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Gus Cantwell

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URI Athletics Department program educates students on GLBT issues

BY GUS CANTWELL
News Reporter

University of Rhode Island Director of Athletics Thor Bjorn understands the issue of homophobia in sports; he was once part of the problem.

As a football player at the University of Massachusetts, Bjorn said, “I was ‘homo-joking’. I would just not understand.” Then his sister came out as a lesbian.

“It made me say, ‘I love my sister’. ... from that point on it was never an issue,” Bjorn said.

Bjorn helped determine this year’s student-athlete program topic of homosexuality acceptance. He wanted students to feel more comfortable in the locker room and on the field, without the constant fear of being tormented by teammates or other students.

“I really want our family to feel safe, welcome, encouraged to be who they are,” Bjorn said. “Our society hasn’t gotten a sense of how damaging words can be.”

Following the GLBT sit-in at the Robert L. Carothers Library and Learning Commons 24-hour room last September, Bjorn decided educating student-athletes about homophobia in sports would be a good idea. The idea for the program was originally introduced this past summer by Associate Athletic Director Gina Sperry and Coordinator of Violence Prevention and Advocacy Services Keith Labelle. The pair recognized that homophobia was a major issue across the country.

“Sometimes people don’t understand the level to which GLBT is discriminated against,” Sperry said. “We wanted to break what people have perceived as a stereotype.”

Sperry also recommended bringing Esera Tuaolo, a former NFL player who came out after his retirement, to speak with URI’s students and student-athletes. He was chosen largely because Sperry felt he would be honest and open with his audience. Tuaolo also spoke with coaches and administrators about the best ways to make their athletic environments more inclusive.

“The coaches were very receptive to it,” Sperry said.

Tuaolo’s presentation last Monday night was a mandatory event for all student-athletes and the feedback was extremely positive.

“Once they got there and participated... [the students] were glad they were there,” she said.

“There’s no better stereotype breaker than [Tuaolo].”

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Drive
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Blackmar says that she believes that giving to those in need is the real reason for the season.
"It's all about being thankful and putting a smile on someone else's face," Blackmar said.
Donations are being accepted until Dec. 15 and can be dropped off at the Memorial Union Information Desk or the Carlotti Administration Building, room 108.
The date and time of the collection reception for the holiday drive has been changed and is now on Dec. 14 from 3:30 p.m. to 5 p.m. at the University Club.

GLBT
From page 1
Bjorn added, "It's not a football issue...it's an international cultural issue."
Sperry said that Tuolelo's presentation was the second part of the program. The first was a video entitled, "It Gets Better." Created by URI's LBTQ Women's group, the 45-minute film was part of a national campaign started due to rising suicide rates among homosexuals.
"I remember the atmosphere was very supportive," Sperry said of the packed Edwards Hall Auditorium on the night of the film's showing. The film was student-initiated and featured numerous students and faculty members on campus.
"It was real people you see every day," she said. "It was a really powerful experience for a lot of people here."
Bjorn said that he has learned a lot himself through these events.
"I'm far more aware of the derogatory language," he said. "In September, I wasn't as aware of it as I am now."
The coaches have also been receptive to the program. However, with coaches coming and going often at universities, Sperry said new coaches will need to be on board.
"The key is to not just check the box and say we're done," Bjorn said. "It's got to become part of our daily lives."
"You continue to train athletes...so later they can do the work," Sperry added.
Sperry also hopes to create optional training sessions for all athletic department faculty in the future. This would allow faculty members to become "safe zones," as people that members of the GLBT community can safely discuss issues with. She would also like to see more GLBT-related websites added to the main URI website.
"When students are looking to come to URI, they look at those web pages," she said.
Sperry is considering a focusing on transgender athletes and the issues that arise when transgender athletes try out for teams during future programs. The ultimate goal, she explained, is to make all students and student-athletes feel accepted in the community.

Basketball
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The Rams were outrebounded by Virginia Tech 33-29, but Rhode Island was able to grab three more offensive boards than the Hokies.
"I thought it was a hard-fought game," URI head coach Jim Baron said. "We knew they were going to