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URI Community Sticks Up for Sexual Diversity

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Department of Communications News Bureau
22 Davis Hall, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, RI 02881-0806
Phone: 401-792-2116 Fax: 401-789-3435

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URI NEWS

THE UNIVERSITY OF R.I.
AFFIRMATIVE ACTION OFFICE

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For Immediate Use
For More Information:

Diane Goodman, 401-792-2442
Jan Sawyer, 401-792-2116

URI Community Sticks Up for Sexual Diversity "Safe Zone" Campaign Begins

Lesbian Lounge Lizards, gay comics, and the irreverent Newspaper columnists Phillipe and Jorge will help kick off the "URI SAFE ZONE" campaign on Tuesday, April 13 at 7:30 p.m. in the Biological Sciences Auditorium, Kingston Campus.

Although the evening is meant to tickle your funny bone, the campaign is far from a laughing matter.

This week, supportive members of the University community began posting stickers reading "URI SAFE ZONE" at the Kingston Campus. Their intent is to convey a message to lesbians, gays, and bisexuals (as well as the larger community) that the person displaying the sign is understanding, trustworthy, and non-judgmental.

Anyone seeing this symbol will know that, whatever the attitude toward gays, lesbians, and bisexuals may be elsewhere, here at least is a "Safe Zone."

The campaign is the brainchild of the Committee to Eliminate Homophobia and Heterosexism. The 30-member committee, headed by URI's interim Affirmative Action Officer Diane Goodman, formed last year. Members represent a cross-section of the URI community -- faculty, staff, students, men and women of different ethnic and racial backgrounds and sexual preferences.

"There is a need to address gay issues," Goodman says. "There's a lot of homophobia and negative attitudes across college campuses as well as within the larger society. There's still a great deal of ignorance. We want the campaign to be a general consciousness raiser."

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The Silent Minority

URI, Goodman says, is not a particularly dangerous or unsafe place for gays. There is, however, a sense of gay invisibility. Since gays are known to compose about 10 percent of the general population, Goodman suggests the absence of a gay culture at the University may mean there's a perception that URI is unsafe or unwelcoming for gays, lesbians and bisexuals.

Goodman notes that while society seems to realize that it's not okay to be racist anymore, homophobic behavior is still accepted. The attitude is enveloped in jokes, teasing, and the language.

The committee doesn't expect the campuses to be plastered with stickers. Instead, they want only those who are truly supportive to exhibit them.

Affirms diversity

Goodman says the campaign is another aspect of the University of Rhode Island affirming diversity.

President Robert L. Carothers agrees: "Our goal with this community is not merely to avoid discrimination. Rather, it is our goal to respect the dignity of each individual and to affirm the right of each member of this community to lead his or her life free of fear or harassment. Sexual differences, like other differences, are important aspects of URI's rich cultural diversity."

The Stickers

The stickers are two connecting triangles -- one pink and one black -- surrounded by a green circle and bears the words "URI SAFE ZONE." Nazis used the pink triangle to label gay men and the black triangle to label lesbians (and others deemed antisocial). The triangles have since been adopted as a symbol of gay and lesbian identity and self-esteem. The green circle that surrounds the triangles, the opposite of the familiar red circle with a slash, signifies that it's okay for these issues to be discussed in the area where the symbol is displayed.

Movie and Panel Discussion

In addition to the comic celebration planned on April 13, a movie and panel discussion is planned earlier in the day. "Pink Triangles" will be shown in Biological Sciences Auditorium at 4 p.m. followed by a panel discussion. Both events are free and open to the public.