

Remarks of Daniel R. Pinello '72 on Receiving the  
2009 Williams College Outstanding Queer Alum Award  
Rainbow Graduation Ceremony  
May 2, 2009

When Justin Adkins e-mailed me five weeks ago to extend the invitation for this Rainbow Graduation, his message began, "My name is Justin Adkins and I am the Queer Life Coordinator at Williams College."

My immediate response was, "Oh, my God! How times have changed at Williams. To have an official college position titled Queer Life Coordinator." That fact remains astounding to me.

Let me tell you how different the College was when I entered as a freshmen in the fall of 1968. First, the Class of 1972 began as all male. Women were not included as freshmen until 1971. Second, we had to wear coats and ties to dinner in the Freshmen dining hall of Baxter Hall, where the Paresky Center now stands.

But as I would discover later, Williams' most significant attribute for a then closeted gay male was that, during the prior academic year, another gay student, named Danny Johnson, had hanged himself in the basement of West College. Williamstown was such an inhospitable setting for gay people in the 1960s that suicide appeared to some as the only option.

Indeed, that was almost my own fate. In my sophomore year, I fell in love with a straight senior who had been my junior advisor. When this first instance of unbridled passion for another man forced me to deal with my sexual orientation, I had no one to turn to for help or advice. I felt totally alone and bereft of all emotional and psychological comfort at the College.

Fortunately, the incident triggered an awareness that I had to deal intellectually and otherwise with my homosexuality, and a series of events followed that concluded with my October 1971 coming out article in the *Williams Advocate*.

How different my college experience, and that of Danny Johnson, would have been had we had our own Queer Life Coordinator on campus back then. So I urge students to be very appreciative of Justin Adkins.

Unfortunately, the circumstance outside of Williamstown for LGBT Americans has not changed all that much. As a legal matter, lesbians and gay men are not as secure today in the United States as people of color were once Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Forty-five years after federal law removed race as a legitimate ground for denying employment or public accommodations to African Americans, no such protection exists now with regard to sexual-orientation discrimination. In fact, employers in 30 American states today may legally deny jobs to gay people.

As another index of how far we still have to go, consider the composition of our national legislature. The Congressional Black Caucus has 41 members, who represent 7.7 percent of Congress. The proportion of the American population that is black is about 13 percent. Thus, an increase of about 29 members of color, or 71 percent more than now exist there, would be necessary to reach racial parity in Congress.

Today, there are just three openly gay or lesbian members of Congress: Representatives Barney Frank of Massachusetts, Tammy Baldwin of Wisconsin, and Jared Polis of Colorado. They constitute 0.6 percent (that is, six tenths of one percent) of Congress. National exit polling data indicate that approximately four percent of all American voters self-identify as lesbian or gay. I think that is a very modest estimate of the nation's gay population, but let's go with it in any event. Thus, in order to increase the openly lesbian and gay membership of Congress so that it would be comparable to the proportion of the population that is gay, you'd need about 18 more members, or an additional 600 percent.

To repeat, Congress would need about 71 percent more black members to achieve racial parity, but 600 percent more gay members to attain proportional representation based on sexual orientation.

And circumstances aren't any better in most state legislatures.

In light of these kinds of statistics, I have three words of advice for graduating students: Location, location, location. Where you live determines what rights you have. And at this time when you have the greatest mobility in your lives, I urge you to select where you live with the utmost care.

For example, if I were graduating this year, I'd seriously consider relocating to Canada, which is among the four countries in the world with the most favorable legal environments for gay people. The other three are Belgium, the Netherlands, and Spain. In contrast, the United States ranks 22<sup>nd</sup> worldwide in how it treats lesbian and gay citizens.

If you must remain in this country, then be especially careful about what state you live in. Because nineteen currently have so-called Super-DOMAs, which are amendments to state constitutions banning recognition of all forms of relationship rights (such as marriage, civil unions, domestic partnerships, reciprocal benefits, etc.) between same-sex couples.

The Virginia Constitution, for example, has this provision: "Only a union between one man and one woman may be a marriage valid in or recognized by this Commonwealth and its political subdivisions. This Commonwealth and its political subdivisions shall not create or recognize a legal status for relationships of unmarried individuals that intends to approximate the design, qualities, significance, or effects of marriage. Nor shall this Commonwealth or its political subdivisions create or recognize another union, partnership, or other legal status to which is assigned the rights, benefits, obligations, qualities, or effects of marriage." More comprehensive language designed to limit the relationship options of same-sex pairs would be difficult to imagine.

Accordingly, I urge you not to settle in these states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

If you do end up in one of those places, then you may turn out as I did in Williamstown back in the Fall of 1968: An unwitting pioneer in an unfriendly world.

Although trailblazing may not be the most appealing personal chore, the LGBT community does need more people prepared to work harder in the trenches. And that doesn't mean simply helping to elect well-meaning politicians like Barack Obama and then waiting around for them to give us our rights.

The task for gay people 37 years ago when I came out was to achieve basic decency in how society treated us as individuals. Today's challenge involves achieving equality through legal recognition of our relationships. And although the path to that objective has been arduous so far, I think that the mechanisms for success are more readily available than what many in our community now believe. In particular, we should take lessons from the African-American civil rights movement.

The single most important political motivation for congressional passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was the fear of more public unrest arising from civil rights demonstrations by people of color. The sit ins and other direct actions by blacks and their white supporters in the early 1960s galvanized national public opinion against racial discrimination in the South and prompted Congress to act.

A year ago, my husband Lee and I applied for a marriage license at a town clerk's office near our home on Long Island and then refused to leave the clerk's office once our application was denied. The police were forced to arrest us for trespass. Our civil disobedience in favor of marriage equality – the first of its kind in the Empire State – garnered substantial sympathetic press. Within 48 hours of the sit in, we had seven interviews with Long Island and New York City broadcast media, two for live shows. Three half-page articles about our activities appeared in *Newsday* (Long Island's principal daily), as well as a front-page profile in the *New York Times*' Long Island section. All of the media coverage was favorable. Indeed, a Sienna College poll published last month showed that 51 percent of Long Islanders now favor marriage equality.

And just think how quickly the politicians in Albany would act if every town clerk's office throughout the State of New York had same-sex couples sitting in to demand marriage licenses.

In short, I urge you to act in creative ways to advance LGBT civil rights once you are beyond Justin Adkins's protection as Queer Life Coordinator.

And I offer hearty congratulations on the occasion of your graduation.

Thank you.