



free agent

The butterflies of a first date and the comfort of a loving partner. What some dream about is the reality of others. Polyamory is on the rise as people of all backgrounds across the country embrace nonmonogamy.

*Story by Mary Kate Hafner
Photos by Alexandra Martin*

Andi Wilson has been married to her husband, Tom, for 23 years. The pair met during a psychology class while studying at the University of Missouri. They had an ordinary love story, dating for a few years, marrying and settling in Mid Missouri. Photographs of the pair in front of the columns at graduation and more recently floating on Jacks Fort river are featured on their joint Facebook account. Nothing was too out of the norm until five years ago when the couple decided to embrace polyamory.

Polyamory is the practice of having multiple, simultaneous emotional and romantic relationships with the consent of all parties. Despite how polyamory has been embellished, these relationship may or may not be purely sexual. In fact, sex has little to do with this identity oftentimes. As each monogamous relationship is different so is each polyamorous relationship.

Polyamory communities distinguish that a poly relationship is different from an open relationship. While open relationships focus on sex and attraction, a poly relationship expands past that, focusing on possible long term connection and commitment. The focus on each person and relation is unique just as the relationship.

A 2016 study in the *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy* showed that of 8,718 participants shows that more than one in five study participants reported engaging in consensual nonmonogamy at some point in their lifetime. While millennials may be given credit for the rise of polyamory, the concept of multiple partners is

nothing new. There are books, blogs, dating coaches, websites, and apps all devoted to polyamory that have been growing since the mid-90's.

The Wilsons decided to practice polyamory after years of self exploration and frank discussions with each other. "We were worried about jealousy and drifting apart," says Andi Wilson, "Remarkably, we are closer now."

Polyamory opens oneself to being able to experience the world through more viewpoints than our own. Terri Conley of the University of Michigan found in her 2014 study found that polyamorous people are more likely to strengthen all relationships, romantic or otherwise.

California native, Jenna Cripps, discovered her polyamorous identity two years ago during a long term relationship. While her commitment and love for her partner were firm, she couldn't shake the appeal of experiencing another person. When she shared her feelings with her partner, the conversation went south leading to the couple's end.

Today, Cripps is thriving. She lives with her partner while maintaining two outside relationships. She defines polyamory as two or more people in a relationship.

"My partner and I have the option to date other people. We have talked about both dating the same woman but we haven't started dating anyone yet," says Cripps.

Cripps is open about her relationships. She says there is a fifty-fifty reception when she reveals her status. "A lot of people don't understand. They think I'm being a slut or I'll

change my mind when I'm older. On the other hand I've had just as many friends say, 'welcome to the club,'" says Cripps.

Wilson is not as forward. "Not all of our family or friends know about our relationship. It's not something we feel like needs to be the face of our life," Wilson says.

Openness of a poly relationship can bring forth a multitude of questions from outsiders often focused around the theme of jealousy. But like most monogamous relationship advice, communication

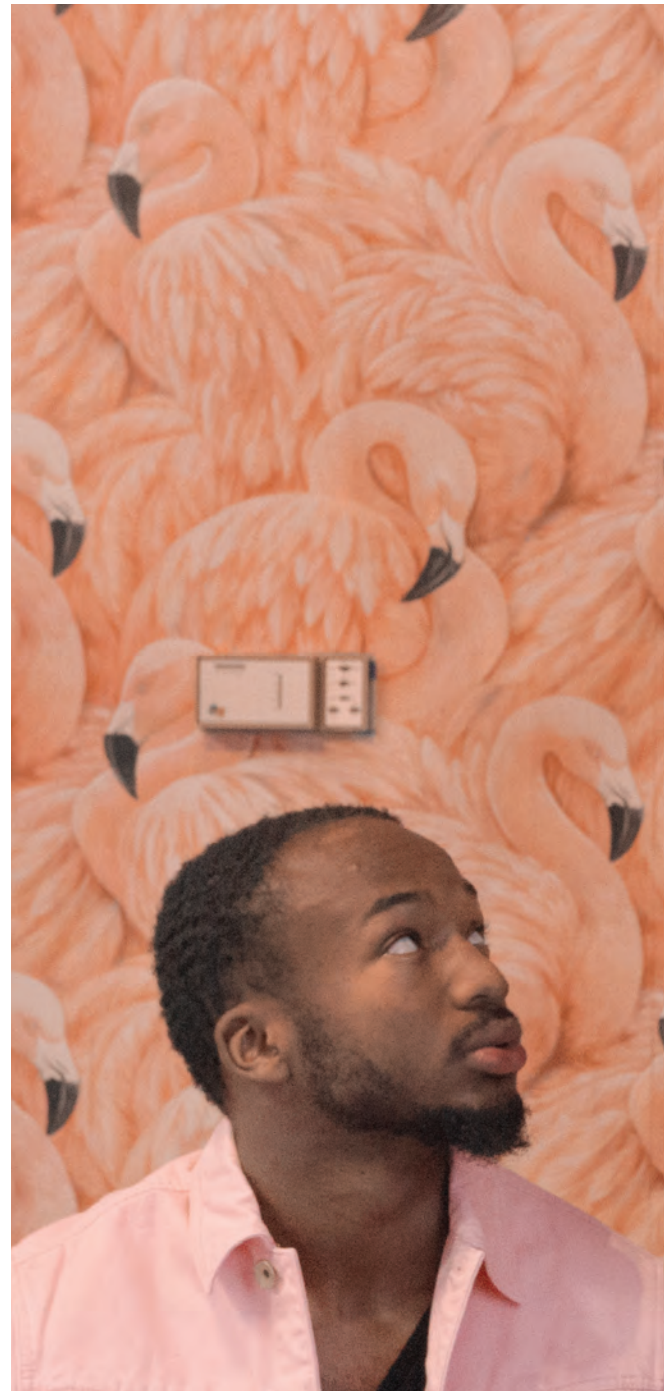
"Communication will be the difference between success and failure," Wilson says, "Without frequent check-ins and dedicated 'us' time, the relationship would have ended a long time ago."

When asked about jealousy Cripps promotes honesty as the only option.

"When I talk to my partner I straight up tell him what I'm doing. I'll tell him when and where I'm going on a date and who it's with. He will ask me how it went and I'm honest about it," she says.

In principal, polyamory may present itself as the way of the future; an utopia of connective and progressive bliss. However, it's no free love picnic. The problems of a monogamous relationship will still be there in a polyamorous relationship, only multiplied. This is not the life for everyone. The work involved to balance multiple paramours is great. Time can be the biggest challenge, especially if both parties are engaged in multiple affairs. There is also loneliness that can be experienced if one's anchor partner is currently more active in another relationship.

"The effort is worth the reward," says Wilson, "not much worth having is easy."





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THE A-TEAM

Navigating Nonexistence

*Story by Erika Westhoff
Photography by Allison I. Moorman*





If you make your way past the first four letters of the LGBT alphabet soup, you'll eventually run into L-G-B-T-Q-I-A.

Often remembered only as “ally,” this A can also stand for agender, asexual (ace), or aromantic (aro).

No, these terms are not directly connected. What they do have in common, however, is the prefix “a-” which means “not.” Not part of the male/female gender binary, not sexually attracted to others or not romantically attracted to others.

Gender, sexuality and romance play such prominent roles in our society, but for those who identify with the capital “A” it is the dismissal of these identities that shape their experiences. Experiences that are as diverse as the individuals to whom they belong, particularly in the Stephens College community.

Stephens College junior Cai Santee’s hot pink hair, beat-up combat boots and jean jacket stuck full of political pins broadcasts their punk aesthetic and activism. What their style doesn’t tell you is that they are a poet with an un-ironic love of country music and a non-binary woman-aligned lesbian.

“The ‘A’ of my identity is my gender. I have a flow chart of identification: trans, non-binary and agender. In my brain, my gender is very solid and it’s disconnected from the societal binary,” Santee says. “But my expression of gender shifts. Some days it’s very feminine, like campy feminine, and other days it’s very masculine, in a kind of default way.”

Santee had always felt that they weren’t a

woman, but didn’t discover the term agender until college. Meanwhile, Stephens senior Janet Reinschmidt was introduced to gender theory in high school by their English teacher, who openly identified as gender variant.

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Upon introduction, Reinschmidt invokes the image of a modern skater version of a ‘70s folk singer. If you engage them in conversation it becomes clear that they possess a wealth of Old Hollywood trivia. Reinschmidt identifies as a non-binary lesbian. Much like Santee, Reinschmidt didn’t identify as agender until college.

“I always knew that I didn’t fit in the gender binary, but non-binary didn’t feel like a space I could occupy until recently. I finally felt comfortable with myself,” Reinschmidt says.

For Reinschmidt, claiming the agender label was more about being open with themselves than anything. A fear exists that excess labels make everything more confusing rather than helping, a fear that Santee disagrees with.

“Labels are just putting names to feelings that

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-Olivia Bashaw.

already exist. We're not creating new feelings, it's like 'oh this is a feeling and there is a word for it and there is a community for it and I can get advice on how to maneuver it in society,'" Santee says. "For example: I'm woman-aligned in that I'm a femme lesbian."

The woman-aligned label for non-binary folks acknowledges their experiences in a binary society. A femme-presenting non-binary person walking down the street will still be seen and treated as a woman. When non-binary individuals assert their place in what are considered women's issues and spaces, like Stephens College, it can cause confusion for those who see it as contradictory Santee says.

"I figured it to make sense for me because women's colleges were created to give a safe learning space to a marginalized gender, which is still what I am," Santee says.

Santee and others have found their place within what are assumed to be solely women's spaces, but they still experience moments of exclusion, for example when genitals are equated with gender or being told their pronouns aren't valid.

"I've had a lot of people tell me that you can't use they/them pronouns if you're one person. Then people will use that as an excuse to ignore your identity altogether," Reinschmidt says. "But grammar is always evolving."

Evolution is seen not only in grammar, but in labels that apply to sexuality. Approximately one percent of the world's adult population is asexual, but a stigma exists surrounding

the term. Until very recently, the scientific community labeled asexuality as a disorder. Research conducted at institutions such as the University of British Columbia has since concluded that asexuality is best defined as a sexual orientation.

Stephens junior Olivia Bashaw's personality practically vibrates through their small frame in what could be mistaken for nervous energy. Brown roots peak out of gray hair, off-setting their hodge podge grandma style. Bashaw is asexual and a self-labeled lesbian since it would take a very specific guy to spark their interest they say.

"Labels can be empowering. Having a term made me feel valid," Bashaw says. "I thought I was broken, but then I realized there was a label for what I was feeling."

In 2016, University of British Columbia researchers published a dissertation that stated "no single theory can explain asexuality," underscoring the diversity among the asexual population. Diversity that is seen in the asexual community present on Stephens College campus.

Sitting in front of her gaming monitor playing Overwatch, Stephens junior Courtney Sarpy exudes a quiet presence at odds with her height and assertive voice. She loves Korean pop and dramas, attributing a portion of that love to the fact that they aren't as sexualized as Western media. Sarpy identifies as asexual and is non-discriminatory when it comes to romantic attraction.

“Asexual as a label is like a cloud casting a shadow, it’s covering everyone who identifies under it, but we’re all catching a different amount of shade,” Sarpy says. “People make a lot of assumptions when I say I’m asexual, like that I don’t masturbate. Masturbation? Fine. Sex? No.”

A difference exists between sexual attraction and having a sex drive, Sarpy explains. Other people don’t have to be involved in order for someone to have a sex drive, but this fact causes many people to assume that asexuals’ lack of attraction to others stems from past sexual trauma. Past trauma may be a contributing factor for some people, such as Bashaw, but it doesn’t undermine their asexuality.

“For me it is trauma-based, or well, it’s hard to say if it is directly trauma-based, but the trauma that I had definitely solidified my asexuality. Honestly, the fact that I had to even force myself to be in my past relationship is telling, but it’s hard to remember how I felt before it happened,” Bashaw says.

Society is so sex entrenched that it is assumed everyone is both straight and sexual until proven otherwise, Bashaw explains. They considered themselves heterosexual until they realized they didn’t have to be interested in either men or sex.

“I’ve been trying to reclaim the word ‘prude’ for myself,” Bashaw says. “Prude has a lot of bad associations with it, but I want to use it as a way to empower myself. Yeah, I don’t want to hear about sex and I think that I have a right to not have to hear about sex.”

Sarpy rejects the word “prude.”

“It bothers me when people are talking about their one night stands, but also it’s your body. You do you,” Sarpy says. “You’re not a slut, I’m not a prude. We’re just who we are.”

Bashaw and Sarpy experience many different assumptions about asexuality, but one in particular is the connection people draw between asexuality and aromanticism. Almost no consideration is given to aromanticism as its own concept. The few studies where it has been discussed are asexuality studies with subjects who identify as both aro and ace.





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*Are you asking me about my race,
my sexuality
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The subject of aromanticism in people who experience sexual attraction has yet to be really explored. But romantic attraction and sexual attraction can exist separately. For some people the two align, like if someone identified as both bisexual and biromantic. For others, the two attractions differ, like if someone is heterosexual and aromantic. Aromantics can still have close platonic sexual relationships, just like asexuals can still have romantic relationships.

People who identify as aromantic could also be asexual and agender or any combination of identities. Many would argue that there is a clear connection between sexuality, romance and gender, but theoretical arguments don't always apply to lived experiences.

Bashaw, Sarpy, Santee and Reinschmidt all have encountered people who casually undermined their identities with phrases such as, "you haven't met the right person yet," "you have to be either male/female," "you just want attention" and the plaintiff accusation "but that doesn't exist." Those outside the LGBTQ+ community are not the only ones saying these things. Even within the community there is a rejection of the prefix a-identities. With every interview conducted, a need to defend instead of just discuss their identities was present.

"My least favorite question is, 'What are you?' Are you asking me about my race, my sexuality or my star sign? There are so many things that I am, Creole, asexual, a Virgo. So, explain what you want and then accept what I give you," Sarpy says. "My asexuality is not who I am as a person even if it is a part of me, but once I explain that I'm asexual to people it seems like they think that's all I am."

Despite push back outside and within the LGBTQ+ community, Reinschmidt asserts that a space exists for those who identify as agender, asexual or aromantic. The process of finding that space may vary person to person, but the most important aspect is self-reflection and self-identification.

"I'm comfortable with myself, so it's not like everyone else has to be comfortable with me too, which is something that I'm finally getting," Reinschmidt says.