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The University of Alabama Gay Student Union celebrated its first anniversary on January 13, 1984. As with all anniversaries, this marks a time for reflecting on the past and envisioning the future.

Originally an informal group of men and women enraged at the abuse of and prejudice against homosexuals, the UAGSU has become an efficient organization dedicated to eradicating discrimination by changing public attitudes through education. The Preamble to the GSU Constitution sums up the philosophy of the group stating:

We believe that all persons are created equal, and that discrimination of any form is unjust. In accordance with the belief that lack of knowledge fosters discrimination, we feel that education is the most proper tool to end discrimination, and to accomplish peaceful attitude change for the betterment of our community.

The fledging GSU grew from 24 members to 69 in the weeks following the organizational meeting. The organization became a member of the Alabama Conference for Personal Rights, and several GSU members were instrumental in the final drafting and approval of this group's Constitution. Through the Alabama Conference, the GSU members learned much about state-wide gay rights activism, and the GSU began to contribute to a struggle extending beyond the University of Alabama campus and the Tuscaloosa community.

In April of 1983, the Gay Student Union petitioned the University of Alabama for official recognition. After many months of legal consultation and unnecessary delay, the Campus Activities Executive Board considered this petition. The CAEB, which consists of 12 students, denied recognition. This refusal was immediately overturned by the Director of Campus Activities, and on September 6, 1983, the Gay Student Union became an official organization of the University of Alabama. As a recognized organization, the UAGSU was granted access to University facilities and the right to participate in events sponsored by the Campus Activities Executive Board.

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The first such event was Get on Board Days, a public showcase and membership drive for campus organizations. The UAGSU's table attracted the attention of interested supporters, hostile detractors, ambivalent passers-by, and the local media with a large banner proclaiming, "Someone You Love is Gay". The publicity of Get on Board Days was the culmination of a two week barrage of press coverage ranging from sympathetic to ignorant. The University chapter of the Young Americans for Freedom was the most vocal contentious segment. Its members claimed to oppose the GSU on legal grounds, despite the fact that the courts have consistently upheld the First Amendment rights of campus gay-rights organizations and despite the fact that homosexuality, per se, is not illegal in the state of Alabama. Such opposition merely served to inspire GSU members and supporters.

The UAGSU's Speakers Bureau quickly was in demand for engagements with classes and campus organizations, sometimes speaking as many as three times a week. The groups addressed included the fellowship group of a campus church, a graduate-level Home Economics class, the Social Work organization, and numerous psychology or nursing classes. These speaking engagements proved to be rewarding experiences due to the immediate and usually favorable feedback. The personal contact probably furthered the cause as much as the information imparted. Many instructors commended the eloquence and openness of the GSU members; even the most antagonistic listeners had to admire the bravery of the speakers, and many grudgingly admitted to the normalcy of the gay students. The GSU Speakers Bureau strove to present gay people as humans, not vastly different from straight counterparts, and certainly not different enough to warrant the discrimination felt in employment, housing, and other areas. This brave contingent of the GSU succeeded in producing subtle changes in attitudes which can lead to later changes in discriminatory laws and practices.

Another educational service established by the UAGSU is a Gay Resources Library. This library, stocked entirely by donations, now contains 81 volumes, 15 periodicals, and several pamphlets or articles. The volumes include non-fiction studies of various aspects of homosexuality, novels about gay people, and books by gay authors. The periodicals range from national weekly newspapers to local quarterly newsletters. The articles and pamphlets deal with such diverse subjects as the latest AIDS research, local opinion of the UAGSU, the Metropolitan Community Church, and gay celebrities. With this library, the UAGSU hopes to reach people, gay or straight, who otherwise would depend on the non-gay, often biased, and usually inaccurate media for information on homosexuality and related issues.

Recognition of the Gay Student Union by the University of Alabama, long a bastion of discrimination, was but a first step in the eradication of unfair treatment of gay people. The subsequent accomplishments of the UAGSU, likewise, represent initial stages. Homosexual teachers and government workers are fired; homosexual soldiers are discharged from the armed services without benefits. Homosexual men and women are physically attacked by gangs of drunken joy-seekers and vocally abused by members of virtually every strata of society. Homosexuals are invariably portrayed on television as pitiable creatures or objects of ridicule. Homosexual couples are denied the financial benefits and societal approval accrued with legal marriage. Homosexuals are often rejected by their families, shunned by their co-workers, and denied legal custody of their children. Until society ceases to view gay people as abnormal perverts who do not deserve basic human rights, the work of the UAGSU and similar organizations must continue. The gains of a year, though heartening, allow only a momentary pause for celebration. In its second year, the UAGSU plans to continue to educate with its Speakers Bureau and Gay Resources Library. The formation of a Political Action

Committee, more extensive peer counseling, and programs on gay-related issues for the edification of GSU members are among the additions planned to further loosen the bonds of misunderstanding, hatred, prejudice, and discrimination which keep gay people from proudly assuming a place of full equality in American society.