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Auburn's LGBT community celebrates sexual expression on campus

5–6 minutes

Oct. 11, 1987 marked the first-ever National Coming Out Day, a celebration of sexual identity among the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender community.

Today, NCOD is an internationally recognized holiday, allowing people still "trapped in the closet" to come out and publicly declare their sexual orientation.

This year, NCOD falls at the end of a week where the Supreme Court declined to hear the appealed gay marriage bans in five different states, opening the door for marriage equality in 30 states total.

Though attitudes toward gay rights and marriage equality are changing, social stigma in conservative communities is still holding many back, said Ariel Barasch, president of the Auburn Gay-Straight Alliance and senior in English and resource management. "The biggest obstacle to coming out is the reaction that people get," Barasch said. "Especially when you're a teenager. If you come out to your family and your family is very conservative, if you get kicked out of your house what are you going to do? There's nowhere to go, so you just stay in the closet because you would rather live in your home than be who you are, which is a horrible

trade-off but it's one you have to make."

The Auburn Spectrum provides the support many recently declared LGBT students lack at home, Barasch said.

Through concourse events, classroom outreach and public panels Spectrum encourages both social acceptance on campus and confidence to come out.

"We're a safe space, anyone can come in and feel safe among us," Barasch said. "We get some people who are pretty excited about it, and they make it worth it, just to show those people that we have a presence on campus, that people aren't alone."

Throughout the week of Oct. 11, Spectrum and the Office of Diversity and Multicultural Affairs hosted events around campus to promote discussions of gender identity and sexual equality.

In addition to student-run programs, Auburn hosted two advocates for LGBT rights, Robyn Ochs and Chad Griffin.

Allen Sutton, OMD director, said he wants to provide the same services and support for the LGBT at Auburn that he helped develop in his previous job at Texas A&M.

"[LGBT Month and Coming Out Day] is something that we did fairly often at Texas A&M," Sutton said. "Texas A&M was very supportive of LGBT students, so supportive in fact that they actually have a LGBT resource center that's directly tied to LGBT students and has programming for those students."

Sutton said he would like to establish an LGBT resource center at Auburn to continue to provide support for students throughout the year.

In the meantime, programming featuring Chad Griffin, head of the Human Rights Campaign and Robyn Ochs, editor of the LGBT Resource Guide, are ways to encourage sexual identity awareness.

"Robyn Ochs was someone that I specifically sought out to bring on campus," Sutton said. "I've heard her speak at several venues, she's very down to earth, she's someone who knows how to talk about LGBT issues without trying to force it on anyone."

Sutton said he chose Ochs because she comes across very naturally when talking about issues concerning LGBT students. Ochs spent Thursday, Oct. 9, lecturing around Auburn's campus, including short presentation during a business management class in Lowder where she discussed her own personal experiences.

"My very first month of college I fell head over heels in love with another woman and until that point I had never considered the possibility," Ochs said. "I was frozen with fear, I spent more time thinking about this than my schoolwork, to be quite honest. It took me a really long time to come to a place of comfort with my identity and I'm really happy to say that now I'm very comfortable with my identity, but it's not an easy thing because there's so much silence."

Ochs called the expansion of LGBT rights and gender expression through government legislation "a huge step forward," but it's only another part of the campaign for complete equality.

"We are in a moment of profound cultural change," Ochs said.

"Part of that change happens through the legislative process and by extension through the judicial process, [but] the bulk of that change needs to happen through hearts and minds, through personal conversations, through education and through increasing awareness by having people stand up and tell their own personal stories. Ending a discriminatory law doesn't end discrimination."

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