

Sabbatical Proposal  
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I. Statement of Proposed Activity

The purpose of this proposed activity is to uncover an aspect of NIU's history that does not appear in the usual archival records: the history of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) community at NIU. The LGBT community has been an acknowledged presence on campus since 1970, when NIU's first gay student organization, the Gay Liberation Front, was founded. That organization, now called Prism of NIU, celebrated its 32<sup>nd</sup> anniversary as a recognized student organization in 2002. Yet much of this community's history has gone unrecorded. The history of the LGBT community exists in the form of personal recollections, in memories, in stories passed word-of-mouth. In short, the history of this community exists in individual experience. The goal of this project is to record those stories through oral history interviews, and to synthesize the data into a cohesive narrative for publication and accompanying presentations.

II. Description of Project

A. Nature of Project

The proposed project studies one of the major social movements of the twentieth century, the modern LGBT civil rights movement, as reflected in one community's experience. Despite DeKalb's rural location, NIU's LGBT community began to organize in 1970, less than one year after the Stonewall Riots in New York City served as a catalyst for a new national movement. The progress of this national liberation movement can be traced through the experiences of LGBT individuals at the local level. University communities particularly became centers of activism, increased visibility, and progress. The long-standing presence of an organized LGBT community in DeKalb defies the popular perception which persists even today that DeKalb is too rural -- and thus too far removed from the stereotypical urban center of gay life -- to support a visible and active LGBT community.

The proposed project is a continuation of work conducted in 1995-1996 in conjunction with and following the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of NIU's LGBT student organization. At that time, I began locating, organizing, and analyzing documents pertaining to the history of the NIU LGBT community. As part of that preliminary research, I began to compile a list of people involved with the community over the course of its history. I identified key individuals with information and insights for oral history interviews, and conducted several initial interviews, including an interview with one of the co-founding members of the student organization. The current proposal would build on the work already completed through additional archival research, interviews, and finally synthesis of the collected data into narrative form.

## B. Research Methodology/Creative Techniques and Data to be Used

Building on the foundational work already accomplished, the proposed project will encompass two phases. The first phase will consist primarily of qualitative research. The methodology will include additional analysis of historical records and documents, to identify important individuals, events, and themes, followed by oral history interviews with key individuals and then transcription of the interviews. As the interview process proceeds, information gathered will be analyzed related to the direction of the project, and any necessary adjustments will be incorporated into the interview format. As interviews are transcribed, they will be concurrently analyzed for common themes articulated by interview subjects.

The second phase will focus on writing, as data from the interviews are synthesized into a single narrative, and themes that emerged from the interviews are drawn out to reflect the community's collective history as experienced by the individuals within it. The narrative will also incorporate significant aspects of LGBT history nationally during the same time period, so that the local history is placed within the context of the contemporary social environment at the national level.

## C. Relationship of Project to the Literature in the Field

During the past two decades, the study of gay and lesbian history has grown enormously. The value of oral history as a methodology for uncovering otherwise inaccessible accounts of the past has been demonstrated by such seminal works as Making History: The Struggle for Gay and Lesbian Equal Rights, 1945-1990: An Oral History (Eric Marcus, 1992), Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community (Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, 1994), and Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America's First Gay and Lesbian Town (Esther Newton, 1995). In addition, the value of community histories is represented in Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories (Brett Beemyn, 1997), an anthology of eleven essays detailing the formation of specific LGBT communities across a wide historical and geographic span. Clearly, the proposed project fits within an established genre in LGBT studies, and offers potential for publication, as well as presentations at regional and national conferences.

## D. Projected Results/Disciplinary Significance

As stated above, the oral histories recorded via the proposed project have the potential for publication, whether as a book, as journal articles, or as essays in anthologies. Results of the project could also be presented at conferences such as the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Creating Change conference, the Midwest Bisexual Lesbian Gay Transgender College Conference, the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies Seminar Series, the National Oral History Association Conference, or other regional conferences. Locally, the project could result in on-campus presentations such as for LGBT History Month or for the University Libraries. Project results will be shared with the NIU Presidential Commission on Sexual Orientation. In

addition, the data compiled in the interview transcriptions will have value as research materials that could be housed in NIU's newly established Gender Studies Collection in the University Libraries. This collection serves as a resource for scholars nationally who are conducting research on gender topics. According to Interim Head of the Special Collections Glen Gildemeister, "the collection is 'critical' for NIU." He further states that "gender issues are among the most important of the last half of the twentieth century in American life. ... We hope that NIU will become known as a place researchers go first when they want to study these kinds of issues." (*Prairie Flame*, February 2002)

### III. Relationship of Proposed Research and Professional Work

I have been involved in developing LGBT programs and services at NIU for ten years in several capacities: as a member of the Presidential Commission on Sexual Orientation (1992-present); as faculty advisor to NIU's LGBT student organization for seven years (1995-2002); and as LGBT Program Coordinator (1998-present). Over the past six years, I have also developed my knowledge base in the theory, methodology, and interviewing techniques involved in conducting oral history projects. I have attended the National Oral History Association conference, as well as workshops on "Discovering and Preserving the Past through Oral Histories," presented by the Chicago Oral History Roundtable. The initial phase of this project in 1995-1996 was funded by a Northern Illinois University Centennial Grant. At the outset of the grant, I also consulted with an expert in oral history about project design and administration.

### IV. Benefits of Proposed Leave

#### A. Personal Benefit

The proposed leave will offer an opportunity for:

- concentrated research and writing, enabling me to complete work already initiated, with the goal of developing a manuscript for publication;
- combining my professional experience in LGBT programs and services, my extensive background in journalism and writing, and my scholarly interest in oral history;
- development of additional expertise in all of the above areas;
- advancement of my professional development through improving my qualitative research skills;
- enhanced professional standing through presentation of the project results at national and regional conferences.

#### B. Benefit to Employing Unit

One of Programming and Activities' departmental goals is to "expand and support programs that foster higher educational aspirations and achievement among minority

students.” The benefits to the Office of Programming and Activities are outlined below:

- During the course of my professional work in LGBT services, I have witnessed the power of discovering one’s community history for students who struggle against the forces of oppression, stigma, shame, and prejudice. For LGBT students, who are vulnerable to isolation and marginalization, developing a sense of connection to their predecessors instills students with greater confidence, pride, and hope for future success. Learning one’s history, in effect, allows one to envision one’s future by counteracting debilitating societal messages about one’s inherent personal value. The data accrued through this project could be used in programmatic initiatives, such as campus educational presentations or displays for events such as LGBT History Month, that would support the development of a welcoming campus climate and thus positively impact the retention and graduation of LGBT students.
- Given that the LGBT community is extremely diverse, including individuals from all racial, ethnic, gender, and social class backgrounds for example, this project would support the aspirations and achievement of students who may face cultural bias due to more than one identity factor.

### C. Benefit to Division

One of the primary goals of the Division of Student Affairs is to “facilitate opportunities for the academic, personal, and social development of students.” The proposed project supports this goal in several ways.

- As described above, this project can be utilized programmatically to support the developmental process of LGBT students, enhancing their ability to develop a positive self-identity and fostering their sense of connection to both historical and current communities, two factors which positively correlate with retention and academic achievement.
- The educational uses of the compiled data can also have a positive effect on non-LGBT students, by educating the campus community at large about the experiences of LGBT individuals and their role in NIU’s history.
- Programs developed based on the project data would contribute to a campus environment which affirms diversity and provides students with opportunities to learn from multicultural perspectives.
- In developmental terms, exposure to the experiences of diverse populations can support students in developing the knowledge necessary to live in a pluralistic society and prepare students for employment in a diverse workforce.

### D. Benefit to the University

The benefits of this project for Northern Illinois University include:

- a more complete and accurate history of NIU and the individuals who have been the human face of the institution;

- a record of the university's progress toward its goal, as stated in the NIU Constitution, of achieving equal treatment based on sexual orientation;
- further opportunities to fulfill its mission of educating students to live and work in an increasingly diverse society;
- increased potential to recruit and retain a diverse faculty whose personal identity as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, and/or whose research interests are in LGBT topics, thus expanding the realm of knowledge in NIU's curriculum;
- increased involvement of alumni in the life of the university and potential to establish on-going relationships with alumni;
- creation of educational materials which could be used in whole or in part for class units relating to sexual orientation, for staff development and training programs, for individual research projects, and for general university programming.

**V. Outside Resources Needed for Project**

The proposed project does not require use of any outside resources or facilities.

**VI. Alternative Means for Project Completion**

Not applicable.

**VII. Past Sabbatical Results**

Not applicable.