

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

March 5, 2010 at 10:29pm

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## 'It's about helping people'

by Joshua J. McElwee

*For the past year an informal group of students at The Catholic University of America has been organizing to support gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered students and faculty. Named CUAllies, the group has been met with some opposition. While the students claim the group is only a support system for minorities on campus, the university has withheld official support in fear of endorsing an organization that might advocate for issues contrary to official Catholic teaching. Spokesman Victor Nakas stated the university's opposition in a Dec. 11 article in The Washington Post. He explained that students already have access to support services through the university's health center, counseling services, and office of campus ministry.*

*Catholic University student Lauren Crook, who cofounded the organization and is in her final year as a sociology student, spoke with NCR editorial intern Joshua McElwee about the group and its vision. What follows is an edited version of that interview.*

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### **NCR: Why did you form CUAllies?**

*Crook:* We formed CUAllies because there was an obvious need for it at The Catholic University of America [CUA]. There was not a publicized "safe space" for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and questioning [GLBTQ] students and their allies anywhere on campus. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops stated in their 1997 pastoral message to parents of gay children that "all homosexual persons have a right to be welcomed into the community." The founders of CUAllies felt that Catholic University was not doing its part to welcome homosexuals or to eliminate the discrimination that exists within the university community. Many GLBTQ students and their allies have felt discriminated against on campus, unsafe because of their sexual orientation or beliefs, and unsupported by the larger CUA community.

The main goal of CUAllies is to work to create an environment where all people feel safe, welcomed, and affirmed. It is a belief in Christian hospitality and that all people are created in the image of God that impels us to reach out to the GLBTQ community here.

### **How has the administration treated the group?**

We believe the administration wants to make CUA a more hospitable place for everyone, but they are unwilling to address GLBTQ issues and provide a publicized safe place for GLBTQ students. We are trying to work within the confines of the university to uphold its mission.

Since we have been denied recognition as a new student organization, we are not able to publicize on campus, receive funding from the university, and reserve rooms to meet on campus, although we can meet unofficially if there are open rooms available.

However, some progress has been made recently. Last semester, we had one of the associate deans come speak to over 40 members of CUAllies at one of our meetings about some of the support resources that are in place for students. We are also in talks to work with the dean of students to create some sort of pamphlet or handout to inform students about discrimination, the university's zero-discrimination policy, and how to report instances of discrimination.

### **Have students and professors been supportive of the group?**

Fellow students have generally been incredibly supportive of the efforts of CUAllies. We made 100 T-shirts and they were gone within a week and we had to order more. The student newspaper, The Tower, has featured several articles about our efforts. It has definitely become a talking point around campus. It's not unusual for me to be wearing my CUAllies T-shirt and for someone to stop me and say a word of encouragement or ask where they can get their own. Of course there will always be some people who aren't supportive, but for the most part I would say they are the minority. Professors have been fairly supportive as well. Several have asked for T-shirts and some even come to our weekly meetings. Others have asked to be put on our weekly e-mail list, where we send out e-mails to over 100 faculty and staff of the university with testimonies of GLBTQ students and their allies, along with resources for them.

### **How has the group supported you and other students in faith and academic life?**

For me, this group just let me know that I wasn't alone. It's so easy to come to here to CUA and to feel like you're the only GLBTQ person on the entire campus. It allowed me to talk to people who have been in the same position as me: who have had to come out to their parents, who have had to deal with verbal harassment due to their sexual orientation, who have had to struggle with their faith and their sexuality. I'm a senior and my time with CUAllies is the first time in four years that I've felt that I had a real, reliable resource at this university to go to regarding my sexuality.

On a broader note, I feel that one of CUAllies' main strengths is that it doesn't take up any views that take attention away from its main goal of creating a safe, welcoming, affirming environment for all students. Our past topics have ranged in subject greatly. We've done peer support counseling, a discussion on coming out, difficulties GLBTQ students experience going home for the holidays, and faith and spirituality. At the meeting on faith, we invited a deacon and a Harvard Divinity scholar to come speak about the coexistence of homosexuality and a strong spirituality. At that meeting, we handed out information with local mosques, temples and churches of all denominations that are publicly open to GLBTQ individuals.

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We don't talk about same-sex marriage, about safe sex, about same-sex adoptions, because these issues are not what we're about. We're about providing a source of comfort and safety for individuals who don't find that other places on campus. We have members who are pro-gay marriage and we have members who don't believe in it, but that is the beauty of CUAllies -- everyone is welcome! Straight, gay, transgendered, black, white, Republican, Democrat, Catholic, atheist -- it doesn't matter. CUAllies wants to support the person.

### **What advice do you have for students at other Catholic universities facing similar struggles?**

I would advise other students to constantly keep in mind why they're doing what they're doing. This isn't about fighting 'the man' or creating new laws or getting your name in the paper -- it's about helping people. It's about making that freshman who sits crying in his dorm room because he doesn't understand his feelings feel a little less alone on campus. It's about educating the student body about how to appreciate diversity. It's about empowering the student who had a horrible word written across his board to report the discrimination to the appropriate people. It's about making that new teacher not afraid of professional retribution when she talks about her partner with other faculty members. At its core, it's about maintaining the dignity of the human person.

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