

RfA editorial note:

Upon learning about Room for All for the first time, the writer of this account contacted us to express gratitude for our ministry. She said it had moved her to write about her experience as a lesbian student several years ago at an RCA college (“It came pouring out!”), and she wondered if her story might be helpful to anyone else. In that hope, she has given us permission to post it. Although the writer is now completely “out” in all of her relationships and associations, she has chosen to remain anonymous so that others in the story will not be identified. While these events are in the past, their power to build up or break down walls is not.

“...and Not this World”

I loved being a student at my RCA College; four of the best years of my life were the ones I spent as a student there. My parents, lifelong members of another denomination, marveled at how I “blossomed” during my college years. (They even made financial gifts after I graduated because they saw the positive impact the college and the community had on me.) I formed deep and meaningful friendships with students, faculty and staff. During the summer months, I found myself counting the days until we, my “chosen family,” would all return to campus and start another year of learning and growing.

Over those four years of encouragement and support, I became a leader on campus, frequently singing or providing the prayer for a chapel service or introducing the day’s guest speaker. I was asked by the Administration to speak at fund raising events for the College. As a budding singer/songwriter, I was asked to put on coffee house “concerts” on campus, sometimes to standing room only crowds, to raise money for various campus organizations. I became a member of a Reformed Church where I sang in the choir and worked with the RCYF. I was asked to be the music leader for several camp sessions (and served as Camp Director for one) at the area’s RCA Retreat Center. When I graduated, I was one of three students who received Faculty Honors. The Faculty Honors award is “bestowed upon graduates who excel in academic achievement, Christian influence, general attitude and participation in worthwhile campus activities.” It is the highest honor the college gives to graduating seniors, determined by a vote of the entire faculty. I felt loved, respected and appreciated. I belonged.

But through each meaningful and joyous experience, a nagging question followed me: *“Would they still feel this way about me if they knew I was gay?”* I always feared the worst, but tried to soothe my fear by telling myself, “They know me, they know my heart. They held me up as an example for others to follow. They wouldn’t....they couldn’t... feel any differently about me—could they?”

It wasn’t long before my fear became a living nightmare. After two years of teaching vocal music, I was absolutely thrilled to return to the college when I was hired as an Admissions Counselor. My first year as a staff member was just as wonderful as my student years had been. I loved my colleagues, loved going to work every morning, and loved sharing my experience with the hundreds of high school students I worked to recruit for the College. As a staff member, I once again was called upon to sing in Chapel, to lead music, and to speak at fundraising events. I was also back at the same Reformed Church serving faithfully as a Sunday school teacher and a choir member. Only one thing had changed since my time as a student: I was also in love.

I was aware that I was different as early as 3 or 4 years old. I knew that difference had something to do with not wanting to grow up and marry the neighbor boy as my sisters often teased that I would. I also understood that I shouldn't mention this difference to anyone. I looked up "homosexual" in the dictionary at age twelve; for the first time, I had a word for "what" I was.

From that time forward, as I heard more and more pejorative, angry and hateful things said about gay people, I constantly questioned myself as a young teen: *"Am I really evil? Am I really perverted? Am I a criminal?"* And worst of all: *"Am I an abomination in God's eyes?"* I prayed that God would change me—that I would become the person God wanted me to be. That change never happened, but gradually I became aware of something else: When I heard other people talk about homosexuals, I felt guilty and ashamed. But when I was alone, searching my heart and soul with earnest, I felt at peace. After all, love was good and wonderful, wasn't it?

I found out how good and wonderful when at age 23 I met "Beth." I walked on clouds. I experienced things for the first time that my peers had been raving about for a decade. I wanted to shout it from the mountain tops, but of course, I couldn't. All my friends and colleagues loved Beth and never seemed to question why we were always together. But I wrestled constantly with not being completely truthful or authentic. I felt I was lying by being silent about the true nature of our relationship and it bothered me to no end. I told Beth I wanted to set up an appointment with the college chaplain regarding my struggle. She shrugged and said, "If you feel like you have to..." She didn't experience the guilt I did over the love we felt for each other. Little did I know what I was about to do...to both of us.

I had a great deal of trust in our chaplain at the time. I always thought of him as a very spiritual and discerning man; one who could offer sage advice regarding any trouble or concern. "Yes", I thought, "I can trust him." After all, he had written me such a wonderful letter when I graduated, commending me on my leadership and faith. He knew me. He knew I had a heart for God.

"I'm gay." I finally got the words out after several painful minutes struggling to say it out loud.

He shifted nervously. "Do you just think you are this way," he asked, "or are you actually in a relationship with someone?"

"No," I said, cautiously, "I know am. I'm dating someone."

His eyes turned dark. He stared right through me a few moments before he continued. When he did speak, his words were stern and even.

"You have two choices: You either resign from this college immediately, or together we will tell your boss and the president of the college that you are gay and let them decide how they want to handle this. Regardless, you need to end the relationship immediately! Don't see her, don't talk to her on the phone, don't even write to her!"

I was shocked. As I tried hard to comprehend everything he was telling me, I became nauseous and dizzy. He gave me until 9:30 the next morning to make my decision; if I didn't get back to him by that time, he would take matters into his own hands. I left his office in tears and in a daze.

I went to pick up Beth after work, as I had promised her, and began to sob as soon as she got in the car. "What on earth is wrong?!"

"I can't see you anymore—if I do, I'll lose my job!" She looked shocked and confused. Soon we were both sobbing.

I lay curled up in a ball on my couch that night, going back and forth as to what the best option would be. I was not out to any one at the time. If the chaplain was so angry and disgusted with me, what would this do to my parents if they found out? What would I tell them if I resigned? They knew I loved my job and the college. They had been so proud of me, how could I disappoint them like this? Where would I find other work? What reason would I give potential employers for leaving my previous job? Was I really going to lose Beth? Maybe it would be best if I just took my own life and ended everything now. One by one, I thought of all of the important people in my life and how devastated and confused they would be if I killed myself. I couldn't do it.

Somehow I made it through the night. I was young, afraid, and didn't know what to do. The chaplain was someone I trusted and I thought he must be right. So the next morning I told him I wanted to do the right thing. I would do what he told me I had to do; I would talk to my boss and the college president.

My boss wanted me to stay. The next stop was the president's office to see if they could make that happen. The three of us, along with the assistant chaplain, met him in his office. The president held his face inches from mine as he spoke carefully, quietly, and angrily. He told me my "disease" was similar to alcoholism (if he really felt I had a disease, why was he so angry?). I could stay, but keeping my job came with conditions. I would, of course, have to end my relationship as the chaplain had said – no more contact with the person I was closest to, the only person in my life who understood. Secondly, I was required to get psychological help to change. Up to this point my main concern had been losing my job, my ability to support myself. Now, I was hit with the reality of losing the one I loved and what that would do not just to me, but to her. I broke down.

Someone suggested they leave me alone to compose myself before I went out in public since I was so visibly shaken. They talked as if I wasn't there. Someone finally spoke to me and said I should take my time. One by one they headed for the door. I caught the eyes of the assistant chaplain as she filed past me; I considered her to be a friend. We had been in a close-knit discipleship group together when I was a student. She held the gaze of my tear-swollen eyes for just a moment. Then without so much as a comforting word or gesture, she turned and followed the others out the door.

Devastated, I sat alone in the presidential suite, looking out in a daze at the campus community that meant so much to me. It all felt like a very bad dream. I worked hard to gather myself together so I could make it out of the building and get home to collapse in private.

For the next four years I tried my hardest. I was given lots of literature from Exodus ("pray the gay away") Ministries. I met weekly with the chaplain who started each meeting with questions like, "Why do you hate men?" ("I don't. I just fall in love with women.") Or worse, very personal questions about my relationship with Beth. He told me if I didn't get this "sin" under control soon, I would be completely lost and "there [would] be no more [me]."

I also saw two different therapists during that time. The first was a woman at a Christian counseling agency in a nearby town whose first words to me were, "I hope you're not expecting me to help you accept yourself, because I won't do that!"

“No. I’m here because I’m trying to change,” I assured her.

Over the next few appointments, she gave me a battery of psychological tests. When we met to review the results, she was perplexed. “I don’t understand,” she said, “This is one of the healthiest psychological profiles I have ever seen!”

How could I have a healthy psychological profile if I was a homosexual? It didn’t make any sense to her. I guess she hadn’t read the literature which explained that emotional and mental health issues of gay and lesbian people were the result of oppressive treatment in society, not the result of being gay. She told me she could do nothing more to help me.

My next therapist, a man, surprised me first by saying, “You and I both know there is nothing we can do to change this.” Wow! Someone understood! He went on to suggest that I find a nice man to marry and do the best I could at trying to live a heterosexual lifestyle—even though he understood I could never be physically attracted to my husband. Essentially, he suggested that I live a lie. I couldn’t help but wonder at the irony—I’m being truthful, yet I’m the one outside of God’s good grace?

As I look back at the years and experiences that followed, I am proud of the way I held on to my integrity—and my sanity. I think that healthy psyche, as tested it as it was, saved me many, many times. Word got out around campus; I was never really sure how. Those who had decided I could stay had also decided we needed to keep this quiet. After all, it was suggested, it could jeopardize the financial support from some of our constituents if they found out a known homosexual was a paid staff member. The chaplain accused me of coming to him only because I realized people were finding out and I was trying to save my job and my own skin. I don’t know what convinced him of that since I went to him weeks before anyone else let on that they knew. Regardless, it was not the case.

One of my co-workers was convinced I was meeting with the chaplain every week because I was selected to become the new assistant chaplain (the current assistant planned to return to seminary soon). His assumption reminded me of the vast disparity in how people on campus viewed me, simply depending on whether or not they knew. Those who didn’t know still viewed me as someone capable of spiritual leadership. Those who did know felt quite differently.

Another staff member confronted me on campus one day: “How could you get up in front of us and sing when you knew you were *that way*?”

“Because I was asked to,” I replied.

“I don’t think they should let you stay here,” a student said to me in passing.

“I guess I should feel lucky then, that the decision wasn’t left up to you,” I responded politely.

The choir director who raved to others that I was one of her best students, who always greeted me with a warm hug and was moved to tears on many occasions by my singing, could no longer look me in the eye. When we crossed paths, she held up her hands in front of her as if to say, “Keep your distance; stay away from me.” The only words she could get out were, “Have you had your testosterone levels checked?”

The very people who had lifted me up, who had led me to Christ, who filled my life with joy and friendship, now looked at me with disgust or pity. Those who had said, “Welcome!” were now giving me a very clear and very different message, “You don’t belong here anymore.” My spirit was crushed and I felt all alone in the world.

As time passed, I struggled more and more with depression and I had frequent thoughts of suicide. At times, I truly felt it would be better for everyone if I was dead – especially for me. I couldn’t change, yet that’s what everyone was expecting from me. I wasn’t faithful enough, they told me. I wasn’t praying hard enough, wasn’t reading my Bible frequently enough. And then, in the darkest of hours, God sent an angel.

A former classmate of mine heard through another friend what I was going through. She started to write to me and send me positive literature and music. She pointed me toward different ways of interpreting the Bible. She assured me I was wonderful just the way I was. She also told me I was committing emotional suicide (little did she know how close to the edge of a real suicide I really was) and encouraged me to “leave that town.” I started taking graduate courses at a nearby state university as I worked toward my Master’s Degree in Psychology and Counseling. I read everything I could get my hands on about what the sciences and medical communities had to say about sexual orientation, and slowly, I started to believe again that I really was okay—I was healthy, God loved me and I was just as God had made me and intended me to be.

After completing my Master’s Degree, I finally did “leave that town” and the RCA. I moved to a large city where I accepted an internship at New Ways Ministry – a ministry that works to educate the Catholic Church about sexual orientation, and one that works with LGBT persons to integrate their spirituality with their sexuality and welcome them back to the church – much the same as Room for All is doing for the RCA.

One of the first weekends I was there, I attended Dignity, a Catholic Mass specifically for LGBT people. It was the first time I’d ever heard of a religious community doing something positive for the LGBT community. My eyes must have grown very wide when I walked into an Episcopal Church that first Sunday (no Catholic Church would allow Dignity Mass to be held on their property, so the Episcopal congregation offered their sanctuary on Sunday nights for that very purpose). The sanctuary was packed with over 300 LGBT people as well as friends and family members.

As soon as the music started and the congregation raised their voices in song and praise, I started to sob and I couldn’t stop no matter how hard I tried to get control of myself. It had been years since I had felt welcome in a Christian community and once again I was feeling God’s warmth, love and acceptance—only this time, I was welcomed and loved just as I was. I didn’t have to be anything or anyone other than my true self. For the first time, I was free to celebrate being “me.” I hadn’t lost myself as the chaplain threatened I would; on the contrary, I was finally at home with my authentic self.

It’s now many years later and even though I lead a happy, fulfilling life and am fully out and integrated in every aspect (work, community, family, and friends), my heart still aches now and then for those lost connections that were once so dear to me. When I hear a favorite hymn, I am transported back to my time in the church and still I fight back the tears. I cannot bring myself to attend my class reunions not knowing which shoulders will be cold, which pair of once-welcoming arms are now closed to me. Occasionally, I dream of a day when I can return to campus to speak or sing in chapel once again or

better yet, to help organize an LGBT alumni event. My heart also aches for the young LGBT people there in their midst.

As I recently wrote to a former friend of mine who is an RCA pastor, "I ask you to study different thought on this issue, to have conversations with other clergy who have come to a new understanding. If not, the LGBT people among you (and trust me, they are among you) will eventually leave. My prayer is that they only leave the church, and not this world."