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Myths, opinions probed

Class explores lesbianism

By **Debbie Howlett**
 Of the Emerald

Some people term lesbianism a deviation from the norm, while others ask why gays "make such a big deal" of their chosen lifestyle. Barb Ryan, a senior in psychology, says the lesbian community is an oppressed minority. She says their issues are unknown and also wrongfully frightening to a "straight" society.

Her remedy, for the second term in a row, is to teach a course on the subject. "Lesbianism: Myth and Reality," is a women's studies course conducted through the SEARCH program.

Student's reasons for enrolling in the class vary. Some say they have been "waiting for a class like this to be taught," some want to define their own sexuality, or some enroll simply out of curiosity. Twenty-five students registered winter term and 20 have registered so far this term.

"I'm teaching the class, first of all, to dispel some myths about us, to make lesbians and the issue of lesbianism more visible to the community," Ryan says. "And secondly, to educate people on how varied lesbian culture and lifestyle really is."

Areas the course could cover are in fact so varied, she says, that each topic could become a ten-week course in itself. Issues that the class has discussed

include "coming out," lesbians in history, politics, the workforce, racism, motherhood, lifestyle, and the media.

Ryan says that her approach is unique in that it is from a lesbian perspective. Most classes are usually overshadowed in that they deal with the issues of gay men and bisexuals as well, according to Ryan.

Myths Ryan deals with most frequently, she says, come in three forms, centering around men, sexuality, and "deviant things."

"The (myths) we grow up with and the ones we hear most, center around men," she says. "Everything from lesbians hate men, to lesbians want to be men, to men could cure a lesbian." In each of these explanations, "a man gets the credit," for the woman's own choice of lifestyle.

Dealing with sexuality, Ryan quotes myths claiming that lesbians are "over-sexed, attacking straight women, attacking children. Those to me are the most ridiculous, and aren't based on any truth whatsoever."

And added to that, says Ryan, lesbians are called "deviants, sinners, unhappy, suicidal, alcoholic, every bad title," to explain a choice that differs so much from prescribed "norms."

"Lesbianism threatens a lot of the institutions based on heterosexism, which I define as the assumption that all people are heterosexual. The myths are perpetuated because they benefit our society the way it's set up right now, our white, capitalist, patriarchal society," says Ryan.

Ryan adds that she is most frequently asked by heterosexuals why lesbians "make such a big deal out of it, if it's their own personal lifestyle." Her response is that "we're not the one's who are making the big deal."

Through prejudicial employment laws and housing

policies, and society's unresponsiveness to the needs of a lesbian couple, Ryan says lesbians are denied basic civil rights.

"There have always been homosexuals, throughout history, and there always will be. Because of that fact, you can't assume that everyone you meet is heterosexual," says Ryan. "When people realize that one out of ten women is a lesbian, when they see how normal lesbians are, maybe they won't feel so threatened."

Although social tolerance remains from the political liberalism of the 1960s and '70s, Ryan says the approaching conservative swing is causing two extreme reactions among the lesbian community. Some go back into the "closet," while others unite in an effort to make their issues heard.

This trend is noticeable in her classroom in the form of auditing students. From five to ten people attend class each week unregistered, in part, she says, to prevent the course title from being indelibly inscribed in their transcripts.

Class members are taking this approach who might even be straight, but it would "look real bad if some day someone would look back and say 'Aha! You took a lesbianism class.' Why is that so horrible and scary to these people?"

Ryan welcomes students who would rather not enroll. She says that it is better than not having them attend at all. "I'm more interested in educating people," Ryan says.

Ryan's long term goal with the course is to see it become a regular entry in the women's studies department catalog, where she feels it will be "taken seriously." She hopes that her strict grading procedure and thorough preparation of curricula and reading materials for the class will enable a University professor to take over the class next year.

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Almost 4,000 strike

EUGENE — Nearly 4,000 Weyerhaeuser Co. workers in Oregon and Washington were honoring picket lines on Thursday of workers who are on strike in Raymond, Wash., a company spokesman said.

Lee Bjorklund said 1,600 workers at Springfield and Cottage Grove in Oregon walked off the job Thursday morning, along with 400 at Snoqualmie Falls, 200 at Enumclaw and 50 at Tacoma, Wash.

They joined 1,100 workers at North Bend, Ore., and 600 in the Raymond-Aberdeen, Wash., area who had begun honoring the picket lines on Wednesday.

Another 550 workers at Chehalis, Vail and Pe Ell plants had also walked out in support of the Raymond workers on Wednesday. The company decided to shut those operations down on Thursday and Friday as an inventory control measure, Bjorklund.

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