

A Home of Their Own
By Stephanie M. Colman

A lot has changed in the 40 years since Arthur Vandegaart has been on campus.

I recently met up with Arthur on a crisp spring afternoon after a determined Internet search uncovered his phone number. Vandegaart graduated from California State University, Northridge the year the campus changed its name from San Fernando Valley State College.

“Hello.”

“Are you Arthur Vandegaart?”

“Yes,” he tentatively replied.

“Are you the Arthur who graduated from Cal State Northridge in 1972 with a degree in sociology?” I asked, trying not to overwhelm a complete stranger in the first 10 seconds.

“Yes,” he said, sounding very confused.

And just like that, I had him. The man responsible for starting CSUN’s Gay Student Union nearly 40 years ago.

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The 1970s was a decade of growth in advocacy efforts on behalf of the LGBT community. The infamous Stonewall Riots took place in June 1969, and the first-ever gay pride parades in the United States were held in Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco and near the Stonewall Inn in New York one year later. Within two years of the riots, gay rights groups had sprung up in almost every major U.S. city.

Around the same time, the first student gay rights organizations began to develop, starting with Columbia University’s Student Homophile League, founded in 1967 by Stephen Donaldson. Soon

after, branches of the organization were started at Cornell University, New York University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, City University of New York and University of Minnesota.

Arthur Vandegaart remembers very little about his time as a student on the CSUN campus. The campus was, as it remains, heavily populated with commuter students who split their lives between time at school and time at work.

As we walked across campus toward the bustling, impressive Student Union complex, Arthur was wide-eyed, much like a tourist seeing historical landmarks for the first time.

“That used to be the engineering building,” he said, pointing at what is now Sierra Hall.

We continued across the quad, passing the library.

“Has the library always had that same architecture?” he asked.

We found an empty corner inside the Matador Involvement Center, and Arthur settled in to recall his role in founding an organization that has continued to play a monumental role in the lives of LGBT students for more than four decades.

“It was a fairly quiet time,” he began. “I wasn’t out or anything. It was a quiet time in my life... a kind of confusing time. That’s all I really remember.”

“That’s all you remember?” I asked.

“Well, I did hit it off very well with a couple psychology professors,” he added.

Turns out, it was his involvement with those professors that eventually led to Vandegaart’s coming out.

When a graduate student was looking to assemble a “growth group,” a sort of Maslowian experience where students shared information and received feedback under the guidance of a professor, Vandegaart decided to join up.

“It seemed like a good idea,” he said. “I liked the professor and I liked the facilitator. I don’t

think I was anticipating anything. There were eight of us and we'd meet for a couple of hours each week for 10 weeks."

As the time went by, a lot of people revealed a lot of things. But not Vandegaart.

"It was down to the last two weeks. We were running out of time. People were like, 'Well, you're very nice, but we don't know shit about you,' and I was like, 'Well then, you'll probably never know shit about me,' but we worked that out over the next seven or eight hours."

I desperately wanted to know more, but sensed that, if I wasn't careful, I might not know shit about him either.

"I had had very traumatizing experiences before," he explained. "It went on for hours ... my contribution of what I was or wasn't going to tell them. They were very patient about it. I was in major trauma. I was crying and all over the place. I wanted to tell them, but I just didn't like the thought, or the vulnerability of it. It just seemed like I was having enough problems managing it on my own.

"Finally I just said, 'Yeah, I'm gay,' and they all said, 'Wait. You mean you didn't kill anybody? That's all there is? That's it?' It took an hour or so to put me back together and we all went home."

He got an "A" on the project. Not long after, he chartered Gay Student Union.

"The next semester I said, 'Well, why not?' There wasn't much support available. You had to personally know somebody. All the major colleges were beginning to have meetings and things, mostly run by men. It was the embryonic stage."

Vandegaart's experience was a lot like students today... struggling to come to terms with their own sexuality and often, dealing with unsupportive parents.

"Coming out to my family was a catastrophic blow-out," he said.

“Your parents weren’t supportive?” I asked, recalling stories of fellow students whose parents had not taken news of their own children’s sexuality well.

“You don’t even want to know,” he said, wringing his hands. “It came out to be just another dysfunction of the family and it resulted in my step-mother’s suicide six months later.” He paused to worry a snap on his jacket. “I really felt like, to some degree, had I not brought that out, because other things were brought up at the same time, they could’ve played the game longer.”

He took a deep breath and shook off the emotion. Changing the subject, he picked up my copy of the original club charter, complete with the names of the first 15 members of Gay Student Union.

“Oh golly. Where did you get this?” he asked. He looked over the names, running his finger down the list.

“Oh... David Trinidad. He’s a writer. New York. Writes very nice books.” He reached for his glasses in order to take a closer look.

“Arlene Pfeiffer. Robert Lye. I was thinking of him today. He went on to KPFK. It was 1972. Doggone. Wow.”

He spent a lot of time with Trinidad, Pfeiffer, Lye and the other organization members. They became the core of his social group.

“I held parties at my house and did the meetings. There was some gossiping, and some dating ... people met each other. It was kind of like people were meeting each other for the first time. I really think it was one of the paramount moments of my existence. Not so much founding the club, but having such a supportive system. It made a tremendous amount of difference.”

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A few weeks earlier I had stopped by an LGBTQA club meeting. The group, which has a mailing list of more than 300, hosts weekly meetings with an average attendance of about 40 students.

New members introduce themselves and are asked random questions such as “What’s your favorite movie?” or “What’s the most embarrassing song on your iPod?” The questions are trivial by design to help newcomers relax, have a laugh and quickly realize that, when they’re at a meeting, they’re among friends.

It seems to help. A little.

“On my first day I was scared shitless,” said 21-year-old linguistics major, Deandre Pierce. “My heart was pounding. I was very nervous. But I became comfortable.” Now, when he spots new members, he tries to be one of the first to reach out and extend a welcome. “I try and approach new members and make them as comfortable as possible because I know what it’s like... I’ve been in those shoes.”

Like Vandegaart, Pierce transferred to CSUN as a junior. Born and raised in Fresno, he welcomed the opportunity to move away from his hometown and its inhabitants’ narrow-minded ideas. But moving to a new town and a new school can be overwhelming at times. And lonely.

“I remember feeling so depressed,” he said, his eyes glistening with emotion as he described the difficult transition. “I left my family. It’s hard to move to a new city. I had a roommate, but we weren’t really on the same page. I’d go to the library just because I didn’t want to be at home.”

He ended up meeting a fellow gay CSUN student via a mobile app.

“He took me to the LGBTA meeting and that’s when everything changed,” he said. “I wound up meeting several new people that night and immediately my spirit was lifted. I was overwhelmed to meet people who were just like me, and who understand. It’s very difficult to be gay, be in college and know not everyone accepts you.”

Not feeling accepted is never an issue at the meetings.

“Going to meetings is a social thing. I know I can go, be myself and not have to worry,” he

said.

The feeling of acceptance and camaraderie is evident. At a recent meeting, the group kicked things off with a round of “The Ship is Sinking,” an ice-breaker where members casually mill around and suddenly, the leader announces, “The ship is sinking!” and calls out an order ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous. The last person to respond is tagged out of the game.

Members begin to mill about.

“THE SHIP IS SINKING!” yells club President Hugo Valencia. “Everybody hold hands.”

They all scamper about, clasping hands with the nearest member.

The game continues with comical requests such as “Do the YMCA!” and “Strike a Charlie’s Angels Pose,” both met with laughter.

When the game winds down, the group forms a circle on the floor. The topic for the evening is coming out stories. One by one, those who are comfortable share their experiences. Stories of accidental outings are common. Stories of wholehearted, unconditional acceptance, particularly among biological family members, aren’t completely lacking, but are rare.

“I don’t know how she really feels about it,” said one girl, referring to her mother. “She expects me to hold in my feelings for the rest of my life. I don’t think she’ll ever understand.”

As stories are shared, members nod their heads in understanding and in a show of support. While each situation is unique, the overall shared experience of navigating both an internal and external struggle for acceptance is apparent.

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Nineteen-year-old Jessel Quiroz has been in the closet with her family for years. Her dad was angry when he learned her two best friends were lesbian and bisexual.

“After that little situation, I’m afraid of telling him,” she said. “Yeah, dad... I’m bisexual ...

you know that girl who came over ... that's my girlfriend.' If I say that, I think he'd go off on me on a whole different level. My mom's the same way."

Her brother knows. Sort of. He thinks it's a phase, not who his sister really is.

"He asked me once and when I told him yes, he was like, 'You're such a liar. You're trying to go with the trend.'"

As if sexuality was akin to mullets, going Goth or wearing skinny jeans.

Jassel has been attracted to both men and women since she was young. She remembers being attracted to women ... girls ... as young as in the 4th grade.

"I remembered I liked this guy named Chris," she said. "The next time it was this girl and I was like, 'Uh oh.' I thought it was maybe just that one girl, but then I got to middle school and it was like, no, there's that one, and that one, and ... but I still had boys on the back of my mind."

It's tough not being out to her parents. Living at home, behavior and phone conversations are constantly censored. She sometimes imagines what it might be like to tell them the truth, and be completely open with her parents. "I hope they'd say, 'Yeah, we knew that ... we're glad you got that off your chest.'" Instead, she worries it would cause them not to trust her.

"It's hard to wrap my head around even *thinking* of telling them," she said.

"What was it like listening to the few coming out stories of friends whose parents are supportive?" I asked, remembering what I had heard at the recent LGBTQA meeting.

"I was getting emotional," she said. "People were like, 'Yeah, my mom totally said it was fine and she already knew,' and my mom is not like that at all. I really wish that could be part of my life. It made me sad to think 'My mom's not like his mom.'"

She paused, her eyes moist with emotion.

“It just sucks.”

* * *

“I think CSUN is an accepting campus,” said Garrett Kynard, a sophomore Cinema and Television Arts major. “At the same time, there’s also a lot of ignorance. It’s not violence, but you’ll hear things around campus. That’s why LGBTQA is so important. Queer people are going to hear things. I did. But then I joined the club and saw all these people like me, and all the allies in support of us, and saw this strong support group and that being queer isn’t a problem ... it’s something you can be proud of and something that’s supported.”

Unlike Quiroz, Kynard is completely out with his family. At least to the extent that they choose to believe it. Raised in the church, his mom thought she could “pray the gay away.”

“Words have an impact on people, whether you notice it or not... they do have an impact,” he said. “That’s one of the main reasons I reached out to find an LGBTQA group on this campus ... so that I would feel supported and know that sense of unity.”

It was a desire for support and unity that helped spark Vandegaart’s motivation to launch Gay Student Union 40 years ago. In 2008 the campus launched a queer studies minor, an 18-unit program that focuses on “histories, contemporary experiences and community-based knowledge of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender people, intersexed people, queers, and others who occupy non-heterosexist and non-normative gender positionalities.”

There’s also the soon-to-be-opened gay resource center, the first of its kind on a college campus in the San Fernando Valley. The center will serve as a clearinghouse of information and support for the LGBT community.

“[The resource center] is a university commitment to resources of all type and kind: human resources, financial resources and space,” said Greg Knotts, a professor of education and the faculty

advisor for CSUN LGBTQA. “It’s like saying, ‘You can go to MEChA and there’s an office for you ... you can go to Black Student Union and there’s an office for you and now, you can go to the queer resource center and there’s an office for you.’ It’s 2012 and there’s finally space that’s congregatory and common as a resource for not just LGBT students, but anybody who says, ‘What’s this gay thing? I don’t get it.’”

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The past 40 years have been witness to tremendous change. The passing of gay marriage laws, the end of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell, laws that require California schools to teach gay history and laws that help protect LGBT students in higher education. Yet still, students today report the same feelings of isolation and generally describe LGBTQA’s life-changing support in much the same way as its founder from so many years ago.

When I asked Arthur Vandegaart how he felt about founding an organization that had gone on to have a positive impact on so many students, he seemed overwhelmed by the very suggestion.

“I just held parties at my house and hosted some meetings. At that time in my life, I didn’t know what it was to be a founder.”