

Straight and Narrow by Fred Coppersmith

Author's Note: Written as an assignment for a Penn State English class and inspired by on-campus events in the spring of 1997, this article was made possible largely through the help of STRAIGHT's then vice president, Alex Cadman, with whom I was friends my freshman year and who was kind enough to sit for an interview here and in an earlier assignment. The views expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views of the author, so please, no angry letters. STRAIGHT has, at any rate, since disbanded, making this article now largely irrelevant.

Darin Loccarini is not happy.

"My reputation is on the line," he says. "I think all our reputations are on the line. People are watching us...people are wondering. It's time to get this organization going."

That organization is STRAIGHT, Students Reinforcing Adherence in General Heterosexual Tradition, which Loccarini founded on Penn State's University Park campus in the late autumn of 1996. The group's stated goal, to create a university organization formally opposed to the acceptance of homosexual behavior, has been met with resistance from many at Penn State. Its ultimate agenda has been questioned by some, feared and attacked by yet others, and the motives of its founding members have been examined and debated at great length - first on the steps of Willard Building, then in the pages of The Daily Collegian, and finally before the Undergraduate Student Government Supreme Court. The group's charter, originally denied by the Court in an unanimous decision, was later granted by the Student Organization Appeals Board in March of 1997.

That decision relied on the assumption that STRAIGHT would not discriminate, that any undergraduate student would be allowed to join. "The documentation of record in this case," wrote the Appeals Board, "establishes that STRAIGHT does not have a discriminatory membership clause, that STRAIGHT does not have as its purpose discrimination on account of sexual orientation or other prohibited discrimination, and that STRAIGHT's purpose does not conflict with the established policies of the University."

However, says Loccarini, "It's time to change policy."

To that end, he says, STRAIGHT plans to introduce just such discriminatory measures in the near future, to limit its membership by removing openly homosexual students from its roster and barring their future participation. "They have the potential to thwart our mission with a vote," says Loccarini, "and that shouldn't be allowed in any group. Something like this has never happened before because nobody ever took on the arrogant homosexual lobby as I did."

Adds STRAIGHT secretary Steve Markle: "Usually, if a person in the community does not agree with the Mission Statement of an organization, they will not join it. It should be a requirement...that every member of a group supports the mission statement and that 'the organization has cohesiveness and unity'. Up to now, members of ProLife did not join ProChoice. Members of some satanic group did not also simultaneously attend Christian Youth groups. To do so is ridiculous."

Yet, many in the Penn State community to which Markle refers do not see the validity to his analogy, nor do they agree with his and Loccarini's plans. Many, including the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Student Alliance (LGBSA) and the USG Supreme Court, maintain that all Penn State students have the right to join STRAIGHT, regardless of sexual orientation. Laura Hennessey, educational committee chair of LGBSA and a member of STRAIGHT since its inception, has stated her disappointment with Loccarini and disapproval of his plans. In April of 1997, when Loccarini first announced the possibility that STRAIGHT might limit its membership, The Daily Collegian quoted Hennessey as saying "'If he attempts to do that, I'm going to raise hell.'"

At the same time, Duane Gildea, political co-director of LGBSA also made public his misgivings about such discriminatory measures and questioned whether the University Park community might not be "starting to see the true side of [STRAIGHT]. They who fought for a voice are refusing to allow dissenting voices to be allowed in their organization."

Yet Markle contends that "members of LGBSA...should not be allowed to join STRAIGHT because they are clearly in opposition to our organization's mission statement....people should not be joining groups they oppose in order to sabotage/eliminate their opposition - in any political arena."

LGBSA Political Team Leader Dan Hindman does not agree with this assessment, nor does he believe homosexual members pose a threat to STRAIGHT. "Penn State organizations are not to be placed in opposition or with the intent of eliminating one another," he says. "I consider comments made by STRAIGHT to be belittling and against Penn State."

But what if STRAIGHT does amend its constitution? Could Darin Loccarini and his supporters be successful in introducing such a policy and removing homosexual members from their group?

"Organizations cannot amend their constitutions without the approval of the USG Supreme Court," says Associate Justice Bryan C. Weis. "If STRAIGHT or any other organization attempts to amend or change their constitution and/or bylaws, it must first be reviewed by a Justice of the Court, who will apply his or her knowledge of University Policy to render a decision. In this very case, for example, such an amendment would probably be rendered illegal, that is, in violation of the Universities explicit non-discrimination policy, specifically '...sexual orientation...'"

Any such decision by the USG court, however, would apparently not deter Loccarini. "They're a bunch of legally ignorant socialists," he says of the court. "When you're doing the right thing, there's nothing to worry about. I don't take no for an answer if it's unjustified."

STRAIGHT's mission, he claims, "isn't to conform to the school, it's to make the school conform to the law and common sense."

Yet, as University law stands, Loccarini's success seems unlikely. Given its current constitution, any attempt to deny membership based on sexual orientation would result in the loss of STRAIGHT's charter, says Weis, and amending the constitution to include such a discriminatory clause would conflict with the laws STRAIGHT has agreed to abide by.

"If any organization is found in violation of University Policy or its own constitution, it is grounds for suspension and potential loss of charter," says Weis, "upon review by the appropriate offices..."

Adds fellow Justice Joshua D. Snyder, "If STRAIGHT denied membership to someone because of that person's sexual orientation and it was brought to the attention of the Supreme Court, there would be a hearing and almost certainly STRAIGHT would be made an inactive organization."

Further opposition to Loccarini's plans, ironically, comes from within STRAIGHT itself - from the group's own vice president, Alex Cadman.

Loccarini's plans, Cadman says, would leave the organization "fighting for its existence again, which basically doesn't get anything done."

"Darin wants to put us back in the newspaper," he adds. "That's not really important to me. It never really was."

Cadman maintains that he is much more interested in conversing with the "other side" - the lesbian and gay community - within the parameters outlined by University law and STRAIGHT's charter, whether through discussion or debates.

And although Loccarini may have the support of other officers like Markle, it is uncertain what percentage of STRAIGHT actually agrees with his proposed course of action.

"The general consensus among STRAIGHT," says Cadman, "is that, although Darin was the only person who could get the organization started, a lot of people have doubts about his leadership in the organization....He was the only reason it got started, but a lot of people have reservations about him as an actual [leader]. We're kind of unsure what his motives are...they don't like which way he wants the organization to go."

The direction that STRAIGHT will ultimately take, then, remains unclear. With unresolved conflict within the group and without the support of University law, however, Loccarini's success in limiting the organization's membership seems doubtful. While he and other members like Markle appear determined to change STRAIGHT's constitution, and therefore change University policy, many in the Penn State community - and the University itself - do not believe that policy should be changed. Only time, then, will tell; only time will reveal the consequences of Loccarini's plans.