

opinions

The door to the closet opens up to reveal a battlefield full of misconceptions

My candidates for the Top 10 most offensive epithets: Dago, Wop, Spic, Kike, Nigger, Chink, Jap, Pollock, Wetback, Faggot. Tags that serve to reduce a person to a word, a stereotype.

But one of these things is not like the others. One of these things just doesn't belong. Could it be the last one? When was the last time you heard someone yell "fag?" Queer? Homo? Chances are that it was probably fairly recently. Those monikers are OK, right? What's wrong with a little playful name-calling?

But it's more than that, isn't it? The Top 10 is a top 10 of prejudiced insults. And what makes slurs like "faggot" commonplace is that they represent a socially acceptable prejudice. The prejudice most forgiven. Prejudice against homosexuals. Homophobia.

It's a sensitive topic to deal with because most people don't understand and don't want to make an effort to understand what it's like to have sexual preferences that differ from the prescribed norm: John loves Jane. But what happens when John admits he's attracted to Joe? Or Jane realizes that she can only live a life with Jean?

Comments from a homophobe: "That's unnatural, goddamnit! Who do these people think they are, going against God and nature and all that? It's Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve!"



Paula J. Hnasko

Imagine what it must be like to live in fear of revealing your sexual preferences. The door to the "closet" opens up to reveal a battlefield. Come out and prepare for combat. But conditions inside the closet aren't any better. Private wars, public lies. If you lie, then you won't be harassed. Verbal and physical abuse is a reality in the homosexual world.

"I can smell a queer a mile away. If one

ever comes near me, I'll beat the shit out of him."

Dealing with discrimination is never easy. Staying in the closet means avoiding being victimized. A gay man? Limp-wristed, high-voiced, earringed. A lesbian? Short hair, rough-and-tough in flannel shirts and hiking boots. Professions for gays? Artists, hairstylists, actors, interior decorators. Not lawyers, doctors, bankers or brokers.

"He made that decision. He could go straight if he wanted to. It'd make life much easier. Hell, a good woman could turn him around."

That's like saying a good woman could turn me around. Changing a sexual preference you were born with isn't like changing your socks. I think I'll trade the navy for the argyles. If it were that simple, don't you think there'd be a lot less homosexuals? There are easier ways to stage a rebellion. "I don't associate with fags."

But what if you're roommate admitted he was gay? Yeah, the guy you play basketball with on weekends and party with until three in the morning. The guy you always thought was "normal." Does he automatically be-

come a freak now that his secret is out in the open? Do you stop talking to someone you've been friends with for two years? And you thought you knew him. How could he be gay?

Sexual preferences aren't easy to understand. Atypical preferences can be disturbing, frightening. People have very different ways of dealing with things they don't understand, things that they fear. Some choose to ignore. Some enjoy joking and name calling. Others resort to physical violence — fag-bashing.

Prejudice against homosexuals.

Why do people go out of their way to abuse others for being different? It's an age-old problem. Now gays are the popular minority group to abuse. What do homophobes fear? It's a fear of the unknown. What goes on inside the closet?

"Maybe they'll want me to be like them. I'm not a queer."

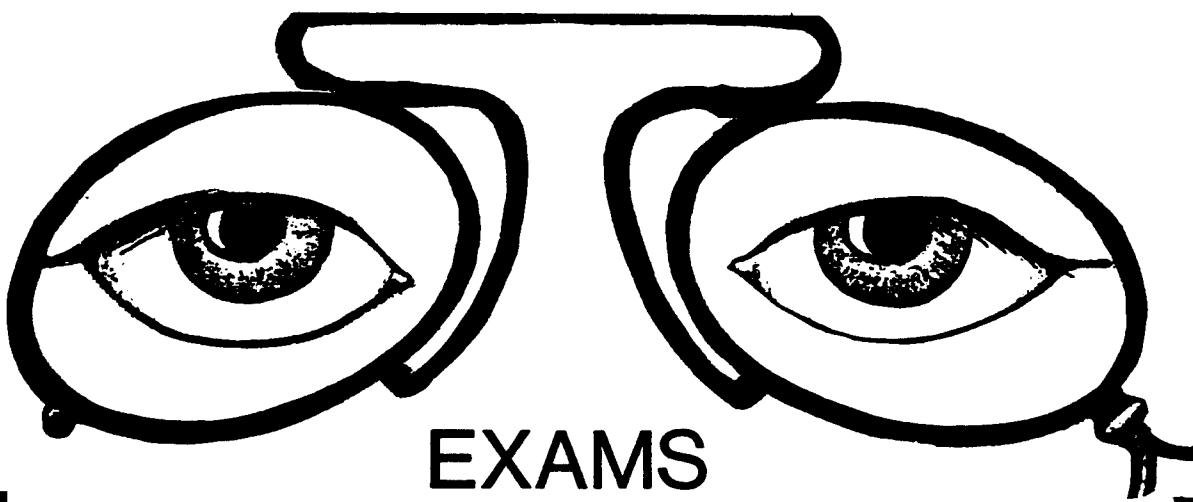
Gays aren't proselytizing. They're not out to sign up new members for their "club." They realize that just as they can't convert to a straight lifestyle, you can't convert to being gay.

What do homosexuals want? The right to live their lives as they choose. The right to be able to be who they are, without pretending to be something they're not. The right to be able to live without being persecuted for their beliefs. The right to be able to live without the fear of verbal and physical violence. Rights that belong to all human beings.

"People don't think about what it's like to be gay when they make comments like 'fag' and 'queer.' They should be more considerate of our feelings. Why do people go out of their way to abuse us? Why should I compromise the way I feel for their sake?"

I'd like to thank the Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Social Support Group of East Halls for sharing their feelings on homophobia with me. You've enriched my understanding.

Paula J. Hnasko is a junior majoring in English and is a Collegian columnist.



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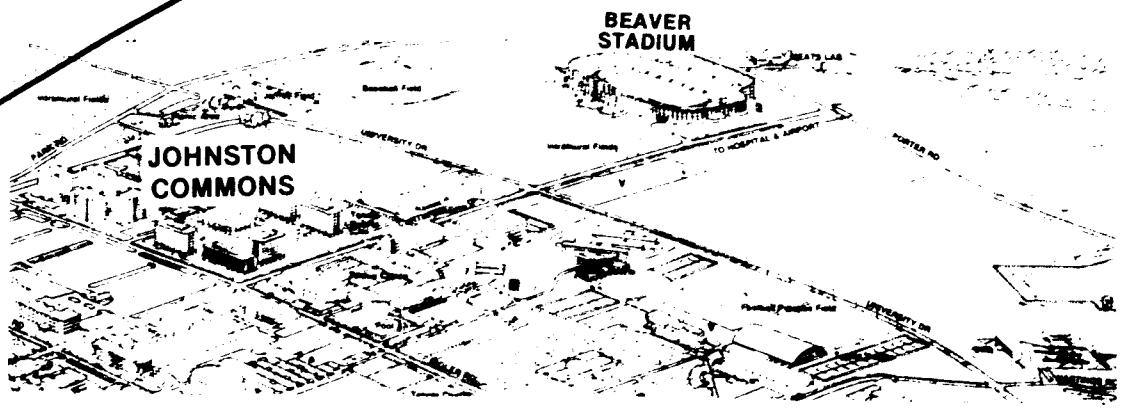
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