

Out for Change Reflection

By: Jennifer Nguyen

In Fall 2007, I was a junior at Georgetown and just a few months removed from my own coming out. Unlike the countless coming out stories I had heard, I felt no liberation – I had spent a night with my sister nervously picking at the label of a beer bottle before I began to cry. There was no proverbial weight coming off my shoulders, only heightened questions. Among those questions was why I had chosen to go to a Catholic university where I had hardly seen a gay community.

That Fall, I began my journey in search of Georgetown's LGBTQ Community. 7 days into September, I went to a queer social event called the "Ladies Lounge". It was business as usual – a calendar of gatherings, a viewing of the "L Word", casual flirtation. I said "see you later" as I left the event, but wasn't sure how much I meant it.

Just 2 days later, a gay Georgetown student was tackled from behind and hospitalized. Like many of my classmates, I found out about the crime 25 days after its occurrence. I had come out of the closet only to be left in the dark. Even in my brief introduction to our LGBTQ community, I knew that "business as usual" no longer existed.

My world very quickly went from testing the waters of the queer social scene to an immersive experience in LGBTQ activism. My life expanded beyond the gates at 37th and O and into an unknown world named Burlieth, stretching to meetings at houses on T and S Streets. It was a semester of firsts – my first petitioning in Red Square, my first organizing meeting, the first time I asked a professor for an extension. It was also my first experience with how hard and arduous change can be.

Like many movements, the Out for Change Campaign endured the struggles of managing our energy and sustaining momentum. Fueled by the passion of our student leaders, the campaign forged on despite unanswered e-mails, demands, and requests for meetings. Olivia, Scott, and Shamisa embodied unwavering persistence, guiding the movement with their resilience. Julia, Jack, and Kristina were the social justice ride or dies – will sing, dance, and create for progressive change. Connor was never afraid to take on the tasks that no one would volunteer for.

The change we demanded of the university felt as seismic as the change I underwent myself. I spent the semester wondering what place an introverted student could have in protest and at raucous rallies. As someone who had never been exposed to organizing, I often dragged a roommate to Out for Change meetings because I was too shy to go alone. I sat quietly at those gatherings, jumping at any volunteer opportunity that involved e-mailing a professor or administrative ally. A month into the movement, I discovered something about myself – although I'm not much of a talker, I love listening. Subsequently, I became a facilitator for Out Spoken – a safe, confidential discussion space for LGBTQ students.

Ironically, the movement's turning point towards success occurred right after a second hate crime in late October. This time, I knew the victim and his story. One late night on campus, he was pushed against a wall and called a homophobic epithet as smoke from a cigarette was blown into his face.

To that person – thank you. Not for what you did, but for what you ignited. The embers of your cigarette, the smoke screen illusion of your power kindled the last leg of our movement – a movement that would become one of the most successful organizing campaigns in our university's storied history.