



Echoes of Silence: Experiences of LGBT College Students at Syracuse University

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Although the following conversation is fictitious, the details are not. We constructed this essay as a dialogue to portray a realistic conversation that might occur between two LGBT students at Syracuse University. Although we do not speak on behalf of all LGBT students on campus, we sincerely attempt to tell some of their actual stories, experiences, and thoughts in an effort to “break the silence” that continues to oppress LGBT students at Syracuse University.

It’s a cold Tuesday night in September. Two S.U. students bump into each other on Marshall Street and decide to get lattes at Starbucks.

BRIAN: So, how's it going?

RACHEL: Not so great actually. Did you read the D.O. today?

BRIAN: Yeah, why?

RACHEL: It said that there was an anti-gay hate crime last weekend.

BRIAN: Oh... yeah I know about it.

RACHEL: It really surprised me. I know this isn't the most accepting college campus out there, but I never expected anything like this to happen here.

BRIAN: Yeah, me neither. I mean, being a freshman, I've only been a student here for about 2 weeks, but I had always assumed that people on a college campus would be pretty accepting.

RACHEL: I guess I've had mixed experiences... I'm not really sure just how accepting it is here. I know you said before that when you were looking at colleges, you liked Syracuse because it seemed like a very diverse and accepting school. What made you think that?

BRIAN: Well, I had no idea exactly what to expect of SU before I came here. I had actually read in one book that profiled colleges around the country that there was a big divide between gay and straight students on this campus. The book said that there was a certain "tension" regarding LGBT issues here. That kind of scared me. On the other hand, I had done some research on my own. I was looking around the Internet to see what kind of LGBT resources Syracuse had to offer when I discovered the website for the LGBT Resource Center. I read about everything the Center had to offer, and was pretty impressed. I found the email address of the director, Adrea Jaehnig, and sent her an email regarding some of my reservations about coming here. She really made me feel a lot better. It's really great that we have an LGBT Resource Center on this campus. I know a lot of people who go to schools without any formal LGBT support organizations.

RACHEL: Yeah, the Center is amazing and Adrea does so much. But just the presence of the Center alone doesn't mean that the University is at ease with queer issues... after all, think about this

hate crime.

BRIAN: You know, I really just don't want to talk about the hate crime right now... maybe later, okay? So anyway, how are your classes going so far?

RACHEL: Well, it's funny that we were just talking about whether or not SU is an accepting place. Even though I love my classes this semester, I keep finding myself in uncomfortable situations.

BRIAN: Really? Me, too. I was just in a class that covers progressive issues and we were talking about how gay people are oppressed. It was nice that nobody really said anything derogatory towards LGBT people, but all of the other guys felt compelled to keep saying things like "I'm straight," and "but I'm not gay" while talking about these issues. I was almost tempted to make up a girlfriend or something just so everyone wouldn't know I was gay. It was almost like I had to match up to their masculinity. I really felt like I wasn't good enough to give my opinions because I wasn't straight.

RACHEL: Yeah I hate how, sometimes, straight people who mean well and support the LGBT community are so scared of being identified as gay. But wait, I thought you were already out?

BRIAN: Well, I am, and I definitely wouldn't mind coming out in class, but I really didn't want it to be under those circumstances. When everybody is defending their own heterosexuality, it hardly feels like a comfortable place to come out. How have you gone about coming out in class?

RACHEL: Well, I guess it really depends on the class. I took French classes last year, and even though my TA seemed very liberal, as part of getting us to speak in French, she'd ask questions like "How would you describe your ideal boyfriend?" and "How would you describe your future plans for marriage and children?" I know it was unintentional, but it felt like my whole existence was erased. I've never cared about marriage or kids, but all of the sudden they were something I wasn't worthy of, something I was literally stripped of the vocabulary for. It

was just a little vocabulary exercise, but I really didn't know what to do. In the end, I just went along with it trying to be as gender-neutral as possible to avoid marking myself as queer, but the whole exercise left me with a bad taste.

BRIAN: Really? I didn't think you would mind coming out in class.

RACHEL: Well, even though I have come out in some classes, we both know how hard it really can be.

BRIAN: Yeah, especially in classrooms that perpetuate such a heterosexual norm.

RACHEL: Exactly. Nobody wants to be known as "the gay kid." Then, the next time a LGBT issue comes up in class, everybody looks to you for an answer, as if you represent an entire group of people. In my poetry class last semester, I brought some poems that were gender-neutral, and almost immediately I was asked about my boyfriend. I was uncomfortable then, too, but it was a much smaller and friendlier setting, and I did correct their assumptions.

BRIAN: Wow... what did you say?

RACHEL: I actually told everyone that the poems were about a girl and then there was silence. But it was so stupid because everybody knows I'm queer. But I was really impressed with my professor because even before that, he really made a point of treating everybody's work as if it could be written by anybody and about anybody. Actually, this approach sometimes makes kids who aren't used to thinking about sexuality uncomfortable.

Brian: But when you think about it, that's something that we have to deal with every day.

RACHEL: Have you come out in any classes yet?

BRIAN: Well, I haven't actually said the words, "I'm gay," but I feel like it's pretty obvious by the stances I take on LGBT issues and how passionately I speak on behalf of gay rights in classes. For example, in my sociology class the other day, when people were talking about gay families with children, we talked about the misconception that gay parents will produce gay children. I think I really cleared up people's misconceptions when I pointed out that

the “most common” way to produce a gay child is through heterosexual sex.

RACHEL: (laughs) Isn't it funny how when you don't qualify a passionate statement for gay rights with “I'm straight,” people label you as gay? That's why I have so much respect for my straight friends who stand up for what they believe in and don't feel the need to point out or defend their own heterosexuality.

BRIAN: Yeah, I'm really surprised that teachers don't seem to notice when kids preface their statements with things like “Well, I'm straight, *but...*” I think that would be a really great way to point out the prevalence of heteronormativity.

RACHEL: Yeah, and not to be a bitch, but you have to hear this one: I was doing a series of interviews for a class freshman year, and because my TA seemed pretty cool, I interviewed her as part of the project, only to find out that her “greatest challenge” is “dealing with” gay people. She knew it sounded awful, but she told me that gay people make her uncomfortable, and that unlike when she works with other minorities, she feels like she has to apologize to gay people for being straight. Not only did she assume that I was heterosexual, but she really shocked me with her ignorance.

BRIAN: She actually said that? Do straight people really think we want them to apologize for their sexuality? That's crazy!

RACHEL: Well, I certainly don't think she represents most straight people with her view. But the worst part was that she asked me to strike that comment from my notes and leave it out of the interview. Not wanting to cause her major trouble or wanting to risk my own grade, I complied with her request. Still, it has left an impression on me that I don't think I can ever forget.

BRIAN: Well did you at least eventually tell her that you were gay?

RACHEL: I kind of played the same game you played in sociology and more or less came out to my class the next week. I'm still not sure if she ever made the connection.

BRIAN: Did she ever apologize?

RACHEL: For being straight?

BRIAN: (laughs) No, for being ignorant.

RACHEL: No. She never mentioned it again. But I bet that if she did apologize, it would probably be for her heterosexuality, not her ignorance.

BRIAN: (laughs again)

RACHEL: But really, the fact that she never brought it up again says a lot about how invisible gay issues really are.

BRIAN: And I think that silence is one of the major hurdles that the LGBT community has to deal with. Unfortunately, people seem to underestimate the size of our community just because there are so many LGBT people who aren't visible or who aren't in a position where they can safely and comfortably speak out. In fact, just the other day, my friend came into my room all upset. When he was walking out of the dining hall, this guy in line started calling him a faggot and saying hurtful things to him about his sexual orientation. I felt like running back downstairs to find the guy. It was so heart breaking to me that out of probably 10 or 15 people in line, nobody was motivated to speak up. It's so difficult to be the only one defending yourself in that kind of situation. I was so surprised that my friend, who is totally open about his sexuality, didn't stand up for himself. Since nobody spoke up, how can we be sure that this boy won't say something like that again?

RACHEL: I know we're all guilty sometimes of letting comments slide by assuming that they are not supposed to be offensive. But it's hard to be the one to have to respond to every seemingly benign comment.

BRIAN: Yeah, it seems like a lot the time gay people are made to feel like they are being overly sensitive, but then again, it seems like most of the time, nobody else really steps up to the plate to speak out on their behalf when these things actually do happen. I know I've been at parties with my own friends where I overhear anti-gay slurs, but everyone just lets them slide by, including myself. I want to speak up, but it's so difficult to be the only one saying anything.

RACHEL: Things like this happen every day, but come on, when was the last time a conversation over beer bong was about gay rights?

BRIAN: Yeah, and if I brought up LGBT issues in the middle of a frat party, I'd probably end up stuffed in the keg.

RACHEL: (laughs)

BRIAN: But seriously, stuff like this happens every day. I have a friend who is totally in the closet, but gets along with his straight roommate really well. However, this roommate blasts Eminem songs that just send my friend further and further into the closet. He probably has no idea that every time he sings along to these lyrics, he is basically talking about killing his gay roommate.

RACHEL: Wow, that's horrible. Freshman housing situations can be pretty crazy, especially with randomly assigned homophobic roommates. So how's dorm life treating you?

BRIAN: It's going great, actually. Before filling out my housing application, I had already found a roommate who would be accepting of me, so we chose to live together. I just didn't want to feel the need to hide my sexuality or deal with someone feeling uncomfortable because of it. But as it turns out, I have to deal with that anyway. Even though I am fortunate to be on a floor with LGBT allies, there have definitely been those uncomfortable moments. For example, a couple times this year, I have been brushing my teeth in the bathroom, when the door would open and a guy would start to walk in to go take a shower, but then take one look at me and turn around and leave. I think it's really bizarre that other people would be that uncomfortable with me just brushing my teeth while they are taking a shower. It's not like I'm going to bust through the shower curtain to watch them. They're not that hot anyway!

RACHEL: (laughs)

BRIAN: But really, having something like that happen right before a class not only takes your mind out of the classroom, but kind of consumes it for the whole day. Of course, all students come to

class with other issues and baggage, but for many LGBT students, these issues are always there and impossible to ignore.

RACHEL: Yeah, and so often they're completely invisible, too.

BRIAN: So, have you heard from anyone else who is upset by the hate crime?

RACHEL: Everyone I've talked to who has heard about it has been really disturbed, except a few people who told me they didn't believe it was a hate crime because it's not that unusual for a drunk college boy to yell "faggot" and "throw some punches," which I find really disturbing. The problem is really all of the people who have no idea what's going on. If you miss one D.O. article, you're completely clueless to this. But, on the plus side, those who do know about it seem to be very concerned and even more supportive of the LGBT community than they were before. But, I guess it's easier to support the LGBT community when they are victims.

BRIAN: Yeah, that's an interesting point. It's a shame that it takes something like this to bring people together and support one another. It's too bad the bystanders and everyone watching while it happened couldn't rally together and speak up then. Everyone just watched it happen like it was some kind of show.

RACHEL: Wait, were you there?

BRIAN: Okay, I guess you got me. Not only was I there, but the victim who was attacked that night was my friend. I was there and saw everything happen right in front of me. After calling me and my friends faggots, the attacker threw my friend to the ground and went at him with everything he had. He kept saying things to him like, "I'm going to kill you." The attacker just kept punching him in the head and beating him, even while we were on our cell phones with 911. I could barely even stand up when this was happening. My stomach turned into a knot and I just froze. Worst of all, the guy just wouldn't stop. My friend would get away for a couple of seconds, but then the attacker just came back after him and beat him harder than before. At one point he was slamming him into the pavement and I also remember his head being smashed into the

hood of a car.

RACHEL: Damn. Is he okay? Are you okay?

BRIAN: Yeah. He's doing okay now. The skin was all scraped off of his arms and elbows and I felt some blood around the back of his head. But he insisted that he was going to be okay and he just wanted to get some rest. As for me, now I sometimes think twice about whether or not it's safe to go outside. I sometimes find myself looking around at other people, wondering if they would hate, or even hurt, me if they knew I was gay. It's been especially hard dealing with my classes because I have so much to deal with outside of them. Every time I come back to my room I have a message from someone who wants to talk to me. It's especially difficult because I am going through so much on my own and this is taking a lot out of me. I mean, this is only my second week of college. I don't even know who my friends are or where I fit in yet. I feel like this is distorting that whole process. It sucks that sometimes I'll just get done telling the story to someone who needs to know it, and then I have to wipe my tears and put on a happy face and go to class where it feels like none of this stuff even matters.

RACHEL: I don't know how you'd even have time to think about classes. Do your professors know about this?

BRIAN: Well, I sent an email to all of my professors. I only heard back from two of them, and they were both very supportive. My women's studies professor and TA were very understanding. They came to me and said that the women's studies office was a safe space that I could come to any time, even if it's just to study or whatever. They also said not to worry about it if I got behind in reading and class work for a little bit. That really helped to make me feel much less stressed out.

RACHEL: So... where does all this leave you?

BRIAN: Well, obviously it hurt a lot. I kind of lost faith in people when everyone just stood around. We even talked to two witnesses afterwards who knew the attacker, but they never came forward. So, no one has been charged with the attack.

RACHEL: Great. So thanks to them, either one of us could be sitting in a class next to somebody who might want to kill us?

BRIAN: Yeah . . . kind of sucks, doesn't it? I guess we just have to focus on the good that's coming out of this. I mean, people are coming together to speak out, and even if it did take something like this for it to happen, at least it's happening. I think we could really make some good out of a bad situation. This has really motivated me to get more involved in LGBT and diversity activism, even if it's just speaking up in the classroom.

RACHEL: It's really cool that you're willing to do that. But at the same time, it sucks how the entire burden of making the classroom a safe space can fall on the shoulders of queer students. I would think that a classroom that feels like a safe space would be a more comfortable environment for everybody. I don't know whether my TAs and professors are scared of dealing with this stuff or if they just have the privilege of not thinking about it.

BRIAN: Yeah. If they only understood how their silence echoes across campus.

