

Students, faculty speak out through Day of Silence

Lauren Melfa

Reporter

On Tuesday more than 60 voices were absent from the usual hectic Elon day. Sixty fewer students chattered with friends at College Coffee, answered questions in class and talked on their cell phones on the way to the parking lot.

These 60 students and staff joined in silent protest for Elon's first Day of Silence celebration. Wearing white shirts with "SILENCED" printed across the front and armed with index cards explaining the event, participants protested the historical silencing, in varied forms, of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered (GLBT) persons.

The National Day of Silence began at the University of Virginia in 1996. Founder Maria Pulzetti said that by remaining silent in protest, advocates of GLBT rights and the rights of all oppressed people could reclaim the silence instilled on so many.

Since then, the Day of Silence has grown to become the largest student-led movement dedicated to creating safe schools and communities for all students of every gender and gender orientation. The Day of Silence is also a way for friends and family members of GLBT persons to show their support and understanding of these lifestyles.

Although the movement has grown popular among elementary, middle, high school and college students over the past few years, Elon's Day of Silence coordinator Adam Smith only recently found out about the celebration.

Smith, a sophomore communications major, inherited the paperwork for Day of Silence when he took over as co-chair of Spectrum last year and immediately realized that the celebration had a place at Elon.

"Lots of times at Elon, gays and lesbians think they can't come out because they won't be accepted into leadership roles or into social groups. I disagree and want to let people know that this community does exist and many people care about this issue," Smith said.



Lauren Melfa / Photographer

Day of Silence participants gather in Moseley Center for College Coffee Tuesday wearing T-shirts bearing the name of their campaign against prejudice and discrimination, "Silenced."

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I would never want any other person, especially our students, faculty and staff, to feel that their lives or status at Elon were in jeopardy because of their sexual orientation.

—Janna Lynn Patterson, associate dean of students

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In February, Smith began holding interest meetings to start planning Elon's celebration. He said he was impressed by the response from faculty, staff and student organizations. Many Elon students expressed interest in participating, while Kathy Manning, Elon's director of Service Learning, offered to turn Day of Silence into a service program.

Associate Dean of Students Jana Lynn Patterson took a special interest in the project and helped Smith purchase the T-shirts and print fliers. She started working with gay and lesbian students after experiencing the difficulties her sister had to overcome as a lesbian in the military.

"I would never want any other person, especially our students, faculty and staff to feel that their lives or their status at Elon were in jeopardy because of their sexual orientation," Patterson said.

"I think the Day of Silence is a

good way for our community to express our support for our community members who are gay, lesbian, bi-sexual or transgender. It is also a time for us to learn more about the issues surrounding sexual orientation and the harassment and sometimes danger that these students, faculty and staff may face," Patterson said.

Once he was sure that his project would work, Smith registered Elon with the National Day of Silence project Web site (<http://www.dayofsilence.org/>) and started planning specific events.

While Elon is participating in ways similar to other schools, with participants covering the campus with fliers and gathering at College Coffee, the celebration had to be altered slightly to coordinate with other events happening on campus.

Smith planned Elon's celebration a day ahead of the actual National Day of Silence due to the Student Undergraduate Research

Forum activities April 9.

Additionally, an event traditionally taking place at the end of the day called "Breaking the Silence" was cut out of Elon's celebration due to Walter Cronkite and David Gergen's visit to campus Tuesday. Smith also had to explain the celebration to faculty who might have participating students in class.

"Everyone won't be able to stay silent, even I can't, but it's worth trying," he said, "even just wearing the shirt is a statement that students here aren't ashamed and can combat hate and ignorance."

At College Coffee Tuesday morning, Smith couldn't stop smiling. Pleased with the turnout and the curiosity of non-participating students, he labeled Elon's first Day of Silence a success that will definitely be repeated in years to come.

Contact Lauren Melfa at pendulum@elon.edu or 278-7247.

Day of Silence Timeline

1996 Day of Silence starts with 150 students at the University of Virginia; founder Maria Pulzetti makes it a national project.

1997 Day of Silence takes place at 100 universities with a new name, National Day Of Silence, and a Web site. Pulzetti and Jessie Gilliam create a program adopted by Australian schools.

1998 Day of Silence Project becomes official and expands to include more than 200 schools.

1999-2001 Day of Silence grows with help from the program Advocates of Youth. Day of Silence coordinators meet in Boston to discuss a strategy for the year's events. More than 300 schools participate.

2001 The Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN, pronounced "glisten") a national network dedicated to ending sexual orientation and gender discrimination in elementary, middle and high schools, officially sponsors the Day of Silence. GLSEN develops a high-school leadership team to help coordinate events for the day.

2002 This year's Day Of Silence is the most successful in the history of the organization: 1,900 schools and more than 100,000 students participate. The first resolution about the Day of Silence is introduced in Congress. USA Today, MSNBC, CNN, Voice of America and a live broadcast on NPR gave student events on various campuses national coverage.

2003 Elon's first Day of Silence celebration: more than 60 volunteers participate

From the Day of Silence Web site (www.dayofsilence.org)