Out, with love

LBGT students build meaningful relationships on inclusive campus

By Samantha Radecki | Published 10/02/12 11:43pm

After a brief encounter, a Facebook conversation and months of casual dating, Ra’Nia Hawkins is happily content walking around campus hand in hand with her significant other this fall — something she said anyone involved in an intimate relationship would be pleased about.

But what might be a bit different about her relationship compared to the majority of other couples at MSU is that this playful and affectionate interaction the psychology senior is partaking in is with her girlfriend, psychology junior Khyrah Simpson, with whom she is involved in a same-sex relationship.

Hawkins and Simpson have been seriously dating for a little more than a month and have since fallen head over heels for each other, acting very affectionate toward one another in public.
Despite occasions when their touching or kissing can sometimes draw a judgemental look here and there, overall, they feel as if students, faculty and staff at MSU are very accepting and open — creating a warm campus climate for lesbian, bisexual, gay or transgender, or LBGT, individuals.

“I mean it happens, but it doesn’t stop us,” Hawkins said. “We do all the little cute stuff couples do — we kiss when we want to, hold hands, hug ... (and) just giggle and look at each other,” she added, joking and beaming at Simpson.

Hawkins and Simpson both agree their relationship is just as serious and just as committed as any heterosexual relationship; and, in general, they feel comfortable and open about loving whom they choose to love, regardless of gender and sexuality, because of the accepting environment at MSU.

The girls are two of many LBGT students at MSU who feel the same way, said Deanna Hurlbert, assistant director of the LBGT Resource Center.

Although there is no way to tell the exact number of students who identify as LBGT on campus, the percentage of individuals in relationships in the LBGT community would be about the same percentage as individuals in relationships in the heterosexual community, Hurlbert said.

And for couples such as Hawkins and Simpson, MSU is a place to express pride for who they are.

New times
The percentage of students who identify as LBGT is a vague number and could range anywhere between 1 and 10 percent of the student population, depending on if students choose to identify as LBGT, Hurlbert said.

“(For example), there maybe is somebody who has been in a heterosexual relationship, but they have been attracted to someone of the same sex,” Hurlbert said. “(Or) people might be in a same-sex relationship ... but they do not identify (as LBGT).”

Kinesiology junior Ricky Price said he came out during his freshman year because MSU was such a new and diverse environment, and he was more able to see himself as an openly gay individual.

Price, who now is in a serious relationship with international relations and comparative cultures and politics sophomore Danny Becker, said he is happy and more sure about his sexuality now than when he was single.

“I would say that I’ve felt very accepted. I haven’t felt, like, weird or anything being (out) in public with him,” Price said. “(But) when I was single and by myself, I kind of felt weird about (it, and) now, being with him, it (is) normal and fine.”

According to the MSU LBGTQ Climate Project Report published in September 2010, 33 percent of the 1,051 respondents identified as LBGTQ, while 66 percent identified as heterosexual.

More than half of all participants combined described MSU’s climate as “comfortable” or “very comfortable,” while only 5 percent of respondents contemplated leaving MSU because of a “homophobic and/or genderist climate.”

The survey collected information from undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, staff and administrators.
Hurlbert acknowledged the climate of MSU and agrees it is welcoming, but said experiences are unique and incidents of discrimination and prejudice still do occur.

“People tend to be more open and more comfortable to same-sex couples now than they were 10 years ago,” Hurlbert said. “But some people still have very terrible experiences, (while) other people are very comfortable and very supported.”

Hawkins said she only has encountered a few negative instances at MSU, and now, she just brushes them off and does not waste her time on them.

“A lady (once) told me I was going to hell, that I was raped and that I was scared of hot dogs,” Hawkins said, laughing sarcastically. “So, I mean, (I) found it hilarious — I couldn’t even be mad. I was just like, ‘I am!?’”

**Facing hurdles**

Although there are many people who come out during college, Tina Timm, an associate professor in the School of Social Work and a licensed marriage and family therapist, said young people have to overcome some religious, ethnic or geographic hurdles.

Timm said this is especially true when sexuality and the validity of a relationship is up for public discussion, as it currently is in the U.S.

“You can be out or (with a partner), but that is not part of being able to be happy and have equal rights (when) not being able to live your life the way you would want to,” said Timm, who also is an expert on issues of sexuality.

Kelly Morrison, an associate professor in the Department of Communication, said lesbian couples report high rates of equity in relationships and effective conflict resolution and fidelity.

She also noted lesbian women are the most faithful and heterosexual men are the least.

Morrison also said there are many more similarities than differences between same-sex and heterosexual relationships, but a common difference is gay and lesbian couples reported needing a network and safe space.

“They need a network of support when ... (they) are in a society where a lot of people disapprove of these relationships,” Morrison said. “There’s certainly (an) attitude difference in the ages, just in terms of being accepted and having open attitudes toward marriage equality, since it’s a political issue.”

**True happiness — all about honesty**

The ability to be out and be open and affectionate in their relationship is something both couples said has brought them true happiness.

Having the courage to come out and be themselves to friends and families feels as if a weight is being lifted — an opportunity that both couples feel other students should recognize.

Simpson said this exactly was the case when she recently came out to her entire family.
“It just was like a burden lifted off my shoulders and I was able to progress, with this thing next to me,” Simpson said nudging and giggling to Hawkins. “She’s like the best thing that has ever happened to me. ... Being open is the way to go.”

Price said having the ability to connect with a person who has overcome many similar hurdles is even more fulfilling when it comes to understanding the person whom he is in a relationship with. “There’s automatically that similarity, and this is by far the happiest I have ever been,” Price said.