

GLBT Alive and Well

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By Robb Murray, Mankato Free Press

Photo by Luke Gronneberg



Shane Windmeyer, author off the book *The Advocate College Guide for LGBT Students*, was one of the featured speakers for National Coming Out Week at Minnesota State University. MSU made the book's list of the top 100 LGBT-friendly schools in the nation. This fall marks the 30th anniversary of there being some form of LGBT center on campus.

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The campus' political climate was volatile, and there was no lack of progressive thought. But an office, an entire office, where young gays and lesbians could go for help or to seek counseling? Was MSU ready for that? Was southern Minnesota ready for it?

Ready or not, it happened.

Thirty years later, the center is alive and well and serving roughly 5,000 students annually. The center — now called the [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Center](#) — has a full-time coordinator, an ever-expanding mission and hopes of creating an endowment that will fund scholarships and provide leadership training for its student leaders.

And it's impact is indisputable.

"Some of the people who are really active now, a year ago weren't even sure if there was a word for what they were feeling," says Jessica Flatequal, LGBT program coordinator.

Chalgren: Pioneer

To launch something so groundbreaking, so outside the mainstream, a pioneer is needed. In Mankato, that person was Jim Chalgren.

Chalgren was among the first in Mankato to openly advocate for equal treatment of gays and lesbians, and certainly the first at Mankato State University to do so so openly.

He founded the Alternative Lifestyles Office in 1977, making it the second center of its kind on a college or university campus in the nation. He was a graduate student in the counseling and student personnel program.

His activism won him state and national attention. In fact, in 1983, he was named Mr. Gay Minnesota, and he traveled to New Orleans where he represented Minnesota in a national competition.

Eventually, Chalgren left MSU but continued to push for gay rights in Mankato. He worked for several years to get a gay-rights ordinance passed in Mankato. The city, however, rejected it. And in 1987, with his health failing as he suffered from AIDS, Chalgren moved to Minneapolis, where he said there was much more support for gays and lesbians. Chalgren died in 2000. Today, an [extensive library of materials](#) relating to his life can be found at the University of Minnesota.

Center evolves

After Chalgren left, the center continued to evolve. In 1994, the center's name was changed to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Center. The word Transgender was officially added to the center's name in 2002. But perhaps the biggest, and most significant, change came in 2003. The center had sought funding for a full-time coordinator in 2003 and was initially denied. Following a dramatic sit-in outside MSU President Richard Davenport's office, Davenport changed his mind. The following year, Flatequal was hired as the full-time coordinator.

The center's location has changed much over the years, as well. Before Chalgren pushed the issues, there was no space. Once that barrier was broken down, they bounced around to various locations on campus, some of which were less than ideal.

"At one point it was in a little closet in the counseling center," said Kelly Meier, director of Student Leadership Development and Service Learning. "Seriously. It was a closet. Which is kind of ironic."

Eventually they found their current spot, in Meier's hall of student organizations in the newest wing of Centennial Student Union.

"Right now the students are really happy with their location," Meier said. "They've made it their own."

One of those students is Taryn Lindemann, a junior from Milwaukee, who says the center means a lot to her.

"It means a family environment for me," she said. "My family is so far away from home. (The people in the center) are who I go to for support."

Shift of mission

Flatequal says while the previous 25 years of a graduate-student-led center has built the foundation for all the great things that have happened, adding a full-time coordinator was what the center needed to take its effectiveness to the next level.

"I would never discredit any work of the previous grads — what they did in 20 hours a week is phenomenal," Flatequal said. "But with a full-time person, it's easier to oversee things like marketing, being a presence on university committees, working on the endowment."

Added Meier, "The addition of a full-time staff member has completely changed the face of what we can do on campus."

For years, much of the center's work was focused on what Flatequal calls the "don't hate me" events. And those still take place. But they've also added a lot more to their plate, such as finding ways to teach leadership skills to the students who use the center.

One way they hope to enhance that is through an endowment. So far the center has raised about \$50,000, about half its goal, for an endowment that will be used for scholarships and for stipends to send students to training sessions.

And they still go to classes and address LGBT issues whenever asked. Lindemann, in fact, is one of a stable of students who volunteer to talk to classes. Students, she said, almost always treat them with respect and respond favorably to what she has to say.

"We go in, we say who we are, what we represent, do our coming-out stories, take questions and answers," she said. "They ask 'Were you born this way, did you choose it, what do your parents think, what do your friends say, how were you received on campus' — anything and everything, we've gotten asked."

Whatever they're doing must be working. MSU recently was named one of the top 100 LGBT-friendly campuses in the country in the recent book "The Advocate College Guide for LGBT Students." The Advocate is a magazine geared toward gay rights issues.

Goals

Flatequal says that despite the great strides they've made during the last few years, there are many areas for improvement. For starters, the budget. Their programming budget is \$9,000, hardly the kind of money one wishes for when planning a year's worth of outreach and education. She's also a realist.

"I want people to pay attention to us, I want to be treated equally," she says. "But I also respect all the other departments and I would never want something at their expense."

In the next few years, Flatequal hopes to do more with the 'T' part of LGBT. So far, she says, it's sort of been the forgotten initial. She also hopes to reach out to other populations on campus, such as the various ethnic groups with recognized student organizations, and include LGBT members of those populations in the work the center does.

Says Lindemann, "I think it adds a wealth of knowledge most campuses don't necessarily have."