

## Former ODU Students Return to Make a Difference

By Jessica Weaver

As former students of Old Dominion University and leading members in the LGBT community of Hampton Roads, Shannon Bowman, Don L. King, and Lisa Turner decided to work closely with the Endowment for ODU Gay Cultural Studies in order to offer students courses and, more specifically, a program they wish had existed when they were students. Now executive board members for ODU Gay Cultural Studies, Bowman, King, and Turner offer their hopes for a program that could bridge the academic side of ODU with students interested in the history and politics of LGBT communities as well as the greater Hampton Roads community.

The Endowment for ODU Gay Cultural Studies was launched in the spring of 2010 when Professors Avi Santo (Communication) and Dana Heller (English) determined that the time was right to introduce such a program at ODU. Student interest in classes focusing on LGBT studies had increased steadily over the years, and faculty with expertise in LGBT scholarship had already begun designing courses in various disciplines of the Humanities and Social Sciences to meet student demand. Moreover, history was leading the way. The national move toward the eradication of the military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, court challenges to the "Defense of Marriage Law" barring federal recognition of same-sex marriage, and the burgeoning of LGBT courses and programs at colleges and universities around the country all signaled that the time had come to make the ODU campus part of the national intellectual dialogue about sexual orientation and culture.



Political strategist and owner of the Turner Group, LTD, Old Dominion University alumna Lisa Turner ('89, BS in Political Science) found it energizing that the idea for bringing a Gay Cultural Studies program to ODU had blossomed from within the university. "I liked the fact that it was coming from within the university, the energy and drive was inclusive; it wasn't solely a LGBT driven project. And I know, from my own

political experience, how important it is to work from the inside out," says Turner. "I've been impressed with the willingness and openness of the university and I'm encouraged about our progress thus far."



Military veteran, real estate agent, and ODU alumnus Don L. King ('00, BA in English) uses his academic experience and skill set in order to assist in this endowment campaign and to engage in other non-profit work. Also, as a founding member of Hampton Roads Business OutReach (HRBOR), a gay and lesbian business association, King realizes the

need for students to have a program that promotes equality of the LGBT communities in both the academic setting as well as the larger community. "Had there been a gay cultural studies program at ODU while I was there, I would have majored in it," says King. "It's long overdue and ODU is a great place to have it. I think the more visibility we can get as a community, the better it's going to be and education is a great place to start."



While attending ODU, Shannon Bowman, current marketing director of Motley Media Concepts and founding member of HRBOR, studied Criminal Justice, Sociology, and Women's Studies. After leaving ODU, Bowman's career focused on marketing and advertising as well as non-profit endeavors. Bowman lists several

reasons why she is eager to work with this endowment, "It's part of the LGBT community and supports those types of efforts; it's non-profit and that's appealing to me, and the association with ODU is also very important." She also states, "Once you have a state-funded university that legitimizes the gay and lesbian community through education programs, then it trickles down to social issues, economic issues. It supports the community as a whole. If you're studying it, it's relevant."

While moving forward into this next century, the team behind the Endowment for ODU Gay Cultural Studies hopes to not only create an academic program emphasizing political, social, and cultural issues surrounding the LGBT communities, but also create an alliance between ODU and the greater Hampton Roads community. Turner states, "Universities provide a portal to the community and region that they reside in. They provide an intellectual experience as well as a bonding experience that you wouldn't otherwise have if the University didn't exist. What I'm looking forward to is the intersection of government, academics, community, and organizations. ODU can be on the forefront, driving this collaborative effort, paving the way for the region and other institutions to follow." The historical significance of this program is also very important to Turner, "I believe this program may be the best opportunity for an ODU student to be

involved in a course of study that's actually going to witness the U.S. Constitution changing for LGBT equality within the next ten years."

Turner states, "It's important to me that we create a program here that is representative of the history of being gay and whatever all that has meant—in popular culture, the struggles in the streets, the legislative and legal battles, the way we view ourselves, as well as the things we confront within our own community."

When asked why students should care about bringing a Gay Cultural Studies program to ODU, Bowman offers a simple, yet profound answer, "If you care about people, then you should care about this program. Because, guess what? You know someone who is gay. Everyone knows someone who is gay." Soon after, King responds with, "I wonder if people asked African-Americans why there should be an African American Studies program or Women's Studies program or Jewish Studies program. For all the same reasons people wanted those courses, that's why we want this."

As of March 2010, the campaign to bring a Gay Cultural Studies program to ODU was successful in its creation of an official endowment. There is an active and tangible desire for this kind of program by students, faculty members, and alumni. If you wish to donate to the Endowment for ODU Gay Cultural Studies and help make this program a reality, please contact Cathy Craft in the Development Office at [ccraft@odu.edu](mailto:ccraft@odu.edu). And follow our website for ongoing updates about sponsored events, lectures, and gatherings.