

Students succeed living gay lifestyles

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faith.

But when she first began to acknowledge her sexuality in her early teens, she knew nothing of the self-torture that lay before her.

Knudsen said, at an early age, she knew she looked at women differently than other girls.

But admitting "I'm a lesbian" was a foreign concept until late in high school, when she thought — just maybe — she could admit it to herself.

Her timing for this realization couldn't have been worse, she said.

About that time, her uncle's wife abruptly left her husband to marry another woman.

"In an instant, the family is up in arms and saying terrible things" about lesbians, Knudsen said.

She found her lesbian aunt inconsiderate and unkind, and the woman left her with little desire to identify with other lesbians, Knudsen said.

But hearing her parents spout "We hope our kids aren't like that!" was the blow that slew Knudsen's hopes of peacefully accepting a lesbian lifestyle.

She just couldn't let her parents know she was gay. She just couldn't be

the next to tear her family's life apart.

So Knudsen suppressed all lesbian thoughts and, for a time, convinced herself she was straight.

She began dating boys and used each new relationship to push the word "lesbian" further from her body. For years, it seemed to work, she said.

"I had buried it as deeply as I could," Knudsen said. "I was utterly miserable, but I couldn't figure out why."

Her freshman year at UNL, Knudsen still maintained a straight lifestyle.

But, seeking a release from self-doubt, she drank heavily with other students in her residence hall. She soon sank further into desperation and became increasingly paranoid about living straight.

She feared talking with an openly gay man who lived on her Abel Residence Hall floor, worried that other students would believe she also was gay.

Knudsen was determined to keep her secret.

When a relationship with "the perfect man" failed in the fall of 1995, Knudsen said she knew something bigger had occurred.

He was sweet and funny and



ALISEN KNUDSEN, a senior English major, gets ready at 6:30 Wednesday morning for a long day of classes and work.

everything you could ever want," she said. "But to think about marriage with him — it made me afraid."

That Thanksgiving, while driving home from her parents' house, she finally told herself she was a lesbian.

Although first traumatized by her own admission, within minutes her feelings turned to excitement.

"I got home and called my closest friend," she said.

In admitting her lifestyle, she surpassed what she deems the biggest hurdle to coming out. "It was like an avalanche from there," she said.

Although Knudsen quickly learned a large and supportive gay community lived around her, she faced a new obstacle.

She had to tell her parents. She set up a Saturday to go home and talk with her parents, and she told them outright of her lifestyle.

No one yelled, "which was relatively unexpected."

But there was little acceptance, either, she said.

"The hard stuff came later, when it sunk in," Knudsen said. "That was rough — it still is rough. That's the hardest thing I'll ever have to do in my life."

It was harder than getting chased by a truckload of men screaming "Dykes! Kill the dykes!" in downtown Lincoln, she said.

And it was harder than learning her father had joined the Christian Coalition, an organization that denounces homosexuality.

Stacy's story

If verbally attacked for being a lesbian, Stacy Schultz will loudly defend herself.

Her girlfriend of two years, Knudsen, said she loves Schultz for it, because she makes those around her feel secure.

"Oh, no. She said that?" Schultz said, laughing and rolling her soft brown eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses.

She can't see herself as anyone's heroine, but she is loud, she said.

Others must know the gay com-

munity is strong and supportive. No one should know the pain of isolation she endured growing up in Seward, she said.

Schultz grew up attending the same schools as a friend, who also came out a few years ago. She faults herself for not realizing another gay person sat tortured and alone in her high school classes only a few seats away.

"It should have hit me in the face" that the friend also struggled with his sexuality, she said.

But at the time, she was only beginning to accept her own.

Schultz said, from age 6, she knew she was different.

She recalls teachers pairing girls with boys for activities, but pairing herself with girls felt more natural.

"I never verbalized it to anyone else, so no one could tell me I was wrong," she said.

And, because sexuality wasn't discussed in her private school, she never had a title for her feelings.

Not until her third year in a pub-

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