

## VIEW FROM HERE

# Student teachers

Once again college campuses are pointing the culture toward change

by Patricia Nell Warren

**D**espite controversy—indeed, because of it—the 6th annual Southeastern Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual College Conference just stamped its fiery lambda on Bible-belt sensibility. Site this year: Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro. Big lesson of the weekend: Anti-gay hate can spark a powerful reaction among fair-minded straight youth and adults.

Over 300 students came from every state in the region, for the biggest turnout yet. Co-chairs Allie Sultan and Michael Grantham titled the gathering "And Liberty for All." Three days, Feb. 14-16, were packed with workshops, networking, a resource fair, a coffeehouse, on-line chats, book signings, a fund-raising reception, a banquet and a dance, plus an open meeting to discuss what campus will host the '98 gathering. A hardworking volunteer corps from MTSU's Lambda Association supported the co-chairs throughout.

A preconference blast of hate e-mail, death threats, sulfurous sermons and edged editorials had fizzled by opening day. The student organizers simply publicized threats to the media. Thanks

film finished to loud applause from the packed auditorium.

Keynote speeches came from Torie Osborne, Lynn Sheppard, Paul Yandurra and myself. David Mixner, also scheduled to speak, got caught in airline-strike snarls and was unable to reach Murfreesboro.

Mainstream media—local press, CBS and NBC affiliates—gave this historic conference the notice it deserved. The campus TV station provided positive coverage. Unfortunately, major gay news media were absent. But regional community publications, including *Xenogeny*, did support "Liberty" with enthusiasm.

Allie Sultan told me: "I have received dozens of e-mail messages since Sunday. People have already started to become more active in the South.... On Saturday I'm going to Asheville, N.C., to be at a joint meeting with three college LGB groups from the area. [I've been] talking with some heterosexual people in my classes...it gives me a new, different sense of happiness to be accessible for heterosexual people as well as the gay community here at MTSU!"



to cool and last-minute efforts by moderate church groups in town, who called for a show of Christian love over a show of rage, the conference went off without incident. The Baptist Student Union, stepping over elders' protests that their action was condoning homosexuality, served a big Southern breakfast to the conference-goers, complete with grits. They still believe that traditional marriage is the only permissible place for sex, the Baptist kids explained, but they were uneasy about the frenzy of hate and wanted to make a Jesus-like gesture.

Focus of the frenzy was a screening of *It's Elementary*. This popular documentary, with its message that grade-school kids need positive information about gay issues, had been protested elsewhere in the United States. Sultan and Grantham told me that initially the MTSU administration shrugged off their requests for tightened security. But after a look at the death threats, and a phone call from civil-rights attorney Abby Rubinfeld (who got Tennessee's sodomy law dismissed), MTSU grew concerned about possible violence. Filmgoers walked into Tucker Theater past a metal detector and campus security. Outside, several squad cars patrolled. But only a few shivering picketers showed up. The

Michael Grantham's comment was: "The responses from across the country are great. They really make us feel like we've done what we've aimed to do. Allie and I hope that everyone feels empowered enough to initiate a much needed social change throughout the Southeast and United States."

Personally, I left Murfreesboro feeling more hopeful. There are growing signs that hate religion will be rejected by the fair-minded among Christian students and adults across the country. Indeed, the South is not the monolith of redneck religion that some believe it to be. The South birthed Thomas Jefferson and religious freedom. The South was where a black openly gay Quaker activist named Bayard Rustin helped the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. develop the civil-rights movement of the '60s.

Next year's Southeast conference may well be greeted with more howls of protest. But no doubt about it, these empowering youth events are denting the Bible belt.

Patricia Nell Warren is author of *The Front Runner* and other books.

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