

Nick  
WILTGEN

# Seeing straight

## Homophobia: Get it off your chest

**"SILLY FAGGOT. DICKS ARE FOR CHICKS."**

Those stark words in big, bold print marred my field of vision as I climbed the stairs from the Avery Hall basement last Thursday. For a few tense moments the words, blaring from the back of a male student's T-shirt, were inescapable; I could only re-read them to



make sure I was seeing straight. My blood pressure doubled and I shook with anger as my friend Rick and I climbed the stairs. "I don't like that shirt," I told Rick, half-hoping the guy, who was less than 10 feet in front of us, would hear me. "I don't either," Rick said.

As we walked out the door into the cool air, I cast a sideways glare through the shield of my sunglasses at the offender. He was looking in my general direction, but I couldn't tell if he was looking at me or if he had heard my comment.

I wanted to go back and say it to him again, to his face. "I don't like that shirt." I also wanted to call him a bigot, an idiot and a few other things, but that would have only brought me down to his level. Instead, I walked away and headed for the Union.

As much as that incident bothered me, a year ago it would have probably messed me up much more. You see, it's only been nine months since I finally decided to accept my own sexual orientation.

A year ago I was still trying to be straight, and failing miserably. It was a facade I had been trying to keep up, to varying degrees, since I was 14.

I figured that if I would just give women one more chance, I could succeed at being straight. But it didn't work.

"Maybe I'm just not the romantic type," I thought. Before I'd even finished high school, I thought that since I had never had a real girlfriend ("real" as in going out on at least one date) that I was incapable of loving anyone at all.

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I became more and more desperate to find a woman, so I could prove to myself that I could be normal. Senior year, I tried to find a date to homecoming, but I just couldn't find a woman I was attracted to. I cried in frustration: Why? I began going to drinking parties — something I once vowed I'd never do. A friend of mine promised he'd get me "drunk and laid," and I believed him. (Of course I didn't think about how that was going to work; I just wanted to believe it would happen.)

As graduation approached I had still only seen half his promise come true — the drunk part. I'd done plenty of that. But the rest never fell into place. I went to more parties, drank more often; but I usually ended up unconsciously forgetting about the girls, or else "I couldn't really get into it," as I wrote in my journal after one night out looking for women.

Worse, there was open bigotry at a few of the parties. At one party, several people got into a conversation about how horrible gays were, and one girl described her negative opinion of homosexuals a bit more vividly than I cared to hear. But I couldn't say anything; I could only quake in fear and find an excuse to leave.

At another party, people told me that since I and only one other person in the whole room supported gay rights that maybe I should leave the party and go sleep with him.

All the while I wondered why all my friendships with guys felt more than platonic to me. That's as far as I would allow my thoughts to go, though; I felt that if I admitted anything to myself, everyone else would read my mind, and I'd be trapped in misery until college.

When I finally got to college a little more than two years ago, I was

free to start over. I sobered up. I even mustered enough courage to tell a few people that I was confused about my sexuality, but I still wasn't ready to settle on anything.

Human nature is human nature, though, and eventually I had to confront the issue again, for I still lacked a significant other. I tried talking to women whenever possible, but nothing ever really clicked. I really wanted to be straight. I actually told people I had decided to be straight because it was "socially convenient."

Maybe so, but it wasn't personally convenient. I was 19 years old and I had myself pretty much figured out except for this one thing. Trying to be straight was a nice thought. But in reality, I knew I couldn't keep trying much longer. I was heading for my 20s, and I was missing out on part of life because I refused to be honest with myself. I had refused to confront my fear, my confusion.

So in January 1996, I finally decided to put an end to my denial. I went to a support group for gay men. I'd never knowingly met a gay man in my entire life. I thought they'd all be effeminate, they'd all have a high-pitched lisp, they'd all be wearing weird clothes and makeup and who knows what else. I figured they'd all have no self-esteem, they'd all be terminally unhappy. I feared I wouldn't fit in at all.

But that's not what I found. I found that some were young, some were older; some were effeminate but others were masculine; there were high voices, low voices, medium voices; and nobody was dressed in drag (which was a shocker to me then!) And they were not glum, miserable people; they had highs and lows and everyday concerns like

everyone else. I was ecstatic to find out that being gay did not condemn me to a life of depression and isolation!

Slowly I became accustomed to living with my orientation. Of course I eventually had to tell my parents, and although they weren't thrilled at first, they're very supportive now. Over time, I became comfortable enough to tell a friend or two, and then a few more, and then even my co-workers at my summer job. To my surprise, nobody's had a problem with it so far.

I've been "out" for nine months now, and I'm finally comfortable with who I am. And I've learned a lot about people's attitudes toward homosexuality.

I've seen preachers on campus attempting to condemn homosexuality on moral grounds. I've seen the Rev. Fred Phelps from Topeka, Kan., and his troupe of anti-gay protesters demonstrating on TV. I've read letters to the editor in various newspapers arguing that gays want to destroy the American family. Hell, I've even listened to my own brother tell me that homosexuals are worse than murderers. (Thankfully, he later apologized and rescinded.)

Those people had to put some effort into expressing their views. They were, I presume, attempting to generate at least semi-intelligent debate on the issue of homosexuality.

But the guy wearing the "SILLY" T-shirt took a whole new approach. All he had to do was throw on the shirt and go. He didn't have to think about it. He didn't go around offering reasons for his views. Judging by the words on the shirt, I doubt he was looking for any sort of intellectual discussion.

As I walked away from Avery Hall that day, I looked back at him one last time. I saw those same six words again on the front of his shirt. Now that I've gotten this off my chest, I hope he'll get those words off his.

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### Cartoon PORTFOLIO

## The Scar of David

