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Rainbow Pride and Perseverance at IWU: Creating Change

Amelia Von Gemmingen '15

On Illinois Wesleyan University's website, you can read about the [gender inclusive living space](#) established in Pfeiffer Hall—a “living-learning community committed to counter space, education and activism around social justice for LGBTQ+ and transgender-gender non-conforming (TGNC) people.” Prospective students are certainly reading about it.

“I had been worried from the beginning about how it was going to work out having a roommate in college and if they would be accepting or not. And not wanting to get into any negative situations,” one of the first-year students that chose to live on the floor told me as he described his process in choosing a university. He read about the Rainbow Floor online and cited it as one reason IWU was listed as one of the best places in Illinois for TGNC people. This had a deep influence on his choice to apply to IWU at a time when he was still early in his transition and had concerns about his safety and comfort living in a dorm situation.

The Rainbow Floor was established in 2015 during my time at Wesleyan, but I didn't know the backstory- one that speaks of grass roots community empowerment. Its establishment as a structural support for members of the LGBTQ+ community at Wesleyan that will exist into the future reflects an administration willing to change when students showed that change was necessary.

The Rainbow Floor was designed with safety and community at its heart, taking into consideration factors like having a bathroom with a code lock so that only those living on the floor have access as well as allowing roommates to live together regardless of their gender.

“The Rainbow floor is whatever the community needs. It was inspired by the needs of transfolks so that they could be successful during their time at school.” said Paige Buschman '17.

Buschman and Avery Amerson '17 were the two IWU students who made founding gender-inclusive housing their project. The process began in October of 2014. On the phone with me, Buschman laughed and said that since she still had access to her IWU e-mail, she could probably locate the initial message about the idea that she sent to Matthew Damschroeder, then Assistant

Dean of Students for Campus Life and Pride Alliance advisor (she did, indeed, locate the e-mail as well as the original proposal).

In her sophomore year, Buschman had been voted onto the Executive Board of the [IWU Pride Alliance](#), the registered student organization (RSO) group for “securing equality and safety on campus for students regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity/expression.” Her involvement in the community meant she was aware that there was a population of TGNC people whose needs were not being met by the available options for residential life.

This echoed true from testimony of a trans student interviewed for this story. “One of the things with gender inclusive housing for trans people is that most people don’t realize how frustrating it is to try to be trans. It made my problems with gender so much more salient to be on such a secluded floor. This floor is ‘for’ women and this floor is ‘for’ men and I’m not on the floor I think I should be on. It made me always think about it and I was already always thinking about it. When you’re able to just live with people and it’s not a problem and you know they accept you for how you are, it makes coping with those sorts of things a lot easier.”

Damschroder spoke similarly on the topic, referencing research that was related to Title IX: students who are worried about their safety or uncomfortable in their environments cannot learn effectively.

“[Successful students are ones] that don’t have to constantly attend to identity obstacles, micro aggressions, macro aggressions. Those kinds of experiences distract from and detract from the student’s ability to be fully purposeful in their education,” said Damschroder.

He continued, “As an institution, if we’re bringing students who are marginalized historically or presently, who are underrepresented, on our campus we have that additional obligation to make sure that the environments we bring them into are safe and inclusive where they can find support and comfort and affirmation in their basic identities. That’s true whether it’s an identity grounded in sexual orientation or gender identity, or in racial identity, or in religious identity. Any of those experiences where you are an ‘other’ person in the context of a majority have a potential to detract from one’s ability to fully engage in the educational enterprise.”

Amerson recalled a Pride meeting where the discussion turned towards ideas for gender inclusive housing. “We realized that’s not that strange of an idea. Other campuses have gender inclusive housing. So, we just decided on the spot we were going to try to make it because Wesleyan didn’t have one and we knew that we would want something like that so surely other people that would also want that,” he explained.

A year earlier Amerson had been involved in an effort for gender neutral restrooms. The biggest pushback during that campaign was from members of the greater Bloomington-Normal community who expressed concerns in an open meeting at the Hansen Student Center. These worries were addressed by explaining that the bathrooms were all to be single stalls. The success of the campaign, Amerson told me, “Established that Wesleyan supports the LGBTQ+ community so we can move forward with other, bigger things.”

Buschman and Amerson turned to Google to see what other schools were doing as inspiration for their eventual proposal. There were some scattered examples, but less than one might hope, numbering less than 100 when the Rainbow Floor was established. Damschroeder acknowledged that very few were Midwestern schools with suburban or rural campuses. Buschman and Amerson drafted the proposal, looking toward other themed housing that IWU supports such as Blackstock and I-house.

“I remember sitting down with Paige and Avery to talk about some of the possibilities or what they saw as goals, and this idea came forward. This community that had gender-inclusive possibilities that were different than communities we’ve had in the past” said Damschroeder. The early discussion included possible locations for such housing and how it might be viable institutionally. Logistics and details aside, Damschroeder believed that it was a sound goal and would be widely supported.

“Students are oftentimes way ahead of administrators. I wasn’t ignoring the idea that some people might have an issue with it,” said Damschroeder. “But I knew from my work and research that it would benefit students to have a space like this where they could live authentically and less fearfully and have allies and peers around them. It just made sense that we would move in that direction.”

In preparation to the campaign, Damschroeder, Buschman and Amerson made sure that they would focus on the educational and social values based in evidence that the proposal would have for students. This work would be essential when the pushback came, somewhat to do with the collective understanding of gender at the time, which was in a state of transition itself. The response to the proposal from this mindset, Damschroeder said, was ‘we don’t allow men and women to live in the same room.’

This would be the biggest challenge for the Rainbow Floor—getting the administration to allow roommates of different genders to live together in gender-inclusive housing. A lot of education about gender was needed. In regards to men and women living together, “that’s not the way gender works. And that’s not how we needed to continue to facilitate a misunderstanding of identity,” said Damschroeder. “It was our responsibility as educational leaders to be out in front of that and push back against those misperceptions not in a way that protected or insulated our students but in a way that freed them to be who they knew they were and affirmed them in that knowing.”

One of the concerns of the administration was that people who were dating could live together. “Our arguments for that,” Amerson said, “are that gay people could be dating and live in the same room [already]. It shouldn’t really be a concern because it’s going to happen or not anyway.” Buschman added that roommates, regards of romantic relationships, get into fights and those situations have to be addressed, so the Rainbow Floor would not be creating anything new types of problems in that regard.

Another concern, that straight couples who are not part of the community would utilize the exception in order to live together on the Rainbow Floor, was also raised. But as Amerson pointed out about trying to live on the Floor, “It’s the same with any themed housing. You have to fill out an application on why you want to be on the floor, so I don’t think that’s an issue either because you can filter out those people.”

Buschman told me that one of the arguments against the need for the Rainbow Floor was that if students wanted a private bathroom; they could live in The Gates, fully furnished on-campus apartments, though reserved only for junior and senior students.

“No matter how we went about it, I wanted it to be the cases that people have the opportunity to live in a dorm where they can have privacy. You could technically live on the Rainbow Floor just as you could in Gates, but I don’t think it’s appropriate to pay an extra thousand dollars to have access to these necessities. I also wanted to build a community and create space,” said Buschman.

This is an issue of equity, Buschman argued. “We also know that there’s a correlation between families support in financial issues and being a member of the LGBTQ+ community.” The other living option where one had more privacy was Martin Hall, which also had an upcharge.

Across the student affairs enterprise, supporters did a lot of education. Karla Carney-Hall, Vice President of Student Affairs and Dean of Students, had conversations with the President, cabinet members, and members of the board of trustees to push the educational benefit of the program. The message was heard.

“Bravely, the institution and decision makers at the time allowed things to unfold that maybe were a little uncomfortable or maybe didn’t square up with how they understood the university had been administered in the past but really reflected the way we were moving forward,” said Damschroeder.

The university was also moving forward towards inclusivity by allowing students to self-identify to be placed on a floor of their choosing. This approach allowed the student to choose a floor that reflected their gender identity, and meant that they would be put on a floor where they would be gender comfortable. The Rainbow Floor could be a part of that accommodation.

“We thought it was kind of problematic to force someone to disclose that they are trans in order to receive the housing accommodation regarding the cross-sex living. We shouldn’t have to ask; it shouldn’t matter for living on the Rainbow Floor,” Buschman said. This conversation also included allowing first-years to live on the Rainbow Floor, when usually students are required to reside in the first-year housing options rather than themed housing.

Like the gender-neutral bathrooms, pushback came from people who were not currently on campus such as alumni, something that happens with any progressive change, Damschroeder noted. He told me people said “That’s not the Wesleyan I knew!” His response: That Wesleyan

existed 50 years ago. There were also plenty of alumni who were proud of the Rainbow Floor and the values it represented.

The Rainbow Floor was up and running by February 2015, with the process of finding people committed to living on the floor. Buschman lived on the floor its first year that following fall. That first year, many of the people living on the Rainbow Floor were living in singles. It was a mixture of members of the LGBTQ+ community and supporters of the cause. “Generally, it was very quiet,” Buschman said.

The Rainbow Floor was assigned an RA that also covered the other half of the floor, which ended up being disappointing for the Rainbow Floor’s programs. Buschman said, “the whole idea of the living learning community is that you should be doing programming that is related to the community directly. So, if we’re going to do a program on healthy relationships, it would be on LGBTQ+ healthy relationships.” The programs themselves were a slow start, along with specific decorations like LGBTQ+ flags to hang in the hall.

Another stumbling block came in November 2015: the prominent location of the Rainbow Floor in Pfeiffer Hall meant that people had to walk through it. Buschman said, “we had this conversation many times—in establishing this space are we forcing people to come out? In establishing this space, are we creating an opportunity for hate to become an accessible thing?”

Worries about how the campus would accept the floor, in terms of whether or not there would be any hateful actions, were touched upon when the Rainbow Floor’s hand painted peacock mural was vandalized.

“We had an argument in Pride [Alliance] over whether I assuming this was an act of hate when it was probably just someone who was vandalizing because they were vandalizing,” Buschman said. “I was upset by this. We’re literally a disenfranchised group of people; someone vandalized something on our brand-new floor. Even if it wasn’t necessarily an act of hate, it still clearly inappropriate.”

Damschroeder remembered the event, “It became a moment when the campus took a step back and did some thinking and education around the issues. While that was a negative moment on the

floor, I think at least it was used positively to have people think about whom or what our community stood for or against.”

Buschman was actually able to provide a photo for me of a letter to the Editor that was published in *The Argus* in response to the vandalism on the topic of respecting LGBTQ+ people.

The biggest concern for the Rainbow Floor in the first year was whether or not enough people would sign up to live there next year. If students did not, the Rainbow Floor might not be viewed as a necessary part of campus. The current RA of the Rainbow Floor, Anna Schultz-Breef '21 was able to update me on how the Floor is doing, and for 2018-19 it is at maximum capacity.

Schultz-Breef was attracted to living on the floor because she wanted to help foster a welcoming environment that enables student success. This year the Rainbow Floor is a mixture of first-years with upperclassman, and the vast majority of the group are TGNC or identify elsewhere in the LGBTQ+ community. The opening of Pfeiffer Hall to first-years made the Rainbow Floor more available to first-years as well.

She fondly described for me how in the evenings members of the Rainbow Floor would gather to chat to each other, having impromptu floor meetings and building community .-

One popular and now annual event hosted at the Rainbow Floor is the Fruit Mixer, a program sponsored by the Office of Diversity and Inclusion (ODI) which is held in the first floor Pfeiffer lounge. It's a social program with Pride, the Rainbow Floor, and faculty allies and an opportunity for the RA to talk about the Rainbow Floor.

“It's a time to eat fruit and sweets and talk. It's for everyone to meet others in the LGBTQ+ community and see what faculty and staff is supportive allies,” Schultz-Breef said. “45 people came - it was just so many people!”

The first-year student I talked to mentioned how visible the Fruit Mixer makes the faculty and staff allies. He had seen the [out list IWU has online](#), but it was different to be able to talk to the staff, especially considering that as a student you might not have them as teachers. “It widens the community from just the students who are on the floor to the staff,” he said.

Schultz-Breef's personal goal this year is to revamp the Pride lounge, which began as an office before its conversion to a space available to the Rainbow Floor. She reached out to the faculty and staff through the Provost to ask for donations and LGBTQ+ resources. "Things to make it livable, to make it somewhere people would want to come to study," she said.

Pride Alumni Community co-chairperson Jim Richter '93 reached out to alumni to help make the space comfortable and useful. Donations came in, including books with stories about LGBTQ+ experience. Schultz-Breef was really excited about a Spirograph and coloring books and supplies for students to use to relax, be creative, and possibly provide an outlet for anxiety and stress.

Considering that the Floor is operating at capacity, Schultz-Breef reports that if there is an influx of students who want to live on the Rainbow Floor, expansion may be necessary in the future. Amerson thought it would be interesting if there was enough interest for the Rainbow Floor to be its own house and that it's important for the University to be open to progressing in that direction.

Buschman's hopes for the future of the Rainbow Floor are rich with the desire to empower the community, rather than prescribe to them how they ought to live— "For me, ideally, I want whatever our community needs. The whole point of having done this in the first place was because I didn't feel like trans folks specifically had the space they needed to be themselves and be successful," she said. "So, if that means that people need more singles, if that is what our community says they want, then give it to them. Anything that brings us together as a community in all senses of that word regarding LGBTQ+ unity, I'm there for it. I don't really have expectations— I want our students to guide what that looks like. It can go wherever it needs to go."

There's a lot about the founding of the Rainbow Floor that impressed me, particularly the quick turnaround time from the proposal to the establishment. Amerson discussed what this means in relation to the legacy of the Rainbow Floor.

"Moving forward, if there are any students who want to push for other things on campus that we don't have, they need to realize that Wesleyan is pretty open about it. The problems that we had in trying to establish this were not that the administration didn't want it to happen," he said.

“They had concerns and we needed to find ways to address their concerns or prove that they were not going to be a problem. If there were anything in the future students wanted to implement, they shouldn’t feel hesitant to do so because there are plenty of supports in the administration they can rely on.”

The existence of the Rainbow Floor as well as the RSO Pride Alliance is vital. Amerson said, “people are looking for a campus that is accepting. ‘Do I have a place here?’” Things like IWU having an active Pride Alliance—it’s really important for incoming students. It shows that the school is welcoming—not only just that they’ll accept you and tolerate but that you have a voice and I think that’s important for any underrepresented group.”

Damschroeder told me how much the Rainbow Floor meant to him. “It is probably one of the prouder things for me. It was truly an opportunity to create a space of inclusion on campus... When I think about what I might have left behind or contributed, creating space for LGBTQ+ students and moving forward the goalposts around full inclusion, if I had any little bit to contribute to that, that would be the thing I would be most excited to say I was able to make a difference... I’m really grateful to have had that chance.”

“I would like to thank the following people for their generosity of time in speaking with me about the Rainbow Floor: Paige Buschman, Avery Amerson, Matthew Damschroeder, and Anna Schultz-Breef, as well as the people who wished to remain anonymous.”

Amelia von Gemmingen is a graduate student at Carnegie Mellon University where she is currently pursuing her MA in philosophy. She graduated IWU in 2015 with a BA in psychology and minor in German. Amelia is one of several alumni volunteers who makes this newsletter possible!

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