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Fraternity & Sorority Professionals as Allies

for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, & Transgender
Fraternity & Sorority Members

CREATING A WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT
For GLBT Members

The Emergence of

GLBT ISSUES

Brotherhood: Gay Life in College Fraternities

– Shane L. Windmeyer, Editor
– Reviewed by Buck C. Cooke

When *Out on Fraternity Row: Personal Accounts of Being Gay in a College Fraternity* was published in 1998, there had been little written about the gay experience in the fraternal world. *Brotherhood: Gay Life in College Fraternities* shows how far the fraternal movement has come since then in dealing with gay and bisexual brothers. It also illustrates how far there still is to go to eradicate heterosexism and homophobia in fraternities. The stories collected in



Several authors describe how they struggled to not only reconcile their identity as being gay and a fraternity man, but also with their ethnic backgrounds and religious beliefs. Stories detail men coming out in groups with Christian, Latino, and Asian-American roots.

Two authors, Travis Shumake and Chris Ho, describe being rejected by fraternities prior to being extended an invitation to membership. These stories are excellent examples of the role allies play in the

life of someone struggling with issues of sexual orientation. Both authors received support from heterosexual friends and campus administrators as they pursued fraternity membership. I laughed out loud when Shumake described how the Sigma Chi chapter was criticized and punished by the sorority women on his campus after initially turning him down. Another touching story was written by Benjamin Swartz, a heterosexual man with a gay “pledge son” (or little brother) and how forming a personal bond with a gay man changed his attitudes about GLBT issues. Swartz writes, “...fraternal diversity can enhance brotherhood by adding a whole new dimension to lifetime friendships, to the growth of individuals, and to the fraternal values of humanity. My brother, my pledge son, taught me valuable lessons about diversity. Through his eyes I was able to see his reality, and as a result I am a better brother and a better person.” (p. 61)

Despite all of the advances we have made as a profession and a fraternal movement, hatred and prejudice still exist in the world of fraternities. *Brotherhood* is a call for all fraternity advisors, volunteers, and leaders to continue to fight for the inclusion of sexual orientation in nondiscrimination policies, to educate undergraduate leaders and volunteers about how to deal with GLBT issues, and to prepare young student affairs professionals and seasoned veterans alike to deal with the question, “We have a brother who came out, now what?”

In that vein, *Brotherhood* contains excellent resources for campus professionals and fraternity volunteers and staff members. These include case studies, an insightful article about the connections between homophobia and hazing by Pamela Freeman, an excellent article by Kelly Jo Karnes about navigating recruitment and new member programs for gay men (including a list of questions for a gay man to ask himself as he goes through recruitment and selects his fraternity and a list of questions for a fraternity to determine the group’s readiness to recruit an openly gay member), and an article by Tracie Massey on coming out as a gay fraternity man (including guidelines to developing a coming out action plan to ensure all angles are considered and that efforts have been made to make the coming out process as easy as possible).

Brotherhood brought me to tears, made me angry, touched my heart, and motivated me.

In *Brotherhood*, Shane L. Windmeyer has collected another series of poignant, touching, frustrating, hopeful, and convicting stories about the experiences of gay and bisexual fraternity members. The stories are followed by a powerful conclusion by past AFA President Douglas N. Case where he proposes the “gay fraternal agenda” and an excellent collection of extremely useful and practical educational resources.

A large part of *Brotherhood* is positive, detailing how men were honest with their fraternity brothers about their sexual

orientation and were accepted. The book begins with an uplifting forward by Dwayne Todd, the anonymous writer of a letter used in the preface to *Out on Fraternity Row*. Todd describes how he has come out of the closet in every facet of his life, including to his fraternity. He now is a volunteer for the international organization and is accepted by his brothers as a gay fraternity man.

Not all of the stories in *Brotherhood* have a happy ending, however. Clay Cunningham attempted to pledge a fraternity at Texas A&M University and was depledged right after bid day. The pledge educator explained to Cunningham that because he was gay he could not be a new member. The pledge educator then literally took Cunningham’s pledge jersey right off his back and he walked out of the fraternity event shirtless and broken.

Several themes emerge in *Brotherhood*. Depression is a frequent theme in the stories. Even some of the authors whose stories ended happily had rocky roads to travel, including stories of a suicide attempt and self-medication with drugs and alcohol in an attempt to make the pain and fear go away.



Perhaps one of the most valuable tools for me in the book is the article "Biblical Passages to Support a Gay Brother," by Doug Bauder and Reverend Rebecca Jimenez. Every time I have worked with a fraternity on this issue, a member or advisor or other alumnus brings up the Christian values of their organization and how gay and bisexual members just cannot fit into their organization. This article discusses how different interpretations of the Bible cause problems in many cases, including dealing with sexual orientation. It also includes a list of sources that helps with the exploration of how gay and Christian can go together.

Other resources include guidelines for creating a support group for gay fraternity men by Grahaeme Hesp, recognition of fraternities taking the lead in inclusion of gay members (including a list of questions for men to ask their inter/national fraternity leaders about inclusion of sexual orientation), a sample chapter diversity statement for groups to adopt, examples of fraternal non-discrimination policies and legislation, and a description of Lambda 10 resources.

Brotherhood is a reminder of the timeless and universal concept of a chosen family, a bond stronger than friendship. Cunningham reminds us "...gay people are everywhere. There were closeted gay men in those fraternities who were certainly fearful of coming out at Texas A&M and being labeled as gay. Each of us runs forward to find acceptance and brotherhood for who we are" (p. 57). *Brotherhood* sends a message to gay and bisexual fraternity men that they are not alone and that perhaps their chosen family – their brotherhood – will accept them for who they really are.

– Buck C. Cooke is the Assistant Dean of Students/Director of Greek Affairs at the Georgia Institute of Technology.

OUT & Greek

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