

Black Hawk College Forms a New Gay-Straight Alliance

Written by Mike Schulz

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Viewed less as a movie than as a cultural phenomenon, one of the most refreshing aspects of *Brokeback Mountain* is the matter-of-factness with which it tells its gay love story, as this revolutionary work treats its protagonists' romance with the same dignity and consideration that has accompanied heterosexual screen romances since the dawn of cinema. (What makes *Brokeback Mountain*

revolutionary is that most straight audiences don't seem to *mind*

.) As it dramatizes its heartbreaking central romance, the film, for many, might be providing some understanding into the fear and irrational hatred often faced by those in the gay community.

Yet understanding of this sort is still slow in coming. At the two local screenings of *Brokeback Mountain*

I've attended, several of the film's more dramatic and moving encounters were met by some audience members (especially, judging by the timbre, *young*

audience members) with varying degrees of nervous laughter; uncomfortable viewers appeared to find an outlet by turning the characters' pain into a joke.

Some students at Moline's Black Hawk College are hoping to change reactions such as these.

Recently, and for the first time since the late '90s, the school has established a gay-straight alliance that, in the words of organization President Zlatko Filipovic, "will serve as an outlet for awareness and diversity at Black Hawk College."

Entitled Unity Alliance, the group – which currently consists of 15 active members, with English instructor Karen Hindhede and Information Technology Service technician Susan Hamann acting as group advisors – meets every two weeks, and is committed to raising and discussing issues pertaining to the GLBT (Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgender) community.

Although most of Unity Alliance's activities are targeted to Black Hawk students, the public will

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have the opportunity to participate in these discussions as well, and the first will be held following Unity Alliance's presentation of *The Laramie Project* on Thursday, January 26. Moises Kaufman's work, which details the aftermath of the 1998 murder of 21-year-old Matthew Shepard, explores issues of hate crimes and intolerance, and audiences are invited to stay after the film's conclusion for a discussion of the themes raised in the HBO movie.

The Laramie Project will be shown at 5 p.m., with admission \$2, slices of pizza available for \$1.50, and all of the evening's proceeds benefiting Unity Alliance programs.

"It's important to open a discussion of these issues," says Filipovic, who also serves as president of the Black Hawk College Broadcast Club and writes for the school's journalistic endeavor, *The Chieftain*. "People need to understand what hate crimes *are*."

Faculty advisor Hindhede says that a student organization of this sort was last attempted at Black Hawk in 1999, but that "it was a very small group ... not very active." Yet when, in the spring of 2005, she met with Moline High School graduate Filipovic and others about the possibility of forming a new gay-straight student group, Hindhede says she was "floored" by the passion the students had for the project.

"The idea behind it [the group]," she continues, "was to increase awareness and have a presence in the community," in addition to providing its members with "a social club in a safe environment." Through a series of flyers and e-mails, word of the organization reached a group of like-minded students – several of whom also work for the area's Quad-Citians Affirming Diversity project – and, Hindhede says, "we met in the beginning weeks of the fall semester to draft a constitution" required of all student associations at Black Hawk.

"It just takes a few people to get something like this started," Hindhede says of the fledgling organization. Professing to be "thrilled" with the students' active involvement thus far, Unity Alliance's co-advisor adds, "The direction and energy *has* to come from the students," who, thus far, "have so many great ideas about what they want [Unity Alliance] to do."

Among those ideas is the eventual creation of scholarships, which Filipovic foresees being awarded "to high-schoolers who are working to increase awareness and tolerance for GLBT individuals in their community." The organization intends to build financing for the scholarships through fundraisers such as Thursday's showing of *The Laramie Project*, with further movie-and-discussion events currently in the planning stages.

Other plans for Unity Alliance's fundraising program, Hindhede says, include auctions and raffles, and hopefully more social activities held in conjunction with Unity, the Western Illinois University Quad Cities gay-straight alliance. "We'd like to see our numbers continue to grow," says Hindhede, who adds that the organization is currently "trying to lay the groundwork for what we'll do in future years."

Both Filipovic and Hindhede agree that, with *Brokeback Mountain* and other GLBT-themed works (such as *Capote*, currently in local release, and the yet-to-arrive

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Transamerica

) earning plaudits and awards, many who were previously unwilling might now accept, and take part in, an organization such as Unity Alliance. "A story like

Brokeback Mountain

is long overdue," says Filipovic. "It seems like a very good time to open a dialogue about homosexuality."

"The movie may, in a sense, enable students to talk about some of these issues," adds Hindhede. "We support anything that opens up dialogue and builds bridges."

The Laramie Project *will be shown at 5 p.m. on Thursday, January 26, in Building 4 of the Black Hawk College campus.*

For more information on Unity Alliance, contact organization president Zlatko Filipovic at (zfilipov@yahoo.com) or (309)716-0542, advisor Karen Hindhede at (309)796-5638, or advisor Susan Hamann at (309)796-5628.