

Comer starts political group

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eighth and ninth grade year, I saw the Millennium March on Washington and the students who started the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) in Salt Lake City, Utah," he said.

"I was actually just flipping through the channels on the television and came across it on C-SPAN. I've heard a lot about the arguments and the bickering that was happening back then. I really didn't know much about all that, but watching the event and knowing that people like me were in D.C. making a stand and working for me, inspired me to do something here.

"The students who started the GSA in Utah, and who had gone through so many legal battles to keep it, were speakers at the main rally. It was then that I decided I wanted to start a group like that. So, in September 2000, when I was in 9th grade, I started it along with the help of about 14 or so other students.

"By the end of my first semester, however, all of those students had been scared or harassed out of being active with the club. I guess the harassment from other students was just too much. For about a year and a half, the GSA was comprised mainly of me. In my junior year the group started to grow and we were probably one of the most active groups on campus by the fall semester of my senior year.

"It was tough, but I had a lot of support from a few awesome teachers. With their help and mentoring I made it through. I'm also just a tad hard-headed, too. I wasn't going to let much get in my way."

Comer says he also had help from the Winston-Salem chapter of the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) and YouthFLAG, the LGBT youth support group run by Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) Winston-Salem.

"By 2001 I had actually gotten involved with the local GLSEN chapter, so I did have larger, organizational support and plenty of mentors in the LGBT community," he said.

Comer grew up in an internet-connected world and he has made the most of it. "The GSA had a website for a time and that certainly helped with getting the word out on campus. I'm sure it also helped plenty of students who might not have been able to come to meetings."

When he enrolled as a freshman at UNC-G, one of the first things he did was start a web log. "MattHillNC.com is probably one of the best things I've done. It's popular with students at UNC-G and with people in the Triad and it helps to raise a lot of awareness. I'm hoping that we can create the same type of atmosphere with the NC Advocacy Coalition website," he said.

"Having my website has given me the opportunity to not only speak my mind, but to express my thoughts in a more public arena. Talking with people one-on-one is a great thing, but putting the message for equality in a forum accessible to whoever happens to access it can spread our movement further. My website has also opened up a lot of personal

opportunities for me, too. I've met a lot of great and interesting folks in the Triad area and it is how I first got active with Congressman Brad Miller's campaign, too."

Comer naturally got involved in organizing when he got to college.

"One of the first things I remember doing at UNC-G's Open House, while I was a senior at Reynolds, was going to the UNCG PRIDE office and talking to one of their officers," he said. "I got involved with the group, first as our organizational senator to our student government. I'm still involved now, as one of the group's two outreach coordinators.

"I tried my hardest to be a representative voice for LGBT students in student government also. I'm still involved with the student senate and I'll be going into my second year as chairman of the senate legislative committee when Fall comes around."

Despite a full agenda of school and volunteer work, Comer wanted something more.

"Politics is how I think and what I think, and a political group was something I have always wanted to do. It all started to come

North Carolina Advocacy Coalition

<http://www.myspace.com/ncadvocacy>

together through last semester. I saw a need for local and grassroots advocacy and activism, especially with youth and the 18- to 24-year-old voting demographic — the college crowd."

So, from that impulse, the NC Advocacy Coalition (NCAC) began.

"We really want to reach out to youth. College-aged youth are the most progressive age group in America. Using the internet and social networking sites like MySpace.com (where the group does have an account) is turning out to be a great way to reach youth on their level. The internet also makes getting out information easier and quicker," he said.

His work may have a beneficial effect on organizing in the Triad area as well.

"Since I live in the area and go to school here, I do think that the group's work will have a lot of impact on the Triad. This is also where I grew up and where I am rooted, so a lot of my political awareness is based in local governments. For example, I can definitely see the NC Advocacy Coalition working to draw attention to what has been some very outspoken anti-LGBT stances taken by the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Board of Education."

NCAC is rolling right along and picking up support from local community members.

Joshua Henson of Greensboro, a college student, gave NCAC its first in-kind donation: the domain name, www.ncadvocacycoalition.org.

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