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Exhibition documents history of LGBTQ life at UChicago

By [Susie Allen](#)
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LGBTQ life has been a part of the University of Chicago since the institution's earliest days. But many at the University still don't know about the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning individuals whose stories are intertwined with the institution's history.

A new exhibition at the [Special Collections Research Center](#), "Closeted/Out in the Quadrangles," draws on archival material from the University of Chicago Library to raise greater awareness of the University's LGBTQ past. The exhibition is part of a long-term research project into LGBTQ history at the University sponsored by the [Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality](#). In addition to the exhibition, the project includes undergraduate courses, a speaker series and extensive archival research as well as the collection of new materials.

Lauren Stokes, a PhD candidate in history, curated the exhibition, which builds on an earlier Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality project that [documented the history of women at UChicago](#).

For "Closeted/Out in the Quadrangles," Stokes, Monica Mercado, PhD'14, and seven undergraduate interns collected 95 oral histories from LGBTQ alumni, faculty and staff. The exhibition will include iPad listening stations so visitors can listen to excerpts from these oral histories.

Among the excerpts are remarks by alumni such as James Hormel, JD'58, former dean of students of the Law School and the first openly gay United States ambassador; cultural anthropologist Esther Newton, AM'66, PhD'68, who wrote the first major anthropological study of a homosexual community in the United States while a graduate student at UChicago; and Deborah Gould, AM'90, PhD'00, activist, scholar and author of the first book to analyze the emergence, development and decline of the direct-action AIDS movement, ACT UP.

"What emerged in talking to the alumni is that there are as many ways to be queer at the University of Chicago as there are alumni," Stokes said.

Still, some common themes emerged. Most interviewees saw the University's rigorous, intellectual environment as central to their experience. But "people interact with that in different ways," Stokes observed. Over time, the University's intellectual culture became an important question for Stokes' research: "How does the University's focus on being an intellectual center both enable certain kinds of queer life and also frustrate queer life?"

In the decades since the University was founded, sweeping social changes have allowed LGBTQ individuals greater visibility in public life. The exhibition traces that arc, from the years when Prof. Sophonisba Breckinridge, PhD 1901, JD 1904, had intimate but unacknowledged relationships with Marion Talbot, the dean of women at UChicago, and Edith Abbott, who was the dean of the School of Social Service Administration; to the 1980s, when students openly wore T-shirts proclaiming "The University of Chicago is gayer than you think."

That T-shirt is among the photos, personal documents, administrative records and ephemera that will be on display at the exhibition. A square from the AIDS Memorial Quilt created by University of Chicago students also will be on view.

Stokes said that the exhibition is, in part, "a community-building exercise" for LGBTQ faculty, students and staff. "It's important to know that we've been here since the beginning of the University,



PHOTOS


Students protest the inequality of domestic partnerships at Weddstock, 1992.

Courtesy of University of Chicago Photographic Archive



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and we've been here in a lot of different ways and in a lot of different places.”

But she believes “Closeted/Out in the Quadrangles” has something to offer everyone.

“Even if you don't personally see yourself in that story, looking at the University of Chicago through a sexuality-based lens gives you a new perspective on the University of Chicago as not only a place where great thinking happens, but where emotional and personal connections are made and where people learn about themselves,” Stokes said. “That's an important part of the University of Chicago story as well.”

“Closeted/Out in the Quadrangles” opens March 30 and runs through June 12 at the Special Collections Research Center, 1100 E. 57th St. An associated web exhibit will be launched in April at <http://lib.uchicago.edu/e/webexhibits/>.

TAGS

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