AIDS crisis had begun, but it was yet to receive any significant attention from the national media.

### The Student Queer Movement

Alongside the development of national movements, student movements cropped up on many college campuses, starting in the '60s and on into the '80s and beyond. In an article examining a queer publication by the Gay Student Union on UCLA's campus, David Reichard describes the creation of these student organizations as part of "public queer world making," an effort to normalize and organize queer life.<sup>20</sup> UCLA's first "openly" LGBT student organization was created in 1969, the same year as the Stonewall Riots, making it an early example. Originally part of the Gay Liberation Front tradition, this UCLA organization was small, largely male, and mostly inactive, barring particular "political/educational" action.<sup>21</sup> It would rename and revamp its image in 1972, as a "Gay Student Union," rather than part of the Gay Liberation Front, which Reichard says had a "revitalizing effect on membership and attendance." It now focused more on "community-formation" as opposed to political efforts.<sup>22</sup> In 1973, the group successfully sought out recognition and funding from UCLA's Student Legislative Council; though "contentious" the effort to do so went relatively smoothly.<sup>23</sup>

In the environment of Appalachian State University in North Carolina, however, students experienced more difficulty in establishing their own LGBT organization. In 1979, the Appalachian Gay Awareness Association applied for university approval.<sup>24</sup> Although it struggled to find a faculty adviser, its application came on the heels of other such organizations receiving recognition within the UNC system.<sup>25</sup> The SGA approved the organization, but the university's chancellor, Herbert Wey, stalled on official approval. He wrote several times of his opposition to the club, and the community of Boone, the non-university parts of the town, expressed opposition to the club as well.<sup>26</sup> The AGAA did finally receive approval on June 13<sup>th</sup> of 1979, but only after several weeks of ambivalence from Wey and with obvious reluctance. Though the group received recognition, Staley points out that "[Wey's] public disapprobation of AGAA gave tacit acceptance to anti-LGBT intolerance harassment."<sup>27</sup>

This last point touches on an important facet of the process of gaining official recognition for such LGBT student groups, and one which will be further explored in this paper, in the context of the University of Alabama. This give-and-take between the "dozens of gay college clubs organized" through the 1970s, and the schools' administrations is an important theme in the development of the student movement for gay rights. Additionally, the difference in the AGAA's experience and that of the UCLA GSU highlights the tension regarding time and place for such student groups, how quickly the social and political context could shift in favor of or against them. Los Angeles, CA and its authorities are quite different from those in a place like

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> David A. Reichard, "Behind the Scenes at the *Gayzette*: The Gay Student Union and Queer World Making at UCLA in the 1970s," *The Oral History Review* 43, no. 1 (2016): 101.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Kathryn Staley, "Gay Liberation Comes to Appalachian State University (1969-1979)," *Appalachian Journal* 39, no. ½ (Fall 2011/Winter 2012): 79.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 83-85.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 85.

Boone, NC, and by the mid-to-late-1970s, the “anti-gay movement” had organized more effectively, as noted earlier in the case of Anita Bryant and by Staley. As the decade wore on, new student groups faced more opposition.

### **The University of Alabama**

Further exploration of these themes is important to develop an understanding of the queer student movement and the ways in which place affects such organizing. This paper offers an interpretation of the motivation behind Southern queer student groups’ activities and success by investigating the longest-running queer student group at the University of Alabama, the Gay Student Union. Founded in 1983, the GSU was not the first of its kind at UA but accomplished more than its predecessors and still survives to the present day, albeit by a different name (Spectrum).<sup>28</sup> Earlier research projects regarding UA’s Gay Student Union can be found on the university’s *Queer History* website, but this paper focuses on the organization’s official and unofficial activities. By drawing on oral histories of several key members or their relations, articles from UA’s student newspaper, *The Crimson White*, a popular queer newspaper, the *Alabama Forum*, and select archival material available from UA’s Special Collections, this paper will attempt to construct a history of the early GSU and comment on what distinguished them from earlier groups such as GAZE (est. 1974), and suggest how these differences resulted in the GSU’s persistence.

The movement for queer rights at the University of Alabama began with the idea that being visibly queer and thereby forcing the campus—students, faculty, and administration—to recognize the existence of queer students was the first step towards greater social and political change. As such, the GSU focused its efforts on educational activities and being a perpetual and physical presence on campus. Its actions, minor steps as they may have seemed, were always conducted with political intent, in contrast to other groups that formed largely to establish community or for social reasons. This conceptualization of political advocacy as being about the consistency of visibility is a major factor in the GSU’s effectiveness. In the late twentieth-century South, rebellion against the University of Alabama’s attempts to deny queer people’s humanity by being visibly, audibly, and unapologetically queer was at the heart of the Gay Student Union’s formation and activities.

### **GAZE: Precursor to the GSU**

Though perhaps the most significant queer student group at the University of Alabama, the GSU was not the first. It was preceded by “GAZE,” formed in the early ‘70s. Despite its similar goals, GAZE did *not* intend to make the news through visibility or political advocacy. First mentioned in an interview in *The Crimson White* (CW) in 1973, GAZE’s organizers Lynn Johnson and Pat McGough assured the CW that the group was not political, quickly assuaging possible backlash from the campus.<sup>29</sup> Four years after Stonewall, the Gay Liberation Front and its more aggressive, militant politicism would still have been fresh, and the anti-gay movement well developed. Johnson expressed that the group was “just a common ground” where gay students could gather, and McGough followed by saying that she did not “see [GAZE] as a very politically oriented group.”<sup>30</sup>

At this point, UA’s queer community may have felt too endangered to organize politically and risk extra backlash. Earlier, the article mentioned the prevalence of homophobic graffiti in campus bathrooms, with many stalls covered in

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<sup>28</sup> The Power of Naming: Language and the Construction of Queer Community, “Summary,” *Queer History*, The University of Alabama.

<sup>29</sup> “Gay Students Planning ‘Loose’ Organization,” *The Crimson White*, June 11, 1973, 1.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

slurs.<sup>31</sup> Johnson expanded on this, adding that UA was a “very isolated, closeted campus as far as gay life goes.”<sup>32</sup> Though openly discussing one’s queerness was an inherently political act at the time, Johnson and McGough clearly stated that GAZE’s purpose was to address the lack of community for queer students rather than to fight for queer rights or organize politically. Though intentionally apolitical, GAZE signifies the early presence of queer students on campus and their sustained interest in organization. In fact, the GSU’s founders may have been inspired by this initial group, considering the language that McGough uses to describe GAZE: “some sort of broad-based union of gay students.”<sup>33</sup> GAZE and its officers were not ready for sustained political action, but their organization shows that UA students started building a community and establishing solidarity at least a decade before the GSU’s founding. Such a foundation provided invaluable support for the GSU.

GAZE cited its main goals as “to gain chartered status ... and to get a permanent meeting place on campus.”<sup>34</sup> They achieved the former, as indicated by the *CW* from September of the same year. Entitled “GAZE chartered, no ‘expected’ controversy,” this article interviews McGough again, now as GAZE’s “official Moderator.”<sup>35</sup> McGough announced plans for a speaker’s panel and a newsletter, but expressed frustration that GAZE had not been granted SGA funding.<sup>36</sup> Her words demonstrate both the headway queer students made on organizing and the continued obstacles to sustaining a student organization long-term. Though it was granted a charter, the SGA denied GAZE full status as a student organization by withholding funding. Though McGough said she planned to pursue funding, the group likely did not achieve this goal.

In fact, the student organization burned out within less than ten years, as indicated by the need to form a new queer student group in 1983. Even with a spotlight article on the group’s acquisition of a charter, forces conspired against its survival. GAZE lacked SGA funding and a solid base to increase its membership, as a result of the continued and pervasive societal bias against queerness, still technically illegal and certainly viewed as illicit “activities.” McGough, when asked, estimated that there were “approximately 1,300” queer people on campus, but GAZE started with only 20-25 members. Furthermore, McGough expressed doubt that GAZE would be able to add many more students to its roster.<sup>37</sup> She anticipated that the danger “coming out” could pose to many closeted students on campus would outweigh the positives of joining the group, saying: “There are career considerations, family relations, and some aren’t ready to have their friends know.”<sup>38</sup>

Following this, McGough emphasized again the importance of community as GAZE’s founding motivation, an intent that was still controversial.<sup>39</sup> The interview concludes with *The Crimson White* interviewer asking if funding GAZE would be illegal, as the state still adhered to and enforced its sodomy laws.<sup>40</sup> McGough explains that just “[homosexual] acts are illegal,” but that it was not illegal to identify as gay.<sup>41</sup> From the question’s crassness to McGough’s careful conclusion, “We’re just trying

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> B. Fisher, “GAZE chartered, no ‘expected’ controversy,” *The Crimson White*, September 6, 1973, 2.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

our wings out, being very cautious. By necessity,” the interview demonstrates the unwelcoming atmosphere that GAZE’s founders attempted to organize within.<sup>42</sup> GAZE’s position was simply too precarious to openly campaign for queer rights.

The group’s short lifespan emphasizes the importance of sustained visibility for political action and the necessity of conviction in addition to visibility. GAZE did not explicitly intend to change campus opinion, so it did not reach its loftier goals, which the GSU would.<sup>43</sup> However, the campus atmosphere in the ‘70s was significantly less tolerant than in the ‘80s, as indicated by McGough’s interview and the prevalence of homophobic graffiti and slurs in bathrooms across campus, so the group’s less political agenda does not diminish its accomplishments. Though GAZE neither politicized nor lasted the decade, the students who started it were doubly brave to have organized within their environment. Still, the difference between GAZE’s short and the GSU’s long life span seems to stem, at least in part, from the difference in political motivation.

## THE GAY STUDENT UNION

### Origins

The Gay Student Union formed to challenge community norms that made queerness both illicit and illegal. Founded officially in 1983, the group likely existed in some informal way before then, as indicated by GAZE’s “loose organization” of students, and the words of Rachel Barrow, a founding member of the GSU.<sup>44</sup> Barrow described the GSU as a group of friends who formalized their connection, then elevated it by recruiting other students and acting on their political motivations.<sup>45</sup> In addition, David Miller, the group’s first faculty adviser, noted this motivation as part of the group’s draw; they had run articles in *The Crimson White* expressing frustration about “getting thrown out of bars because of complaints from frat boys and sorority girls.”<sup>46</sup> The GSU would serve as a vehicle for the students to “fight back” against such treatment.<sup>47</sup> The GSU’s evolution from earlier groups’ social origins to a formal political organization with a sharp distinction in purpose supported its success and longevity.

Multiple accounts confirm that Elliott Jackson Jones, the group’s founder and first president, started the GSU in response to his experiences with homophobia and harassment. According to Rachel Barrow, a founding member of the GSU, Jones and some friends were passing time in a bar when other patrons began to harass them. A minor physical altercation broke out, and, when it settled, Jones and his friends, rather than their harassers, were asked to leave.<sup>48</sup> Jones’s sister, Pat Richeson, mentioned that Elliott talked about experiencing this kind of altercation on more than one occasion.<sup>49</sup> These accounts demonstrate the commonness of open homophobia in Tuscaloosa during the ‘80s and the danger of being openly “out.” This origin story demonstrates that the GSU developed openly as a reaction to oppression. It never attempted or pretended to be apolitical, because from the start its motivation was to prevent episodes like the one Jones experienced—which it could not do as a social

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> “Gay Students Planning,” 1.

<sup>45</sup> Rachel Barrow, interview by Victoria Carl, *Queer History*, The University of Alabama, October 2019, transcript.

<sup>46</sup> David Miller, interview by Abby Laurenson, *Queer History*, The University of Alabama, November 2019, transcript.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Pat Richeson, interview by Camryn Walker, *Queer History*, The University of Alabama, November 2019, transcript.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

organization. Barrow underscored this point as she described the first unofficial organizational meeting for the GSU. After that last incident in the bar, Jones began campaigning for queer students to come together. Barrow says Jones drew on his own friend group for support, but also got members invested by highlighting the unfairness of their treatment as queer people.<sup>50</sup>

Barrow belonged to that group of friends, though she said she was not with Jones the day he was kicked out of the bar, nor does she attribute her own politicization solely to that event.<sup>51</sup> Instead, Barrow mentioned her sister's reaction to Barrow "coming out," that her sister claimed she had never known a gay person. Barrow, incredulous, said, "Of course [she] had. [She] had to have."<sup>52</sup> Though nearly ten years had passed since Pat McGough had expressed her concern over GAZE's membership and the isolation of queer people on campus, visibility for queer community was still low. Barrow joined the GSU with a keen knowledge of this and a mind to improve queer students' ability to be open about their sexuality.<sup>53</sup>

Despite the danger, or perhaps because of it, Barrow remembered the first meeting "fe[eling] like a gazillion people were there," estimating more realistically an attendance of roughly forty people."<sup>54</sup> In addition, though Jones marketed the first meeting as "organizational," Barrow remembered a representative from *The Crimson White* attending.<sup>55</sup> The presence of *The Crimson White* indicated the extent to which Eliot had been prepping, and a difference between the conception of GAZE and the GSU. The presence of the *CW* also demonstrated Jones's intent to spotlight the group in the student newspaper. If, as Barrow already mentioned, a single person coming out could be a political statement on its own, then a queer student organization "coming out" in the press would have an even greater effect. Jones planned to make a political statement with the GSU.

In addition, Barrow expressed that, in recruiting, Jones emphasized the unfair treatment queer people received in the city, "get[ting] [his friends] riled up."<sup>56</sup> With this overtly political motivation, twice as many people showed up to the *first meeting* as were cited as regular members for GAZE.<sup>57</sup> Political action threatened the safety of queer people involved in the GSU, but despite the homophobia present in the UA community, these early members judged it worthwhile to endanger themselves in pursuit of a safer future. Though Jones's friends may have made up the bulk of the GSU's original members, queer students across campus responded to the possibility of advocating for their rights. By branding itself as political from the start, the GSU attracted passionate students who stuck with the club through the years and inspired new members to join.

### **Gaining University Recognition**

Unlike GAZE, which received an SGA charter without "expected controversy," the GSU faced obstacles to achieving recognition by the university. In large part, these obstacles stemmed from the university's discomfort with queer students existing openly or with university approval. David Miller, the GSU's first faculty adviser, said, "the university was reluctant to do it. But they had to find the right reasons to not do

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<sup>50</sup> Barrow, interview.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.; "GAZE Chartered," 2.

it,”<sup>58</sup> indicating that the university did not have legitimate reasons for barring the group’s existence—by this time, other such queer student groups existed across the country, from California to North Carolina. In addition, Miller revealed that when the university’s president announced that the group would receive recognition, the president said “the fourth amendment is alive and well on ... campus.”<sup>59</sup> As the fourth amendment references a citizen’s right to reasonable privacy, specifically to be “secure in their persons [and] houses,” these words reflect the contemporary belief that homosexuality involved only sex and private acts.<sup>60</sup> The GSU formed to change this kind of thinking which defined queerness as an activity rather than an identity. Given the difference in motivation between GAZE and the GSU, it is unsurprising that the GSU experienced more difficulty pursuing a charter. GAZE’s leaders assured the administration that they had no express political purpose, but the opposite was true for the GSU.<sup>61</sup>

As part of the organization charter application, the SGA required the GSU to submit a roster of ten names to demonstrate that there was interest in and desire for the club.<sup>62</sup> Despite their “gazillion people” at the organizational meeting, the group struggled find students willing to be officially associated with the GSU’s advocacy efforts.<sup>63</sup> Miller mentioned, as did Barrow, that most of the GSU members were not openly “out.” Miller referenced sorority members who were queer but might face consequences from their sororities if they came out openly. Miller also described the sense of risk for queer students and faculty, the latter unwilling to risk their positions and the former, who “didn’t think it was safe for them to come out.”<sup>64</sup> In the end, the GSU relied on “some straight allies who put their names on it,” who, like Miller, functioned as a layer of protection for the more endangered members of the club.<sup>65</sup> Any association with queerness was risky for these students, so, like GAZE, they had to be cautious with who was recorded as active in the club for the members’ safety.

After finding ten members to list on the application, the GSU moved on to finding a permanent faculty advisor. An article printed in both *The Crimson White* and the *Alabama Forum* mentioned that, though the group had a provisional faculty sponsor, that person did not want their name printed and was working with students to find someone else.<sup>66</sup> Eventually, Miller volunteered, inspired by the efforts of the students to organize and recognizing the lessened danger for him to act as sponsor, since he both had tenure and identified as straight.<sup>67</sup> He sent out a memo to other faculty members, asking for extra sponsors as a show of support, explaining, “The president of the organization feels, and I agree, that as many faculty co-sponsor as possible would be a good idea.”<sup>68</sup> Such a show of faculty support would lend the GSU additional social legitimacy and encourage queer students to continue their efforts.

The memo also underscored the danger of alignment with the GSU, even for faculty, and therefore its importance. It read, “Nobody is asking for a commitment of

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<sup>58</sup> Miller, interview.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> “Fourth Amendment,” Legal Information Institute, accessed March 26, 2020.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> “Gay Student Union Recognized by UA,” *Alabama Forum*, October 1983, 1 and 7.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Miller, interview.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> “[GSU] Recognized,” 1 and 7.

<sup>67</sup> Miller, interview.

<sup>68</sup> David Miller, Memo Sent to University of Alabama Faculty Requesting Gay Student Union Sponsorship, 1983, Miller-Stephens GLBTQ UA Student Organization Collection, The University of Alabama Libraries Special Collections, Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

time. It's your good name we want to drag through the mud."<sup>69</sup> Ultimately, the group listed twenty-five faculty co-sponsors on its application for recognition; though such co-sponsors served little functional purpose, the stunt displayed support for the GSU and resistance against the SGA and the administration from a form of campus authority.<sup>70</sup> Faculty members exist between the administration's ultimate authority and the students, so their co-sponsorship provided some form of authority approval; this was not solely a student "rebellion," but also support for a community of people being denied their right to exist in space they held partial ownership of.

Nonetheless, more obstacles lay ahead. Once the group found their ten members and twenty-five faculty sponsors, they again applied to the SGA committee which held the power to approve or deny their charter. After pushing the vote from the end of the spring semester to the following fall, as described in the *Alabama Forum*, the SGA "turned it down" again.<sup>71</sup> Even as the group pushed through one obstacle to success, social factors worked to prevent their existence. Exasperated but determined, Jones took it upon himself to sue the university for discrimination.<sup>72</sup>

Though it was unlikely that the university would ever be able to block the GSU from attaining official recognition, the process of initiating legal action—or at least, the threat of legal action—took several months.<sup>73</sup> During that time, *The Crimson White* ran a variety of articles which documented the back-and-forth between the group's efforts to legitimize their organization and the reactions of the student body.<sup>74</sup> The fact that such a group was attempting to incorporate was significant to students. The research project "Tides of Hate at UA" examined patterns of public displays of hatred against the Gay Student Union, finding that "hate came in waves on campus," especially when the group "pushed aggressively for more visibility, legitimacy, and larger institutional presence."<sup>75</sup> In particular, the project noted that several events experienced major responses from campus, among them the group's creation.<sup>76</sup> The audacity of queer students attempting to be visible in their meeting and community elicited a large, mostly critical response from campus, demonstrating the depth of homophobia at UA in the '80s and thus the importance of the GSU's founding.

Because of the very public nature of the campus debates and the questionable legality of UA's denial, Jones took care not to make it too obvious that he was the group's leader. Richeson said he did not tell their family about it, and that they found out from a paper instead; in addition, Jones sued the university as "Jack Jones" rather than "Elliott," using a shortened version of his middle name, "Jackson."<sup>77</sup> Though the university had no case, Jones, the group's leader and organizer, still felt pressure to keep his identity secret.<sup>78</sup> He listed his name on its roster and he was visibly their president, but he still felt the need, occasionally, to hide his identity as a queer man and defender of the queer community.<sup>79</sup> This illustrates the constant tension in the group between the desire to increase their visibility and normalize queer life and the fear of repercussions against them.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> "[GSU] Recognized," 1 and 7.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Richeson, interview.

<sup>73</sup> "[GSU] Recognized," 1 and 7.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Tides of Hate at UA, "Summary," *Queer History*, The University of Alabama.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Richeson, interview.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

However, the GSU pushed on, determined to make change and recognizing that achieving university recognition would be a major win. Miller described the students' original goals as stemming from them being "tired of taking shit ... of being abused and discriminated against," and their desire for "a safe place" as well as "a public presence."<sup>80</sup> In particular, the GSU wanted to define their presence as a community. Miller, remembering his response to a radio station interviewer's question about "community standards," summed up the purpose of fighting for recognition: "Who is the community? ... Who has the right to say I'm the community and you're not?"<sup>81</sup> By forcing UA's administration, student government, and the student body to recognize the GSU's right to gather, its members claimed their right to be part of the college community and refused attempts to deny them the privileges of this community. Finally, in October 1983, the administration overturned the SGA's decision, and the group was granted an official charter and recognition by the university.<sup>82</sup>

## VISIBILITY AND ADVOCACY

### Educational Activities

The group set up a table at UA's student organization fair, Get On Board Day (GOBD), for their first activity as an official organization. It featured a large banner, brightly colored and painted with the words, "Someone you love is gay," and fourteen club members clustered around the booth to answer any questions about the group's philosophy and activities."<sup>83</sup> The banner, with its bold declaration that not only do queer people exist, but that they are far more common and closer to students than may be perceived, drew eyes to the booth, capitalizing on the past months' controversy. Students were likely already aware of the GSU, given the back-and-forth in *The Crimson White* and the threatened lawsuit, so the banner clearly designated where the GSU could be found while also attracting students with no knowledge of it yet.

Barrow emphasized the importance of Get On Board Days to being out and visible, saying that "we'd show up, just to be visible ... even if there was somebody that thought they might be gay and they weren't really ready to be out, that at least they could see us."<sup>84</sup> GOBD was a recruitment event, for sure, but the GSU also sought to utilize its publicity to the fullest by making a splash at its first official event. The act of being visible, of taking up public space without fear, reminded students that queer people existed on campus, reminded queer students they were not alone, and challenged the administration that sought to keep queer students quiet.

In addition to this, the group actively educated at GOBD in hopes of changing opinions. As mentioned before, members tended the table, ready to answer questions, and provided pamphlets discussing the "history and aims of the GSU, answered specific accusations of the group's detractors," and "various aspects of homosexuality."<sup>85</sup> One such pamphlet lays out clearly, in an easy-to-read font, the philosophy of the GSU: "We believe that all persons are created equal, and that discrimination of any form is unjust."<sup>86</sup> Though it does not list a year, its logo matches

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<sup>80</sup> Miller, interview.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Bridgit and Rachel, "University of Alabama GSU Celebrates 1<sup>st</sup> Anniversary," *Alabama Forum*, March 1984, 1-2.

<sup>84</sup> Barrow, interview.

<sup>85</sup> Bridgit and Rachel, "GSU Celebrates 1st Anniversary," 1-2.

<sup>86</sup> "The University of Alabama Gay Student Union Pamphlet," 1983-1985, Miller-Stephens GLBTQ UA Student Organization Collection, The University of Alabama Libraries Special Collections, Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

one found on a GSU shirt from 1984, verifying the pamphlet's association with the original iteration of the GSU.<sup>87</sup> Such pamphlets made it easy to disseminate the GSU's official position, even to students unwilling to talk to GSU members. This is indicative of the continuous focus on changing minds about who "gay people" were and what they were like.

Not long after GOBD, the GSU began planning "Speaker's Bureau" events. Barrow and the one-year anniversary article for the GSU in the *Alabama Forum* reflect on the events as personal, educational, and largely positive opportunities for queer students to interact with straight students in an extremely visible way. Barrow describes the bureau, which she participated in, as about four to five students who presented at classes and organization meetings and "answered questions we probably had no business answering."<sup>88</sup> She said they often received questions ranging from intensely personal—"What was it like to come out, how did you know?"—to broad political questions like "gay positions on things in the world."<sup>89</sup> Students also asked what GSU members' families felt about their being out, and Barrow said of this interest in their families and the process of "coming out," that "a lot of people who were okay with us being closeted were not okay with us being out, and they would ask us why, you know, why would you come out?"<sup>90</sup>

These experiences were an effective way to combat prejudice and ignorance about queer students and what it meant to be queer. Though Barrow and the other GSU members may not have been entirely accurate in answering question about "gay positions" on politics, their stories about what it was like to be gay and to come out, to deal with parents and family, placed a spotlight the humanity of queer people. Barrow highlighted this tension between what could be tacit acceptance of a difference in "sexual" behavior and what students or communities did not accept as a visible change in lifestyle. The difference in opinion as homosexuality exited private spaces also indicates the association made by most people between homosexuality and actual sex acts. By interacting in real time with students who thought this way, the GSU Speaker's Bureau could offer alternate ways of explaining what homosexuality was and correct opinions or understandings caused by ignorance. Speakers had the opportunity to showcase queerness as part of their identity, rather than as an activity or sexual act.

Barrow also noted that "most of the time people were really trying to learn something," and that "because we were students, and they were students, they felt that they could ask us stuff that they didn't have any other way of getting the answer to."<sup>91</sup> Since a person's sexuality may not immediately be obvious, most students, like Barrow's sister, believed they had never met or did not know any queer people. Though they may have, the Speaker's Bureau often acted as students' first interaction with "out" queer students, and the visibility and personal nature of the event encouraged students critically consider what it would be like if their roles were swapped.<sup>92</sup> Barrow felt "they really were trying to think, okay, if I were gay, how would I be in the world?"<sup>93</sup> The effects of these Speaker's Bureaus may be hard to quantify, but Barrow believes it helped. She said, "They would look at us and go, 'oh,

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<sup>87</sup> "The University of Alabama Gay Student Union Anniversary T-Shirt," 1984, Miller-Stephens GLBTQ UA Student Organization Collection, The University of Alabama Libraries Special Collections, Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

<sup>88</sup> Barrow, interview.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

well ... wait ... I know her, and she looks just like me.”<sup>94</sup> These events heightened visibility in a more focused way; though they did not carry a giant, brightly painted banner with them from class to class, the personal stories that GSU members told impacted students’ and faculty members’ assessment of them and, by extension, of the club and the greater queer community.

The *Alabama Forum* article, “University of Alabama GSU Celebrates 1<sup>st</sup> Anniversary,” mentioned these events would occur “as many as three times a week” and spoke to a variety of groups, including “the fellowship group of a campus church, a graduate-level Home Economics class, and numerous psychology or nursing classes.”<sup>95</sup> The author of the article characterized these events as “rewarding experiences due to the immediate and usually favorable feedback,” which tracks with Barrow’s memory of engaged and interested students.<sup>96</sup> The article also praised the personal connections the events created as being just as valuable as the knowledge shared.<sup>97</sup> Not only did the Speaker’s Bureau spotlight queer students, they provided opportunities “to present gay people as humans, not vastly different from straight counterparts, and certainly not different enough to warrant ... discrimination.”<sup>98</sup>

Often, GSU members received approval from instructors, who “commended [their] eloquence and openness,” praise which was valuable as an indicator to students of faculty support for the GSU.<sup>99</sup> Even “antagonistic listeners” noted the speakers’ “bravery” and “the normalcy of the gay students.”<sup>100</sup> The article concluded by saying the bureau may have “succeeded in producing subtle changes which can lead to later changes in discriminatory laws and practices.”<sup>101</sup> Both the article author and Barrow, forty years later, remembered these events with pride and positivity, indicating that they may well have had the effect desired. In addition, the bureau’s ability to speak to potentially hostile groups, such as the church fellowship group and the Home Economics class (which both emphasized traditional living), and its focus on the positive nature of these events demonstrate headway in changing the taboo nature of openly discussing queerness.

The GSU also maintained a small library, stocked with educational resources to help students better understand queerness, as well as books written by and about queer people.<sup>102</sup> It even included whatever newsletters GSU members could get local, state, and national queer organizations to send to the group for free, addressing “AIDS research, local opinion of the UAGSU, the Metropolitan Community Church, and gay celebrities.”<sup>103</sup> Called the Gay Resources Library, this was a perpetual space for learning about queer students and queerness in general. Barrow said it first operated out of a member’s apartment, but eventually took up semi-permanent residence in the communications building on campus (Reese Phifer Hall).<sup>104</sup> The May 1984 edition of the *Alabama Forum* highlights this triumph—receiving space on campus—which “ha[d] long been one of [their] goals.”<sup>105</sup> The office space, in the Department of Broadcast and Communications, “provide[d] a convenient place for meetings,” and allowed the group to have office hours, in addition to making the library more

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Bridgit and Rachel, “GSU Celebrates 1st Anniversary,” 1-2.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Bridgit and Rachel, “GSU Celebrates 1st Anniversary,” 1-2.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Barrow, interview.

<sup>105</sup> “UA Gay Student Union Get Campus Office Space,” *Alabama Forum*, May 1984, p. 5.

accessible.<sup>106</sup> Their ability to have “a physical presence on campus” dedicated to education, to the GSU, and to queerness, was significant for the group’s ability to remain consistently visible over time.<sup>107</sup> The existence of the library in an on-campus space suggested longevity and legitimacy and made both the library and the GSU more accessible for interested students.

In addition, Barrow remembered the experience of setting the library up quite fondly:

“There were three or four of us there one night, setting it up, making little boxes to put the periodicals in and stuff, and—and it was just fun, we felt like we were doing something. It felt like we were in on something ... important.”<sup>108</sup>

Clearly, the students felt safe in the space they had for their library, and as one of few initiatives mentioned in the one-year anniversary article included in the March 1984 *Alabama Forum*, the library was very important to members and as a symbol of the GSU’s existence and permanence. Barrow emphasized the importance of having the space when she said, “I don’t know if a soul ever went there and checked out a book, or read a magazine, but to have that—to have that space ...”<sup>109</sup> She cut herself off before concluding, but it is clear how important the existence of the library, and its permanence, legitimacy, and visibility as a space dedicated to the GSU, was to the group.

It is hard to divorce the GSU’s educational activities from their advocacy, as most of their official events were either overtly political or contained such undertones, stemming from the group’s inherently political motivations. The Gay Resources Library and the Speaker’s Bureau were featured in the GSU’s celebration of their first anniversary in the *Alabama Forum*, demonstrating the centrality of their importance to the group. It is also significant that even forty years later, these two events remained vital to Rachel Barrow’s memory of her time with the group. These activities, educational in regard to queer people and their lives and political in regard to “gay positions,” show the importance of politics and education in GSU’s club activities.

### Social Activities

The GSU also planned social events, often in the form of parties. Barrow described the parties as “a fundraiser for the Gay Student Union ... [which] got lot of people who weren’t interested in organizing or politics or so forth to come and contribute that way.”<sup>110</sup> Elsewhere, she mentioned they could have over a hundred attendees at the parties they threw, meaning that at about three to four dollars a person, the group could all at once significantly increase their visibility and personal interaction with students, give students positive associations with the group by providing a fun party, and earn money to fund the group’s more political acts. As Barrow pointed out, students who had no interest in political advocacy or the greater political purpose of the GSU would still attend the parties, increasing name and face recognition for the GSU and its individual members.

Another similar activity was the sale or distribution of GSU t-shirts to celebrate the group’s first anniversary. The Empowering Voices collection features a picture of such a shirt, with the GSU’s name and distinctive logo, the date, and the phrase “First Anniversary” printed on it.<sup>111</sup> David Miller also mentioned an earlier t-

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Barrow, interview.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> “[GSU] Anniversary T-Shirt.” Miller-Stephens GLBTQ UA Student Organization Collection.

shirt they had, which featured “a picture of an empty closet with an opened door” that said “out and proud.”<sup>112</sup> Most clubs sell t-shirts, so this was a good fundraiser for the group, but more significantly, it was a very public and personal way to draw attention to the group and its survival. A t-shirt also increases facial recognition and personalization; after all, a t-shirt must be worn by someone. In that way, groups or students who opposed the GSU, those who did not oppose it but were scared or embarrassed to join, and even those still ambivalent, saw how many and what kind of members the group boasted. Barrow emphasized the overall importance of the group’s continuance past its initial members.<sup>113</sup> The t-shirts celebrated two major obstacles which the GSU overcame: the “out and proud” shirts honored the success of receiving university recognition, while the anniversary shirts lauded the group’s survival through a tumultuous first year. With the seven-month wait for official recognition and serious resistance in *The Crimson White*, it would have been much easier for the GSU to simply disband. Instead, it lived on, a feat which deserved to be broadcast to campus.

### Gender Equity

In terms of membership, Barrow estimated that the group saw “thirty, forty, fifty people at meetings,”<sup>114</sup> and more than a hundred at some parties, suggesting a strong regular membership. This membership was well-balanced regarding gender, roughly “50% women” according to Barrow.<sup>115</sup> Though actual membership numbers were likely not that precise, Barrow seemed assured that the group did not face major issues with gender representation. The group was also “conscious” of this balance in both membership *and* leadership: “if the president was a female, we would try to make sure the vice president was a male,” and vice versa.<sup>116</sup>

Also supporting Barrow’s memory of a gender-conscious club is a hate letter written to female GSU President Natalie Maidden. Furthermore, an earlier letter, this time from the officers of the club to the attendees of the June 1983 Alabama Conference for Personal Rights, also indicates an equal balance between female and male club officers; they all signed the letter, listing a male president, a male treasurer, a female secretary, and a female vice president.

In this, the GSU was unlike the gay student unions of the 1970s; Michael Bronski mentioned in *A Queer History* the dominance of men, especially white men, in some forms of queer organizing. Having “grown up in a prefeminist world,” many GLF/GAA men discounted or excluded queer women.<sup>117</sup> Though the GSU formed a decade after the height of the GLF/GAA, it truly managed a more equitable and fair gender balance, demonstrating the ability of the queer rights movement to learn and grow. Moreover, gender equity proved essential to the success of the GSU.

### Risk and Reaction

The GSU has been characterized multiple times as a “quiet” organization. David Miller described it as such,<sup>118</sup> Rachel Barrow said it was “under people’s radar,”<sup>119</sup> and David van der Griff said that in his early years on campus it “[wasn’t] as

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<sup>112</sup> Miller, interview.

<sup>113</sup> Barrow, interview.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Bronski, *A Queer History*, 212.

<sup>118</sup> Miller, interview.

<sup>119</sup> Barrow, interview.

active.”<sup>120</sup> Compared to recent, flashier examples of political demonstrations—the school walk-outs advocating for climate change or gun control legislation,<sup>121</sup> the giant “Baby Trump” balloon used to protest the Trump presidency<sup>122</sup>—the GSU’s efforts may seem unusually tame for advocacy. However, for their time and place, it managed to strike just enough balance between breaking the status quo and being guarded, drawing in queer students while starting gradual change among the larger student body and administration. Though “quiet,” these efforts were important advocacy activities that provided community for queer students and advocated for queer rights, while preventing more severe negative reactions from the community. Members of the GSU still faced discrimination, prejudice, and homophobia, but the effects of these were lessened by the group’s careful consideration of their activities and the tight-knit community.

In part, the GSU was limited in what it could do by the continuing air of homophobia in Alabama—both the school and the state. David van der Griff described multiple instances of harassment he or his partner experienced while at the school: a roommate of van der Griff’s, upon learning he was gay, immediately moved out, citing “religious differences,” and Steve, van der Griff’s later partner, had his tires slashed while parked in a dorm lot.<sup>123</sup> Rachel Barrow mentioned a party thrown by the GSU at which a neighbor shot a gun into the air outside the party, attempting to scare them all—and, more concerning, the reluctance on the part of the police to punish such actions.<sup>124</sup> Those from the Tuscaloosa community also did not approve, as indicated by a letter written in 1984 to president of the GSU, Natalie Maidden. It expressed the author’s belief that homosexuality was a sin and asked Maidden to “quit defying God,” by attempting to “legitimize homosexuality.”<sup>125</sup> David Miller also received “threatening phone calls late at night from people who disapproved of the GSU.”<sup>126</sup>

In addition, Miller speaks on the intense homophobia displayed by a group of radical conservative students, the Young Americans for Freedom, before and during the GSU’s existence. At a Get On Board Day, the YAF put up a sign that joked about the AIDS epidemic, writing “How does YAF spell relief? A-I-D-S.”<sup>127</sup> The sign played on a Roloids commercial to suggest that the death and suffering of queer people with AIDS was a goal or a wish of the YAF. Miller does say that the sign was quickly taken down, but the scene demonstrates the YAF’s cruel and concentrated opposition to the GSU.<sup>128</sup> YAF also wrote in to *The Crimson White* often arguing that the GSU should not receive university recognition nor exist.<sup>129</sup> Though YAF was a radical group, the “Tides of Hate” research project notes that campus did not approve of the GSU either, as “upwards of 90% of the letters *The Crimson White* published during the 1983-1984 school year that mentioned both the GSU and YAF criticize[d] both organizations.” Thus, the rest of the student body was barely more accepting. A quote

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<sup>120</sup> David van der Griff, interview by Blair Bunge, *Queer History*, The University of Alabama, November 2019.

<sup>121</sup> Brady Dennis, Lauren Lumpkin, and Sarah Kaplan, “We Will Make Them Hear Us: Millions of Youths Around the World Strike for Action,” *The Washington Post*, September 20, 2019; Emanuella Grinberg and Holly Yan, “A Generation Raised on Gun Violence Sends a Loud Message to Adults: Enough,” *CNN.com*, March 16, 2018.

<sup>122</sup> Richard Morgan, “The Story Behind the Baby Trump Balloon,” *Fortune.com*, June 8, 2019.

<sup>123</sup> Van der Griff, interview.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> Letter from Lloyd C. Brannon to Natalie Maidden, September 10, 1983, The University of Alabama Libraries Special Collections, Box 3594-001, Folder 12-A.

<sup>126</sup> “Dr. David Miller,” *Queer History*, The University of Alabama.

<sup>127</sup> Miller, interview.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> Tides of Hate at UA, “Summary.”

published in *The Crimson White* from this time demonstrates some of this homophobic sentiment in words:

“Homosexuality is a blatant form of mental illness at its optimum. It is truly inconceivable to think that such pitiful people are part of the human race. It goes to show you what a sick society we live in.”<sup>130</sup>

This scathing letter to the editor demonstrates the worst of the sentiment regarding queer people in the ‘80s, and its publishing in *The Crimson White* shows the lack of taboo on such prejudice.

### Conclusion

In such an atmosphere, with the added cultural stigma towards homophobia in the ‘80s, the GSU members likely could not afford to do much more than attempt to force the community to acknowledge queer people’s humanity—not an easy task. Members of the GSU actualized this goal by educating students, either directly through the Speaker’s Bureau, or indirectly by providing resources in the Gay Resources Library. Quiet as they may have been, these were important steps in the process of reducing negative views of queerness. David Miller perfectly describes the importance of the GSU’s quiet but consistent work:

“That’s a very gradual thing, it’s not like four quarters and somebody won. But they started doing that hard work and I’ve seen how it’s paid off. I’ve been back to the university since and I’ve seen the kind of progress that started with those students.”<sup>131</sup>

The administration, at one point, asked that the group not run a celebratory ad in the *CW* for their first anniversary, something Miller protested against, specifically arguing that the group “has to be visible in order to sustain continuity over time.”<sup>132</sup> Though the students agreed not to run the ad in the *CW*, they did make the front page of the next edition of the *Alabama Forum*.<sup>133</sup> They found ways to get around the worst of their obstacles on campus, at time seeming “quiet,” but still pursuing the kind of consistent visibility that characterizes effective political advocacy and, as Miller pointed out, that sustains student organizations through constant turnover.

Despite its obstacles, the GSU had a profound enough impact that it drew some students to the university. Van der Griff actually said in his interview that “part of the reason [he] chose to go to the University of Alabama was [he] knew they had an established gay student organization.”<sup>134</sup> Political advocacy concerns *visibility*, which determines how many people see and talk about a protest, as well as *consistency*, which builds a movement. The GSU had both, cared about both, and though it may be characterized as “quiet” by today’s standards, its work was important for starting the long process of changing community sentiment regarding queer people.

Unlike other groups, which formed solely for community and later died out, the students of the GSU in the ‘80s knew that community and advocacy could not be divorced. Their existence and openness were political statements, and instead of denying that, the GSU capitalized on it. The organization lives on today in the form of the student group Spectrum, and their work continues, as indicated by Dorothy McIntush’s experience. Queer people know that even in the Deep South, they are building on a legacy of defying discrimination to live truthfully and openly as queer people. The GSU, flawed as it was, is an important part of this history.

<sup>130</sup> Tides of Hate at UA, “Crimson White Quotes,” *Queer History*, the University of Alabama.

<sup>131</sup> Miller, interview.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Bridgit and Rachel, “GSU Celebrates 1<sup>st</sup> Anniversary,” 1-2.

<sup>134</sup> Van der Griff, interview.



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