

**An Oral History of Gay and Lesbian Activism
at Wake Forest University 1985 to 2000**

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It was one semester of hell, but it taught me how to organize... looking back at that experience was probably the most life changing experience at Wake Forest that I had.¹

Jeremy Bishop's mixed feelings about turning a "semester of hell" into a learning experience is representative of what on-campus activism meant for many LGBTQ students. Bishop served as the President of Wake Forest University's (WFU) gay and lesbian advocacy group, the Gay Straight Student Alliance (GSSA), through one of the most controversial debates in the school's history—a conflict between the university and the Baptist Church regarding the union of two lesbians in the campus chapel in 1999. The controversy gave GSSA and other student groups a platform to exercise their passion for advocacy and to gain visibility. The union was not the only instance in which student activism was pivotal for the gay community. Although 'organizing,' as Jeremy put it, was important for leaders of change, gay and lesbian students at Wake Forest used activism through the GSSA to bring about policy and to combat discrimination in addition to self-empowerment and identity development, and to build social ties. Activists achieved these interpersonal benefits in the process of unifying to change campus climate, and by the climate change itself. From 1985 to 2000, student-led, grassroots activism at Wake Forest University resulted in administrative changes that provided visibility and therefore increased agency for gay and lesbian students.

This paper seeks to tell the story of gay and lesbian activism at Wake Forest University through the perspective of students using a source base including twenty-two oral history interviews of students who attended WFU from the 1980s to the 2000s. The individuals interviewed have a variety of identities; although almost all of the interviews used in this paper

¹ Jeremy Bishop, interviewed by Catherine Medlock-Walton, February 24, 2012, transcript, 5.

are those of white, gay men. Because this was the only source base available, it is important to bring attention to all of the student perspectives that are omitted from this story. The gay history of activism at WFU does not include the perspectives of many women, people who identify as lesbian, bisexual, trans*, queer, or people of color. The oral histories are also limited as undergraduate students conducted the interviews as a part of a Queer Public Histories course in 2011 and 2015, taught by Dr. Angela Mazaris, who is currently the Director of the LGBTQ Center at WFU. With the knowledge that it was Wake Forest students conducting the interviews for classroom purposes, interviewees could have altered their responses to reflect a more positive image of the university.

While recognizing the limitations of oral history, particularly oral history with an interview base comprised of solely gay, white men, it is also important to make clear that the stories of these men are invaluable. In this paper, their interviews have been corroborated with a variety of primary sources located in the Wake Forest University Archives, such as newspaper and magazine articles, student publications, email correspondence, hand-written letters, administrative reports and memorandums, student organization constitutions, and graduate theses to create a fuller picture of a gay² activist history on campus. By using other primary sources to cross-check historical facts, the oral history interviews became a valuable source for constructing a factual narrative. The interviews were also useful because of the nature of oral history; as Kevin P. Murphy and Jennifer L. Pierce point out, "the charged and unpredictable encounter of the oral history interview works to unsettle and destabilize received narratives of social identity,

² In the 1980s and 1990s, 'gay' was used as an umbrella term to refer to many sexualities, instead of the more contemporary term 'LGBTQ.' In this paper, I will use 'gay' in the same way, to be historically accurate.

community formation, and historical progress.”³ The destabilization that oral history gives way to is particularly valuable for queer history, which is inherently sexualized and nonconformist. The instability of the interview process is ideal for uncovering the untraditional narratives of the gay identity.

The role that gay student organizations played in relation to the gay liberation movement and to queer history in general is crucial. Unfortunately, as Brett Beemyn points out in his essay ‘The Silence Is Broken: A History of the First Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual College Student Groups,’ the history of gay student groups in colleges “has been largely overlooked by LGBT historians.”⁴ There are only a handful of gay university histories, and even fewer secondary sources on the historical role of gay student groups. Melinda Miceli’s book, ‘Standing Out, Standing Together — The Social and Political Impact of Gay-Straight Alliances’ tackles the importance of gay student groups, however, her book is based on high schools, not universities and colleges. The few scholars who have written LGBTQ histories of their respective universities include Swarthmore’s Lauren Stokes (2007), Duke University’s Jess McDonald (2010), Appalachian State’s Kathryn Staley (2011), and University of North Carolina Chapel Hill’s Evan T. Faulkenbury and Arron Hayworth (2016). Each of these scholars explores their school’s queer history, and all root the stories in a larger national context by beginning with a single historical flashpoint: the 1969 Stonewall riots. Scholars generally agree that the Stonewall rebellion led to the gay liberation movement across the nation, and therefore on campuses.

Beemyn, however, nullifies this idea, pointing out that “Columbia officially chartered the

³ Kevin P. Murphy, Jennifer L. Pierce, and Jason Ruiz, “What Makes Queer Oral History Different.” *Oral History Review* 43, no. 1 (April 1, 2016): 7.

⁴ Brett Beemyn, “The Silence Is Broken: A History of the First Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual College Student Groups.” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 12, no. 2 (2003): 206.

country's first student gay rights group on April 19, 1967;"⁵ Columbia's Student Homophile League was formed two years before the Stonewall riots occurred. It could certainly be said that Stonewall was a catalyst for the gay liberation movement on campuses, as by 1971, there were gay student organizations at more than one hundred and seventy-five colleges and universities nationwide,⁶ but as evidenced by Breemyn, college students were also thinking about creating space for gay student organizations prior to the riots.

Despite Southern conservatism, the gay liberation movement was taking hold in North Carolina as well throughout the 1970s. By 1980, Appalachian State University, Duke University, East Carolina University, Guilford College, North Carolina State University, UNC-Chapel Hill, and UNC-Greensboro had all approved gay student organizations.⁷ Wake Forest University was almost twenty years late to the scene, as its first gay student organization was not approved until 1991. The fact that WFU is a private university with a Baptist, conservative background is an explanation for this. There are also several other factors. Nella van Dyke writes that institutions are more likely to experience student activism if they are larger and if they have a history of activism (schools who had student protests in the 1930s were four times more likely to have protests in the 1960s).⁸ Wake Forest is a relatively small school, with only around thirty-six hundred undergraduate students at the time, and there is no evidence confirming significant student protest in the school's past. These factors, combined with a Southern baptist culture,

⁵ Ibid, 207.

⁶ Ibid, 222.

⁷ Kathryn Staley, "Gay Liberation Comes to Appalachian State University (1969-1979)." *Appalachian Journal* 39, no. 1/2 (2011): 76.

⁸ Nella van Dyke, "Hotbeds of Activism: Locations of Student Protest." *Social Problems* 45, no. 2 (1998): 205 and 212.

conservatism, and elitism, give a big picture view of why Wake Forest did not approve a gay student organization until 1991. It is also important to note that because the institution did not approve a gay organization until 1991 does not mean that students did not attempt to create one. In the 1970s and 1980s, many gay student groups attempted to organize but due to a “perceived breach of propriety” and “public relations nightmares, many schools asserted their authority over students by refusing to officially recognize” them. There is the possibility that students attempted to create a gay organization, but WFU did not approve it.

The 1980s were a difficult time for LGBTQ individuals. Ronald Reagan’s election in 1980 was indicative of the popular conservatism that was taking hold across the country. The AIDS epidemic hit gay communities hard, contributing to a national anxiety around the fact that “AIDS was a death sentence. And being gay was very much associated with activity that got you killed.”⁹ Anxiety around AIDS and conservatism hit home for Wake Forest, with “fiercely conservative”¹⁰ Jesse Helms as the North Carolina Representative at the time. It could be said that the political and health climate of the 1980s is an explanation for why WFU did not establish a gay student group until 1991. Thousands of student groups gained momentum in the 1970s¹¹ as the gay liberation movement took hold; however, in the 1980s, this momentum died down for many student groups; Faulkenbury and Hayworth illustrate this decline through UNC-Chapel Hill’s Carolina Gay Association (CGA). The CGA, Faulkenbury and Hayworth write, had “lost much of its influence since the 1970s,” as the nation’s climate in the 1980s caused the group to

⁹ Shane Harris, interviewed by Justice von Maur, October 23, 2015, transcript, 6.

¹⁰ Jess McDonald, “Narrative History of LGBT Life at Duke.” Duke University, 2010. <https://studentaffairs.duke.edu/csgd/about-us/history-lgbtq-life-duke/narrative-history-lgbt-life-duke>.

¹¹ Beemyn, 222.

become “smaller, more isolated, and less influential at UNC.”¹² The 1980s were a trying time for the survival of already well established gay student groups, therefore, it makes more sense that the formation of a gay student group at Wake Forest was highly unlikely until the decade had passed.

When reflecting on the AIDS epidemic, Ken Badgett ('87) recalled that on campus, “there was some sense that people [gays] were getting what they deserved.”¹³ Several former students said that being gay was a taboo topic to address—people did not talk about it. The invisibility of gay and lesbian identities on campus made “the overall atmosphere very oppressive,”¹⁴ according to David Styres ('92). A student magazine, *Reality At Wake* (RAW), confirms Badgett and Styres' sentiments. The issue published at the beginning of the 1989-90 school year included a section called ‘Homosexuality: Out of the Closet.’ In this section, the student magazine otherized gay students, explaining that “the Wake Forest homosexual, for the most part, appears to be your average student,” indicating that there was a general sentiment that—until this time—being gay was not normal. The section further portrayed gay students as ‘other’ by arguing that “open gay life is not accepted by the majority of students, and this is probably the biggest reason that gay life here is truly of an underground nature.”¹⁵ The text continued to assure gay people that they may “retain some semblance of normalcy” at Wake

¹² T. Evan Faulkenbury, and Aaron Hayworth. “The Carolina Gay Association, Oral History, and Coming Out at the University of North Carolina.” *Oral History Review* 43, no. 1 (April 1, 2016): 133.

¹³ Kenneth Badgett, interviewer unknown, October 22, 2015, transcript, 4.

¹⁴ William Hawk and David Styres, interviewed by Sterling Wilkins, February 2012, transcript, 11.

¹⁵ *RAW (Reality At Wake) Magazine*, Wake Forest University, 1989, 46.

Forest, as long as they joined Greek life and expressed their sexuality in downtown Winston-Salem or on other campuses in North Carolina.

Almost all of the individuals interviewed who attended WFU in the 1980s recount that the student body expected gay and lesbian students to render themselves invisible and to stick to the status quo. The administration, however, took a different approach by providing a support group for gay and lesbian students through the Counseling Center. This support group ran for approximately ten years, starting around 1987. The counseling group was a secret group that aimed to give gay and lesbian students a safe and confidential space. Stephen Russell ('88) remembers the classified nature of the group:

There was a support group that had started that was like a big top secret... I remember a friend that went and told me that she had to promise—you had to go meet with someone at the counseling center and promise them, like verify that you absolutely affirm that you are gay or lesbian before you'd be allowed to go to the meeting because the meeting was so secret because people were so afraid of their identities being known... There were fliers that were posted around campus and you could like, call this number and what I remember my friend—who is a woman—I remember her saying to me 'god, I don't know what to do because I don't know if I'm a lesbian and they want me to say that I am a lesbian before they let me come to the group but I want to come to the group because I want to *figure out* whether I'm a lesbian.' It was a terrible catch-22.¹⁶

The process that Stephen's friend had told him about was a reality. The counseling group had a required procedure for students to join the group: they had to participate in two private sessions with a counsellor. Given the campus climate around gayness, many students appreciated the confidentiality that this procedure guaranteed.¹⁷ Other students, however, felt that the support group through the counseling center pathologized their sexuality by treating gayness as a mental

¹⁶ Stephen Russel, interviewed by Christopher Thomas, February 20, 2012, transcript, 5.

¹⁷ Nicola Dawkins, "Success of Two Support Groups in Meeting the Needs of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Students at One Private, Southeastern University: Confidentiality vs. Visibility," Thesis. Wake Forest University, 1994, 11.

disorder. One student, Chris Cooper (96'), felt as if the confidentiality of the support group was Wake Forest's way of 'hiding' the fact that there were gay people on campus:

The only way the university sort of dealt with gay issues on campus was to think of it as a mental health problem and help to provide resources... in order to get into this counseling group, you would have to go to the counseling center, have two sessions, private sessions with a psychiatrist therapist where you talked about issues of your sexuality and then that person had to allow you into the group. So the whole thing was designed for, you know, 'dont let anybody know there's gay people at Wake Forest.'¹⁸

The counselors who led the support group were aware that some students had these sentiments by 1994. About seven years after the group was established, a Wake Forest graduate student, Nicola Dawkins, wrote a thesis called *Success of Two Support Groups in Meeting the Needs of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Students at One Private, Southeastern University: Confidentiality vs. Visibility*; with the "southeastern university" being Wake Forest University. The fact that Dawkins chose to keep WFU anonymous in the paper speaks volumes about the university's reluctance to embrace gay student identities at the time. To investigate whether gay students benefited more from visibility or confidentiality, Dawkins interviewed one of the support group counsellors who said that she was aware that there were complaints that the group was "run by a counselor." The counselor was cognizant that students felt they were being pathologized through the group, as she lamented "a lot of people think this is a therapy group. There is a feeling that I will be trying to do therapy when all the members want to do is talk about basketball."¹⁹ The counselor's awareness of student sentiments is indicative that the university was well meaning in establishing a private support group for gay and lesbian students.

¹⁸ Christopher Cooper, interviewed by Miranda Davis, February 19, 2012, transcript, 11.

¹⁹ Dawkins, 12.

In fact, both UNC Chapel Hill²⁰ and Appalachian State University²¹ had put counseling groups in place for gay and lesbian students before gay student groups existed on campus. At AP State, the counseling center offered such a group in 1976—three years before the administration approved the formation of the Appalachian Gay Awareness Association (AGAA). In Staley's essay, she explains that the group's purpose "was to discuss everyday problems due to homosexual preference, rather than change one's sexual orientation or determine its cause."²² At AP State, there was a recognition of the fact that people may have construed a counseling group as pathologizing, rather than as a space to address sexuality while honoring confidentiality.

Despite the efforts of the counseling group—and even the students—to keep gay identities in the private sphere at Wake Forest, gay and lesbian students were forced out of the campus closet. Will Hawk ('93) recalled on-going harassment in the form of bathroom graffiti: there was a "list of people that were gay or presumed to be gay."²³ It is not clear whether this list was intended to be harassment or perhaps an inadvertent attempt by a gay student to create a skewed sense of community by outing others. Regardless, in Spring of 1991, some students decided that visibility was more important than confidentiality and they formed the first gay and lesbian student group: the Gay and Lesbian Alliance (GALA). There is no evidence showing who officially drafted the charter and got the group approved by the university, but Hawk took over as the group's President in Fall of 1991 and he remained in that position until he graduated in

²⁰ Faulkenbury and Hayworth, 121.

²¹ Staley, 76.

²² Ibid.

²³ Hawk and Styres, 13.

Spring of 1993. Hawk's leadership of GALA was pivotal for gay and lesbian visibility on campus; his presidency included many disappointments, but also significant successes.

Hawk hit the ground running with several events planned for the Spring semester of 1992. In January of that year, the group hosted the first ever gay and lesbian film festival on campus, during which they screened three gay-themed films on VHS. Hawk described the festival as "a lot of fun."²⁴ GALA also organized a faculty-student panel on religion and sexuality that Spring. The group had confirmed participation from the university Chaplain, Ed Christman, which was a significant step toward combatting homophobia in the religious community on campus. However, Styres, who was on GALA's executive board, recalled that "about a day before the event, Ed Christman backed out and I never had a definitive conversation about what caused him to decide that he could not participate."²⁵ This was not the only time GALA was let down by university administrators. Weeks later, the group's leadership had scheduled a meeting with the university president, Dr. Thomas Hearn, to request increased GALA funding for the following school year. Hawk and Styres used this meeting to inform Hearn of their successful student outreach efforts, including both social and educational activities, and how this, in turn, had the potential to improve Wake Forest's reputation as being "closed-minded and conservative."²⁶ The students' recollection of that meeting demonstrated Hearn's ignorance of sexuality:

He used the metaphor that being gay was the same as playing tennis—it was just a hobby in his mind. Some students went and played tennis, some people went and

²⁴ Hawk and Styres, 6.

²⁵ Idid, 7.

²⁶ Hawk and Styres, 9.

were gay, and there was no need to increase any support for gay students just like there was no need to increase any more support for students who played tennis.²⁷

Hearn's assertion that identifying as gay was not only simply a hobby, but a 'hobby' that was not worthy of funding was demoralizing to GALA. The student body's general reactions to the presence of an established gay and lesbian student group on campus were similar to Hearn's: Styres recalls that "on at least one occasion," fliers announcing GALA meeting times and events were literally burned off of bulletin boards.

Despite discouragements, the group persevered and garnered support of faculty members such as Associate Professor of Economics Perry Patterson, and Associate Professor of English Mary DeShazer. These professors were instrumental in not only providing emotional support, but also administrative support in regards to funding. Patterson and DeShazer helped secure funds for the group, which had evolved into the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Awareness group (GALBA or GLBA) by Spring of 1993. Consequently, GALBA was able to have the first gay and lesbian rights rally on campus, and to send a group to Greensboro to visit the AIDS quilt.²⁸

GALBA's increased activist momentum was a contributing factor to a significant policy change. In April of 1993, the administration added sexual orientation to Wake Forest University's non-discrimination policy. This was a faculty-headed effort: DeShazer and Perry had "drafted the resolution and sent eighty letters to faculty members concerning co-sponsoring" it.²⁹ The resolution ultimately passed by a faculty vote of 84 to 16. Although faculty spearheaded the modified non-discrimination policy, the student newspaper, the *Old Gold and Black* explained

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid, 7.

²⁹ Rachel Sheedy, "Faculty endorses new stand on gays," *Old Gold and Black* (Wake Forest University), April 15, 1993.

that “on campus, discussion [about gay rights] has increased due to the national climate and to the Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Issues Awareness group’s effort to educate students.”³⁰ Passing the resolution to include sexual orientation in the university’s non-discrimination policy was significant in regards to student activism fostering conversation that grounded and complimented tangible, administrative changes.

Changes in policy and visibility helped GALBA gain financial support from the university to coordinate another significant trip: the participation in the 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation. GALBA received money for gas from the university, and the executive board was able to coordinate with WFU alumni in D.C. to house students for the weekend. According to the *Old Gold and Black*, “the Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Issues Awareness group plans to use the heightened visibility from the march to promote sensitivity to sexual issues among students.”³¹ The March on Washington served to do more for the gay and lesbian community on campus than just promote sensitivity among the student body. It was also beneficial to many gay and lesbian students on a personal level. Will Hawk, for example, believed that the “spirit” from the March on Washington

helped a lot of people who were not yet out or were just coming out to go back to the campus and be good leaders. In particular, we knew two people who really made the GALBA group a bit more radical in the years just after we graduated so I definitely saw that.³²

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ken J. Stuckey, “Students, faculty to march in D.C. for gay rights,” *Old Gold and Black* (Wake Forest University), April 22, 1993.

³² Hawk and Styres, 28.

Hawk was correct. Spring 1993 marked the semester that Hawk graduated, and therefore handed his GALBA presidency off to other passionate student activists. The leadership that presided over GALBA was indeed significantly more radical in its approaches to visibility and activism.

Christopher Cooper ('96) took over as GALBA president in the Fall of 1993, the semester after Hawk graduated. Cooper was one of the students inspired by the 1993 March on Washington to return to campus and be a “good,” and “radical” leader. He recalls that attending the march was “seminole” and “transformative” for him.³³ Cooper’s leadership was defined by radicalism in terms of his approaches to visibility. These approaches communicated unapologetic pride in gay identity, even if they made people, including gay students, uncomfortable. In Dawkins’ thesis, she quotes from an interview with an anonymous student whom she refers to as a “leader” for GALBA—who most likely was Chris Cooper. In his interview with Dawkins, Cooper summarized his leadership style:

I think if we sacrifice temporary person comfort for the long term transformation of the environment, then gay students can’t help but be grateful... We have a mission that maybe gay students here right now can’t recognize or appreciate, but it’s one that we feel is important enough that we have to stand by it with or without their support.³⁴

In addition to his creative visibility campaigns, Cooper made important strides in his first semester as president such as facilitating a GALBA Alumni Homecoming Mixer attended by “thirty-five alumni from New York, Chicago, Washington D.C., and... Winston-Salem,”³⁵ and

³³ Cooper, 6.

³⁴ Dawkins, 13.

³⁵ Sharrika D Davis, “Having Pride: Improving the Campus Climate for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Students at Wake Forest University, Main Campus,” Thesis. Wake Forest University, 1998, 22.

the continuation of already established GALBA traditions such as the Spring gay and lesbian film festival.³⁶ GALBA made significant leeway administratively under Cooper as well, as in Fall 1995, Cooper secured official funding from the Student Budget Allocation Committee (SBAC) for the group.

With the administration beginning to be on-board with supporting gay and lesbian students, Cooper and GALBA adopted radical campaigns for visibility and empowerment. One such campaign was expressed through dress by subverting the homogenous student body at Wake Forest. Cooper described how the typical Wake Forest male had a “look” marked by donning khaki pants and a white t-shirt. To promote National Coming Out Day in October, many schools such as Duke University had a Blue Jeans Day, where gay, lesbian, and bisexual students would wear jeans to show pride for their sexualities.³⁷ Instead of wearing blue jeans, GALBA advertised that gay and lesbian students should adopt the Wake Forest male ‘look,’ and wear khaki trousers to show that they were “out and proud.”³⁸ The goal was to force the majority group to alter their typical look, making a conscious choice to wear jeans on that day. Claiming khaki pants as representative of gay and lesbian pride on Coming Out Day was a method of putting the marginalized group in the position of power through dress. Moreover, seeing a straight man wearing khakis on that day functioned as a private and unifying joke among gay identified students. Cooper’s campaigns often sought to empower and unite the gay community through subverting homogenous, heterosexual, white masculinity on campus.

³⁶ Cooper, 13.

³⁷ McDonald.

³⁸ Cooper, 13.

At one point, Cooper also encouraged GALBA members to write “too cute to be straight” in “big letters” on the quad sidewalk with arrows pointing at the Theta Chi fraternity lounge wall “where we [GALBA] knew they [the fraternity] would be sitting later that day.”³⁹ Another graduate thesis by Sharrika Davis called ‘Having Pride: Improving the Campus Climate for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Students at Wake Forest University, Main Campus,’ fills in the gap explaining the nature of this particular chalking. On the student-run WAKE TV show, *Politics Unplugged*, a student called in and said that “homosexuals should be burned at the stake.”⁴⁰ According to Davis, “GLB students acted in opposition to [the student’s] opinion by writing gay-friendly statements and art on the sidewalks.”⁴¹ There is no evidence confirming that Cooper’s Theta Chi chalking is the same incident that Davis describes, but the timelines do align. If they are the same instances, this means that Davis described the phrase “too cute to be straight” as a “gay-friendly statement.” This is indicative that the type of activism practiced by GALBA rooted gay positivity in subversion tactics.

There is no oral history record of the sentiments of students who were GALBA members under Cooper’s leadership but the former-president asserts that GALBA’s gags at the expense of traditional masculinity were unifying and combative of gay invisibility on campus. There is one source, however, that suggests that some gay students were weary of Cooper’s radicalism. In Dawkins’ study, a gay student who was not a member of GALBA expressed that he did think that visibility was important, but he also believed that “often methods to achieve visibility are detrimental as they can be offensive if not approached in the right way. Radical visibility is

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Davis, 21.

⁴¹ Ibid.

counter productive.”⁴² In Davis’ study, one gay male student expressed that he had “been somewhat ostracized by people in GALBA. I don’t have the same political views as a lot of the people there.”⁴³ Although GALBA was effective in bringing visibility to gay and lesbian issues on campus, the group’s radical activism under Cooper meant that GALBA did not function as a safe space for many gay students. In the mid-nineties, it was more important for the group to be a politically charged activist group than to grow and foster a gay community. Based on these testimonies, some gay students did not feel they were openly welcomed into the group unless they were willing to sacrifice privacy around their sexuality for activistic purposes. As Cooper said, GALBA had “a mission that maybe gay students here right now can’t recognize or appreciate, but it’s one that... we have to stand by with or without their support.”⁴⁴

Visibility versus confidentiality was a significant tension in gay activism on many campuses, not just WFU. In Beemyn’s history of the first gay student groups at Cornell University, he writes that many students “would participate in the group only if they could remain completely anonymous.”⁴⁵ More recently, this tension came to a head at Duke University with the formation of an additional gay student group in order to protect confidentiality. The Duke Gay Alliance (DGA) was formed in 1972 at Duke, and the group’s name was changed to Gothic Queers (GQ) in the late nineties as a reclamation of the term ‘queer’ and to establish the group as out and proud.⁴⁶ Similar to Wake Forest, there were also gay students who did not feel comfortable participating in a gay student group whose main purpose was to foster gay visibility.

⁴² Dawkins, 10.

⁴³ Davis, 44.

⁴⁴ Dawkins, 20.

⁴⁵ Beemyn, 207.

⁴⁶ McDonald.

Therefore, gay students and allies created a second gay group called Duke Allies (DA). In 2002, the president of DA was quoted saying, “Duke Allies gives people who are in the closet, or people who are intimidated by GQ an outlet. We really wanted to make it more of a stepping-stone to activism or the gay social atmosphere on campus.”⁴⁷ DA protected gay students by allowing them to have a sense of community, while honoring their privacy by not requiring them to label themselves as gay. The DA used the existence of allies to protect gay students who were not public about their sexuality.

The student in Dawkins’ study referring to GALBA’s method of visibility as “offensive” may have been witness to one instance where Cooper’s radicalism perhaps crossed a line on the early hours of graduation morning. For the WFU class of 1996 graduation, Senator, Sam Nunn (D-GE), had been selected by the university to give the keynote address. Gay and lesbian students on campus were upset about the choice because Senator Nunn had an official and open record of homophobic practices. At one point, he said he had let two of his aides go for being gay, because gayness was a threat to Central Intelligence Agency security.⁴⁸ In response to the university designating Nunn as the keynote, GALBA members made fliers that included Nunn’s anti-gay track record. As Cooper recalled:

We got up at the buttcrack of dawn before the sun had risen and we had made all of these fliers with Sam Nunn's record on gay rights and we plastered the quad—all of those arches—we plastered the columns all along Wait Chapel everywhere we could... there was some talk at the time of withholding our degrees, those of us who were graduating, but they had no legal way to do that.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Jeffrey Schmalz, “The Transition: Nunn Under Fire From Gay Groups,” *New York Times* (New York, NY), Dec. 6, 1992.

⁴⁹ Cooper, 15.

Cooper also mentioned that GALBA members who were graduating wore rainbow sashes with their robes to show their allegiance to the gay and lesbian community, and as an additional protest effort against Nunn. Jeopardizing the university's graduation by attacking the keynote speaker at the event was the type of radical, "offensive" visibility scheme that the aforementioned student feared.

Chris Cooper graduated that Spring confident that he had left GALBA as "an established group... who knew they had a responsibility to maintain a visible presence."⁵⁰ However, incoming first-year student, Justin Lee ('00) disagreed: that Fall, Lee stated, GALBA "was pretty much nobody. It was like, basically the president. So we had to revitalize it..."⁵¹ Justin Lee, Jeremy Bishop ('00), and Martin Price ('01) all entered Wake Forest around the same time, and were each instrumental in this revitalization process. Perhaps Cooper's radical approach to activism led to decreased membership, as it was common for many gay and lesbian students to be "ostracized" by the group's hyper-political nature, or embarrassed by the public presence established through the subversion of the majority. Many students felt that the group needed to return to its original goals of education, discussion, and making change.

The 1990s was a fundamental decade for gay and lesbian activism at WFU. The student body was not open and accepting of gay identities, and there was much work to be done. Many gay students experienced discrimination on campus and were consequently unhappy. Justin Lee reflected on his time at Wake Forest from 1996 to 2000 saying, "honestly, I spent most of my four years at Wake feeling like I was kind of all alone in the world. I was really depressed."⁵² Lee

⁵⁰ Ibid, 16.

⁵¹ Justin Lee, interviewer unknown, October, 2015, transcript, 5.

⁵² Lee, 11.

was not alone in his sentiments. In Davis' study, an anonymous gay student reflected on his living situation saying that "living in a residence hall and being gay is isolation,"⁵³ and continued to say that he felt people in his hall avoided him after he came out. The same student claimed that when GALBA posters were placed on his hall, they were "defaced" and "offensive things [were] written on them."⁵⁴ Even in the 1990s, many gay students at WFU did not feel comfortable or safe in their own residence halls because of homophobia. This homophobic sentiment extended beyond halls of residence as well; in his interview, Price recalled one evening at a fraternity party when party attendees "spit on me and yelled 'faggot' at me."⁵⁵ The pointed remark of being called a 'faggot' shows that there was a mounting awareness of not only a gay presence on campus, but students were also aware of *who* was gay and felt at liberty to discriminate against them.

It is important to recognize, however, that not all gay students at Wake Forest during the 1990s felt unsafe or felt the brunt of homophobia. In Davis' study, a bisexual female attending Wake said that she had "just really been surprised at just the level of acceptance that [she had] run into."⁵⁶ This is one of the only sources available that gives insight into the perspective of a bisexual woman, so there is no way of knowing if her feelings of acceptance were universal for women in general at WFU. Perhaps it was easier for women to assimilate to the WFU standard for women than it was for men. However, there were also gay men on campus who reflected on having positive experiences at Wake. Drew Droege ('99) said that he "loved Wake" and that he

⁵³ Davis, 50.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 49.

⁵⁵ Martin Price, interviewed by Celia Quillian, February 18, 2012, transcript, 6.

⁵⁶ Davis, 51.

“had such a good time there.”⁵⁷ Another gay male, Shane Harris ('98) was not 'out' when he was attending WFU, but Harris was a Presidential Scholar in Theatre, and therefore very involved in the performing arts. When reflecting on the theatre community at Wake Forest, Harris said the theatre “was just a safe space to be gay, straight, a freak, funny, tacky—it didn't matter.”⁵⁸ Perhaps the anonymous bisexual woman and Harris' positive experiences at WFU are tied to notions of being able to 'pass' as straight. Because Harris was not out when he was at school, his experience may have been easier because people did not know he was gay, and did not ever actively discriminate against him.

Although there were gay students who had positive experiences at Wake Forest, there were many who did not because of their sexuality. When Lee, Bishop and Price arrived at WFU, they each hit the ground running with revitalizing GALBA. One of the first actions taken under the guidance of president Jeremy Bishop was changing the name of the group. Together, the new leadership could not understand what exactly the acronym GALBA stood for, as there was no official constitutional change, and sources like the *Old Gold and Black* called them 'the Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Issues Awareness group,' which did not align with the acronym. Therefore, they decided to change the name to the Gay-Straight Student Alliance (GSSA). Although none of the interviewees said this, changing the group's name to the Gay-Straight Student Alliance raises the question as to whether the reasoning was similar to that behind the formation of the Duke Allies group at Duke University. Did Bishop change the name to GSSA as a protective mechanism for students who did not want to be labeled gay by being a member of the organization?

⁵⁷ Drew Droege, interviewed by Keegan Patrick, February 17, 2012, transcript, 6.

⁵⁸ Harris, 4.

Under Bishop, the GSSA began to flourish. The group organized the first Pride Week at WFU, which consisted of various gay-themed events every night of the week.⁵⁹ This is a tradition that has continued annually to 2016. Martin Price, who was on the executive board of GSSA, organized a candlelight vigil in honor of Matthew Shepard's death in October 1998, and there were five-hundred people in attendance.⁶⁰ With a growing listserv and regular weekly meetings, the group was building up its steam once more. However, the lesbian union in Wait Chapel served as the ultimate catalyst for visibility and agency for the gay and lesbian community at WFU.

In the Fall of 1998, Susan Parker and Wendy Scott, a lesbian couple, requested to have a commitment ceremony in the Wake Forest Baptist Church. The church deliberated on the matter for almost a year, but ultimately voted in their favor. Before Chaplain Ed Christman reserved WFU's Wait Chapel, he asked President Thomas Hearn if it would be allowed given that the couple was two women. Hearn took the issue to the Board of Trustees and there was an ad hoc committee formed to deliberate the situation. On September 7, 1999, the ad hoc committee of the Board issued a statement "recommend[ing]" that the church "refrain"⁶¹ from using Wait Chapel for the ceremony. The next day, student activists Bishop, Lee, and Price met with Hearn:

President Hearn sat there and listened to us and gave the impression that he was taking our thoughts into consideration, and then that same day went out and made the announcement that the decision had already been reached. We all really felt kind of lied to, you know, we all felt like we as LGBT students were not being heard.⁶² - Lee

⁵⁹ Bishop, 4.

⁶⁰ Martin Price, "The Wrong Message," *Wake Forest Magazine*, March 2000.

⁶¹ Ad Hoc Committee, "Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Social and Academic Responsibility," Report, Wake Forest University, August, 1999.

⁶² Lee, 2-3.

They didn't say that everything was okay, but they led us to believe that they didn't know when the decision was coming out. And I just can't believe that the President and Vice President didn't know that the decision was going to come out in the next 5 hours.⁶³ - Bishop

The President was complying with student activists by hearing what they had to say, but the students felt as if he was dishonest with them by not being more transparent about the fact that the university was going to act in compliance with the Board of Trustees.

On the same day, WFU Vice President Sandra Boyette reached out to the university's public radio station, WFDD, asking that the station "use the Trustees' statement 'as it is' and not to 'do extra reporting and interviews,'"⁶⁴ according to Linda Ward who was the station manager. This received significant backlash from the staff at WFDD who believed that university intervention was inappropriate and unprofessional censoring. Paul Brown, the WFDD program director, and other staff members spoke to the *Winston-Salem Journal* about the fact that the university was censoring them, and the story was featured in several papers. A staff member of WFDD informed *METRO* that Ward had told the staff, "someone could lose their job" if they did not comply with Boyette's request. Boyette never denied saying this, and sought to blame the mishap on the fact that WFDD did not have an editorial policy in place. Brown refuted Boyette: "this is not about editorial policy... the story is that we were asked to censor." Moreover, the station had "a full slate of editorial policies in effect since 1993."⁶⁵ Sandra Boyette received most of the public backlash for censoring, but President Hearn was also to blame for censorship activity. In the WFU archives, there is an interview with Hearn with regards to the "same-sex

⁶³ *A Union in Wait*. Directed by Ryan Butler. 2001. [13:40].

⁶⁴ Mike Janssen, "Wake Forest University faculty committee report on WFDD conflict, 2000." *Current* (Washington, D.C.), Feb. 2, 2000.

⁶⁵ John Railey and Wesley Young, "WFU Official Apologizes," *Metro* (Winston-Salem, NC), Sept. 30, 1999.

union issue,” in which he said he felt “great personal anguish.”⁶⁶ Attached to this interview is a barely decipherable hand-written note that read:

Jason,

I decided to have you pick this up so I could include these documents. I am relying on your word that this is for classroom use only. We cannot have meaningful dialogue in the press.

Dr. Hearn

The date is unclear, and there is no way of knowing exactly who Jason was and who had conducted the interview with Hearn. However, the note makes clear that he, in addition to Vice President Boyette, was also adamant about keeping information regarding the ceremony from the press.

The student activist response to the university’s stance on the same-sex ceremony was overwhelming. Amnesty International held a coalition meeting that included several organizations; there were about 50 people in attendance. At this meeting, the students decided to facilitate a petition drive.⁶⁷ To tackle this matter, student leaders in GSSA formed a separate group called Student Alliance For Equality (SAFE). SAFE was formed by the students of GSSA so they could stand in solidarity and advocate for the same-sex union without the stigma associated with being members of a gay student group. The GSSA students created SAFE to “gain credibility,” according to Lee, and to be able to “make things happen behind the scenes as GSSA.”⁶⁸ Under the guise of a non-gay organization, GSSA members believed they had more credibility as activists for Parker and Scott.

⁶⁶Thomas Hearn, interviewed by Anne (last name unknown), date unknown, transcript, WFU Archives.

⁶⁷ *A Union in Wait*, Directed by Ryan Butler, 2001. [14:40].

⁶⁸ Lee, 7.

Within SAFE, GSSA and other non-GSSA students alike worked tirelessly from September 8th to the 27th to combat the university's decision, to gain as much visibility for the issue as possible, and to nurture those who were hurting. SAFE members went door to door on campus asking individuals to sign the petition, even if it meant putting themselves in positions of discomfort:

I remember at the time being terrified about going into fraternity houses and sororities and asking for people to sign this, but I would say 99% of the people were very happy to sign and agreed.⁶⁹

The group eventually got over 1,200 people to sign the petition.⁷⁰ Activists were learning in this instance that leaning into discomfort could yield real, tangible results. In another effort to stand in solidarity with Parker and Scott, SAFE sent out a mass email asking students to bring flowers to the chapel steps the next morning. In an oral history interview, Susan Parker recalls this as “one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever experienced... it was amazing.”⁷¹ SAFE also engaged in acts of resistance that were not so nurturing; Justin Lee recounts mailing packages to the doorsteps of the Trustees in protest of their decision:

Someone got their hands on the trustees' names and addresses. Personal home addresses. And photocopied, like made this thick stack, like photo copy stack of all of the negative press that the university was getting for interfering with Wake Forest Baptist Church's ability to do its own same-sex union ceremony. And they sent copies of this out to every trustee at their home addresses with a letter... I think it gave a lot of the students the sense of like “we have power. Like we can make change. We can do stuff, we can make things happen and if people aren't gonna let us have our voice then we're going to claim our voice anyway.”⁷²

⁶⁹ Bishop, 5.

⁷⁰ Price, *Wake Forest Magazine*.

⁷¹ Susan Parker, interviewed by Lindey Champagne, February 21, 2012, transcript. 7.

⁷² Lee, 8.

The petition, the flowers, and mailing the trustees within a short period of under three weeks exposed student activists to several types of organizing. It gave activists the opportunity to unite around their cause, and bring visibility to not only gay and lesbian identities, but also themselves individually.

Students were not the only group speaking out about the issue. Faculty also showed support for the Church, and disapproval of the university's actions. Faculty in the Wake Forest School of Law wrote a letter addressed to President Hearn and the Board of Trustees in which they shared their "profound disappointment with the trustee committee's decision."⁷³ A history professor, Dr. Michael Sinclair, wrote in the Letters to the Editor section of the *Winston-Salem Journal* that "morale among students and faculty has plummeted over the past several years as both have experienced little but contempt from the present administration."⁷⁴

Not everyone was opposed to the trustee committee's decision, however. Ed Christman and President Hearn received a large volume of mail from alumni, students, and parents. The letters were generally religious in nature, saying that the lesbian union was "a sin," "against God's law," "profoundly saddening," and causing some to question "what happened to the wonderful school I attended?"⁷⁵ A student, Dennis Potter ('01), wrote an editorial in *Wake Forest Magazine* arguing that people of God must "love the sinner, not the sin," and that the university

⁷³ Professors of the Wake Forest University School of Law, letter to President Thomas Hearn and Members of the Board of Trustees, September 15, 1999. WFU Archives.

⁷⁴ Michael Sinclair, "Reports Limited Perspective," Letters to the Editor. *Winston-Salem Journal* (Winston-Salem, NC), Oct. 21, 1999.

⁷⁵ Michelle Whicker Price, letter to Reverend Ed Christman, October 11, 1999, and Laura J. Keech, letter to Reverend Ed Christman, December 10, 1999.

“should have included wording [in the statement] that would allow the application of sanctions if the church went against the university’s wishes.”⁷⁶

After nearly three weeks, on September 28, President Hearn issued a statement in the State of the University Address saying that the community had simply misinterpreted the trustee’s statement.⁷⁷ This is unsurprising, as the wording of the statement was a series of contradictions. The trustees wrote that “it is not the intention of the University to restrict the practice of the congregation whatever its decision may be,” but also said “we recommend that the Administration of the University ask the Wake Forest Baptist Church to refrain from using the University facilities for such purpose.”⁷⁸ The trustees asserted that the university did not have a right to impose on the church’s decision, and then continued to impose on the church decision. Additionally, if it was a simple misunderstanding, why did President Hearn take weeks to clarify the statement? The statement’s ambiguous language and the administration’s lack of communication corroborated the “misunderstanding.” In fact, Kevin Cox, a staff member of Vice President Boyette, made the official news release on September 8 saying, “The university has formally asked the Wake Forest Baptist Church to not conduct same-sex ceremonies in university facilities.”⁷⁹ This statement is makes clear that the university did not give the church the option of having Susan and Wendy’s ceremony in Wait Chapel. Justin Lee suspects that Hearn made the

⁷⁶ Dennis Potter, “The Righteous Decision.” *Wake Forest Magazine*, (March 2000): 29.

⁷⁷ *A Union in Wait*, [30:10].

⁷⁸ Ad Hoc Committee, “Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Social and Academic Responsibility,” Report, Wake Forest University, August, 1999.

⁷⁹ *A Union in Wait*, [13:00].

statement on September 28 “because of the negative publicity that was generated by the students on campus.”⁸⁰

Students and faculty alike did generate a lot of publicity around the union. The story even made national news and was featured in *USA Today*. In *Wake Forest Magazine* the following semester, Martin Price reflected on the debacle, saying that it shed light on the fact that the university was not listening to gay and lesbian voices. Price argued that Wake Forest taking action in opposition to its Statement of Non-Discrimination *and* against its Statement of Principle is “not a gay and lesbian issue.” The issue, Price continues, “is that the voice of a majority of our community is not being heard.”⁸¹ In March of the following semester (2000), President Hearn made an action plan with the Student Life Committee after “discussions with faculty and students” to “explore more deliberately the climate for gay students in our community.”⁸² Not only did activism around the union perhaps cause the university to take a different stance on the subject, but it also led to campus climate talks at an administrative level.

GSSA’s participation in protesting against the Board of Trustees’ decision was monumental for the group itself. It benefitted directly, as its listserv membership grew to about one hundred and fifty people, and they were given office space in Benson.⁸³ The group’s sense of empowerment and agency was strengthened, as GSSA’s leaders, Bishop, Lee, and Price, rallied around fighting against institutional discrimination. At the time of the Wait union debacle, GSSA was a relatively new group, only existing for seven years. The solidification of the group mirrors

⁸⁰ Ibid, [35:20].

⁸¹ Price, *Wake Forest Magazine*.

⁸² Thomas Hearn, memorandum to Sarah Watts and Kenneth A. Zick, March 7, 2000.

⁸³ Bishop, 4.

the progress of the Student Homophile League (SHL) at Cornell; Breemyn writes that the SLH had undergone a “transformation into a more confrontational”⁸⁴ organization in 1970 through organizing a public protest and changing its name to the Gay Liberation Front. This parallels the emboldening of GSSA, as they were united through protest against the Board of Trustees, and they had changed the group’s name from GALBA to GSSA in 1997.

The 1990s were a foundational decade for the GSSA. The formation of a gay student group at Wake Forest was delayed relative to other universities across the nation, where these groups had begun to develop in the 1970s on the heels of the gay liberation movement. Due to a variety of factors, including the school’s size, religion affiliation and conservatism, the election of Ronald Reagan, and the AIDS epidemic, Wake Forest did not establish a gay student group until the 1990s. The gay student organization at WFU experienced some growing pains, with tensions mounting in debates on the importance of visibility versus confidentiality. Many gay student groups around the country were formed and unified through activism during the gay liberation movement, or the AIDS epidemic. Because there was no gay student group at WFU in the 1970s and 1980s, the fledging group needed a rallying point. For the GSSA, the activism that was brought about by the union in Wait Chapel was unifying and foundational for gay students. Through protesting the decision of the Board of Trustees in the late 1990s, students in GSSA were able to use activism to gain a sense of empowerment and agency for the gay community as a whole, and individually.

⁸⁴ Breemyn, 219.

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