

OPINION

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EDITORIAL

Intolerance hurts

"Land of the free, home of the brave"

Today is National Coming Out Day. Regular readers of the Daily Nebraskan opinion pages probably know this already.

The issue of homosexuality fires people up like few issues can. Lately, columnists and letter writers have been debating the issue with emotional intensity.

The debate, of course, goes far beyond the pages of the newspaper.

In November, Oregonians will vote on an anti-gay initiative called Measure 13. The measure would amend the Oregon Constitution to remove sexual orientation from a list of other traits — race, gender, age, national origin — that are protected by law against discrimination.

The conservative Oregon Citizens Alliance placed Measure 13 on the ballot.

Indeed, some of the loudest voices in this debate belong to those who oppose the gay lifestyle — those who believe homosexual behavior is abnormal, weird, dangerous and morally wrong.

The initiative is a thinly veiled message of intolerance and an attempt to crucify those with a different lifestyle.

Theoretically, a person can hold anti-gay beliefs and still be tolerant of gays and lesbians.

But too often, anti-homosexual beliefs lead only to a climate of intolerance, bigotry and hate.

For example, Eric Jolly, director of affirmative action and diversity at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, said a few problems arose during last year's Coming Out Day events.

"In the past, there was at least pushing and shoving, and sometimes more difficult things," Jolly said.

For many gays and lesbians, life is full of difficult things.

Friends and family members may reject them. People may call them names, threaten them or beat them up. Employers may fire them. Landlords may deny them access to housing.

This discrimination is unfortunate and unfair.

Many gays and lesbians say their homosexuality is not a matter of choice. They say that they are "naturally" gay and that homosexuality is just part of who they are.

People should not have to deal with prejudice because of characteristics beyond their control.

But even if sexual orientation were a matter of choice, what right does anyone have to condemn homosexuals? Our sexual behavior is private. It should not be a basis for discrimination. Discrimination in any form is unjustified.

Homosexuals often are labeled as promiscuous and unable to establish strong monogamous emotional ties to their mates. The same label could be given to many heterosexuals. For both groups, sexual responsibility is important to stop the spread of AIDS and other diseases. This responsibility includes such things as sexual abstinence, condom use and avoiding multiple partners.

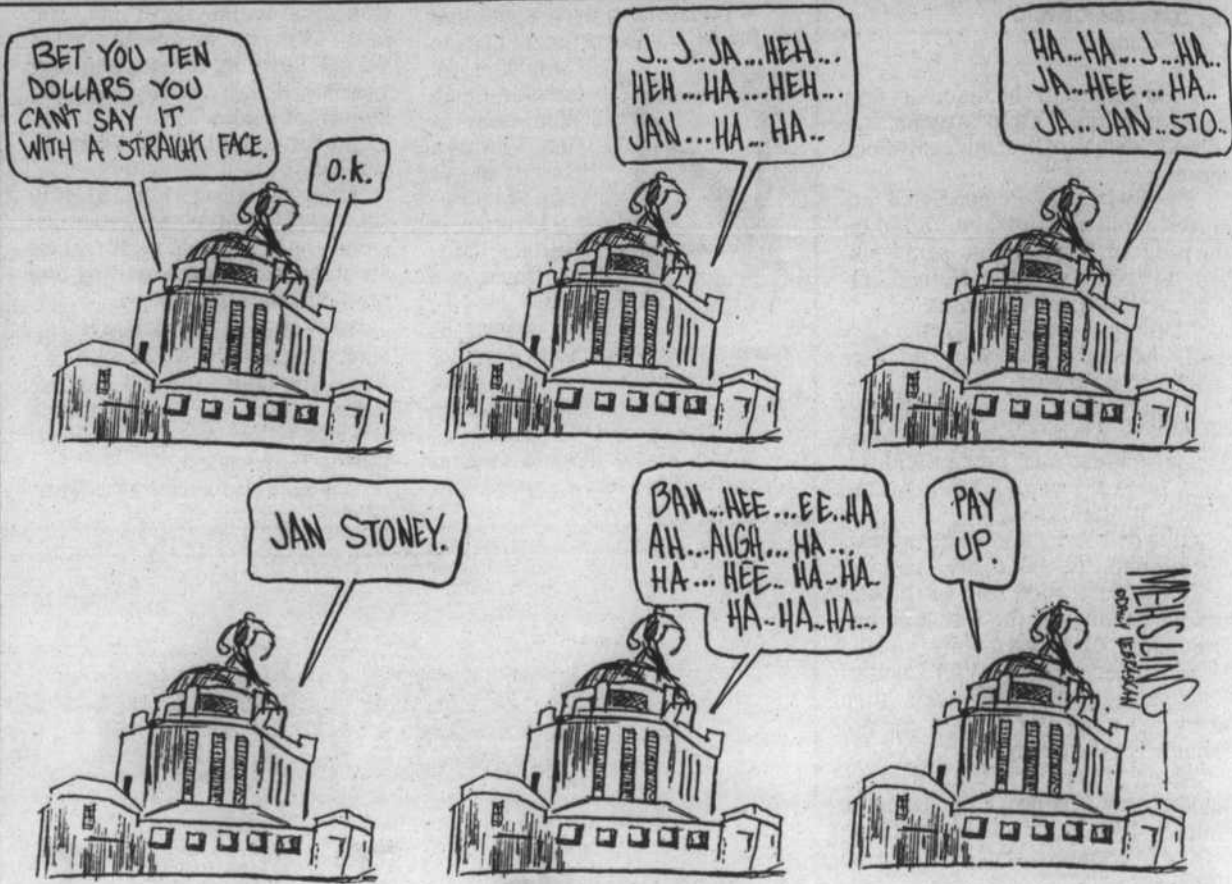
Many homosexuals will take the opportunity today to reveal their sexual orientation to the world. The Daily Nebraskan salutes their bravery.

EDITORIAL POLICY

Staff editorials represent the official policy of the Fall 1994 Daily Nebraskan. Policy is set by the Daily Nebraskan Editorial Board. Editorials do not necessarily reflect the views of the university, its employees, the students or the NU Board of Regents. Editorial columns represent the opinion of the author. The regents publish the Daily Nebraskan. They establish the UNL Publications Board to supervise the daily production of the paper. According to policy set by the regents, responsibility for the editorial content of the newspaper lies solely in the hands of its students.

LETTER POLICY

The Daily Nebraskan welcomes brief letters to the editor from all readers and interested others. Letters will be selected for publication on the basis of clarity, originality, timeliness and space available. The Daily Nebraskan retains the right to edit or reject all material submitted. Readers also are welcome to submit material as guest opinions. The editor decides whether material should run as a guest opinion. Letters and guest opinions sent to the newspaper become the property of the Daily Nebraskan and cannot be returned. Anonymous submissions will not be published. Letters should include the author's name, year in school, major and group affiliation, if any. Requests to withhold names will not be granted. Submit material to the Daily Nebraskan, 34 Nebraska Union, 1400 R St., Lincoln, Neb. 68588-0448.



GUEST OPINION

'Coming out' reflects healing

Jamie Karl's recent warning about multiculturalism (DN, Sept. 30, 1994) used gay rights, "long-haired sloths" and having to exit class through a window as evidence of declining social values. Karl, from Dorchester, valued his Christian heritage and the lessons of home, church and school.

In his column last Friday, Karl insulted the intelligence of Daily Nebraskan readers by trying to engender homophobia — relating "coming out" to AIDS. He cited a "DC family" group. Its leader was ousted by the American Psychological Association for violation of ethics.

Reading Karl's multiculturalism article, I half-liked him. Although I'm old enough to be his uncle, we have much in common to agree upon. My hair is also short, but more conservative — shorter on top, less shaven on the sides. Comfort and convenience make short hair natural to us. It is a choice; other things are not.

Like Jamie, I'm also from a small town nearby. We're also a conservative, German family belonging to a small church of mainline denomination. No one ever molested or abused me. The only trauma was one that happened to my mother when that old, white church left its chalking paint on my navy suit. It was the idyllic life in a Norman Rockwell print.

Adolescence, however, brings surprises. Classmates taunted a friend and me, calling us homosexuals. I had to look the word up; that's how naive I was. (My friend's not gay; he's married and is a father.)

As I consulted the dictionary, my heart fell. A depression haunted my adolescence. As a Christian, would Karl have had any empathy for a skinny, teen-age boy who often craved a "suicide button" to push for an eternal, painless sleep?

Some kids, thanks to societal attitudes like Jamie Karl's, find that button and push it.

I was the editor of the yearbook and class salutatorian. But in my high school photos, sorrow lurks in my eyes. Gay rights weren't on the Elmwood Public Schools' agenda, just like Dorchester.

The Bible told me to forgive my classmates' taunts, but it also told me I'd go to Hell regardless. (Now, Bible scholars say original texts referenced male prostitution in pagan temples, not homosexuality,



We could all be winners if we invested our human and physical resources on mending the aging, inefficient, physical infrastructures of our society. Mutual support and encouragement build stable, productive citizens, gay and straight.

per se.) I began living in denial, thinking I'd outgrow it. Also, like Jamie, I was homophobic.

As a college undergrad, I still hadn't outgrown it. I was getting good grades and was active in student activities. Inside, however, I felt isolated and alone. I also was drinking too much. There were some effeminate gays on campus whom I mentioned to "friends," only to learn how cold some UNL students could be.

Thus began my "coming out." Being gay belongs to neither pride nor shame; it's just the way things are for many. It was a heavy burden, being one person inside and another on the outside — a dishonest existence. Today, I'm happier for my honesty; my appetite is better, and I've added 50 pounds to my healthy frame.

Other friends of mine have tougher histories. One gay friend grew up as a Pentecostal. When his mother found out, she tried to "cast the demon out." His father is a business leader in their town, lives with a woman of loose reputation, has divorced his wife and tells my friend being gay is immoral. He is a big, good-looking, bright, creative guy who dearly misses the affirmation of his family. So much for family values.

Another friend is African American and gay. Like Jamie, he escaped through a classroom window. Not from an alleged gunman but from middle-school classmates who were going to beat him up. His smart teacher told him to stand up to them. Today, he fights for gay rights as an affable, well-adjusted person.

Many gay people missed such emotional support, which builds a long and healthy life. Some accepted negative paradigms about gay life, perpetuated by the many "Jamies" of the world.

"Coming out" is about creating a new paradigm and discarding self-destructive habits (like unsafe sex)

and negative self esteem. It's learning the process of creating healthy relationships that gay persons are often deprived of growing up. It's a reflection of healing and growth.

I'm much happier out of the closet, but I still experience a lot of sorrow — but not from being gay. It comes from what society, directly and indirectly, has done to friends, loved ones and me. What is painful is that, no matter what we may do, there may always be people in power, touting "traditional family values," who will make life a frustrating experience for the rest of us.

Ignorance is a "normal" and a "traditional" part of human society. The battle cries of the conservative Jamies of the world are certainly a normal continuance of tradition. The uniform social code of Nazi Germany is just a contemporary example, being tragically repeated in primitive nations today.

The question is, do we build careers and waste the world's resources in cultural battles, or do we create a better world of mutual understanding, communication and trust? We could all be winners if we invested our human and physical resources on mending the aging, inefficient, physical infrastructures of our society. Mutual support and encouragement build stable, productive citizens, gay and straight.

Karl's message, though he may mean well, is merely one of hate.

Partial thanks are due him, however, for including gay rights in the multicultural agenda. But most of all, thanks to Jamie Karl, I see the importance of "coming out" and raising my objections. Thanks to him, smart, compassionate people — straight and gay — are thinking likewise.

Bruce Koehler is a graduate student and a guest columnist to the Daily Nebraskan.