

# Out in the burbs: UTM's gay and lesbian community find their place

by ALI SANA

It's been a year of growing pains for OUT@UTM, which is winding down its first year as a fully recognized student club on U of T's Mississauga campus. While the group—which represents queer students, staff, and faculty on the UTM campus—doubled its membership over the past year, the club's newly-elected president, Chad Jankowski, says many members are still not comfortable being out of the closet at UTM.

"I've been very fortunate," said Jankowski. "The campus was very welcoming . . . but I also know it's partly because I'm not flaming."

But other members of the group don't feel so fortunate.

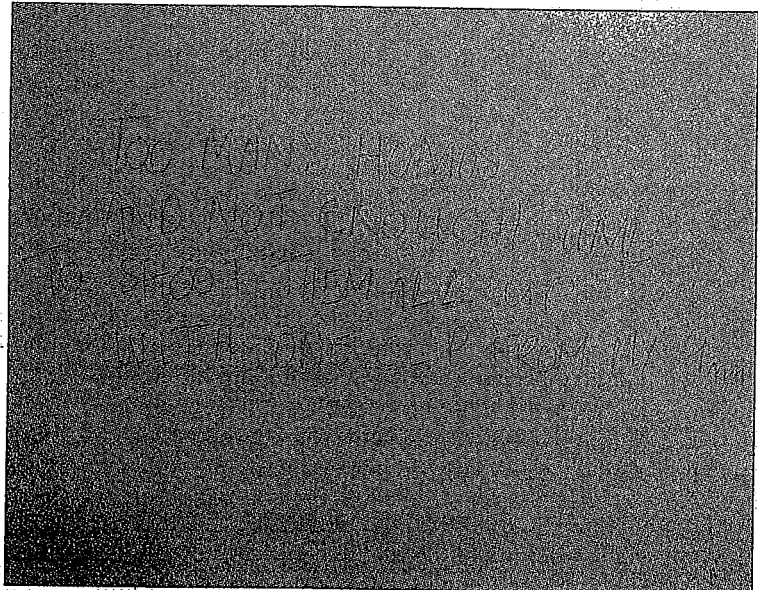
"PDA's [public displays of affection] will still draw a lot of bad attention," Jankowski says. "People still feel they might have to be cautious about holding hands or giving a hug, etc." The group hopes that more members will become more open so that there is greater diversity among the group and efforts such as the "Positive Space" campaign begin to be able to hold up to their ideals.

Jankowski explains that while the positive space initiative is a great campaign, there's no "enforcement."

"It often winds up people just grabbing a whole bunch of stickers."

And despite those ubiquitous stickers, the campus hasn't always felt too "positive." Earlier this year, someone scrawled graffiti in a bathroom that read, "Too many homos, not enough time to shoot them all with one clip from my 9mm."

Events such as a "Positive Space



Cowardly: Homophobic graffiti at UTM.

CHAD JANKOWSKI

feels that for both him personally and gays on campus, as a whole the environment is not threatening, it could be slightly better. He firmly states "I don't have to shut up for any reason."

Skye Plowman, who was president of OUT@UTM over the past year, agrees that she's been personally very fortunate but says that "maybe that's because it looks like I'll tear their faces off if they did say something." Plowman, fitted out in dread-locks and combat boots, feels that one reason the group isn't as successful as it could be is because a lot of people are unaware of it, which she says is both a good and bad thing.

One reason this has been a challenging year for OUT@UTM is the group's lack of a diversity relations officer, whose job it is to involve the group with the larger campus. Last year, the diversity relations officer helped integrate the by setting up meetings with the principal, getting private

That's not to say UTM has the carefree atmosphere of an episode of *Will and Grace*.

Joseph Deogracias, a 5<sup>th</sup> year Forensic Science and Psychology student, whom everyone calls "J.J.," knows that fact all too well.

That's because Deogracias is definitely a more visible member of OUT. He's got a fashion sense all his own, often sporting the *Playboy* bunny insignia in some form or another. "I like to take symbolism to a different level . . . I like contradiction," he says. This type of contradiction is something Deogracias has to live with everyday, as he is very much "out" at UTM—and has been since high school—but is not at home or his church.

"People remember me for the oddest reasons," says Deogracias. Like dressing up as a Geisha last Halloween, for instance. "I helped break the mold here," he says, and that's placed him in a position of being a kind of ambassador on several occasions. But.

my 9mm."

Events such as a "Positive Space Pub" are still hard to get off the ground, Jankowski says, because people still feel that it might be "too gay," and worry about being associated with the event.

With at least 10 per cent of the population identifying themselves as gay or lesbian, Jankowski is optimistic about increased membership and presence over the year, and gaining momentum with events, even off-campus events as well as with "allies," the LGBTQ people who support up. Although Jankowski

the by setting up meetings with the principal, getting private meeting space and helped launch the group. Jankowski and Plowman both say U of T's Sexual Education Centre (SEC) has been especially helpful this year.

"With Toronto being as progressive as it is, within 20-30 years it's going to be very much a non-issue as far as being out goes. I think questions will evolve to 'who's your partner' and in general less gender and orientation specific," said Cindy Lam, a SEC representative who works with OUT@UTM.

position of being a kind of ambassador on several occasions. But, he adds, "I'm no role model."

Plowman says she likes the direction the club is going and that, all things considered, people are coming around nicely. The idea that "there are no queers in Mississauga" is one that is dwindling. Skye says that as a university, it's not just a service or some sort of protection that is served by OUT, but it's more of a responsibility to be forward-thinkers for "the leaders of tomorrow." She says the group is more about, "gay people being gay."