

## **BU Supports Culture of Queer**

### *The History and Struggle to be Recognized*

**By Christina Leonard**

After nearly 25 years of struggle the Boston University anti-discrimination policy now includes the term “sexual orientation.” Last December Aram V. Chobanian, President ad interim of Boston University addressed the student body through an email that read, “On December 2, 2004, the Board of Trustees endorsed my decision to include ‘sexual orientation’ in the University’s policy statement on non-discrimination. I wish to emphasize that this is not a change of policy or practice, but rather a formal affirmation of our long-standing commitment to equality of opportunity at Boston University. ”

Chobanian’s announcement of the policy change took place one year after John Silber stepped down from his position as Chancellor, which he held from 1996 until 2003. While a change in syntax is significant to the student community, the big question for gay advocacy groups on campus is where to go from here.

Student groups such as Outlaw and Spectrum now feel more empowered to move forward with plans for the GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender) community within the university. Fabian Aguilar, President of Spectrum said that even without the term ‘sexual orientation’ in the policy he has never had a problem with discrimination at the university, and does not know anyone who has. But what is important to Aguilar and the rest of the community supporting these changes at BU is that the culture is adequately represented on campus.

“Frankly, it’s not enough,” Aguilar said. “It’s fine that we’re in the policy, but we’ll see if it changes anything.” The group is focusing its efforts on more tangible changes to the university’s commitment to the GLBT community through university-sponsored events, and more funding for a prospective resource center.

Part of the process of making a stronger presence on campus is to pool resources and adhere to the everlasting promise of power in numbers. Spectrum and Outlaw, a GLBT group in BU’s Law school are teaming up with Sacred Worth, a gay advocacy group in BU’s School of Theology, to do research and write the proposal for an all-encompassing resource center for GLTB students on campus. With the help of Allen Ward, Dean of Students, they are working to bring this to the administration and create a center where students can go for support, pamphlets, books, health information, or just to explore.

“For someone dealing with an issue of identity, or anything, they can go to the center and find information and support for what they are dealing with,” Aguilar said. This is a long-term, but now realistic goal of Spectrum’s. Prior to ‘sexual orientation’ being included in the anti-discrimination policy Aguilar said the group had a difficult time receiving funding because the BU Student Activity Office did not consider Spectrum a “cultural” group.

The explanation for such roadblocks lies not in university policy, but in one man’s moral ideals that were explicitly projected on to the student body for more than a decade. “I’m positive Silber is the reason BU is so behind,” Aguilar said. “It’s always the leader who inevitably puts things in to action, and it never went in to action.”

Under the Silber administration Boston University held a staunch policy in regard to

homosexuals, queer culture, and the Boston University anti-discrimination policy. John Silber, who held the position of President from 1971 until 1996 made his statements clear throughout the years as to why he would not add the term "sexual orientation" to the university's anti-discrimination policy. On September 26, 1989 he told the Boston Globe, "...The university does not and cannot endorse homosexuality as a normative condition, nor will we add 'sexual preference' to our nondiscrimination policy for the simple reason that this will commit us to tolerate, among other possibilities, pederasts and rapists, some of whom might be homosexuals and some of whom might not."

The following year, in consideration of a pending Massachusetts law, Thomas D. Cashman, Vice President of Public Affairs at BU, told the Boston Globe that the administration would add the term to the policy, and it would include all specificities listed under the state's gay-rights law. Ten years passed and in 2000 The Student Underground reported a no-progress status.

It seemed as though Silber's intolerance would be defeated in 1991 when Massachusetts adopted the new Civil Rights Act (Bills S.2104 and H.R. 4000) to disallow the discrimination of homosexuals in the workplace. At that time, Cashman was quoted in the Boston Globe. His words were, "...we will implement the directive fully. This notice will include...new language prohibiting discrimination against homosexuals in employment, housing and the other areas covered by the gay-rights law." Despite the passage of the bill, the university never did "implement the directive fully."

Another eruption came in 1992 when New York University held a conference led by Elie Weisel, entitled "Anatomy of Hate." When several students protested the absence of any one openly gay person on the panel of speakers Silber was contacted by the Boston Globe for comment. He responded with a manifest message. "There is no place for gays in a multicultural curriculum, because gayness is not a culture," Silber said. He continued to say that if homosexuality is regarded as a culture, then pastrami and hamburger-eating must also be considered a culture.

It is precisely this view that Aguilar and Outlaw want to counter. Because of Silber's persistence on keeping the gay community out of the university's public image there would have been no chance at building a cultural presence and support ring on campus.

"If you're just coming in to yourself, you need a safe place to go for support or for information, we feel that place should be available on campus," said Rebecca Binder, President of Outlaw. The campus held no such facility, and made no effort to give any signs of progress despite steps forward in society at the time.

In 1996, John Westling was appointed President of BU, and Silber took the position of Chancellor. The Board of Trustees remained the same, most of whom were appointed by Silber while he was President. There are no known reports from any news media throughout the next six years about the issue. It seems as though the university's population accepted the reality of the situation; as long as Silber was in power, there would be no changes in the anti-discrimination policy or a cultural presence on campus.

Westling resigned as President in July 2002 and lo and behold Silber stepped up to the plate, again, as President for the next year. He took office in September of 2002, and within two weeks was launching an attack on the Gay Straight Alliance at the Boston University Academy. The BU Academy is a private high school established by Silber in the 1980s on the university's campus. In response to student protests, Silber

threatened to cut school funding if the group did not shut down. He said that the GSA was founded to "focus the attention of young people on issues of sex." He called the activity "homosexual militancy" and "evangelism."

Student Underground reporter, Marissa Brookes, commented on this incident soon after it occurred. She said, "The forced disbandment of BU Academy's GSA is a sorely disappointing move, but it has accomplished at least one positive thing: BU's campus is abuzz with Silber's outward show of narrow-mindedness and exercise of power." The students were at it again, demanding acknowledgement of their rights to exercise their lifestyle and this time they had support from the state. Congressman Barney Frank (D-Mass) openly criticized Silber when he dismantled the Gay Straight Alliance. On February 4, 2003 Frank publicly released two letters that he wrote to Silber, criticising the closure of the GSA, and also Silber's response.

While this event received media attention throughout the Boston area, Silber continued to exercise his power while he still had time. After all, his second run as President was only temporary.

That same year Silber gave a lecture to the freshmen of the University Professors (UNI) program at BU. In the lecture entitled "Tolerance and its Consequences," he argued for the right of groups to discriminate based on sexual orientation. He drew examples from the Boy Scouts organization, which refused Silber to join when he was a child because of his disability. Silber was born with only one full arm. Silber said disability and homosexuality are acceptable reasons for the scouts to deny entry to the group, as long as scout leaders do not encourage violence toward the gay scouts.

According to Silber, a university in the city that houses over 30,000 students is comparable to a boy scout troop. Evident in his argument is an appeal to moral values – the scout's honor – as long as there is no violence. And keeping in line with Silber's love of philosophy, I ask, what do we define violence as? Violence is abuse and abuse can be performed in a number of ways including verbal abuse, legal abuse, and abuse of power.

But all mighty beings will eventually fall and Silber's campaign against homosexuality was due to come to an end, and dare I say, was better late than never? He refused to cooperate with the Massachusetts law on two occasions and continued to abuse his position as President and Chancellor by making discriminatory judgments on the culture - yes, the *culture* of homosexuality.

Other major universities in the Boston area including Northeastern University, Tufts University, and Umass Boston adopted sexual orientation policies more than TK years ago. Even Boston College, a catholic educational institution added sexual orientation to their policy in 2000. Northeastern, Tufts and Umass also have extensive GLBT resource centers, and many university-sponsored events each year. The GLBT community at these schools is financially supported by the institution, and has extensive staff and employee involvement. Tufts and Umass offer specialized gender neutral housing for those who want it. With BU only stepping towards a change in syntax in 2005, the university has a lot of catching up to do.

Aside from the plans for the resource center, Spectrum is planning the "Cabaret" show for mid-April to take place on campus. Though admittance is free, they will be asking for

donations to go towards the GLBT center's development. After many years of being intimidated by the administration, these groups finally feel enabled to express the culture, yes, that's right - the *culture* of queerness in their community.