Allied Forces

The first time I felt like I belonged at Marquette University was during my freshman year at opening night of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) film festival. It was a group of about 25 of us, all from the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA); we rode the bus together; we divided ourselves into rows at the theater. I sat between David and Nathan; David, who I spent 5 weeks with in a summer program, and Nathan, who I had only met minutes before. The content of the featured movie, Boy Culture, didn’t significantly impact my life or anything, but watching it with two males who happened to be gay on either side of me pushed me to watch carefully. The main character struggles to hide his true feelings for his male housemate, while partaking in emotionally detached sex. I think we can relate the basics of this situation to anyone struggling with their sexuality or gender through the idea of trust. Who can they confide in? How much can they confide? What started as my first film centered on a homosexual and his same-sex relations, other than Brokeback Mountain, resulted in a glimpse of the LGBT community.

The movie before – In-laws and Out-laws – documented real stories from real people. Throughout the varies stories, we laughed, we cried and we reflected. This was reality. The same-sex couples interviewed were real. For once, a movie where directors and producers set aside popular genres, special effects, and famous actors, in order to openly and honestly depict a usually ignored reality.
What does all of this mean for me? I am not the trendiest. (that’s my sister). I am not smartest (I actually got rejected from Marquette). I don’t have the attention span to read novel after novel like my fellow English majors. I frequently speak in movie and television quotes that people have never heard of. There are not many people on campus that I can relate to or that can relate to me. With the GSA, we relate to each other by not being able to relate to each other. We accept our faults and differences and move on.

Being a member of the GSA isn’t all film festivals and pot lucks though, to be the ““S” is a job that is hard to describe. It is a title I struggle with daily, one that I wish could come more easily. I accept my friends for being gay, lesbian and bisexual. What more do I need to do?

***

“So,” David began timidly, “I have a story to tell you about last night.”

*His voice cracked.* I thought. *His voice never cracks. He’s my tell-it-like-it-is friend.*

*What could his voice be cracking for?*

“I got a phone call from this guy. I think he’s a Marquette student. He’s gotta be a Marquette student. The number was blocked,” he rambled.

“What did he say?” I interjected. After a long pause, he replied:

“Stupid fag, just go die.”

I felt helpless.

My heart dropped. My heart dropped just now replaying this situation in my mind. Hearing my friend confide in me, I wanted to cry. Then I wanted to fight back. I wanted to find the nearest telephone booth, transform from Clark Kent to Superman, and destroy his arch nemesis once and for all. But this villain doesn’t have a face. He has a name. An
unknown name to my friend and to me. But not a face. I can’t fight a faceless villain. Behind this cowardly student, is an even bigger enemy. Hatred. How can I protect my closest friends from hatred? A saran wrap force field? Head to toe armor? No. We cannot punish absurdity with absurdity.

What tells a person it is okay to do this? To tell my friend, willing to accept me and others for who we are, to “die”? Who could wish this upon someone? Someone he or she doesn’t even know. A stranger.

When David was done with his visit, we got into the elevator from 12th floor of Carpenter Tower to the lobby. A group of 4 guys walk in, one being an RA, in the midst of a conversation:

“Like my hair cut?” asked one student.

“No, you look like a fag” replied the RA.

Internal dialogue: Here’s your chance Amanda. A voice. A face. The perfect set up to make it known that this kind of behavior is unacceptable. I said nothing. I half expected David to stand up for himself, but then realized why he didn’t. Out of the two of us, I am the one with nothing to lose. So what if they think I’m gay? It doesn’t matter because people who carelessly use such language don’t matter to me. I proudly wear my Ally pin, but what does that even mean if I don’t actively stand up against hatred?

Who are these people?

(1) Sometimes they are Catholic. I’m Catholic; confirmed and everything. But do I discriminate? Do I use inappropriate language to describe my feelings? Do I speak harmfully of those who are different (whatever different means)? Nope. I do not believe the Bible gives any one that right. Cowards hide behind the Bible. Cowards put hateful words in the mouth
of God, any Christian’s representation of what is good and pure in the world, our creator. Jesus invited tax collectors and prostitutes into his home, and any one else who were seen as outcasts or different. Believing this is right, why do they insist on slapping knuckles of the LGBT community? What authority can anyone have in this realm?

(2) Sometimes they are just ignorant. Sometimes they just want to fit into society. Sometimes I am ignorant. There are things that I do not know until it is too late and things I will never know. Fine. But, I include myself in this, let’s start addressing our flaws. Fess up. Let’s show each other that we, too, do not approve of what we say or do. We are human; we make mistakes. But rather than ignoring these mistakes, we admit them. Maintaining ignorance condones our actions; condoning our actions leaves no room for change and improvement. These changes are necessary for today and for the future. We cannot judge the world until we judge ourselves. We cannot fix the world until we fix ourselves.

***

I sat in the break room at work, September 23rd, 2008, yes, when I had already begun brainstorming for this personal essay. Through a chain of mildly-connected stories, we ended up talking about transsexuals. The room filled with laughter as if we were discussing last night’s favorite sitcom. But I am surrounded by people throwing their hurtful comments and disgusting jokes into the center of the room, like girl scouts would throw fresh wood into their campfire, harnessing and expanding their heat source. Flames arise. Giggles ensue. Looking around, I also noticed squinted faces of concern and/or confusion, and heads hung low. I had to be their voice. If I am going to wear my ally pin, I better start acting like an ally. But this is no innocent campfire; this is an uncontrollable blaze, spreading so fast I couldn’t find a place to throw my cup of water. Where does one begin?
“Haha, what do you even put for gender? Ya know, when you are not yet a female, but not entirely a male? Haha,” said my supervisor.

That gives me an idea. I thought. Nothing deep or inspirational, but something that can at least end the laughter...

“At service learning sign up night,” I began, “they asked, ‘male, female or other.’”

“Really? Oh that’s right,” my supervisor replied.

“Well yea,” I responded, “They have to accommodate sites like Project Q [the teen section of the LGBT community center], where I am service learning, who are more welcoming to all people.”

The jokes stopped. It was quiet.

Now, I’m not saying my comment was anything major; no sock in the gut, or philosophical epiphany, but it was what I had. I was not trying to start a political debate.

***

Natalie and David were the only ones to officially come out to me. David, because he thought I didn’t know, and Natalie, because I had no idea. New at this whole coming out story, I responded to David in a way that I now see as rude and inappropriate. It happened on our walk to the first GSA meeting. I shrugged it off.

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

He was taken aback, giggled a little, just as I had done. He tried to push it aside as no big deal, just as I did to him, but I know he wanted to yell at me. How was I supposed to know what a big deal this was?
Months later we talked about why he came to Marquette; miles away from Minnesota, he can be himself. He hadn’t come out to his friends back home; he hadn’t come out to his parents.

He should have yelled at me. David, why didn’t you yell at me?

With Natalie, I made sure it was different. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays we met in the Schroeder dining hall for lunch. She arrived late, as usual, scatterbrained and frazzled. Even though we gravitated toward different food lines, she began her string of random stories and running commentary. We sat at our usual table; she talked, I listened.

“I’m bisexual.”

I remembered the conversation David and I had had about a year previous. He told me she was bisexual, but because Natalie hadn’t talked to me about it, I thought maybe he was just assuming. I also thought about her past relationship stories. Did she have any girlfriends?

“I haven’t had any girlfriends yet. I haven’t wanted to be that girl.”

That girl? I asked myself. What does she mean by “that girl”?

“That girl who dates other girls,” she said responding to the question in my head.

Oh, Right. We live in a world where some people believe this concept to be taboo, I thought.

“I accept you.” I said. “I accept this part of your life. I’m so glad that you trusted me enough to say this to me.”

Although intense, it was a great conversation. We learned a lot about each other that day. Typical to our Friday lunches, we sat there until the dining hall staff kicked us out.
So what do I do with all of this? Can I practice what I preach and admit where I went wrong when handling, more like ruining, David’s coming out story? Do I sit him down? It was affective for Natalie, but would it be affective for us? Can I sit him down? I can’t remember the last time we had a serious conversation. He makes fun of my outfits for their color combinations and I poke fun at his trendy wear. How can I take us back to that day? *Us, back to *that* day, and apologize?