

# Much more to come from LGBT movement

Two lesbian couples and two gay couples publicly affirmed their commitment to each other in front of hundreds of friends, family and supporters March 29 at the Penn State HUB-Robeson Center.

Among the couples were Katerina Sinclair and Delia Guzman. Sinclair is a doctoral candidate in human development and family studies and a master's candidate in applied statistics at Penn State. She teaches a course on sexual identity. Guzman, a former Voices editor, works in marketing at Supelco in Bellefonte and is nearing completion of a bachelor's degree in crime, law and justice.

Sinclair and Guzman spoke with Voices about what the commitment ceremony meant to them and what it means to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender movement.

**VOICES:** What motivated you to participate in the commitment ceremony?

**SINCLAIR:** It fit into our politics, and it seemed to be at the right time in our relationship. We had planned a ceremony years ago, but graduate school stopped us from doing it.

**VOICES:** How long have you been together?

**SINCLAIR:** A little over six years.

**VOICES:** Although State College Mayor Bill Welch presided over the ceremony, he can't legally wed you. Do you hope to some day receive state sanction?

**GUZMAN:** Gay marriage is not really our issue. We appreciate the benefits, and respect anybody who would like equal rights. And we're certainly committed. But marriage is not really our issue.

**SINCLAIR:** My research is on victimization of LGBT youth. Suicidality, mental health issues, relationships with parents, discrimination—these things are, in my mind, much more pressing.

That said, the ceremony was something that affected the community in a positive way. It's nice as a complement to what I do. And gay marriage would establish legal protection, which would make it more comfortable for people to come out to co-workers and friends and not be afraid.

**VOICES:** What do you think about civil unions?

**GUZMAN:** Civil unions are like separate and equal but not equal.

**SINCLAIR:** We should have equal rights.

Why don't we have a civil marriage and a religious marriage? One gives you legal benefits, and the other one is recognized by your own religion, which is essentially what we have now, because my religion will recognize it and the government won't. That seems ridiculous to me.

**GUZMAN:** And I'm an atheist, so I don't care.

**SINCLAIR:** We should have civil partnerships for heterosexual and homosexual couples. Call it what you want, but if you don't call it marriage for same-sex couples, don't call it marriage for anyone.

**GUZMAN:** What she said.

**VOICES:** Some argue that the LGBT movement is, or at least was, about more than gay marriage and equal rights, that it should also be about sexual liberation. What are your thoughts on that?

**SINCLAIR:** We need to remember that Stonewall was started by drag queens, people who had nothing left to lose. To take the privilege they've given and say you want a normal ceremony is disgusting.

**GUZMAN:** We needed to be in this to queer the ceremony. We needed to bring a political element to it.

Some of the other couples said, "We just want this to be all about a day of love and stuff like that." The fact that there will be protesters there makes it more political and makes me want to do it all the more.

I want there to be 500 protesters there. I want them to see us, to see that Mayor Welch didn't back down, that we didn't back down.

**SINCLAIR:** We wanted to subvert the heteronormativity of it all.

**GUZMAN:** This is not an Ozzie and Harriet marriage. None of our family was there, because our family doesn't support us. But we had our family of choice with us, and that's important to us.

**SINCLAIR:** Several studies have shown that despite civil-union laws, LGBT relationships do not conform to heterosexual standards.

One study from Vermont found that gay men in civil unions were not monogamous something like 50 percent of the time. Monogamy is not what civil union means to them. For them, it means they're partners who support each other financially and emotionally.

So sexual liberation is still there, even in



Photo by Doug Bauman

Delia Guzman, Emerson and her mother, Katerina Sinclair, walk past well-wishers on their way to the Penn State HUB-Robeson Center, where Guzman and Sinclair participated in a commitment ceremony with three other couples.

the context of civil unions and same-sex marriage.

Conservatives try to use that against us. They say that gay people aren't monogamous. That is absolutely true, according to the research. And according to the research, 20 percent of heterosexual relationships are also not monogamous.

**GUZMAN:** We're not looking for this ceremony to give us rules about how we can be with each other. We are committing to one another in the eyes of our friends and community. But our relationship is between us and will always be between us, and we will set the boundaries.

**SINCLAIR:** I don't know that the other couples feel that way. I think they feel if we embrace the heterosexual script of what marriage means, we may be more acceptable to heterosexuals.

**VOICES:** Isn't the idea, at least among groups advocating gay marriage, that talk of sexual liberation further alienates LGBT folks from heterosexuals, whereas reframing the discourse in terms of civil rights is a more rhetorically effective way to decrease homophobia?

**GUZMAN:** I think it's unrealistic to think that just because we've had some sort of ceremony people's attitudes will change.

**SINCLAIR:** What actually reduces anti-gay

prejudice? First, empathy. You must be able to put yourself in other people's shoes and say, "I'm married, I love my spouse and I can understand how they feel."

Second, interpersonal contact. A vast majority of the business owners who contributed to the ceremony have gay family members, employees or friends. Someone's close to them already.

So establishing some sort of empathy with protesters would be your best bet, but the idea that they'll just see the spectacle and say, "This changed my mind," doesn't hold with research.

**GUZMAN:** They won't know us. If they met us and established friendship with us then maybe. It may be that somebody who is closeted saw it and was emboldened to make some steps out of closet. As far as acceptance from the heterosexual community, it's not realistic, nor is it what I care about. I don't live my life to be accepted by the heterosexual community.

**VOICES:** How are things for LGBT folks in State College and Centre County?

**SINCLAIR:** I've seen better; I've seen worse.

**GUZMAN:** As far as the ceremony goes,

# Grad students take writing classes to the community

by Katie Jacobs

In the Bellefonte Youth Center on a recent March evening, a girl held up a poster reading "Soul Vomit."

As the first poetry prompt of the day was read aloud, the four other teenage girls in the room murmured their approval. They giggled amongst themselves and then lapsed into silence and began to scribble furiously in their notebooks.

The Bellefonte Area High School students are part of a group led by Penn State graduate student Jamie Barber that meets weekly at the center to write and share poetry. Barber's group is one of five that meet regularly as part of the Penn State class "Writer in the Community," taught by English and women's studies professor Julia Kasdorf.

The girls write in response to media ranging from a song off of the "Juno" soundtrack to a series of surrealist paintings. Some were shy at first, but most were eager to share their work at the end of the allotted ten minutes of writing time.

Kasdorf has taught the class three times at Penn State, the first in 2001.

"The goal of the class is to get poetry out of the classroom and to members of the community who normally wouldn't have access to this kind of program," Kasdorf said.

The other writing groups meet at Center Crest Nursing Home, the Stepping Stone Transitional Living Program, the Mid-State Literacy Council and the State College Area High School's Delta Program.

Jason Whitney, a graduate student working toward a master's degree in fiction, is helping the group of two high school seniors at the Delta Program work on their novels.

Whitney, who taught high school English for 10 years, said the students are some of the most talented he's seen. The boys have set themselves a goal of completing 50 pages this semester, which Whitney said they are well on their way to achieving.

"It's exciting to be working with them, and I think we all really enjoy the hour we spend together every week," Whitney said.

Barber, who is pursuing a master's in creative nonfiction, said it can be difficult at times to separate the critical aspect of the class from the therapeutic side.

"If a student writes a poem about, say, contemplating suicide, it can be difficult to criticize," Barber said. Kasdorf said that duality creates a "healthy tension between encouraging expression and teaching aesthetic skills."

The critical mind that graduate students develop during their studies isn't always the most appropriate teaching tool, Kasdorf said, explaining that students must learn to balance criticism with encouragement.

The writing doesn't always stop when the weekly sessions come to an end.

The paper emblazoned with the words "Soul Vomit" is a poster for the group's public reading, which will take place April 21 at Cool Beans Café in Bellefonte.

In 2005, the members of the group at Center Crest received a grant to publish an anthology of their work, and the Delta students plan to continue working on their novels after the sessions end.

Kasdorf said the program benefits the graduate students as well as the participants.

"It's powerful for them to do this kind of work. It changes their view of who gets to



Photo provided by Krista Eastman. Bellefonte Area High School student Alicia Barger composes poetry at a weekly writing workshop led by Penn State graduate student Jamie Barber, who teaches writing in the community as part of an English class.

be an author," she said. "It reminds them of why they got into the business in the first place."



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everybody's been very kind and accepting. The response at my workplace has been very positive. We're encouraged by that. But at the same time, I know there's plenty of opposition. And really that's the way it would be anywhere.

*VOICES:* Has the situation here improved at all over the years?

*SINCLAIR:* I think that Rene Portland being gone has changed things for the better. I'm particularly happy that she left.

*GUZMAN:* I think that her departure sent a message. And I think the ceremony sent a message.

*VOICES:* What does the LGBT movement go from here?

*GUZMAN:* I hope there's more than just gay marriage. I hope there's more sexual equity as far as pay, for straight and gay, because that affects all women. I hope there are more positive and varied role models in the media, so that everyone on TV isn't either flamboyant like Jack or straight-laced and desexualized like Will.

I hope that they make the commitment

ceremony an annual thing.

*SINCLAIR:* I think that where the movement needs to go is protecting our children in schools. I feel like we've abandoned our kids. A lot of these kids, their families have abandoned them, their communities have abandoned them. They can't appeal to older people as role models. That leaves them in a position of vulnerability that I think is atrocious.

The murder of Lawrence King in California shows that we need to have protection for kids in our schools and that we need to be preparing heterosexual students for another century.

This is a multinational environment. If our children are going to compete with people from different cultures, we have to teach them how to deal with situations different than what they're used to.

It's an educational disservice to straight, white kids when they can't get the job they want because they can't get along with LGBT people in a company with an anti-discrimination policy. They need to learn how to speak about heterosexism and how to overcome their biases.