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Aldemaro Romero Jr.

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Regional

LGBT community still faces stigma, stereotypes

With the federal government and more and more states giving legal status to gay couples, members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community have become more accepted as active and important members in society. However, even with the unprecedented pace of the change in their legal status, members still face issues of prejudice, discrimination, harassment and even violence.

Aldemaro Romero Jr. College Talk

To talk about these issues we assembled a group of experts from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. They were Kevin Cannon, chair of the department of sociology and criminal justice, who is an expert in the area of law enforcement and the LGBT community; Aminata Cairo, an assistant professor of anthropology, who is an expert in the area of stigma and health care; Michael Shaw, chair of the department of chemistry, who knows about stereotypes of gay men in science and how science itself has at times hindered the progress of this community; and Gary Hicks, chair of the department of mass communications, who is an expert on the portrayal of the LGBT community in the media. Of all issues facing the LGBT community, the saddest has to be violence – violence that has on many occasions resulted in deaths.

"A lot of the violence against people in the LGBT community is because people feel they do not fit the gender stereotypes, or the gender expectations for what men and women are supposed to be," said Cannon. "Most of that violence is directed toward homosexual males. Frequently you see people who are out in public interacting with each other in a way that indicates it is a romantic relationship and not just a friendship. Many times others will see that as a threat to their own masculinity." But



Photos by Orlando Phillips

From left are: Drs. Aminata Cairo, Kevin Cannon, Michael Shaw and Gary Hicks, participants of the panel.

even when there is no violence, the issue of acceptance – and fear of not being accepted – can keep some people in the closet. There are, however, some, like Shaw, who have had a very different experience.

"I have never experienced negative interactions with my own faculty and colleagues at SIUE or anywhere else for that matter," Shaw said. "I perhaps have been very, very, sheltered. When I interviewed at SIUE in 1998 I was very impressed with what I saw. The first day of the interview I kept to myself, kind of quiet about my partner and I. We had been together for almost a decade at that point. The second day of the interview I started my first interview with the provost and I basically said, 'well here is my issue, I'm gay, I have a partner and he's undergoing some education and is going to need to transfer to SIUE.' But I was told that was not a problem.

"I talked to my colleagues about it. At the end of the day I spoke to my chair and told him if there is a problem with me being gay please do not offer me the posi-

tion and he said, 'Why would there be any problem?' So I was offered the position and I have been happy here ever since." Yet this positive experience is not universal, or even that common, and because of that many members of the LGBT community suffer from depression and other psychological issues. But because of the stigma and fear of rejection, not everyone seeks the help that they need.

"You have people from the LGBT community who will function as counselors, as psychologists," said Cairo. "Generally it is a very small community where people feel safe to go and where people really understand what the issues are. Being trained as a clinical psychologist, those issues were not even present in my training. So you kind of have to learn on the job.

"And because the LGBT community is so small, if someone goes to a psychologist and doesn't get help there, then word will spread really fast that you don't need to go there. So it becomes word of

mouth where there are safe places to go, where there are people who understand us, where there are people who can support us. So in one answer, there are communities where people go, but they are very small. I also hear from professionals that they would love to help if they only knew how. It is not part of our regular training. But I think it is one of the things we are working on. I think we are starting to recognize that we need to do better as far as reaching out to those people who are not represented." Another issue that has been hurting the LGBT community is that of stereotypes that perpetuate the idea that gay males are feminine and lesbians are all manly.

"There is no question that those stereotypes have been extremely harmful. For people in my discipline we accept it as pretty much dogma that there is no other cultural institution that is more powerful in forging people's identities not only of themselves but also of other people as the mass media," said Hicks. "Whether we're

talking about law enforcement, health-care, or the ability to appear as a scientist or in a non-traditional role, these are images that the media over time have helped to exclude the LGBT community from through different stereotypes and stigmas.

"The stereotypes about what is masculine and what is feminine are simply markers that have been developed over time," Hicks added. "And Hollywood has exaggerated them, and by doing so has perpetuated these ideas over the years so that we now see, with very rare exceptions, gay characters and lesbian characters written into scripts where they have these markers of either being feminine or masculine."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.