



# Behind The Times:

## A Local Suburb's Struggle Towards Equality

by Delwyn Andrews

"[When I got to SPSU] I didn't really have a support base...so I felt I should make that happen," stated Zainab Shekoni when asked why she decided to take the position of President of the Gay Lesbian Straight Alliance (GLSA) at Southern Polytechnic State University in Marietta, Georgia.

**S**hekoni, a sophomore majoring in Construction Management, simply known as "Z" around campus, has taken on a major responsibility being the head of a student organization at a campus where the cause is not really understood by the majority of the student body.

While Atlanta is known nationwide for its gay-friendly atmosphere, with its younger, more liberal demographic, there are still parts of the metro area that are anything but—mainly in Cobb County. Nestled approximately 10 miles north of Atlanta, Cobb County has set up its own identity as more of a conservative environment, far from what you'd see in Midtown, Decatur, or other nearby regions. But why is it that this area has yet to jump on the progressive bandwagon that the majority of Atlanta has been on for years?



*Downtown Atlanta.*

The divide between Cobb County and the city of Atlanta has been very apparent for decades and over many issues: everything from a very visible racial divide to excluding public transportation to many areas of Cobb County to keep the area secluded. Right or wrong, Cobb County has certainly made a name for itself, one that is not necessarily being viewed in the most positive light nationwide.

While there is progress being made (thanks, in part, to groups like the GLSA), there will always be opposition. Earlier in 2013, when the Boy Scouts of America decided on the inclusion of gay scouts, there were various protests from religious organizations nationwide. And throughout my investigation, I found out that one of the key players in the Boy Scouts protests is the Roswell Street Baptist Church, located right here in Marietta. What are the odds? **[I contacted Roswell Street Baptist for comment with no response.]**



*"The Rock" on SPSU's campus, painted for GLSA's annual Day of Silence, an annual day protesting the bullying and harassment of LGBT's.*

However this isn't the only incident of Cobb County's intolerance towards the LGBT community. Also in 2013, there was an interview given by Georgia GOP chair (and Cobb County resident) Sue Everhart, in which she degrades same-sex marriages by stating, "I mean, what would prohibit you from saying that you're gay, and y'all get married and still live as separate, but you get all the benefits?" (1) Basically stating that gay marriage is going to cause insurance fraud to increase .

In 1993, there was also an initiative condemning homosexuality. Though it carried no weight and has since been revoked, it was the first and only political initiative of its kind in this country, making Cobb's intolerance known across the nation. And because of this, it costed the county its participation in the 1996 Summer Olympics held in Atlanta.

With all the opposition in this region, it still has done little to stop Shekoni's task of making SPSU's campus (and Cobb County as a whole) more of a tolerant place to be.



*Members of GLSA at annual Day of Silence at Southern Poly.*

## “We’re making raindrops...”

“We're making raindrops,” Shekoni responded on how she feels her organization has been in the community. But in realizing that there is a lot more work that needs to be done, especially due to past events that have occurred here (as mentioned earlier), Shekoni mentioned that it just reminds her of why she continues to work for visibility for the LGBT community. Being from (and having family from) Africa, a traditionally homophobic continent, Shekoni understands first hand the importance of taking a stand and the impact that it has on future generations.

Outside of campus, there are also initiatives being made to help change the climate of Cobb County's LGBT (in)tolerance as well. Jonathan Murphy, owner of LeBuzz nightclub in Marietta, is one of the major forerunners of this movement. Not only is Murphy the owner of the only gay nightclub in the county, he is also one of the founding members of the North Georgia Rainbow Coalition, a local charity working to raise money and educate the community on LGBT issues. Five years ago, Jonathan also began Marietta Pride, an annual pride celebration that takes place the last weekend in July, which is held at LeBuzz.

Established in 2006, LeBuzz is a quaint little club, nestled on Franklin Road near I-75. With its wide selection of drinks, an in-house DJ, and weekly drag shows, it's easy to see what all the "buzz" is about here.



*LeBuzz during its annual Marietta Pride festival.*

I recently met up with Jonathan at LeBuzz to speak with him more about the club and how he feels the tide is turning as far as LGBT acceptance in the county.

"The [LGBT] influence here has improved greatly over the last 10 years," Jonathan stated when asked what changes he's noticed since the introduction of his establishment.



*Jonathan Murphy, owner of LeBuzz*

As the music begins to pump through the speakers and the nightly crowd started to grow, we continued to discuss what makes Cobb County so much more different than the city of Atlanta.

"It's just the suburban lifestyle that [makes it so] different." Citing previous county commissioners as the major source of discrimination of the LGBT community. But with changing times, especially since the aforementioned 1993 initiative was introduced, there has been a noticeable change due (in part) to new local leadership.

As far as solutions for the problems of intolerance and bigotry, Jonathan simply states, "It's just a matter of time and education. That's all it's going to take," when it comes to LGBT acceptance here.

**“It’s just a matter of time and education.”**

After speaking with Jonathan, I began to converse with other regulars of the club. And in speaking with one patron in particular, you could really feel the sense of urgency and importance to have an establishment like LeBuzz in Marietta.

With a population of almost 700,000 here in the county, there is a very apparent need to have a place where the LGBT community can go without having to travel miles to Midtown Atlanta. And the patrons seem more than supportive and willing to do whatever it takes to keep LeBuzz's door open for a long time to come.

Gay/Straight alliance, vote for marriage equality, or just simply stand up to discrimination when you encounter it--it is up to each and every one of us to take part in what is probably the biggest issue of our era. And for those of you who are "on the fence," ask yourself one thing, do you really want to be on the wrong side of history when it comes to basic civil rights?



*LeBuzz holds weekly drag shows every Saturday night.*

Ultimately, despite the opposition here, the LGBT movement is bigger than SPSU, Cobb County, and anyone else standing in the way of its progression. Though small, groups such as the GLSA are the reason why this movement keeps going. Whether you join your local