

Trials and triumphs of the campus spectrum

by Melanie Bell

"You're what, exactly?"

You approach the washrooms in your faculty building and hesitate in front of two doors.

You listen as your friend points out the hot guy who passes you and the other girls agree. You nod along, but secretly find the stranger in the hall less attractive than your friend herself.

You listen as your friends talk about the people with whom they have made out during last night's party downtown, and wonder what exactly is going through their heads.

Scenarios such as these are the reality for students who fall within a sexual minority.

Among sexual orientations, homosexuality is the most widely recognized outside of heterosexuality, although there are various other minorities who exist within the spectrum of sexuality. Bisexuals are attracted to members of both genders. Although some bisexuals

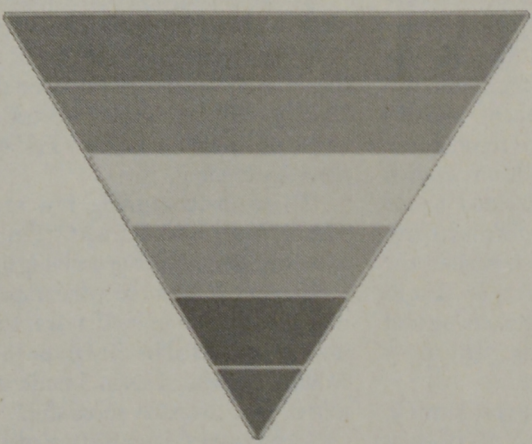
exhibit a preference for one gender over the other, bisexuality is a separate orientation from homosexuality or heterosexuality.

Some people do not conform to society's gender binary. 'Transgender' is an umbrella category used to designate these individuals. It encompasses transvestites, those who

dress like members of the opposite sex, people who consider themselves the opposite gender psychologically; intersexuals have physical elements of both genders, and people who have undergone sex reassignment surgery. Still, other transgendered people consider themselves androgynous, identifying with aspects

of neither or both genders. A former UNB student, who asked to remain anonymous, explained, "I used to feel left out when our gym teacher had the girls go on one side and the guys go on another for gym class. Like, I didn't belong there [on the guys' side], but I didn't feel like I belonged with the girls, either."

This is a safe space



Anyone who is gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, two-spirited or questioning is welcome here.

Intolerance, ignorance, bigotry and harassment are not acceptable.

Mike Daley is a first-year Arts student at UNB and a member of Spectrum, UNB and STU's gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (GLBTQ) alliance. Like many people who are gay, his journey towards accepting his sexuality was filled with obstacles. He suspected that he was gay when he was around 11 and 12, but started dating girls because "I wanted to fix myself." He dated between 15 and 20 girls before he met his current boyfriend. "They liked that I was a gentleman and didn't force them to do anything sexually, but truth is, if they'd wanted to, I would have said 'no' anyway. Some of them were really nice and beautiful girls, but it just didn't 'click'," he explains.

Daley's Christian beliefs are central to his life. He used to pray nightly that God would set his sexuality straight. His self-acceptance also took a religious path, as when he finally asked God to give him a sign if he was meant to be gay, he feels he received something he considered one.

Michael Zimmerman grew up in similar circumstances. "I knew I was

different," says St. Thomas student and employee at Boom!, a nightclub known as the hub of Fredericton's gay scene. Around the third grade, he realized he was gay. He dated girls in the years afterwards, but stopped in tenth grade. Like Daley, he denied and tried to act against his sexuality — "I'm going to get married, I don't care, I'm a freak," — all the while realizing that it was something he could not turn away. In his eleventh grade year, he met his first boyfriend, and they started dating secretly. He came out the following year. He had lied so often to friends, through such actions as commenting

on girls' attractiveness, that some of them were surprised. They had believed the lies. Others had not.

When Zimmerman came out to his parents, he says, "I built it up to be a big deal in my mind. I was crying." His worry dissolved with his parents' reassurance that it didn't matter; they loved him anyway. Daley's parents were equally supportive.

It was a different story for Zimmerman's boyfriend at the time, whose devoutly religious parents left a Bible verse on his bed telling him he would go to hell. They also threatened to kick him out of the

house.

When one of Daley's friends came out to his own best friend, "his best friend pretty well beat the hell out of him. If anything," says Daley, "he should be relieved because that friend's never going to try to steal his girlfriend."

Despite his self-acceptance, Daley keeps his relationships and sexuality secret in certain circumstances, in order to avoid discrimination. He and his boyfriend are friends with a lesbian couple, and they often double date. "People just assume each of us are with one of the girls."

Both Zimmerman and Daley, like most psychologists, believe that sexuality is inherent. "I don't know anybody who'd choose to be gay," Daley says. "Every gay person I know has tried to fix it. I think the people who say it is a choice should try to be gay for a day. It doesn't really work that way."

background," Zimmerman says. It has also become increasingly accepted. "There is less yelling at people outside. It used to be frequent." The nightclub, however, "is in people's face now," along with the existence of sexual minorities within the city.

Boom! frequently hosts live DJs from across the Maritimes, in addition to a variety of themed events such as colour parties. The nightclub makes an effort to market to all lifestyles and subgroups, bringing in performers in styles as varied as folk, break dancing, and metal. In a sexually diverse atmosphere, this also means welcoming different types of sexual expression, including fetish nights and drag nights.

Zimmerman has seen many hookups happen during his work shifts, and some of them last. He has seen people enter wearing "just about everything under the sun. You can tell that everyone there is completely comfortable. [The owners] are really big on letting everyone have space to express themselves—it's how society should be."



asexuality

One form of sexuality that is just beginning to gain attention is the lack thereof. Asexuals are those who do not experience sexual attraction to members of either gender. Recent research has found that 1% of the population falls within this definition. David Jay, founder of the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), describes sexuality as a bell curve. Under this classification, it is logical that some people would not experience sexual attraction at all. Some asexuals have sex drives, despite their lack of sexual attraction to others. Some participate and even enjoy sexual activity, although many find it boring and meaningless, some distasteful. Asexuals have the same emotional needs as other people, and many experience romantic attraction, which includes the desire for close relationships and the emotional aspects of falling in love. Others, classified as 'aromantic', do not experience romantic attraction.

The difference between sexual and romantic attraction is seldom acknowledged, but it exists, even in people who are not asexual. It leads to even further variations of human sexuality, such as individuals who tend to be sexually attracted to members of one sex but romantically attracted to the other.

Heterosexuals talk about their sexuality every day. They can discuss their attractions and relationships openly, without a second thought. For students who find themselves within a sexual minority, the process is rarely that easy.

overcoming personal shame

UNB has a number of programs in place to provide support and awareness for sexual minorities. Spectrum "is an organization that looks after the interests of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, two-spirited, queer, and questioning students, staff, and faculty at UNB and STU." Aside from the executive, members' names are kept confidential. New members and straight allies are always welcome. The group meets every Friday at 5:30 pm. Most meetings take place in the Sexuality Centre on the third floor of the SUB, and social events such as movies, bowling, and games nights are organized. The group is planning to host a winter formal in January. Members of Spectrum have benefited in various ways from participating in the group. "It's nice to talk to other people who have been through everything I'm going through," says Daley. "It's nice being able to put my arm around my boyfriend and not have everyone in the place look at you like you're

a monster."

In addition to Spectrum, the university has a number of initiatives in place to provide support and awareness for sexual minorities. The Sexuality Centre is one such structure. In addition to resources focused on sex, it provides information on various sexual orientations and gender identities. Coordinator Melissa Fulton says the Centre has a few visitors every semester who come in looking for information on sexual orientations. "People of all sexualities benefit from our referral service," she adds. "Some visitors do not know about other groups, like Spectrum, and by coming to the Centre, we are able to refer them to such groups." The Centre has a confidentiality policy and a philosophy of being available, understanding, and open. It is also the home of UNB's Safe Spaces program.

According to the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, 75.4% of GLBTQ students report hearing homophobic remarks "fre-

quently or often," while 89.2% report often hearing expressions such as "you're so gay." 64.3% feel unsafe in their school due to their sexual orientation, and 40.7% due to their gender identity. Combining these forms of discrimination with statistics on harassment, Abbott concludes, "Queer students have to be constantly aware of the fact that they'll be facing a deal of discrimination."

"There are many ways in which people are discriminated against," he continues, "but when it comes to questions of sexual orientation and gender identity, people still feel the need to hide. [Acceptance] needs to be explicit, because it's not safe for people to assume that they'll be accepted."

The Safe Spaces program provides such explicitness through a sticker marked with a rainbow triangle and the following words: "Anyone who is gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, two-spirited, or questioning is welcome here. Ignorance, intolerance, bigotry, and harassment are not acceptable." The program includes presentations that take participants through a guided journey of what it is like to grow up having a form of minority sexuality. Abbott is currently reworking the educational material to draw awareness to transgender issues. "The idea of the male-female tradition being challenged is still perceived as some sort of illness," in many cases, he says. Transsexual people "face a lot of struggle in being recognized in their own identity as well as being safe." Abbott is also including information on asexuality, an orientation in which "sexuality as a norm is challenged. Our language is so ingrained that it doesn't allow us to look outside that." Like transgendered people, asexuals are often told their orientation is an illness. While chemical imbalances and trauma can lead some people to develop aversion or disinterest in sexuality, others are in fact born asexual, and quite content to live

as such. This reality is difficult for many people in our sex-saturated society to accept. The Safe Spaces program has had many positive effects so far. Abbott recalls his conversation with one university staff member who had a Safe Spaces sticker on her door. "Often students noticed the sticker and became physically more comfortable or would talk about their same-sex significant other without having to hide." "Every time I've done a presentation," he adds, "there has been a bit of interesting discussion." Some of this has centered on homophobia, an issue around which Abbott has noticed improvement. In other cases, students will ask him to define a term with which they were previously unfamiliar. In both cases, at least some of the students emerge from the presentation having learned something new about minority sexualities. "[The program] encourages people to discuss these very important issues."

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