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DAILY COLLEGIAN

LGBT community faces issues beyond marriage equality

Sarah Vasile

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The White House covered in rainbow lights. Facebook dashboards awash with Pride-flag filtered profile pictures. #LoveWins trending on Twitter.

These are the things that greeted America on June 26, 2015 following the United States Supreme Court decision that would allow same-sex couples to marry nationwide.

But now that the honeymoon period is over, Capitol Hill is still making an effort to address the discrimination many members of the LGBTQA community are facing.

Joshua Rosenberger, a professor in the College of Health and Human Development, said he sees the legalization of same-sex marriage as a “step forward in equality and basic human rights,” but added it has some drawbacks. Many people think marriage equality was the only issue the LGBT community faced, and they believe it has now been solved.

Rosenberger said it’s important people recognize there are a larger set of issues outside of same-sex marriage legalization, which was just one step toward complete equality.

To address these larger issues, five members of Congress introduced The Equality Act to both the House of Representatives and the Senate on July 23, 2015. The proposed bill would amend the 1964 Civil Rights Act to add sexual orientation and gender identity to its anti-discrimination statute.

Amy Washaw, chair of the university’s Commission for Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and Queer Equity, said it’s “hard to say” whether nationwide legislation such as the Equality Act will diminish discrimination on a person-by-person basis, but noted “having a legal leg to stand on” is important.

The ability for a member of the LGBT community to stand up and say they are facing unlawful treatment is an integral part of the process, Washaw said.

One of the Equality Act’s main goals is to target workplace inequality. There are currently no protections for LGBT employees in 27 states — including Pennsylvania, according to the American Civil Liberties Union. In addition, several states — like New York and Wisconsin — only provide protections based on sexual orientation, not gender identity.

Katie Gumper, who identifies as gay, said the fact she can get fired based on her orientation is “beyond ridiculous.”

“I think someone falling anywhere under the LGBTQA spectrum has nothing to do with their job performance,” Gumper (sophomore-labor and employment relations) said.

Gumper mentioned how, on a recent exam, one of the questions was “can you be fired for being gay” and she finds it “bizarre” that the answer is yes.

“Me being gay and me performing a job task are completely unrelated,” Gumper said. “I think it should be protected.”

Gumper added an employer firing someone based on their own opinions against being gay would be like firing someone for preferring the Phillies just because the employer preferred the Mets.

However, Stephen Rakoczy, who identifies as gay, said passing such legislation might actually have an unintended effect, in which companies stop hiring members of the LGBT community all together.

He cited the Americans with Disabilities Act, a law passed in 1990 that was designed to implement workplace protections for disabled workers, as an example. According to the Cato Institute, employment of men with disabilities decreased by 10.9 percent in the five years following the implementation of ADA.

Rakoczy said he thinks the problem might arise under the Equality Act as well, and said discrimination will still be taking place, just at a different stage of employment.

Currently legislation is a major focus in resolving LGBT issues, but Rakoczy (junior-risk management and economics) said, as a whole, he doesn’t believe America can “legislate acceptance.”

Rosenberger said addressing problems should come from both social and legal highways, noting there’s a fundamental difference between federal law and social justice.

“It’s important to have those types of laws and initiatives in place, but it will not by itself eliminate all of the issues that are being faced by the population,” Rosenberger said.

One such issue Rosenberger addressed was the discrepancy the LGBT community faces in access to health care, particularly in regards to sexual health.

He also cited the fact that LGBT persons across the board face issues like suicide and depression at a higher rate than heterosexual counterparts, something he described as “alarming.”

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, lesbian, gay and bisexual youth are more than two times more likely to have attempted suicide than their heterosexual peers, and 25 percent of transgendered youth interviewed by the CDC said they had attempted suicide.

Homelessness is another problem presently facing the LGBT community, with the True Colors Fund reporting 40 percent of homeless youth as members of the LGBT community, which is a

disproportionately high number considering only 7 percent of the general youth population identifies as LGBT.

Rakoczy said, like with the employment issue, political action will not necessarily decrease homelessness in LGBT youth, because oftentimes people will just go out and vote without “actually doing anything” to directly address the problem.

Aviva Doery, who identifies as gay, said educating parents so they could understand — or at least tolerate — their children’s identities could be a potential solution to the homelessness issue.

Another problem that has been addressed recently due to recent “bathroom laws” passed in both North Carolina and Mississippi is accessibility to public restrooms for transgender individuals. The “bathroom laws” require that people use restrooms that correspond with their biological sex, not their gender identity.

Vashaw said this issue is one the CLGBTQE is currently looking to address on Penn State’s campus.

She said she’s heard instances of transgendered people not using public restrooms on campus because of “fear of ‘not passing,’ and sending off an alarm bell by going into the ‘wrong restroom.’ ”

Vashaw said the university and the CLGBTQE are addressing these issues by putting a policy into place that protects people with the right to use whatever restroom corresponds to their gender identity.

“It’s ridiculous we even have to worry about this, but we do,” Vashaw said.

Campus Pride ranked Penn State a 4.5 out of five stars on its “Campus Pride Index,” a “national Listing of LGBTQ-Friendly Colleges and Universities.”

However, despite institutions like the CLGBTQE and the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer and Ally Resource Center in place, Gumpper said she finds a “general lack of acceptance” of the LGBT community among the student body.

Like many, Gumpper occasionally attends parties at fraternities, and recalled a time when it was “not very accepted” that she brought her girlfriend along.

“People came up to us and said some really inappropriate things, which made us feel uncomfortable, so we felt like we should leave,” Gumpper said.

In general, Gumpper said she doesn’t “see enough promotion of acceptance and diversity” on campus.

Doery (junior-international politics) noted one problem she’s faced at Penn State is that guys “see her orientation as a challenge and not an identity.”

“I don’t mean to generalize men, but in my personal experiences I have been subject to guys who ask if I’m seeing someone, and when I say ‘yeah, I have a girlfriend,’ then they take that as a challenge and say ‘oh, that’s just because you haven’t slept with a guy yet’ or ‘that’s just because

you haven't slept with the right guy yet,' ” Doery said. “I think it's just extremely disrespectful, because how do you know that you're not gay if you haven't been with someone else of the same sex? I would never challenge someone like that.”

Doery said instances like this, where identities are being “invalidated,” are a problem, even within the LGBT community itself.

Rakoczy, too, has experienced discrimination on campus within the Christian group Navigators. He said he was denied a leadership position within the group because of his sexual orientation, but respects the group's right to make that decision.

Rakoczy said it wasn't his peers in Navigators that made the decision, but the higher-ups within the organization itself. In general, Rakoczy described faith groups on and off campus as accepting.

“I wouldn't say [discrimination] is very common,” Rakoczy said. “I know lots of faith groups are very accepting...most people within had no problem.”

Rakoczy said he goes to church at the University Baptist and Brethren Church, which he was actually invited to by one of his professors — who also identifies as gay.

Rakoczy said he finds the church “very accepting” of his identity.

“Not all Christian groups are hate groups,” Rakoczy said “Most of them are not. We hear these bad stories and then we tend to blame them all.”

Despite being part of an oft-discriminated community, Rakoczy also believes all opinions should be respected.

“Just as I should have the right to marry whoever I want, people then also have the right to make their own decisions,” Rakoczy said.

Doery echoed Rakoczy's sentiment and said she believes a lot of problems can be addressed by people realizing that diversity is “a positive aspect of society.”

“As soon as you begin to teach people that being different isn't bad, then people will stop treating people who are different differently,” Doery said. “Diversity is OK, and it's good, and it exposes us to a wider range of ideas...I respect your opinions if your opinions are different than mine, but I still want to know what you believe and I still want to know why you believe that so that I'm educated and I'm not basing my decisions off of something that someone else told me.”

Rakoczy summarized his viewpoint by referencing a historical quote he doesn't particularly like: “don't tread on me.”

“I'm more a fan of the quote ‘don't tread on anyone,’ ” Rakoczy said. “It's not enough that people aren't treading on you, it's enough that you also realize that you can't tread on other people.”

As a whole, Rosenberger, Washaw, Gumper, Rakoczy and Doery said there should be a focus on not just legislation, but also education for those who are ignorant toward the LGBT community.

“Just because I’m gay doesn’t mean I have to be the only one talking about it,” Gumper said.

Rosenberger said the issue could be fully encompassed by addressing the “social justice” aspect through raising knowledge and education, adding that the creation of educational spaces — especially in a campus environment — is important in addressing and changing people’s attitudes and biases.

Washaw said people are “freaked out about things they think they don’t know.” The key, she said, to advocate for social change regarding discrimination is “just realizing people across the LGBT spectrum are part of our society,” and understanding that there’s no fundamental difference between people who are part of the LGBT community and people who are not.

“It’s just something that it’s just who we are, it’s just a part of us. A lot of times people get wrapped around the stigmas and are so connected to the letters ‘LGBTQ’ that they forget we’re people,” Doery said.

Currently the university has programs in place, such as “Safe Zone Training,” that will educate students and improve the university environment, Washaw said. She also noted Penn State President Eric Barron’s devotion to LGBT issues, which she said was an “important message to send to the university community.”

“People will just come to the realization that we’re all in this together,” Washaw said. “That sounds kind of utopian, and I don’t think that it’s going to happen overnight ... there’s always going to be pushback, but you can’t let the fear of pushback stop a movement either.”