URI kicks off fall with a bang

Gay History Month celebrated with films, performers, speakers

October is National Gay and Lesbian History Month, and this week is National Coming Out Week. And down at the University of Rhode Island, the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual Association (GLBA) is sponsoring “Outflicks,” a series of films and performances designed to both celebrate the occasion and fight homophobia and heterosexism.

“From a URI standpoint, the big issue is acceptance. We’re trying to have education in a non-threatening way,” said Gary Burkholder, president of the GLBA. “URI is not classified as a safe place to come out.”

Outflicks, which includes a semester schedule of lesbian and gay films, speakers, and talks, is being held each Thursday (October 13) at 7:30 p.m.

It’s educational for gays, straights, and for those still searching for sexual identity.

When it comes to “coming out” or going public about your homosexuality, “there’s kind of a belief that people will react negatively,” Burkholder said. He said this fear is based on the fact that gays are verbally and physically harassed, but also because this is a heterosexual society.

“When you’re gay and you grow up in a heterosexual society, that brings up a lot of fears,” Burkholder said. “It’s very difficult to come out and stand aside and say ‘I’m different’ when you’re raised to think it was bad your whole life.” He added that most would agree that after they came out, it wasn’t as bad as they thought before they came out.

While URI has had a policy on the
against students and employees on the basis of sexual orientation since the late 1980s, the state has been slow to adopt a non-discriminatory civil rights bill. This, added to the fact that URI is, for the most part, a homogeneous campus — white and heterosexual — has created a climate which has been perceived by gays and lesbians to be unfriendly.

This Thursday (October 13), Outflicks will present comedic actresses Kari Finn and Susan Howard, doing their best to alleviate these fears when they bring their two-woman show, "Ladies on the Couch," to the Memorial Union Ballroom. Sissy on their coach, strumming their guitars ("You can't be a lesbian without being a folk musician," Howard said), the couple will perform a variety of sketches which explore issues such as discrimination, family confrontation, and romantic relationships between same-sex couples.

Howard, speaking in a telephone interview from Chicago, said the sketches, which are largely improvised, are based on she and Finn's own personal experiences as a lesbian couple. "You can expect the unexpected," she said. "It's a show that would be obnoxious and in your face if it wasn't funny." She said the show is for both a gay and straight audience, but warned it is very sarcastic. "It's all exaggerated. The reason it doesn't alienate straight people is because we include stereotypical stuff. There will be 'power tool' jokes."

On the more serious side, Howard said the show stems from what she terms "the worst situation: people coming out." When it comes to "coming out" — going public about your homosexuality, there's kind of a baffle that people will react negatively," Burkholder said. He said this fear is based partly on the fact that gays are verbally and physically harassed, but also because this is a heterosexual society. "When you're gay and you show up in a heterosexual society, that brings up a lot of fears," Burkholder said. "It's very difficult to come out and stand aside and say it's different when you're raised to think it was bad your whole life." He added that most would agree that after they came out, it wasn't as bad as they thought before they came out.

While URI has had a policy on the books which prevents discrimination