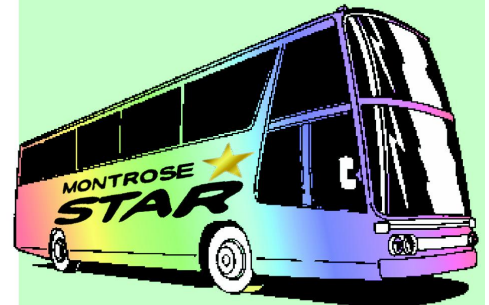


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ANNOUNCING



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25 Years Ago: Gay Activists vs. Texas A&M

By Mark Eastman for the Montrose Star

On a quiet weekday night, sometime during the spring of 1976, a few Aggie students were still occupied with late night studies in their dorms or the university library; scattered Montrose patrons sipped their favorite drinks at their usual mid-week hangouts at Mary's, Badlands, or the Midnight Sun; and the last gay gym buffs made it home after a late workout at the downtown YMCA.

Unknown to them, but not far from where they were, a butterfly of GLBT history was about to flutter its wings and set into motion a series of events that would pit what was then the gay rights movement against Texas' most prominent, and arguably most powerful, bastion of conservative values and tradition, and make Texas a focal point of the ongoing national struggle for GBLT rights.

It was a fight that would begin in the middle of the night in a solitary hallway at the point of a knife, and end on a beautiful spring day at the steps of the Supreme Court of the United States of America. And through it all, there would be rallies, counter-protests, appeals, votes, rivalries, and yes, even romance.

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Montrose Star Pix By Virgil C. Robinson



Our
New
Feature
Each
Issue:
Photos
from
Montrose
& Beyond

*Left:
Spring
Flowers
at Omega
House
Right:
Tribeca
Lofts*



The Story of How Gay Students Won Rights at Texas A&M

By Mark Eastman for the Montrose Star

Continued from front page

This was the battle of Gay Student Services vs. Texas A&M, the conclusion of which would set a national precedent on the free speech rights of gay people on university campuses, and irrevocably change A&M, and the educational experience of subsequent Aggie generations, forever. Many websites document well the court case history. Few tell the story of the students behind that legal battle. Here is that story.

In 1976, as America celebrated its bicentennial, Texas A&M University celebrated its own centennial of its birth as an all-male military school. And though by 1976 the school had been allowing women to attend as full-time students for a whole 13 years, and men were now allowed to attend as civilians, it retained a strong masculine military culture steeped in traditions and conservative values. Women were still not allowed in the famous "Fighting Texas Aggie Marching Band," and, according to some recollections from students at the time, new students were still welcomed at student orientations with the promise that at A&M there were "no drugs, no sex, and no homosexuals."

Stonewall was only seven years into history, and most people of "alternative" sexual orientations still kept their orientations secret for very good reasons, even under liberal conditions, but especially so at Texas A&M.

Prior to that spring, according to interviews tape-recorded 25 years ago, A&M graduate student Sheri Skinner was told of an unusual flyer a friend had seen in one of the kiosks at the campus. Apparently some national "gay" group was organizing a chapter at Texas A&M.

It gave a conference room number, date, and time for the initial organizational meeting. Skinner, in disbelief, went back to look for the flyer to see for herself. But it was parents' week at A&M, and corps members had apparently stripped all the offending flyers from the posting kiosks.

Nevertheless, her friend had noted the details of the meeting, and so Skinner decided to take a chance.

On the appointed evening, Skinner showed up at door of the specified room. She saw another meeting wrapping up in the room, but instinctively knew it couldn't be the right meeting. She waited as those people gradually left her alone in the hallway. Shortly thereafter she spotted another woman waiting around as she was. Quickly they determined they were there looking for the same promised meeting.

Still, no organizers showed up.

Then the two noticed more folks milling around. All in all, three men and three women showed up that evening for this mystery meeting that never was. But, instead of parting ways in disappointment back to their separate, hidden lives, they decided to do for themselves what was promised to them, and formed a support group called "Alternative."

The organization grew as it delicately advertised itself as a support group for persons of "alternative" lifestyles. They established the Gayline, created a speakers bureau, but mostly provided a welcoming and open second family to people who hid their true selves to the rest of the world, including their own families.

Then, one night, close to midnight, as two of the shorter male members of the group were posting flyers about the group in what at first seemed an empty hallway, three bigger male members of the corps of cadets appeared to be ready for them. The corps members had removed their name badges from their uniforms, and confronted the Alternative members.

Then one drew a switchblade, and forced the two to take all their flyers down. Afterwards, the agitated Alternative members quickly phoned Skinner, who was now the president of Alternative. After telling them to call the police, she realized that it was time for the group to get formal permission to post flyers on campus. Surely, she thought, the university would see fit to protect them.

And so, after carefully researching their options, in April of 1976, they approached Dr. John B. Koldus, the Vice President of Student Affairs, and made their simple request. But Dr. Koldus advised the students that the right to post flyers on campus was reserved for recognized student groups only, and partial granting of rights was out of the question.

Unless they had members willing to put their names unto a formal charter and application form, there would be no rights at all. Dr. Koldus referred the students to Dr. Carolyn Adair, Director of Student Affairs, likely certain these kids would never publicly own up to who they were. Besides, even if they did, he made clear he would never approve. But Skinner and her fellow members had already researched the issue, and knew that they only needed three names to fill the roles of group officers.

The rest of the membership's identity could still be protected. After receiving advice from Dr. Adair to apply as a

service organization, instead of as a social or political one (advice that turned out to be wise), three students, Michael Garret, Michael Minton, and Sheri Skinner, put their names down on a public piece of paper, and on April 5, 1976, filed for recognition by Texas A&M University for a group called the Gay Student Services.

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The decision to file the formal application forced changes upon those who up to now had enjoyed the simple benefits of camaraderie and kindred support afforded by Alternative. The university sent the clear message that this would be an all or nothing battle, and these students would now have to take their informal group to a new level of

both sides gained victories and suffered defeats, through two trips up the judicial chain all the way to the highest court in the land, one class of gay Aggies passed on the cause to the next, to carry on the fight they could not see to its end, for the benefit of those that were still to come, for strangers they would never know.

In the Spring of 1984, six years into the legal war, Minton, Garrett, and Skinner were long gone, but GSS was alive and well and growing. GSS now had a formal constitution, attributed largely to one its then-recent members, James Kaster.

But Kaster was not around to see his constitution successfully at work. He left GSS and A&M, a victim of one of the power plays that began to occasionally buffet the organization from within. The



**Panel at reunion conference.
GLBTA president Riley Brain 3rd from left**

seriousness and duty, or surrender. And so, the formal application for the Gay Student Services organization declared its mission as follows:

To provide a referral service for students desiring professional counseling including psychological, religious, medical and legal.

To provide to the TAMU (Texas A&M University) community information concerning the structures and realities of gay li fe.

To provide speakers to classes and organizations who wish to know more about gay li lifestyles.

To provide a forum for the interchange of ideas and constructive solutions to gay people's problems.

After months of drawn-out delay by the university, and an internal memo by the university's president declaring that A&M would never recognize GSS "until and unless we are ordered by higher authority to do so," the response finally formally came on Nov. 29, 1976: Application denied.

The letter by Koldus cited several reasons, among them the potential incitement of illegal homosexual activity on the campus and the attendant health concerns; that the university was responsible for providing student services; and that the group's purpose and goals were not "consistent with the philosophy and goals" of A&M.

The students of GSS responded in February 1977 with the opening salvo of a court battle that would last eight years.

And through those eight years, as

organization was no longer the extended family that Skinner had helped to forge in her days at A&M. It now saw itself as a more activist and business-like organization with serious obligations and programs. It saw itself with an increasingly public profile as gay activism around America as well as the approaching high profile judicial decisions on its court case put it in the spotlight of current events.

The incumbent president of GSS wanted to resign, overly burdened, he said to his future successor, by the increasingly public obligations and demands of the office. Marco Roberts, a Political Science major, had not been in GSS very long. But he had made clear his interest in running for office, and his willingness to use his name (still a rarity at the time).

The GSS president explained that he needed to have a viable candidate to take his place before he could offer his early resignation. Though a little stunned at being approached to run so early for office, Roberts said yes. He had no idea what was about to happen, and how the next two years would change him and forge his character for life.

Unknown to him, he was the anti-candidate, placed to run against James Kaster's exiler. After his awkward speech was followed by an expert address by his opponent, Roberts squeaked by with a narrow electoral victory. After the results were announced, he overheard someone say that he only won because his opponent was "too caustic."

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Texas A&M Students

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In time Roberts would learn that the internal politics of GSS would be even more demanding of his political skills and emotional stamina than any challenges A&M, the public exposure, or the campus religious fundamentalists would ever throw his way.

The hard work started immediately, with early morning phone calls from the formidable-looking and intense, yet dispassionate, GSS Secretary Cynthia Kittler, informing him of his "must do's" for the week. Fortunately for Roberts and GSS, he quickly became a successful fundraiser, and so was unanimously acclaimed for the full term just a month before the end of the spring semester, and as GSS scaled back its activities during the relative quiet of a College Station summer. But soon the summer quiet would be prematurely broken, and Roberts would find himself at forefront of the winds of change.

On August 3, 1984, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, on its second go at the *Gay Student Services vs. Texas A&M*, again reversed the District Court that had ruled in A&M's favor a second time. This time, though, the case was now permanently beyond the pro-A&M District Court's hands. There was only one last appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court left, and everyone knew it. That fall, 38,000 Aggies, and countless Alumni, were "intensely and highly focused," as Wikipedia notes, on the question of whether GSS should be recognized by Texas A&M.

Upon hearing the news, Kevin Bailey, a Computer Science major, and the newly elected GSS secretary at the time (and eventual GSS historian and archivist), mobilized and began to setup his and Roberts' first press conference.

Already that evening, the local news channels were leading their broadcasts with what was for most student, alumni, and even local Brazos Valley residents, an alarming development.

The newscasts featured Texas A&M's lawyer putting forth his often repeated arguments characterizing GSS as akin to groups promoting bestiality and child rape. If there was one thing that united the GSS membership at that time, it was their determination to counter those characterizations, and present their position in the light of reason, American values of tolerance and free speech, and of course, constitutional law.

Almost to a person, the membership agreed with the importance of dispelling common stereotypes, and in presenting themselves in the most conservative, non-threatening manner possible to the public, especially the A&M population.

Winning a court case, they believed, would not be enough to secure membership safety if the vast majority of students,

faculty, administration officials, and even police officers, remained hostile to GSS, particularly in light of the resentment of being forced to accept its presence on campus. In Marco Roberts, they found their spokesman.

Footage of dozens of old newscasts show an articulate, poised, conservative-looking, and dare I say attractive, GSS president making the case for the equal rights to freedom of speech and university resources for gay students. Counter-posed in newscasts with the equally articulate, poised, conservative-looking, and dare I say attractive, A&M student body president David Alders, who was anti-GSS recognition, one would not have known which was the "gay" one, and which was the "normal" one without the sound or the identifying screen text.

However, this conservative demeanor would

eventually haunt Roberts from within the organization he now led.

The fall of '84 was a transformative one for GSS and for himself. With most GSS members, save the officers, remaining anonymous; with the GSS faculty advisor Dr. Larry Hickman, a philosophy professor, being straight; and with frequent media coverage of the GSS vs. A&M story; Roberts soon became the one person most Aggies knew as "a gay."

For years afterwards, Roberts says, he continued to run into former straight and GLBT Aggies whom he had never met in college, who remembered him as the "leader of the gays." GSS's own prominence in the school's public consciousness began to have an effect on both straight and sexually closeted persons on their perceptions and reactions to the whole idea of homosexuality and alternative lifestyles.

During that fall, a frenzy of activity surrounding the GSS vs. A&M case continued to roil the campus. Letters for and against GSS frequently dominated the opinion page of *The Battalion*, the school's paper, as well as that of the city paper, the *Bryan-College Station Eagle*.

Legal maneuvers and the decision of the Texas Attorney General Jim Mattox to not pursue the case to the Supreme Court kept bringing back the GSS story to the evening newscasts.

And through it all, people who normally would never have second-guessed their views of on homosexuals were being continually prodded into articulating why "the gays" did not deserve the same rights as themselves. And those who were closeted, were now gaining encouragement from seeing others like themselves in the newspapers and on TV.

According to Roberts, "now and then, when I walked alone on campus, and there were few people around, I would have some stranger approach me, say 'thank you,' and then just quietly move on. Sometimes they were in uniform, and would actually stop to shake my hand. On other occasions, when visiting an administration official or a faculty staff member, the person would suddenly close their office door, and tell me they supported our cause. Then they would reopen the door, and it would be as if they never said a word."

Roberts also tells of discovering that many people who were vocally anti-GSS were actually gay themselves. "This happened often," said Roberts. "On

one occasion, during one of our bigger meetings, we were reviewing news footage of the previous year, and were surprised to realize that some of the

people expressing anti-GSS sentiments to the interviewing news reporters had since been known not only to frequent the one gay bar, but in one case one was dating one of our members. Everybody was stunned."

And, some of these closeted folks did more than just express an opinion against GSS. According to Roberts, some took substantive steps against GSS. One example of this regarded the A&M Student Senate vote on a resolution as to whether A&M should recognize GSS.

The night of October 15, 1984, Roberts attended the Student Senate session, being advised of the resolution that would be taken up that evening. The debate was stormy and went back and forth quite some time. Eventually Roberts was offered the floor, and spoke on behalf of GSS and the right of free speech of all people regardless of sexual orientation. Then the vote was taken, and it was a tie. The chamber's presiding officer then broke the tie by casting her vote in favor GSS.

Student reaction was swift, and very negative. Stories in *The Battalion* in the days that followed reported several stories on student senators who voted for GSS recognition who were now under siege by their constituents. The paper received a new barrage of letters to the editor. Months later, Roberts would be surprised to discover that a gay dinner guest at his home, dating one of his fellow GSS officers, cast his vote against GSS.

A lot happened that October. There were frequent TV and radio interviews, news stories, and GSS fundraisers. And then there was a friendly student group inclined to radical activism that gave GSS a forum to speak on the campus, an event that brought out hundreds of students, many of them very angry.

The next day, the city paper, the *Bryan-College Station Eagle*, plastered its front page with a dramatic picture of Roberts addressing the crowd at the October forum, along with a full story.

Then the obscene phone calls began. Roberts says his roommate took the calls with nonchalance. When men would call offering to perform some sort of sexual act on Roberts, his roommate would snip "Oh yeah, well take a number," and then hang up. It was also when Roberts was told that his boss started getting calls from some customers demanding he be fired. He wasn't. "I have always kept a deep sense of respect and gratitude for Mrs. Stratta for that."

As the months went by, and victory slowly approached, GSS once again began to experience internal strife. Some new members who joined in the spring semester of 1985 were unhappy with Roberts' leadership, and formed a sub group that at first operated as a wrap group for women with GSS support and funding, but eventually became a base for what records of the time describe as "anti-Marco" sentiment.

Minutes of the meetings of that spring record increasingly contentious exchanges. At one point, when the president and other officers of what was then the Houston Gay Political Caucus came to speak at GSS in the wake of the final Supreme Court decision, they were treated to the awkward spectacle of Roberts' being berated by some very vocal critics of his views.

So, just as GSS achieved its long sought victory, and met for the first time as an officially-recognized organization on A&M soil that July 20, 1985, the organization was sliding into internal turmoil. "I was angered by the vicious characterizations of me, which I do not care to repeat, based solely on the fact that I was not ideologically radical enough for some folks," Roberts' said.

"And, I was hurt and disappointed that so few came to my defense. I could now understand how James Kaster must have felt. I thought that after winning re-election for the third time the opposition would ease up, but it did not. I had turned my life over to this cause. I made myself come out to my family so I could be public. I had risked my job. I was now emotionally exhausted. So, on our first on-campus meeting, after being subjected to more hostile antics and accusations, I announced my resignation as president, effective at the end of the first meeting of the fall semester."

As it turned out, Roberts did not resign, and went on to win a fourth (and last) re-election in 1986 before he left Texas A&M after his graduation. During the summer, one of the GSS members, Paul Hearne, called on Roberts to rescind his resignation. But Roberts said that unless he knew that two-thirds of the voting membership really wanted him to stay, he would not.

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Texas A&M Students

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Why two-thirds and not just a majority? Because, he said, "a mere majority could easily flip, and would not give me the clout and moral support I needed to continue on under what I knew would be continued assaults from within. I needed to know that even as few dared to speak in my favor openly, the support was there, that I was not on alone."

His friend Paul managed to get the signatures, and at the appointed meeting in August, at the start of the fall semester, he presented a petition that read more like a proclamation that lauded Roberts' work. It contained the requisite signatures, and so Roberts stayed.

So what was the nature of the opposition? Who were they? As it turns out, the one person who was identified as the leading force behind the opposition was not "out."

As a professor at the university, she accepted the guarantee of anonymity that GSS offered its members, and neither Roberts nor Bailey would violate it. The one member of the opposition that we could find that was public was Chrys Hulbert, the then-recently-elected Vice-President of GSS.

While she could not be located for this article, the minutes of that first fall meeting record her letter of resignation, in which one can find a manifesto of grievances. In it, Hulbert describes her personal dissatisfaction with "what can only be described as an archaic system of representative democracy based on a hierarchical structure, which limits information and power to a few select members of the group, as opposed to participatory democracy, in which all members of the group have equal access to information and power, and equal responsibility toward insuring that the work gets done."

Her letter urged the group to "to define the oppression of gays within society in terms of its common roots with other forms of oppression, such as sexism, racism, and class privilege. She hoped that "you will seek to identify who your oppressors are, and the socioeconomic reasons for that oppression."

When we caught up with Kevin Bailey at the two-day conference held at Texas A&M this year, marking the 25th anniversary of the court case victory, he explained that "previous leaders of GSS had learned the hard way how easy it was for your opponents to bring in friends to stack an election when the only requirement for voting was that you had paid dues."

"Many of those votes came from people who never attended a meeting before or after. Marco pushed, and achieved, an amendment to require attendance at least two previous meetings in order to vote on the constitution or for officers. He won another amendment to require votes on constitutional amendments be announced at a prior meeting. Both of these amendments protected the status quo in GSS. To many, including me, it seemed the status quo included Marco himself. ... But then, at the first meeting on campus, Marco resigned."

Bailey added that "It seemed to me at

the time that one of the main conflicts in the group was between those who wanted structure and a leader, and those who wanted a more egalitarian system. I don't know how to design a system that will please both. For myself, I thought the group needed structure, and I needed structure in my life, and so I supported Marco."

Not all of it was turmoil and internal angst. Despite the internal rifts, the group presented a unified front to the outside world, especially to the university. And they all did seem to agree on the common goal of gaining university recognition, and the benefit that would be to everyone, not just themselves. And there were the moments of levity, the moments of chutzpah, and the moments of love.

On St. Valentine's Day of 1985, the MDA Kissathon was staged in Kyle Field, A&M's famed football stadium. An estimated 1400 couples kissed for what some say was 90 seconds, forming the shape of a heart on the stadium's field as they kissed. Among them were Marco Roberts and David Kerr, president of the Gay/Lesbian Support Group at Trinity University in San Antonio, whose own organization had more recently been

denied its own application for recognition from Trinity, and was in the midst of deciding its next move. (Soon, of course, that would be moot).

Kerr and Roberts also happened to be in the middle of a passionate affair. And so they openly kissed in a crowd of nearly 3000 Aggies, in the place some Ags like to call "the center of the universe." Unknown to most, a photo of their kiss, in a silhouetted profile, was sneaked into the pages of the Aggie Yearbook of 1985, documented for posterity.

(A photo of the other, non-silhouetted side, is here in this article, with their permission to the publish.)

On April 1, 1985, the Texas A&M Political Forum had invited the still-unrecognized GSS to once again speak at the university's campus. In a matter of coincidence, as Roberts began to address the students at the open forum as he and his fellow officers had done back in October, the news spread in pre-Twitter fashion throughout the crowd that the Supreme Court had rendered its decision: GSS had won.

Many other remarkable and dramatic events occurred during those eight months between the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals decision in August of 1984, and April 1, 1985, too many to detail here. But the most important development, aside from the court victory, was the perceptible change of attitudes at Texas A&M, and in the Brazos Valley overall.

The public reaction was now far more muted. If people were still bothered by

gays coming on campus officially, they were fewer in number, or at least, less alarmed. The April 1 open forum itself did not feature the intense debate or hostility of just six months earlier. Texas A&M had changed.

Today, the GSS of 1985 is long gone, replaced by a new GLBT support system consisting of two organizations. Knowledge of those events has naturally faded almost entirely from the campus. However, Andrew Vaserfirer, a graduate student in sociology at TAMU conducting a research project focusing on the GSS actions as a social, educational, and legislative movement, says he thinks "most GLBT students are aware of the case and its significance, at least the active ones, because of the recent anniversary, but also because the GLBTA program coordinator is very interested in local history, specifically the lawsuit."

In a sign of progress and new respectability, the university now provides significant financial and moral support. In a sign of progress and new respectability, the university now provides significant financial and moral support and the president of the university actually spoke at the proceedings of the two-day conference held March 30 and April 1, in observance of the 25th anniversary of the Gay Student Services vs. Texas A&M University court victory.

In a curious mix of past and present, present-day GLBT leaders could be seen speaking at the conference as old news images of Marco Roberts flashed across huge screens above their heads.

Riley Brian, a senior Recreation, Park & Tourism Sciences major, is the current president of Gay Lesbian

Bisexual Transgender Aggies, the undergraduate student group which he says is "focused primarily on social activities for GLBT students."

He adds that the his group also has some educational programs. As for the services that GSS used to provide, he says today, "the GLBT Resource Center is the main point for GLBT persons seeking information, education, programming, etc. (The resource center has a library with hundreds of books, DVDs, magazines and much more.) It is a great resource to have on our campus for both the queer community and the ally community." In another sign of progress, Brian points out that "the GLBT Resource Center has been a part of the Offices of the Dean of Student Life since September 2007."

As for what the student experience is today at A&M in contrast to those of GSS in the past, Brian said "I think that our current members can still feel some of the same struggles as the members of the GSS in 1976 and 1985."

"Even though our campus is now more accepting than then, it is still not the most welcoming place for GLBT people. We are making great strides to help change this

institution into a place where everyone can be comfortable expressing themselves and being who they are without fear of negative repercussions."

"I feel that this University will continue to grow to become a more accepting place for GLBT people. For the most part, the majority of our members feel respected, but at times don't. I was a member of the Corps of Cadets and the Aggie Band and during my time, I felt both respected and disrespected. My buddies were accepting of me being gay, while many upperclassmen were not respectful of my sexual orientation, no matter how much respect or change has happened, many students still would not feel comfortable walking across campus holding the hand of someone of the same gender for fear they may become the victim of homophobic violence."

What would he say to Sheri Skinner, Marco Roberts, and all the others who carried on the fight? "I would tell them thank you for not giving up. It is through their determination that I am able to be a part of and lead an organization that helps people of the GLBT community. Without them and their hard work, who knows how much longer it would have been for GLBT people to have the right to form organizations to meet on campuses around the country."

Days after the conference, Bailey reflected on the progress he witnessed. "When I attended the GLBT Aggies' 25th anniversary, the university managed to come up with rainbow colored tablecloths for our lunch break. The president of the university helped to open the days' events."

"When I stepped out of the building to meet Marco on the sidewalk, we greeted each other with a little hug. That's all different from 25 years ago. The case had something to do with it, but it was just one link in a long sequence of events. Most of those events were outside the spotlight. The work we did outside the spotlight is the real work. It's what allowed us to say to the world 'This is who we are, this is what we have done, and even this is why you need us.'"

I asked Roberts for a last thought on this matter. "I'll tell you what I told Andrew Vaserfirer after he got me thinking, asking me about the past."

"One of the things I think we as humans all tend to be guilty of to some degree or another, is our refusal to recognize the humanity of not only those that look or act differently than us, but also of those that think differently than us."

"We want to believe that the reason someone else believes something other than what we see as the self-evident truth, is because of some moral or intellectual flaw in that person, or better yet, both. It requires work and self-restraint to consider that maybe those who oppose us, even though they be wrong, perhaps even unfair and to be rightfully opposed, are also sincere in their understanding of the world."

Instead, "I think we even subconsciously like to think that maybe they're not quite as humane, or human, as we are. But everyone, male or female, straight or gay, rich or poor, religious right-wing nut or ardent leftist atheist, is human... a human being looking for a little bit of freedom, and a chance at happiness in this life."

For more information on, and video footage of, the history of Gay Student Service, you can visit GayStudentServices.net



**The Kiss-a-Thon
at Kyle Field**