

USGA, A Place Where All Are Welcome—LGBT Or Straight

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PROVO, Utah—“I don’t have the room number right now, but if you come in from the West entrance, a sign will be posted indicating where to find USGA.” Up the west stairs of the Provo Academy and to the right was a sign for [USGA](#) at BYU. Though this group, Understanding Same Gender Attraction at BYU, isn’t a BYUSA-sponsored club, BYU students and faculty run it. “Our goal is to save and improve lives of LGBT students at BYU. We do that by providing a safe, supportive space for people to gather and share experience about being LGBTQ and by raising awareness,” said Gina Darata, vice president of USGA.

Each Thursday, Gina meets with USGA at BYU in the Provo Library. The room fills up a while after 7:00 p.m., accounting for the customary Mormon standard time. “We really want to do everything that we can to help students who are struggling, and anyone who’s struggling, know that they’re not alone and have the support they need,” Gina explained. USGA has had activities like Music and The Spoken Word (Queer Edition!), LGBTQ/SSA History at BYU, and End of Year Testimony Meeting. This group provides a space for people to express themselves and feel supported by a like-minded community.

Many members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints struggle to reconcile the Church’s stance on same-gender marriage and LGBT issues in general. “They struggle with ‘why do I have a church that so actively fights against same-sex marriage and those particular issues, but is also a church that has actively fought for LGBT rights in terms of medical rights and housing’,” said Brian Willoughby, Assistant Professor in the BYU Family Life Department.

It is no secret that the LDS church has actively campaigned against the legalization of same-sex marriage. In 2008 when Proposition 8 was scheduled for vote, members of the Church were asked to actively campaign for it. Though the LDS church doesn’t support same-sex marriage, the church preaches the necessity to treat LGBT individuals as children of God. The official doctrine of the LDS church is that all are children of God and are equal in God’s eyes.

The LDS church even has a website, mormonsandgays.org, that attempts to address the Church’s stance on the LGBTQ community within the church. Their website states, “With love and understanding, the Church reaches out to all God’s children, including our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters.” Because of doctrinal teachings, the LDS church does not support same-gender marriage, but they do advocate for a community of love and respect. “Not discriminating against people is central to the gospel,” said Brian Willoughby.

On June 26, 2015, same-gender marriage became legal in the United States. While the LDS church held their stance on same-gender marriage, they continued to encourage members to treat all people with [respect](#). The LDS church continues to support legislation that campaigns for LGBT rights in regards to hospital visitation rights, medical care, and housing and employment equality. Brian Willoughby explained that the church “is trying to model for us that there’s a very clear difference in different domains.” The church’s model includes “reaching out and giving people basic rights,” said Willoughby.

Why does it seem that LGBT circles and religious circles are constantly at odds? “A lot of time people talk about religious people and gay people or LGBTQ people and in those two categories—and in a sentence will separate them like that. But we’re not separate. We are Mormon, believing students at BYU. It doesn’t really get more religious than that. And we wanted to send a message that there are those people who are both, and we’re them,” said Gina Darata. In the media, LGBT issues usually seem to be pitted against religious freedom.

Recently, there has been much discussion around LGBT rights because of the “religious freedom” bills passed in North Carolina and Mississippi. The [bill](#) in Mississippi says that businesses cannot be penalized for denying services to people based on sexual orientation. “The biggest myth is that just because we got gay marriage equality that there aren’t any other problems,” said Anthony Gipe, civil rights lawyer and former president of the Board of Governors for the Washington State Bar Association.

Gipe explained that in over 30 states, businesses may fire employees because of an employee’s sexual orientation. In most of the states that do include protections for LGBT individuals, there is only protection from job termination if a business has more than 15 employees. Not only that, but in general, women make less money than men. Thus, if a woman is lesbian and of color, she will be paid 60% of what her white, male counterpart makes.

How does BYU fit into the LGBT equality discussion? “There are resources for people in the LGBT community, but they’re not Mormon resources, and sometimes non-Mormons in that community doesn’t understand the same kind of perspective that I’m coming from, and they see it in this divisive way and see gays and religious people. And so it’s a really big deal to me to have USGA where we are one,” said Darata.

BYU professor Brian Willoughby explained that he’s noticed from his studies and from his students that much homophobia comes from misunderstanding in doctrine, the way people were raised, and inexperience with LGBT individuals. Renee Johnson, a professor at John Hopkins who did a study on emotional distress among LGBT youth, explained that it’s important to remind people that “everybody deserves to be treated with respect.” She’s observed that much homophobia can be prevented by people’s conscious effort to watch the way they speak. “I think sometimes what parents don’t realize is that every time they say something homophobic, however slight, young people are hearing it, and so they know; and if you’re a young person and you’ve heard your parents say something homophobic, then you’ve learned that it’s not okay to be who you are.”

Brigham Young University preaches “Enter to Learn, Go Forth to Serve.” There’s no restriction as to *who* students are to serve. “We are all the same. When we die, we become bones. You cannot tell: white, black, gay, straight,” said Terri Kinjo, member of the LGBTQ community. This sentiment mirrors the LDS teaching that all are children of God. “Everyone is welcome at USGA,” said Darata. “We’re a community of students, faculty, and guests. If you’re just friends, even if you don’t know or think you don’t know anyone who is LGBT, you are welcome to come. There’s visitors every week. There’s always some straight people here. We won’t make assumptions about you. Everyone’s welcome, and we’d love to have you.”