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**Students in process of organizing university's first fraternity for gay, bisexual and straight men**

By Jean Stevens

Seated comfortably in chairs and on a forest-green plush sectional couch at the LGBT Resource Center, eight men laughed and played off one another's jokes, the conversation sliding from television shows to road trips. The hum of their voices was the only sound in the room, and their smiles and animated interactions created a warm, welcoming atmosphere. Each man was dedicated to the same idea: creating a chapter of Delta Lambda Phi, a national social fraternity for gay, bisexual and straight men.

Albert Nguyen, a senior computer science and electrical engineering major, commented that a sense of brotherhood had already developed within the group even after only one meeting.

Cliff Lyons, an interested community member, said online chatting had furthered their communication since the first meeting.

"We'd like to thank AOL Instant Messenger for bringing us here today," said Jeff Linehan, a junior magazine major, in a booming voice.

Paul Mercurio, a graduate student in landscape architecture in the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry, sat in a folding chair with an air of authority. He had introduced the idea of DLP at a September Pride Union meeting. As an undergraduate at Boston University, he researched DLP and guided it through a nearly two-year process to make it a Boston community chapter. He also helped launch a chapter at the University of Washington-Seattle for the Seattle area. DLP is a nationally recognized fraternity formed in 1986 by men who wish they'd had the fraternity experience but missed out because they were gay.

"In Seattle, I had to search and search," Mercurio said. "Here, I hardly did anything and I have 14 people interested. Here, they're going to be awesome."

"The potential for good here is so great," said James Kaechele, a sophomore environmental forestry and biology major at ESF. "We're all excited about it; we wanna jump in."

Much to the group's dismay, the Syracuse University chapter can only live informally in a house because the national council is in the process of drafting legislation to allow DLP chapters to own houses, Mercurio said.

But the DLP interest group is months away from thinking about a fraternity house. Before becoming an official chapter, the group must petition to become a colony and then undergo a pledge process.

Two of the men had been interested in pledging at traditional greek houses at SU, but hesitated because of rumors they'd heard about homophobia and a friend's bad experience.

Many of the men agreed that was another unique aspect of DLP and hope that the DLP community can help break down stereotypes, especially within greek life.

"It drained his soul, crushed his spirit and he became less of a man than he once was," joked Linehan in a choked-up voice.

The DLP pledging process varies among the 18 nationally established chapters, Mercurio said. Rush lasts from two weeks to a month, and adheres to a strict no-hazing policy. Because the fraternity strongly emphasizes acceptance, all men - gay and straight - can join DLP.

"It's not just for gay men, and that says a lot," Kaechele said. "Not only can straight men join, but we want them to join."

Scott Huegelmeyer, a junior English major, said he was tentative when he first learned of DLP, but changed his mind when he recognized that they could achieve the many positive objectives of greek life, including service.

Gay stereotypes make it especially difficult to pledge, said Derek Bryant, a

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sophomore landscape architect major at ESF who was sitting next to Kaechele on the couch.

"But I'm excited to help other people get involved in greek life and feel comfortable enough to have a fraternity to join," Bryant said.

Freshmen become instant targets for the greek community. But for Jim Pagano, a landscape architecture major, he did not feel quite so confident that he could be a part of it.

"I never would have thought of being in a frat because of being gay," Pagano said quietly, resting his elbows on his knees in his chair. "But being a freshman and getting the chance to help start this, it's pretty exciting as well."

Kaechele, treasurer of Pride Union, participated in Boy Scouts and earned the highest ranking of Eagle Scout, he explained with a smile. But now that his Boy Scout experience is over, he would like to become involved in another organization of men that works for the benefit of others. DLP chapters have been involved with service activities such as Toys for Tots, meal preparation for those with AIDS and drag show benefits.

"It's a good idea to get a bunch of people together who want to do something for the community," Kaechele said. "I've totally missed that."

Traditional SU greek life did not interest Nguyen. But when he heard about Delta Lambda Phi, he thought he would like to become involved in the start of something new on campus, something no one had ever seen before.

Students have attempted to launch a DLP chapter for several years, but not made progress, and the group did not have institutional support, Mercurio said. This year, however, the men are confident they will be successful.

"I'm pretty sure we'll be recognized and accepted," Linehan said. "OGLEL is pretty accommodating. And if they don't, we'll give 'em hell."

The Office of Greek Life and Experiential Learning is ready to meet with the DLP interest group and will do whatever it can to help establish the fraternity, said Joseph Oravec, associate dean of OGLEL. DLP fits in perfectly with the SU core value of diversity, he added.

"I'm excited to see what the students' responses are, and I hope that's what they are - responses, not reactions," Oravec said. "I certainly hope that people would embrace the opportunity to seek out a different perspective."

Matt Ward, a senior interior design major and president of Pride Union, loves the idea of the fraternity and is also curious about how the university community will respond. The recent bias-related incident has drawn much attention to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered community and people seem to have recognized that bias is something that needs to be faced, he said. The ongoing Coming Out Week will also give people an opportunity to learn about the fraternity.

"There are many people here who go about their daily lives and don't come across gay people," Linehan said. "It's something new, a little radical [and] some people's heads will turn."

The interest group is not concerned with any sort of negative feedback because most of the men feel the LGBT community has been more or less accepted at SU, Linehan said. Other chapters have not faced any outward prejudice either, Mercurio said.

Indeed, as they joked and laughed, apprehension and fear were the furthest feelings from the men's minds.

"We're open to any kind of chapter starting up," said Tom Toole, a senior finance and accounting major and president of the Interfraternity Council. "There's definitely a need for this type of organization at Syracuse."

SU is a good place to be gay, Linehan said, because of the number of gay people and how comfortable they are to be out. But the LGBT community can be cliquish, and, as with any social scene, it can be hard to find a niche. Linehan, who never felt strongly either way about greek life, is looking forward to finding an alternative social outlet.

"It can draw a whole new group of students who maybe aren't involved right now," said Adrea Jaehnig, director of SU's LGBT Resource Center. "It'll be really good to sort of increase visibility that the LGBT community is as diverse as the straight community."

The men of Syracuse's future Delta Lambda Phi are still months away from officially becoming a fraternity. But as they sat on that couch, linked by a common goal and by friendship, they've already forged the bonds of brotherhood - the most important step of all.

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