

romantic interest.

Quentin's second roommate, during his sophomore year, had no problem with his homosexuality. "Kurt didn't care at all. He let me put my pictures on the wall, he helped me to explore what it meant to me to be gay. The only thing he was worried about was me snoring," remembers Quentin. "This year, though, is pretty rough. I'm in NADA, which I thought would be a pretty open-minded community, but my roommate, who's from England, is freaked out about it. It makes him uncomfortable, but he doesn't acknowledge it." I frown at this, but Quentin seems unaffected. He doesn't feel, however, that he should modify his behavior because it bothers other people. "I don't want to be homogenized," he says.

Quentin is comfortable being out. Nick Galloway is not. Nick only got up the nerve to talk with me after a few drinks and only after I told him I wouldn't use his real name. As we talk of this and related things, we sit on the floor of a friend's room, joined by Nick's boyfriend next to us and REM in the background. Nick has not yet told his roommate about his homosexuality. "I think my roommate would feel very different about me. He's very conservative, and I think it would hard for him to adjust to." Nick is in the majority—he's one of the many gay and bisexual students who have not yet come out of the closet. "I'm normal," he says. "I eat, I drink, I sleep, the same as any heterosexual person. If I could change, I'd do it in a heartbeat. If I had a pill, I'd take it. If I had a magic wand, I'd use it." He waves an imaginary wand in the air.

Nick sensed early in life that he was different from other kids. "I've known since I was at least five. I'd spin around, saying I was Wonder Woman." He laughs briefly at the memory. "And in kindergarten, there was a boy named Kevin that I wanted to give a Valentine to. I always had crushes on guys rather than girls. It was odd." He pauses reflectively. "In high school, I had feelings, but I just pushed them aside. I used to cry myself to sleep, saying, 'God, why am I like this?'" Nick's boyfriend, who sits beside us on the carpet, reaches over to pat Nick's hand. I can tell that they love each other, so I ask about their future. As the soft light from the halogen lamp shines on his blond hair, Nick tells me that he wants to go into advertising and that he wants to get married. "You can be my best man," he jokes.

Elizabeth, an anthropology major in the Honors College, didn't question her sexual orientation until she was out of high school. "I grew up in a theater environment," she says, tucking her long dark hair behind her ear. "I admired the grace in the ballet dancers, but I was too busy drawing and playing make-believe to think about dating them." We've just sat down at a corner table in Hardees after escaping the advances of an unknown male in the front of the restaurant. I make a mental note to ponder that irony later. Eying the red jacket she has draped across the back of her chair, I note that she has better fashion sense than I do, but that is not unusual.

Dipping her spoon into her mashed potatoes ("I don't know why I like these so much"), Elizabeth continues her story. Though she has dated men, she realized that she had a crush on a woman at an art camp in the summer of 1995. She didn't know what it meant, so she didn't act on it. "I came to USC wanting it to all go away," she remembers. "I wanted to find a great guy—a knight on a white horse and all that stuff, but it didn't happen. The guy I dated for about a year was very effeminate, and he realized that I was bisexual."

Elizabeth came out to her parents at the end of last summer. "My dad is more laid back about it than my mom, but they both think it's something I can change. I don't want to rule out the possibility of my falling in love with a guy, but I fall in love with a person, not with what's between their legs." She has found it harder to come out to lesbians about being bisexual than to straight people. "It's hard for people to understand the bisexual concept," she says. "There are lesbians who have made no effort to get to know me because I'm bisexual. They think I'm straight, playing around at being gay. And straight guys think it's sexy—they want to see you with their girlfriends." She gives a dry laugh. "Just because you're bi-doesn't mean you want a threesome. I'm not going to lose my Christian values just because I'm gay—I have too much respect for my body and my morals!" Immorality bothers her a lot. "Columbia's lesbian community is pretty small and incestu-

ous," she says. "People sleep with anyone—it kind of scares me. Relationships are more important than sex. After all, how much time does a married couple spend in the bedroom versus everywhere else?!"

She has experienced her fair share of homophobia. "Maybe because my parents are both educators, my family has too much taste to tell gay jokes. And the anthropology department is pretty liberal. The first time I experienced homophobia was at work. I was wearing freedom rings and a customer asked me what they were. When I told him that they're a gay pride symbol, the man muttered something to his wife and they stormed out of the store." She pauses to take a bite of her sandwich, chewing carefully. "And one time at the symphony, when I was holding hands with a friend of mine, the older couple a few seats down kept giving us weird looks. During the intermission they moved to the far end of the row."

All four students—Elizabeth, Quentin, Julian and Nick—feel that gay students in other parts of the country may have a different college experience, though each student attributes this to different reasons. Quentin believes that the conservatism of the South has produced a negative environment for gays, particularly if they are both black and gay as he is. "We have to wade through a history that shouldn't matter," he says. "It's easier for gays in other areas of the country. People are more open-minded." In contrast, Julian believes that a gay student's

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experience is like any other person's, and that it will depend on a number of factors, including his or her environment, location, the political atmosphere, and the influence of the family. "Everybody comes to the train station with different baggage," he says, waving a hand in the air above his head to give emphasis to this point, "and it just happens that one of the bags that I came to college with is my homosexuality."

One of the bags that the students have in common has been the significant role that religion has played. Quentin spent two years in self-examination, during which time he addressed his religious beliefs and needs by researching a number of them. "I had to make peace with God and with organized religion," he says. He stresses the role of religion in Southern culture, which he feels is ingrained into the people of the region. "Everyone's taught the Bible, they go to church, and then they talk about you after you leave the room," says Quentin. In his researching he discovered that Buddhism and Hinduism are best for him "because they don't deal with the person as self, but rather as the soul as self. Judaism is pretty understanding, as well, and Methodists are getting more liberal. After all, Jesus never said anything about homosexuality. He said to love one another, to be good to one another." Quentin subscribes to no particular religion, though he believes in God and Jesus. "I never found God in church. It is in nature, in singing, in truth and honesty, that I find Him."

Julian, in particular, is very much church-oriented. He is a member of Westminster Presbyterian Church, where he sings in the choir, teaches Sunday School to an adult class, helps with the worship occasionally, and serves on a Presbytery committee, which is similar to a diocese. "I'm also in the process of preparing for seminary next year, the Saints be willing," he says. Religion has always played a part in his life. "God has a tendency to gnaw at me and let me know when I do wrong. I recently thought about not going to seminary—it's very tough—but he wouldn't let me."

He doesn't want me to use his real name in this article,

however, because he feels it would hurt him in his mission to counsel others. "My ability to pastor to people depends on their ability to trust me. And if they see me as a radical—on whatever issue, whether it's abortion, or gun control, or drugs—I'm going to turn off a lot of people who come to me." It is for this reason that he plans to hide his homosexuality once he becomes an ordained minister.

Like Quentin, Nick has struggled with religious issues. Having rejected the Baptist Church, the denomination in which he grew up, he now attends the Metropolitan Community Church, whose congregation is primarily bisexual and homosexual. "It was the hardest thing to realize that, hey, the Baptist Church does not accept me. I don't think badly of them—it's just a lack of knowledge." When he was eleven years old, he told his Sunday School teacher about the feelings he'd been having. "He said it was the Devil, that if I prayed long enough, it would go away. He said we could deal with this, we could overcome this." Nick shifts to lean on a beanbag, speaking slowly. "I gradually realized that my feelings were suppressed—suppressed for years. They weren't going to go away—they were buried deep inside of me. I realized that he didn't know any better. But it's who I am. I don't know why God chose me to be this way. I know I'm not going to Hell. God made me this way. I just want society to know that you don't choose to be this way. Instead of suppressed my true feelings and marrying somebody I don't love, I'm going the other way. It may not be 'right' with society, but this is my life."

Tilting his blond head in my direction, Nick confides that he had a girlfriend during his sophomore year at USC. "Yes, I loved her emotionally, but she did nothing for me physically. We had sex, but it wasn't what it should be. I tried to prove to myself that I wasn't what I thought I was—homosexual. It came to the point where I was just fooling myself." His voice breaks and I hesitate, wondering whether we should continue. He starts speaking again, his voice strained. "I just quit the facade. I realized I'd rather get this over with now than wait until I'm thirty or forty. Sometimes I feel like I'm living a nightmare. I don't choose to be this way—I don't think anyone does. How could anyone choose this, want to put themselves through this—the harassment, the torment, the anger?"

I ask about the harassment. "It's just the comments," he says. "Like my dad—he says he doesn't like faggots. In high school, I was the one who talked about gays the most, saying 'So-and-so is gay.' I was the one who betrayed them. Deep down, I knew I couldn't deal with it or accept it in myself." He is quiet for a moment, and I watch his boyfriend stroke his arm comfortingly. Nick looks up at me, his blue eyes watery. "I still have hurdles to cross—like how to deal with my parents. I think my mom knows and has always known. I have to deal with the real world—the work environment—once I get out into it."

Changing people's ideas of gays and bisexuals is a priority for Quentin. He feels that one of the most important things that gays and bisexuals can do is to "stay where their sexuality is." In addition to books on coming out of the closet, he has read a good deal of contemporary literature that addresses homosexuality and bisexuality. He has also written essays and poems that address his own experiences and feelings. "It's important to me that people know all about me. I want to help others to understand, which they will never be able to do unless they know what it means to be gay, what it feels like to be gay. It's an experience that you can't know unless you've been there, and writing about it is particularly cathartic, as well."

I thank Quentin, Elizabeth, Nick, and Julian for talking with me about what is to them such a small part of their lives. To me, because I don't have to live with the stares and hate mail and social stigma, I can leave them and forget about this article and fall asleep easily. It's difficult, however, for me to understand how they can. But each tries to live positively. For them, life is an opportunity to learn, to educate, and to live. And their homosexuality, to them, is only a small part of their whole identity. Asked for a final word, Julian searches for humor and says, grinning broadly: "For the record, I think OJ did it." Quentin turns to a most plaintive plea: "We're all humans—that's the basic thing. People just want to live, to be open, out and free."