

Fifty young men all living, working, playing, eating and sleeping together in one big house. It's the stuff fantasies are made of; gay porn shops have entire sections devoted to the concept—fraternity life.

But when I joined a fraternity my freshman year of college I wasn't into all that—or at least I didn't think I was. When I entered college I was straight—at least in my mind.

Growing up in a military family, I led a sheltered life and didn't really understand what it meant to be gay. It wouldn't be until three years and a few "drunken hookups" later that I would realize I was a gay pea in a straight pod.

After pledging the same fraternity as my brother at University of Idaho, I soon realized my experience was going to be considerably different from his. I immediately had a hard time adjusting.

Being in northern Idaho, I was surrounded by every form of butch you could imagine: hunters, fishermen, ROTC military men, but mostly cowboys and farmers. And here I was, this skinny little guy from Salem who was into fashion, Whitney Houston and Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman reruns.

The hardest part of joining the fraternity was trying to fit in and find my place. I wasn't athletic, I wasn't butch, and I certainly wasn't into farming. But I was a nice guy, a good listener and an open-minded person, and people started to figure this out about me.

Guys would confide in me things they didn't tell anyone else. They trusted me and valued the fact that they could tell me anything about their girlfriends, their families, school or life and that I would be brutally honest but never judge them. Instead, I would listen and try to help them out.

They also loved the fact that I got along with and knew so many girls. Being the vivacious and outgoing guy I was, I knew just about every girl on campus. So I became a regular matchmaker, always setting up the bros.

I came to a point where I finally seemed to fit in. Everyone in the fra-

ternity was used to me and really seemed to embrace my differences.

But by my sophomore year as I started to attend more parties and dances, I became the butt of verbal abuse from other students on campus. "Faggot" and "homo" constantly were being whispered and often even shouted at me.

Once a guy came up to me as I was walking home from a party and told me, "If you weren't such a fairy, you'd get all the chicks." All of the personal attacks hurt so much that I would go back to the fraternity house, lock myself in the bathroom and bawl.

Whenever I went to other fraternities, trouble arose. Guys would see me with a harem of girls, get jealous and try to pick fights with me.

"Who let the faggot in? What's that pansy bitch doing here?"

My fraternity brothers, who already had come to terms with my "femme" ways, would get upset. They would defend me, start yelling back and, on a few occasions, even get into fights over it.

It got to the point where I was so paranoid about what people would say about me that I didn't even want to leave our fraternity house. It felt like shit having everyone talking about me and assuming I was gay, but that was just the beginning.

My own private Idaho

Being gay in a straight fraternity

The toughest struggle came when I finally started to realize that what they were saying might be true. I didn't want to be gay.

It's weird the kind of tricks your mind can play on you when you try to fight something. During my sophomore year I even had hooked up with a few guys from the fraternity, but I still didn't think I was gay.

I told myself that they were just random encounters we swore we never would tell anyone about and that "it was just the alcohol; I normally wouldn't have done that." Looking back, all the signs pointed to my being gay, but I just didn't realize it; denial is a strong force, and so is fear.

I was afraid of what being gay would mean for me. What would people say, how would they react? Would I get my ass kicked by some redneck?

Or, even worse, would I end up like Matthew Shepard, strung up on some fence post? I mean, Idaho isn't that far removed from Wyoming.

But death really wasn't my biggest fear; it was losing my friends. For the first time in my life I felt like I really belonged to something.

I had taken many leadership roles in the fraternity, had joined numerous honor societies

and clubs, had excelled in school and even had been nominated for homecoming king. Sure, I was different from most of my brothers, but that's what was great about it; we all learned from each other. It seemed they had accepted me for who I was, but I wondered if they'd accept me for *what* I was.

These were issues I struggled with during the summer before my senior year, when I finally came to terms with my homosexuality. When I went back to school in the fall, things were quite different for me.

I was out, to myself at least, and that summer had provided me with many new experiences. I had gone to gay clubs and even dated a little, but now that I was back in Idaho I felt I had to keep it secret.

But keeping it secret made me completely miserable. The closet isn't a fun place to hide.

I constantly was covering my trail and watching what I was saying and doing for fear that someone would catch on. It's hard not to be able to tell your friends about something that is eating you up inside.

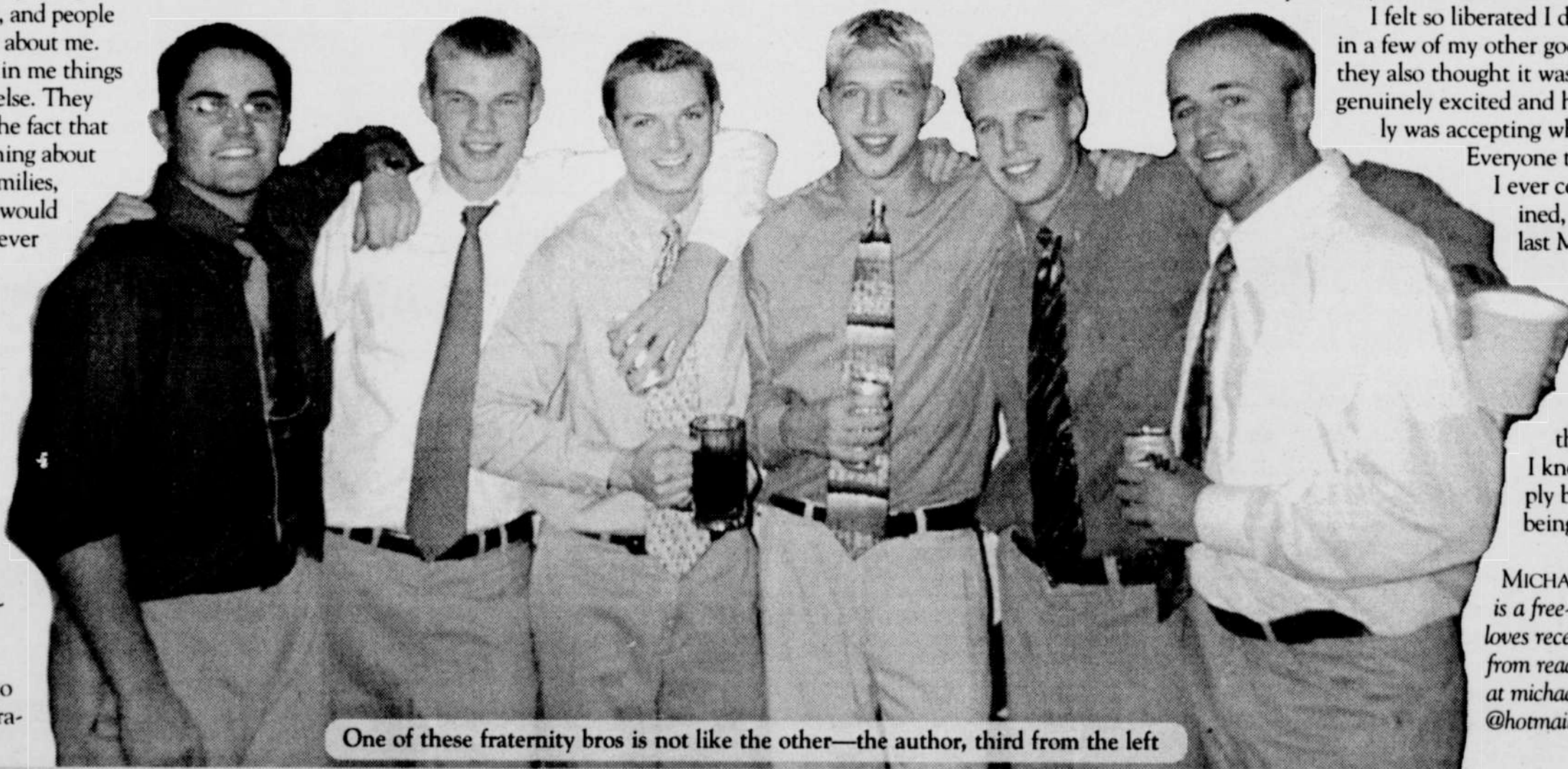
The funny thing is that everyone already thought I was gay. They had been accusing, whispering and gossiping about the subject since I was a freshman, so at this point it was already old news. Except for one big difference: Now it was true, and I was the only one who knew it.

I finally hit my breaking point when, after a night of drinking, I confided in one brother. And guess what? He was there for me, and not just that, he was cool with it.

I felt so liberated I decided to confide in a few of my other good friends, and they also thought it was OK. They were genuinely excited and happy that I finally was accepting who I was.

Everyone took it better than I ever could have imagined, and I graduated last May with the knowledge that my fraternity and college experiences were not a fraud. I had lived them the best way I knew how: by simply being myself and being who I am. ☐

MICHAEL WAYNE KECK is a free-lance writer who loves receiving feedback from readers. E-mail him at michaelwaynekeck@hotmail.com.



One of these fraternity bros is not like the other—the author, third from the left

What it feels like for a girl

New book tells the flip side of the story

BY ORIANA GREEN

SECRET SISTERS: STORIES OF BEING LESBIAN AND BISEXUAL IN A COLLEGE SORORITY
Edited by Shane L. Windmeyer and Pamela W. Freeman. Alyson, 2001; \$13.95 softcover.

This is a fine anthology of several dozen women's stories of sorority life as the odd girl out, and difficult questions are asked and answered. Such as: If lesbians and bisexuals are good for sorority life, is that life also good for them?

The stories are arranged into five sections depending on the type of experience each writer had. The last section contains accounts from straight sisters who welcomed diversity in their houses.

The thoughtful foreword is written by California Sen. Sheila James Kuehl, who was summarily ejected from her sorority when her lesbianism was discovered. To us boomers, though, she'll always be remembered for the 1956-64 sitcom *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*, in which she played Zelda Gilroy, the first smart girl on television.

But an even greater value of this book is its 80-page resource section. It contains an explanation of the Lambda 10 Project National Clearinghouse for Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Greek Issues, which provides educational materials and more. The book also has a guide on how to use these stories as an educational tool. This section is full

of advice on how to deal with all kinds of situations, including homophobia on campus.

Certainly, the lure of sisterhood and a brand new family have been and still can be enticing to lesbians away from home for the first time. But how can you fit into a group of mostly het women and still preserve your integrity and identity? This book goes a long way toward answering that question.

Secret Sisters would be a useful book for a woman considering joining a sorority or for anyone who works with college students or people who just want to see if their own experiences resonate here. No secret handshake required.

