

## Student Voices from the LGBTQ Center @ Connecticut College

### Why QPOC+

By Karina Hernandez, '14

Working in the LGBTQ Center literally thrust me from the margin to the center. I was visibly out on campus and visibly not white (a complete outsider). There were few queer students of color who felt comfortable enough to enter the LGBTQ Center. Working in the LGBTQ Center as a coordinator and joining the Exec board of Spectrum was difficult. Yet, I was grateful that Jen pushed me to step up and speak out when my internalized homophobia shook my core. Jen helped me find the words that called out LGBT oppression. Slowly, I collected the tools necessary to empower my community and my identity. At the end of my sophomore spring, the LGBTQ community and our allies formed great coalitions (including the Connecticut College Diversity Coalition/ CCDC) in order to demand gender inclusive bathrooms for the campus (and we won that).

While things progressed for LGBTQ students at Conn, I continued to feel a divide between my sexuality and racial differences. Racial difference was one intersection where queer students could not see eye to eye, partly because we could not understand it. Our queer community feared discussing race. Yet, many queer students of color, including myself, were hurt by the overt and covert racism we experienced, both on campus and in our queer communities. We were all still discovering the words that could tackle racial oppression. Out of that pain, queer students of color organized, with Anthony Sis and I leading them in a new group called Queer People of Color. We envisioned QPOC as a group that would meet maybe once a month, or once every two weeks, to come together and heal our wounds. When we met, we immediately recognized QPOC as one of the safest spaces for queer students of color to learn from each other and from our experiences. We deliberately remained an unofficial group on campus with no hierarchies and met weekly. It has been a whole year now since QPOC started and the group is stronger than it has ever been. Anthony and I managed to bridge the tensions between sexuality and race and/ or ethnicity.

As seniors, Anthony and I feel so proud to see many new faces at QPOC. We have so many strong and intelligent freshmen that want to learn how power and oppression works. We decided to make QPOC an Affiliated Student Organization of the college. We changed QPOC to QPOC+ to represent all of our allies who face the front lines with us. QPOC+ represents the culmination of my work as an activism and my queer identity. Without QPOC+ and the LGBTQ Center, I would never have found the strength to come out to my family.

### Why I Like Studying Gender & Sexuality

Dakota Peschel, '15

Coming to Conn, I had a vague understanding of gender and sexuality based on what I had learned from alternative media and in my high school classes. Everything seemed very abstract to me, and I have to admit I was terribly uninformed about the history and recent advancements of the feminist and LGBTQ movements. I have taken multiple classes that have focused on issues of gender, sexuality, class, and race. This has helped me to develop a different lens through which to see the world. I have learned the importance of deconstructing a range of different mediums in order to address how power and privilege are exercised in order to marginalize those deemed "other."

A lot of my own personal growth has come from talking with my peers outside of the classroom. There are consistently a myriad of events about these issues organized by and for students. I am also lucky to have many friends who are passionate about gender and sexuality studies, and as such, have had in-depth conversations with them about issues that have made me question my own beliefs. One issue that I have struggled with recently was whether to label myself a "feminist" or a "pro-feminist." This came up while I was up late writing a sociology paper with my classmate and one of my best friends explained to me that I could not actually label myself a "feminist" because I had never been oppressed by my gender. This is just one small example of the discussions that have had on this campus that have shaped my views about gender and sexuality. I have grown into a well-spoken and informed individual through my experiences here, and my hope is that I will continue to learn about these issues and grow for the rest of my life.

As a gay man, I have been made to feel uncomfortable in many public spaces. I have always been acutely aware of how heteronormative and sexist most people are through their actions and their words. My friends from my hometown still use the word "gay" as a synonym for stupid. I have never taken this personally, although lately my critical eye has been sharpened and I will use it to call out injustices I see around me, and I will probably start fighting back. I believe that it is important for me to study these issues because equality is not something that naturally happens on its own; it takes changes within people who then organize their communities to effectively change the way the world operates. I feel as though my experiences at Conn are preparing me to take the next steps in fighting for a more equitable society.

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### Activism & Academics

Amber Villanueva, '14

When I first came to Connecticut College, I knew that I wanted to be involved with Queer activism on campus. Growing up with the knowledge that my grandmother was murdered for being openly gay and living with her partner has fostered my commitment to activism. In her life, she was herself committed to activism, as a co-founder of the first Queer group in her area. Sharing her memory offers a powerful story to for others, demonstrating the importance of activism. At Conn, I have told her story several times at the yearly vigil for victims of hate crimes as well as at new student orientation. I have found that people are very affected by this story and come to understand the importance of their words and actions everyday. With the realization of my own Queer identity, my commitment to activism only increased.

I have taken my interest in Queer activism and melded it with everything I have been involved with in my time at Connecticut College. My major in Gender and Women's Studies, becoming a PICA scholar (Certificate in Community Action and Public Policy) and many of the organizations I am part of have provided opportunities for queer activism. I have chosen to volunteer, intern and organize events at Alliance for Living, a non-profit that serves the needs of people living with HIV/AIDS and chosen the subject of HIV as part of my PICA project and MMUF research, partially as a result of the relationship this disease has with the LGBTQ community. As a writer for *The College Voice*, I wrote about the suspension of the bathroom conversion in Fanning, helping to kick off the protest. I was then also heavily involved in the activism that followed, collecting signatures and educating people on the issues, (learning a lot myself), attending meetings and the discussion with SGA. This one was of the most significant direct actions I have been involved with in on campus.

The morning of the protest in Spring 2012, we placed signs announcing the opening of the bathrooms as gender inclusive and decorated the halls of Fanning with rainbow streamers and balloons. We passed out invitations to students to come support our demonstration and hear our speech and celebrated our gender inclusive bathroom opening and collected over 300 signatures. Our voices were heard, and the administration proposed building a new gender inclusive bathroom, which was completed last year. Afterwards, President Higdon even invited us to a meeting with several deans and himself to discuss other issues that concerned us. This form of social activism is exemplary of the struggles and successes involved in achieving goals of social justice at Conn.

### Classroom Advocacy

Julia Cristofano, '14

When I think of how The LGBTQ Center has affected me, the most prominent thing that comes to mind is my ability to speak out as an LGBTQ advocate in the classroom. Earlier in my college career, I may have let homophobic comments or off handed remarks slide, but now I feel a responsibility to address these remarks made by my peers and professors. I have become acutely aware of micro-aggressions, or at times egregiously ignorant comments, in which my classmates convey unrecognized or uninformed homophobic views. The LGBTQ Center has provided me with the support I needed to embrace and celebrate my own sexuality and the resources to address the inequalities I see around me. I feel an obligation to represent my community in the classroom, even when that means outing myself to a group of strangers and taking on the risk of being personally targeted.

Through defending LGBTQ rights and addressing harmful stereotypes, I have also found myself much more aware of the intersectionality of oppression, extending beyond gender and sexuality, to race, class, and ethnicity. The Center has broadened my critical outlook on the world, my peers, and myself in a way that I was sheltered from for most of my life. I now feel both a passion and an obligation to continue to expand my own understanding of oppression in society and amongst individuals. I am aware, in a way I never was before, of the meaning behind my actions and my words; how they are influenced by and affect other people.

When I first set foot into The LGBTQ Center my freshman year, blinded by the jarringly colorful walls, I could have never imagined how it would come to be such an integral part of my life at Conn. Even until this year, I liked to maintain the notion that whatever the physical space of the LGBTQ Center itself had provided me paled in comparison to the incredible faculty, staff, and students that I have met who care so deeply about human rights. Despite my continually offended color pallet, the friends, meetings and conversations that have helped to form the person that I am today would not have been possible without The Center itself.

People devoted to a cause will always find each other; they will make room for themselves and their work when there is none. The LGBTQ Center takes away that burden and acts as an ever-present space where people and ideas can converge. It is a sacred space. It is a safe space. Because of The Center, I feel empowered to bring that space into my classrooms, my residence halls, my family and every aspect of my life.