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Bisexual Awareness, The Harvard Crimson

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Ochs Says Bisexuals ‘Invisible’

By LEONDRA R. KRUGER

Bisexuals are invisible in the media except when they are portrayed in conflict with other groups, Romance Languages and Literatures administrator Robyn I. Ochs told 30 students gathered at last night’s meeting of the Bisexual, Gay and Lesbian Student Association.

Ochs said talk shows often portray bisexuals as threats to monogamous relationships, emphasizing stories of husbands who had affairs with men outside of their heterosexual marriages and women who were unable to choose between two lovers, one of each sex.

“Bisexuality is often only visible as a point of conflict,” Ochs said. “Bisexuals are only visible around issues of non-monogamous relationships, cheating, and AIDS.”

Ochs used clips from television programs ranging from CNN’s “Sonja Live” to “Geraldo” in her presentation. Although Ochs has made seven talk show appearances, she said talk shows looking for “interesting” guests have rejected her for having primarily monogamous relationships.

Ochs said talk shows inaccurately present bisexuals as “usually male, married to someone of the opposite sex and who has side dishes of the same sex.”

“Not all bisexuals are cheating,” Ochs said. But when bisexuals are in monogamous relationships, they are often miscast as either homosexual or heterosexual, Ochs said at the meeting in the Adams House Lower Common Room.

She added that most people don’t understand the role of bisexuality in human relationships as opposed to attraction to only one sex.

“Our culture has trouble with the idea that people—and sexuality—can change,” she said.
Bisexual activist connects sexual identity and feminism

Gina Cutler
NEWS EDITOR

Bisexual activist and scholar Robyn Ochs gave a personal account of the ways in which feminist consciousness and self-empowerment can be intimately connected with sexual identity in a talk entitled "Bisexuality, Feminism, Men and Me." Friday night in Cohn Hall.

Ochs' talk focused on how her views on feminism were shaped by her experiences growing up and developing her sexual identity as a bisexual woman. Ochs is an activist and instructor at Tufts University in Boston, and helped found both the Boston Bisexual Women's Network and the East Coast Bisexual Network. Her writings have appeared in Bi Any Other Name and Closer to Home.

"For many people discovering feminism begins with some kind of pivotal event," she said. "For me, my personal route to feminism was long and convoluted and ultimately it was closely connected with my own developing bisexual identity."

One of the themes Ochs stressed was the difficulty for women in American culture to escape the heterosexual programming associated with ideas such as body image and marriage. Even though Ochs was raised in what she termed a "liberal household," she said she grew up simultaneously believing that her worth as a human being was in her body and her body was ugly and disgusting.

"I learned the basic truth about being a woman in this culture, that my value was in my body, that how I looked was the most important thing," she said. She said that these images of her body as disgusting did not change until she began to admit to herself that she was attracted to women and found their bodies beautiful. Ochs related how she realized one day in her early twenties that her own body was of a very similar shape and build to that of a woman friend of hers who she thought was beautiful. "I would always look at her and think, God, she's beautiful. And then one day I realized that we didn't look that different," she said.

Ochs said that not only was her own body not ugly, but that she had developed a different set of standards for herself than those she set for other people. "I went home and I thought, she's beautiful, I'm disgusting. But she looks like me. Am I possibly holding myself up to a different standard than I am holding everybody in the universe up to?"

Ochs said this was the moment when she first became aware of the extent to which her self image had been shaped by social conditioning, and how that conditioning was not necessarily valid. "My whole self image changed. It was the experience of seeing myself reflected in another perspective, artificial, really constructed."

Ochs spoke of the need to reconcile the tensions between her bisexual identity and her view of feminism as the fight against heterosexist bias and the double standards often apparent in heterosexual relationships. She outlined a strategy that she felt for herself with which to combat the double standard inherent in the experience of being bisexual in a culture that does readily accept non-heterosexual relationships. The first step, she said, is to be public with her sexual identity whenever possible.

"I made a commitment to be out whenever I could," she said.

"Men as romantic partners are optional and not required. Once I realized that, it took a lot of my desperation away."

—ROBYN OCHS, BISEXUAL ACTIVIST

She said that she makes every effort possible to avoid taking privileges with male partners that she would not be comfortable or be able to take when she is involved with a female, such as discussing her relationships in certain settings and engaging in public displays of affection. Also, she said she will never marry, even if she does end up involved in a life-long relationship with a man. She said that she would have no problem with a commitment ceremony, but because homosexual marriage is not legal she would never want to be legally married.

"I don't have the option of doing that with a woman so I will not ever do it with a man," she said.

The most important thing to realize, Ochs stressed, is that the notion that women have to be involved in heterosexual relationships in order to be valuable human beings is a myth.

"Something that is really empowering for me is realizing that men as romantic partners are optional and not required. Once I realized that, it took a lot of my desperation away. I realized that I won't be any less of a person or be any less valuable, or any less happy if my partner is a woman or if I don't end up with a partner at all."

An informal discussion followed Ochs' talk, which was presented as the first in a series of lectures and events celebrating Bisexual, Gay and Lesbian Awareness Days 94.
Colleges Offer Course on Bisexuality
by Elizabeth Novak

I would probably fit very few of the students right now because I haven’t renewed my credentials in the bedroom. According to the study, I’ve lost all my rights.” Subtext, Ochs, a long-time bisexual activist.

Although her comments are as elusive as 4-year-old Ochs, currently an academic administrator at Harvard, takes the stance surrounding the recognition of bisexual identities seriously. Ochs taught a course on bisexuality at Tufts University in 1991 as part of a program called the Experimental College. The course, entitled “Gender and Sexual Identity: Bisexuality,” began with an introduction to various definitions of bisexuality, it covered theories of identity and relationship with the lesbian and gay community and led to discussions of bisexuality and communities for the future.

This course and one like it, which Ochs taught at MIT in 1990, were the second and third of their kind offered at the nation. Susan Carlson also taught a course on bisexuality at UC Berkeley in 1990. Ochs did contact Carlson prior to her start at sexualities, images of bisexuality in the mainstream, bisexuality in U.S. communities of color, legal, social, and public policy issues for bisexuals, history of the U.S. bisexual movement, bisexuals and lesbian/gay communities, and sexualities and feminism.

In defining bisexuality, Ochs makes the differentiation between bisexuality as an adjective and bisexuality as noun. Bisexuality as a behavior will describe people who belong to a bisexual—meaning that his potential for sexual attraction is people of more than one gender. Whereas bisexual with a capital B, bisexual the noun, is someone who belongs to the bisexual community. Ochs brought in some friends, whose backgrounds varied both ethnically and geographically, for a panel during the week focusing on bisexuality in U.S. communities of color. As the same time, the course was taught, having the panel helped make up for the lack of written work for anthologies for Dy and and about bisexual people at color (see What’s A Bi To Do - Bi Resources, pg. 25).

The panel gave the students the opportunity to recognize and honor that not everyone shared their circumstances and that different backgrounds yielded different contexts for conceptualizing one’s sexuality, Ochs said. “What I was trying to make sure that people understanding in the course was that the idea that bisexuality person will be faced with are different depending on your community of origin and your current community, I was trying to make the point that there is no universal experience.”

As teaching the course in the future, Ochs will be changing her syllabus to include new literature focusing on bisexuality. One book to look out for is Bisexuality in the Ancient World. Ochs will be rewriting the college course throughout the year, lecturing and giving workshops. But she is more than willing to teach a course anywhere if the reimbursement is willing to pay for her effort and especially if they give her as an honorarium.

For more information call her at (617) 492-8476 (days) or (517) 495-4582.

Tulsa University class

Journeys

pat hinen, m.ed.

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453 S. diagonal street

JOURNEYS

The Lavender Network

January 1993
Prof. urges bisexuales to ‘smash’ stereotypes

By MELANIE DESILVA
Collegian Staff

When examining television talk shows and news features, it becomes painfully clear to Rebyn Ochs that the media has generated and perpetuated a distorted image of bisexuality.

Ochs, the co-founder of the Boston Bisexual Women’s Network and a professor at MIT and Tufts University, spoke last Thursday afternoon to approximately 25 students and faculty members about what it means to be bisexual in a culture that defines the term in a limited, misinformed manner. Ochs’ writings have been published in Bi:Any Other Name; Homophobia: How We All Pay the Price and Closer to Home: Bisexuality and Feminism.

“We live in a culture where the word is loaded with stereotypes and misinformation,” Ochs said.

According to Ochs, talk shows like “Geraldo” reinforce the myths that bisexuals are promiscuous, unfaithful, HIV-infected monsters who “lead double lives” by having simultaneous relationships with both men and women.

“When talk shows are looking to do a show on bisexuality, they are only looking for someone who can produce a male and female lover at the same time,” Ochs explained.

Contrary to mainstream belief, Ochs explained that a bisexual is anyone who has the potential to be attracted to someone of the same sex.

After showing disturbing media clips which she felt reinforced societal confusion, Ochs stressed the need for bisexuals to smash all the stereotypes, especially those making them “invisible.”

“All bisexuals are invisible,” Ochs said, asserting that society has created a dichotomous model of sexuality instead of a continuum of sexuality. Trapped in this cultural model, people can either be recognized as heterosexual or homosexual, but very rarely as bisexual.

“It’s sad when a person’s sexuality is defined by the gender of the person they are dating,” Ochs said.

Sadly, a woman seen with a man is assumed to be heterosexual and a woman seen with a woman is assumed to be lesbian when both could be bisexual, according to Ochs.

Ochs encouraged gays and lesbians to embrace the bisexual community and recognize it as an equally important part of the fight for gay civil rights.

According to Ochs, “It’s time for us to open our minds and celebrate the diversity among people.”

Dear Rebyn—
So congrats you’re now a professor. It was fun telling you—hope to see you soon—
Felicia
December 10, 1993

Robyn Ochs
PO Box 391611
Cambridge, MA

Dear Robyn,

I wanted to write and thank you for your wonderful workshop on "Unlearning Biphobia." I have heard many positive comments from students about the workshop; I think we will be talking about you for some time to come. You have a real knack for creating a safe and supportive environment that enabled us to engage in an important dialogue. Your time with us was a great gift to our campus community; and everyone is hungry for more.

So, we want to invite you back. We'd love to have you return and be part of our Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Studies Series, as well as to do another workshop. Either later this Spring or next Fall would be great. Please let me know if you are interested.

Again many thanks for the wonderful work that you do!

Sincerely,

Felice Yeskel, Ed D
Director Program for Gay, Lesbian, & Bisexual Concerns

The University of Massachusetts is an Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity Institution
"I attended Robyn Ochs' 'Unlearning Biphobia' workshop expecting a party line primer. What I got instead was an expansive, challenging, and loving look at how fear limits us all. Robyn Ochs is definitely a bi to watch out for!"

Alison Bechdel  
Creator of *Dykes to Watch Out For*

WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY  
MIDDLETOWN, CONNECTICUT 06457  
Department of Religion

21 September 1992

Robyn-

Thank you again for bringing such wonderful energy, clear insight, and sincere concern to Wesleyan. You made a very positive impression and left us with much substance. I'm hearing all favorable and enthusiastic follow-up comments. Carry on!

Gary

Gary Comstock  
Protestant Chaplain