

40 Years Later: Gay Students' Struggle for Equality

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Thirty-five years since Powell Grant started fighting for equal rights for gay students and faculty members at the University of Cincinnati, he still feels occasional anxiety regarding his sexuality.

“In my mind I’m still back in those days, I have no idea what the climate is at UC, I would still be very cautious,” Grant said.

Grant, 69, is a gay man who spent his time at UC advocating for recognition and equality for gay students. His battle spanned several years in the early 70s — years that involved legal opinions from the highest of city officials and a rift among members of the UC community.

“It was a hostile society,” Grant said.

In the fall of 1972, Grant was a graduate student in the College-Conservatory of Music at UC. At that same time, a group of UC students started the process of forming an official, university recognized, gay student group: the UC Gay Association.

The group drafted a constitution and submitted it to the office of Student Groups and Programs Feb. 12, 1973. According to an issue of The News Record dated March 9, 1973, the goals of that original constitution were:

“To create an awareness in the university community of the existence of homosexual oriented students tending the university. To educate the university community about and to promote a better understanding of the homosexual life-style, and the problems connected with it.”

The group waited several months for a decision from the Student Senate, which repeatedly decided against ruling on the issue.

The climate on campus was much different then than now.

“We weren’t very grown up then,” said Warren Bennis, UC president from 1971 to 1977.

Grant recalled stories of former CCM faculty members, whom were gay, being fired after CCM — which was originally a separate institution — merged with UC in the early 60s.

Jim Aiken, who was in the last graduating class at CCM before it merged with UC in 1962, said he specifically remembers four gay CCM faculty members being fired shortly after the CCM-UC merger.

“The feeling with everyone was they were fired because they were gay,” Aiken said.

Neither Powell nor Aiken said they could prove the faculty members were fired for being gay. The News Record could not confirm Grant’s or Aiken’s claim.

Greg Hand, UC spokesperson, said he doesn’t doubt it could have happened, but there is no way to verify the claims.

After the news came out that Grant was a homosexual, he said some parents pulled their children out of classes he taught in CCM’s preparatory department.

“That was the reality back then,” Grant said. “That was the way the world was, it wasn’t shocking.”

However, when the administration overturned the Student Senate’s ruling that recognized the UC Gay Association in early May of 1973, many at the university were shocked.

“It was very controversial,” Bennis said.

Peter Thoms, general counsel at UC, sought legal advice from Cincinnati City Solicitor Thomas Luebbers regarding the university recognition of the fledgling UC Gay Association, and after receiving advice from Luebbers, Thoms forwarded his legal opinion to Bennis.

Thoms legal opinion stated that recognition of the UC Gay Association would, “fall short of meeting the standards by which the Board must be guided,” according to a May 4, 1973, issue of The News Record.

That same issue of The News Record claimed the UC Board of Directors exerted pressure on Bennis to deny the Gay Association as an official university student group.

“The whole bureaucracy was against us,” Grant said.

The administration ultimately overturned the Student Senate’s decision, denying allocation of funding or university space to the group May 7, 1973.

Bennis, who now resides in California, said he does not recall the specifics regarding that period of time.

With lawyer Doug Mansfield representing the Gay Association, the students threatened legal action against the university.

A majority of the Student Senate, including Bob Fogarty student body president, came out in support of the Gay Association.

Mansfield was on the verge of filing a suit requesting an injunction on the allocation of all funding and space to all student groups, according to a May 15, 1973, issue of The News Record.

That same issue cited sources claiming Bennis wanted the issue to be resolved in court.

However, instead of taking the issue to court, many of the same students involved with the UC Gay Association filed for group recognition under the name of the UC Gay Society.

While the group's constitution was strikingly similar to that of the group previously denied by the administration, the Student Senate approved recognition of the Gay Society at a May 16, 1973 meeting, according to a May 18, 1973, issue of The News Record.

Members of the UC Gay Association agreed not to take the issue to court if the UC Gay Society was acknowledged as an official student group.

The Gay Society received further recognition when the dean of Student Groups and University Programs granted the group use of university facilities for an official group event.

At the time, however it was still unclear if the administration would take action against the Gay Society. Luebbers issued a legal opinion regarding the newly formed Gay Society.

"Based solely on the facts as now submitted to me, my conclusion is that there is no present legal impediment to the granting of recognition to the Gay Society," Luebbers wrote in a letter dated May 30, 1973, obtained by The News Record.

The university never took action against the group after it was allocated university space, and the group was eventually allocated funds.

"At the time, it really shocked people," Bennis said.

For Grant, the recognition of the Gay Society was a major moral victory, but not the end of the fight for equal rights.

Grant and other gay students and faculty members started lobbying for a change to UC's non-discrimination policy to include sexual orientation.

In June 1974, President Bennis endorsed the inclusion of sexual orientation into UC's policy.

"I have accepted the recommendation of the Administrative Council," Bennis wrote in a June 3, 1974 letter obtained by The News Record. "Accordingly, the phrase 'sex orientation' will be added in the appropriate place wherever the university policy on non-discrimination appears."

For Grant, the inclusion of sexual orientation in UC's policy, marked the end of his fight for equal rights at UC.

“I felt vindicated,” Grant said. “I felt my job was done.”

UC’s recognition of a gay student group and the addition of sexual orientation to the university’s non-discrimination policy made it one of the most progressive universities in Ohio at the time.

Students from other Ohio universities reached out to Grant and asked for copies of the UC Gay Society’s constitution and the university’s revised non-discrimination policy, so they could duplicate the policies that originated at UC.

For Bennis, the revised non-discrimination policy led to a whirlwind of legal action.

“I had so many lawsuits against me that my mother referred to me as ‘my son, the defendant,’” Bennis said.

The UC Gay Society eventually turned into the UC Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender & Queer Center.

Grant still struggles with his identity and the pace at which society has changed.

“It’s a curious schizophrenic thing, it’s still difficult sometimes to identify as a gay man,” Grant said. “In many ways I’m still in the [middle of the previous century]. I can’t catch up, and I wish I could. I wish I could have a more realistic sense of the world.”