

# WINDY CITY TIMES

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## UChicago provides a look at LGBTQ life

BY JONATHAN JONES

Imagine coming across the letters of two prominent female scholars from the early 20th century—Sophonisba Breckinridge and Marion Talbot—in which they address each other as “Dear Love” and write things like, “The moon was lonely last night. I sent you my love by it always.” Or imagine listening to oral histories that the University of Chicago’s LGBTQ alumni and faculty narrate about queer spaces on campus, about day-to-day life in dorms—and about gay liberation.

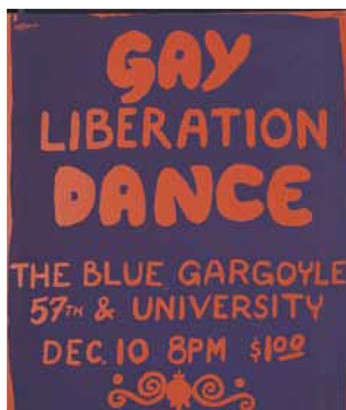
These are just samples of the many artifacts and stories uncovered as part of “Closeted/Out in the Quadrangles,” a project documenting LGBTQ life at the University of Chicago (UChicago) from the early 20th century through the present. Started in 2012 by the university’s Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality, the project entails oral-history interviews with alumni and faculty as well as archival research. It began a four-week preview exhibition on May 15.

Directed by two history Ph.D. candidates, Monica Mercado and Lauren Stokes, the project trains undergraduate researchers in conducting oral histories. “There’s something really powerful in having current undergraduate students interview alumni,” Mercado said. “Something really beneficial and interesting about this cross-generational link.”

The project has recorded 85 oral histories so far to document LGBTQ life at the university, particularly in the late 20th century. “Oral history is really critical to tracking LGBTQ life in the ‘80s and ‘90s,” Mercado stated. “If you were talking to people who work in gay oral history, this is a really fundamental time in terms of AIDS and politics. Right now, it’s really hard to find information about this in the current archives.”

Kris Rosental, a second-year undergraduate student majoring in gender and sexuality studies and public policy, echoed this sentiment. “I think oral history allows historians to uncover and preserve stories and records of queer life that would otherwise be lost altogether,” Rosental said. “So queer oral history projects are important because they really make queer history work possible.”

One of the goals of the project is to gather oral histories from underrepresented communities within the queer community itself. “We’re



University of Chicago Gay Lib poster, 1971. Image from the Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Library

trying to weave the richest, broadest history we can to tap into multiple generations, the college as well as the graduate and professional schools, with an eye to the experiences of people of color and transgender people on campus,” said Gina Olson, associate director of the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality.

The project’s archival research also promises to reveal interesting artifacts, such as the Breckinridge and Talbot letters, which project co-director Lauren Stokes uncovered in her research. “These are very intimate letters, but I was only able to find 32 of them, all within three months in the summer of 1936,” Stokes said.

“I believe that more letters were written, but that someone—either Marion Talbot herself, someone who handled her estate, or someone in the archives—decided that these letters did not belong in the historical record,” Stokes added. “I dwell on this because it points to the particular challenges of researching queer lives in the archives—evidence of same-sex relationships has often been suppressed, erased, or obscured.”

It is important to note that researchers working on the project do not see this as “the” definitive history but rather “a” history of LG-

BTQ life at the university. And even though researchers have collected numerous artifacts and more than 80 oral histories, they said they view this as a beginning and hope their work builds connections between the university and LGBTQ history in greater Chicago.

“Right now, we’re really just telling an institutional history, but we hope that other Chagoans can think about how some of these big institutions are part of the city and regional history of gay life,” Mercado stated. “Thanks to

historians trained by the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality, the story of gay Chicago is only going to be told more and more.”

The project began a four-week preview May 15 at the University of Chicago Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality, 5733 S. University Ave. A long-term exhibition will begin in spring 2015. Find out more at <http://gender-sexuality.uchicago.edu/projects/closeted/>.

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