



FORWARD

Brigham Young University — ‘South County’s Mormon U’ stigmatizes its LGBTQ students

A new generation of activists demand that the historically conservative institution modernize its anti-gay ‘honor code’

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UNSAINTLY PERSECUTION

STUDENTS CALL OUT BYU'S ANTI-LGBTQ PRACTICES

By **DIEGO HIGUERA**

Brigham Young University seems so far from Chula Vista. It is 713 miles away, an 11-hour drive through four states.

Culturally, it is a light year from diverse, progressive South San Diego County. BYU is in the heart of red state Utah, a bastion of conservative politics since the late 1840s.

BYU seems like the last place a kid from the South Bay would want to attend, but there is a quiet pipeline from our multiracial blue coastal strip to the

“Mormon Harvard.” There may be as many as 14,000 Mormons in the South County who have high regard for BYU’s deserved reputation as an excellent academic university with an affordable price tag.

Often, though, culture shock consumes BYU’s overwhelmed LGBTQ students. Ugliness ensues.

Last semester when campus clubs and student organizations were invited to insert brochures and handouts in a Welcome to BYU bag for incoming freshmen, campus officials removed all materials from LGBTQ organizations.

One of the purged clubs was the BYU Rainbow Collective, an organization whose stated mission is “to create and identify safe spaces for BYU’s LGBTQIA+ students.” Rainbow Collective organizes back-to-school Pride events, DEI training and a popular art show.

Rainbow Collective PR Manager Haley Malesich said the move was hurtful. ▶



UNITED IN UTAH

BYU attracts Mormon students from across America with its affordable tuition and generally good academics. Students from the South County are among the leaders of a growing movement to push BYU toward full acceptance of marginalized LGBTQ students.

“(BYU administrators) make statements about inclusivity and loving your neighbor,” she said, “but fail to show up for the LGBTQ+ community and give full love only on the condition that you change who you are to fit their mold.”

Malesich said LGBTQ students are starting to push back.

“We want LGBTQ+ students to know that they have a community of people here to encourage them and support them,” she said. “No one deserves to feel excluded or stranded with no life vest. Our goal is to listen, lift and love.”

Raynbow Collective works alongside 14 organizations that support the greater queer community of Utah. Malevich said faculty and students are becoming more vocal in their allyship.

“Alongside our friends at the Cougar Pride Center, USGA, Equality Utah, the Out Foundation, Black Menaces, and so many others, I have seen a surge of support and love within the community and from allies to the community,” she said. “I feel like our organizations bring out the best in people. We’ve been able to create powerful, deep friendships while advocating for a better, more inclusive Utah. I’ve also seen more people stand up for the rights of those being discriminated against. It’s a beautiful thing to see so many people united in purpose.”

Grace (a pseudonym) is a freshman at BYU. She identifies as an LGBTQ

Mormon, which they said is often a dichotomy difficult to reconcile.

“I want to talk openly about LGBTQ topics, but I’m scared to,” they said. “None of the organizations made for queer BYU students are school affiliated and none can meet on campus. Within these groups, the LGBTQ community at BYU is very vibrant and supportive. We meet and give each other advice, comfort and resources. We warn each other which professors to avoid and also tell each other which ones are allies.”

Grace said their time at BYU has not been all bad, but they feel LGBTQ students are marginalized.

“(BYU has an) Office of Belonging, but that is the only official (institution encouraging diversity) I know of,” they said.

Grace said the conundrum of LGBTQ students’ attraction to BYU seems illogical, but is driven by pragmatism.

“Why do queer students go to BYU?” they asked. “Why don’t they just go somewhere else? We think it’s going to be different. It’s the best choice financially. Some (students) don’t know they are queer until they’re already at BYU. Financial control by parents. Social pressure to attend.”

Grace is attending BYU for spiritual reasons, they said. Many queer students are still faithful members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, but chafe under an “honor code” hostile to LGBTQ students.



SPEARHEADING A CALL FOR CHANGE

BYU administrators and Mormon Church leaders have for years quietly hemmed in its LGBTQ students and prevented them from organizing clubs and activities, according the BYU students and alumni. The community is pushing back and demanding that BYU join other U.S. universities in respecting the rights of LGBTQ Americans. Kaitlynn Wright (l) is one of the emerging voices in the movement to empower LGBTQ Mormon students. Source: *The Chronicle of Higher Education*



“Change is likely to be slow at BYU,” they said. “The honor code stuff is controlled by people very high up (in the church hierarchy), so even if all the staff and students wanted change (to campus culture) it would be unlikely.”

Sydney Mortenson is a freshman at BYU and an LGBTQ ally.

“Most of the people I have talked with seem to be very kind and accepting of everyone,” she said. “I will say, though, that there have been a few times I’ve heard some very homophobic things said by students and people on campus.”

Mortenson said LGBTQ students are subject to the old Christian canard “love the sinner, hate the sin.”

BYU’s surrounding Provo, Utah community can be rough on LGBTQ students, she said. Once, while riding a city bus, she mentioned to a woman that she was majoring in animation. The woman blurted out her disapproval of a same sex kiss in the Disney film “Lightyear.”

“She said she thought it was terrible how early kids are being exposed to LGBTQ relationships and how Disney should not pretend those relationships are normal,” Mortenson said. “Even though many of the people I’ve met on campus are amazing and accepting of everyone, I absolutely understand how (members) of the LGBTQ community can feel unwelcome and unsafe at BYU. The university needs to encourage its students and faculty to be more inclusive.”

Students are modeling the way forward, she said.

“BYU teaches students to love everyone, but I feel like there are definitely times at school where that value is not kept,” she said. “I absolutely love groups like the Rainbow Collective and the Black Menaces and everything they’ve done for the school, but I think more should be

done by BYU itself.”

Mortenson cited the BYU honor code, strictly held behavioral mores that ban “homosexual behavior.” Under the honor code, LGBTQ couples are not to hold hands, hug, kiss or date in public.

Mortenson said the honor code encourages straight students to rat out LGBTQ classmates.

“I think the biggest issue with the honor code is that most people don’t even bother reading it, so they are just reporting whatever they deem inappropriate,” she said. “The honor code is very outdated.”

BYU alumnus Jillian Orr went viral with more than 1.6 million views when they sowed a rainbow flag into their graduation gown and flashed it on BYU’s Marriott Center Jumbo Tron after receiving their diploma. It was a violation of the honor code and could have cost Orr their degree.

“I knew there could be consequences for what I did and I was ready to face whatever it was,” they said. “When I was making this decision I remembered something that had happened this year. On Rainbow Day there were students that went up to the Y for BYU on the mountain and they took lights and made the Y a rainbow. To be recognized! BYU made very, very clear rules against this. (The students) did that knowing they could be arrested and knowing they could be charged.”

Despite the prejudicial treatment, South County LGBTQ students still go to BYU. Pat (a pseudonym), who identifies as queer, said pragmatism weighs in.

“BYU has the program I wanted and every year it ranks Top 10 in the country for \$3,000 a semester,” they said. “Look me in the eyes and tell me that’s not an option you might take. I was a teenager when I decided to go to BYU. I was deeply entrenched in my religion and I knew I would be in a community of likeminded people at BYU.”

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SYDNEY MORTENSON

BYU Freshman, LGBTQ ally

Pat rejects the “you knew what you were getting into” rhetoric they often hear.

“I did not know (about the anti-LGBTQ culture),” they said. “Nobody knows what BYU is like until you’re actually on campus and seeing what’s going on.”

Pat said he made a sound fiscal decision.

“If I had chosen my major at a different university or a different state, I would be paying student loans akin to medical school,” they said.

Mortenson said BYU is a great academic university, but it needs to evolve. There should be room for Mormon LGBTQ students fighting for a better BYU. The university’s motto, “Enter to Learn, Go Forth to Serve,” remains aspirational, she said.

“The university needs to learn from its minority populations,” she said. “LGBTQ students deserve a chance to pursue a better education and feel comfortable while doing so. They deserve the chance to go forth and serve their community.” ■



THE HEM OF HER GARMENT

Jillian Orr flashed attendees at her BYU graduation with the colorful lining she had sewn into her gown. She waited until after she was handed her diploma to show her Pride or she might not have received it.

