

UC Santa Cruz

Out in the Redwoods

Title

Deborah Abbott: Out in the Redwoods, Documenting Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender History at the University of California, Santa Cruz, 1965-2003

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DEBORAH ABBOTT



Deborah Abbott with Katalina Berumen



Deborah Abbott, early 1970s

Interviewer: Regan Breshear: *Deborah Abbott is a writer, health activist, teacher, river guide and current director of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Resource Center at UCSC. Since assuming her position in November of 1997, she has given new shape and direction to the Center. As an American studies major, I was eager to interview Deb Abbott to learn more about the queer history of UCSC, as well as about her work within two local feminist health organizations: the Santa Cruz Women’s Health Collective and WomenCARE (which she co-founded in 1992). I had read several of Ms. Abbott’s essays on pursuing her passion for river rafting, despite her physical disability, and these had deeply resonated with me, as I had been struggling to reconcile my own physical health problems with my dreams for the future. We met at the GLBT Center on the rainy afternoon of February 7, 2002.*

The Center hums with the richness of the many hours of mental and physical labor—by student volunteers and paid staff—that have gone into creating a place where all gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, questioning and queer-identified people and their allies can take refuge. UCSC’s reputation for being one of the most “queer-friendly” campuses in the U.S. is easily understood when one enters the Center. Colorful posters brighten the walls, along with flyers announcing upcoming queer events and numerous lists to get involved with the many, diverse, queer-related groups on campus. An exhibit on GLBT African Americans hangs in the gallery. The enticing library of books and films, and the inviting couches that look out into the redwoods all serve to foster an atmosphere of welcome, creativity, and dynamic engagement.—Regan Brashear



In 2003, Abbott was chosen by Assemblyman John Laird as “Woman of the Year” in the 27th Assembly District.—Editor.

Brashear: Deb, can you tell me a little bit about yourself and your family background?

Abbott: Sure. I always laugh and tell people that I was born at the south end of Monterey Bay, and I did a major migration to Santa Cruz, to the northern part of Monterey Bay. For most of my life, I’ve lived on the bay. As I was born, my parents were building a little adobe house in a rural area of Monterey, literally around my bassinet. They still live in that home.

I was born in 1953. I grew up in a neighborhood of girls and we were out playing in the woods all of the time. I got polio when I was two, and spent a considerable amount of time over the years at Shriner’s Hospital in a ward of girls. I had these incredibly romantic relationships with a series of girlfriends when I was little, and then through my high school years. So when I was seventeen and came to UCSC, I had really tight girlfriends. I had not connected the dots for myself yet and figured out that I was a lesbian, although I look back with amusement, because my very best friend who was still a high school senior in Monterey would come to visit me and we would sleep together. We would shower together; we wrote little tender notes in the mail back and forth. I’m sure there were lots of folks who had connected the dots [laughter] but I always say the writing was on the wall but it was in invisible ink to me. I hadn’t figured it out.

I come from a working-class family. My dad worked for the phone company, and that’s where he met my mom. She was an operator and he was out climbing the poles. So there was not an abundance of resources, but there was really some good solid steadiness to having a home that was ours and a neighborhood that was safe. My dad worked a lot of overtime. We had enough. I went to the public schools in Monterey and then, when I got through high school, I didn’t know what was next.

My parents’ ambition for me was that I would be a secretary. I had an inkling that I wanted something more than that, but I had no idea how to apply for college. But I happened to have a friend who had an older brother who was going to UC Santa Cruz, and so I came and visited him a couple times and it literally gave me an image of what college could be. It was also not far from home. My family had not ever traveled much. Our vacations were always about visiting my grandmother and aunts and uncles, most of whom lived in California, so I hadn’t ventured very far away. Not only was college a



foreign concept, but the idea of going to college far away was inconceivable. So I applied to only one university, and that was UCSC, because that was the one I had seen. I came here when I was seventeen.

Brashear: What year was that?

Abbott: That was in the fall of 1971. I don't think I realized when I was here how young UCSC was. It's in retrospect that I think, oh my gosh, it was such a new campus! When I was here I was at what was called College Five, which is now Porter College.

I lived on campus. Campus life was really different. I lived in the dorms, but after the first month, my dorm mate, who came from a wealthy family, got a boyfriend and decided she wanted a single room. This was in the days before there was such a crowd in the dorms, so I got a double room all to myself. I painted it and moved in a refrigerator and a hotplate which, of course, is *verboden* now. I had three kittens that I had found, and a big long plank with a carpet stapled to it that went down to the outside meadow. I have really fond memories of living at Porter and being a maverick in my own way, having my cats, cooking, and baking bread, and having lots of friends over.

I still have wonderful memories of being an undergraduate at UCSC, mostly because I got stretched in incredible ways that weren't possible within my family and in the little community I had grown up in. My parents weren't readers. We had *Reader's Digest* and a few magazines, but they didn't have many books on the shelves. I felt like a kid in a candy store, because I had always been smart and I had always been really curious, but I hadn't had a lot of opportunities to have my mind and my psyche expanded and challenged.

For awhile, I was a music major, and studied clarinet. I decided not to continue majoring in that, but it was wonderful to get to explore myself as a musician. I took a lot of creative writing classes. I had known from early on that I was a writer, but it was really exciting to be around people who were professional writers, and to develop myself as a writer. Then amazingly I ended up being a biology major, because my curiosity was such that I was fascinated by how things work. Not mechanical things. My partner is an engineer; she's really fascinated by how mechanical things work. But I have always been fascinated by what makes people tick, and how the natural world works. And so I moved towards being a biology major, and loved studying physiology, and physical anthropology. *Animal Morphology* was one of my favorite classes. I loved being here and



immersing myself in all kinds of different courses that stretched me. My one regret was that I was here just as the women's studies department was being founded and developed. I really wish that I had discovered that when I was here, even though it was in a fledgling state.

Brashear: Do you remember there being a women's community, or even the beginning of a queer, gay/lesbian community?

Abbott: I did gravitate to women friends, but I didn't have a sense yet of there being a women's community. I was here before the Women's Center was here. I'm sad. If there had been a women's community on campus, and a more visible queer community, I would have figured myself out sooner. It would have been another rich layer for me to explore when I was here.

I talk to a lot of alumni who were aware that they were gay or lesbian when they attended UCSC, but felt really adrift when they were here. They felt like they were the only ones, and that there were no other gay people to connect with. That wasn't my experience, even though behaviorally, in a sense, I was being a lesbian, albeit a romantically but not yet sexually inclined one. I was really content, being here as I was.

Brashear: Can you talk a little more about your coming out process?

Abbott: Throughout my time at UCSC, I still had a very romantic friendship with my high school friend who came and studied here. What ended up happening is she broke up with me even though we never called it that; she found another best friend. I was heartbroken though I couldn't figure out why. This was after all, "just a friend."

In my sophomore year I was living off campus in a little cottage down by the boardwalk. The thing that makes me chuckle is that when my romantic friend broke up with me, within a week I was cultivating a very close friendship with my neighbor. Within a couple of weeks, we were leaving little Easter baskets on each other's doorsteps and spending all our free time together. It was with her that I finally figured out that I was a lesbian.

So my neighbor and I became intimate, but not sexual friends, and ended up living in Santa Cruz together in my junior and senior years. She ultimately introduced me to the man who would be my husband. I moved up to San Francisco with him for a year, had



my first child, then moved back to Santa Cruz. I returned because I missed my friend terribly. It was after I moved back to Santa Cruz that we sexualized our relationship. We literally fell into each other's arms one afternoon and I had an epiphany. I finally connected the dots.

When I moved back to Santa Cruz in the winter of 1977, I became involved in the Santa Cruz Women's Health Collective. For the first time, I was hanging out with out lesbians.

Brashear: Really, so when you were at school here that wasn't the case?

Abbott: I am sure I was hanging out with some lesbians at UCSC, but people were much more closeted. At the Women's Health Collective, women weren't closeted. Lesbians were putting together a book called *Lesbian Health Matters!*, and they were out and proud.

As an aside, I have a lesbian aunt, who lives in San Francisco. I had known she was lesbian. I had known her partner for years. But she was of such a different generation that I didn't feel like her, and so it didn't make sense that I could be lesbian.

Anyway, here I was back in Santa Cruz with a newborn child. I fell more deeply in love with my woman friend. My husband and I had an open relationship, so we started talking a lot about what this new development meant. I actually stayed with him for a while longer because he was someone that I really cared about, and I had a new baby. I got pregnant again. I had a second child. So there I was, living with a man and two young boys. I also realized that my strongest nature was to be with women. Over the years I had divvied up my life. I had my sexual life with men and most of the rest with women. But as soon as I fell into my friend's arms, I realized—oh my gosh. I remember laughing, thinking, oh my God, I can have my cake and eat it too. [laughter] I can have my intimate partners be women. That's absolutely the best fit for me.

Brashear: How were your parents when you came out?

Abbott: It took me a while to come out to them. After a couple of years, I separated from my husband. My girlfriend was married; she had a young child. She lived in Los Angeles. She enjoyed our sexual involvement, but realized that she wasn't a lesbian. So we sort of reverted back into our friendship and I started exploring relationships with other women at that point. My husband and I separated.



It took me awhile to come out to my parents, because I was terrified. When I finally did, my father was mostly okay. He had grown up with his lesbian sister, who had come out back in the forties. So he had more familiarity with what lesbianism is about. My mother was just enraged, and suicidal, and had a strong negative response. It was really painful, mostly because I had two little kids, and I was a single parent. She was very rejecting. I would say it took her easily ten years to get to a place where she could sign a Christmas card to me. It's not that we had no contact, because she did want to continue a relationship with the kids, but it was difficult for many years.

I've been out now for more than twenty years and my mom is now relaxed enough that she can be comfortable around my partner and come to our house, and has come out to a few people herself. It's been a long, long journey for her and for me.

Brashear: How did your experience in dealing with your disability when you were young [affect] your coming out?

Abbott: That's a great question. As hard as it was growing up with a disability, the piece of it that made it easier for me to be a lesbian was that I had, from my earliest memories, always been visibly different, and I knew I wasn't going to fit in, ever, no matter what. So I didn't have the issue that a lot of folks have when they come out. If they have fit in, in various ways, they have to reckon with what'll it be like to be a deviant, what'll it be like to be a misfit.

Interestingly, my mother had been a fierce defender of me, as a kid with a disability. When people would stare at me or say mean things to me, she would... She's a powerful woman and she'd put her hand on her hip. And I have an image of her with her big red purse dangling off of her hip. She would just look at people and say, "Next time why don't you bring a camera, goddammit!" Then she would turn to me and say, "Those people are really stupid, Deborah. Those people are really stupid and ignorant and don't pay any attention to them!" She'd grab me and we'd storm off. So not only had I gotten that I was different, but that my difference was okay. If other people couldn't deal with it that was their problem. That was a gift my mother gave me that ironically backfired on her, because she helped me come out as a lesbian.

My coming out process was in Santa Cruz, which is a progressive community. As soon as I came out, I realized how many gay and lesbian, queer folks there were in town. I was at the health collective, where quite honestly, to be queer was cool. I had a lot of support in



that circle. I developed lots of friends and whether they were straight or queer, they were really supportive. So my coming out, except for my family's response, was actually pretty easy.

You could make the case that if I already had two stigmatized identities: one as a woman with a disability, and two as a woman, that it could of potentially been a struggle for me to add to the stigma. But for me it worked the other way around. I didn't have issues with kissing in public or holding hands in public. Santa Cruz is a pretty safe place to do that in. I probably wouldn't if I lived in some little town with a lot of homophobic folks. But I think it was also about that as someone with a disability, I've never been able to hide who I am. I'm not about hiding. I don't know about hiding. I don't want to do that.

Brashear: Can you talk about the Santa Cruz Women's Health Collective, and what was going on there?

Abbott: It was exciting. It was just a few years old when I joined. When I look back now, I just think, oh my God, what a phenomenal thing. It was mostly women in their young-twenties. A few people were in their mid-twenties, and an occasional person was older than that. We built an amazing health center. There were no abortions in Santa Cruz County happening at that time, mostly because Dominican Hospital was the main hospital and it was a Catholic organization. The Women's Health Collective was a way to empower women who needed and wanted abortions, so we did abortion counseling, pregnancy testing, and drove women over the hill to Choice Medical Clinic that was in San Jose at the time.

We were self-taught. I wore every hat there. Over the five or six years that I was there I did everything from clean the carpets, to being the main bookkeeper, to working the hotline and training new volunteers to work the hotline, to doing anti-racism trainings. I taught fertility awareness classes and became the national chair of a fertility awareness group for a while. I helped build their library. I learned about collective process and group dynamics, *ad nauseam* sometimes. [laughter] It was wonderful and it was terrible! You know, those old jokes about how many feminists it takes to screw in a light bulb always crack me up, because there we would be at midnight trying to figure out what color we wanted to paint the room. But we also were there until midnight making really important decisions—hiring medical doctors who would allow us to do half of the exams and run the lab. I gained so much confidence.



When I think about what has helped bring to me to where I am, UCSC was really instrumental in just giving me permission to explore my creative self and to recognize all the potential that I had. But I think most people figure out when they get a bachelor's that it's not exactly professional training. You have to go on. One of my major critiques of UCSC was that there was really poor advising at that time. Even though I had completed a pre-med major, I had never been given any counsel about how to apply to medical school, and so I didn't. I didn't know how to take that step. I didn't have any money and my family certainly didn't. Had I gotten help with applications and scholarships it might have made medical school possible for me.

My instinct though was to go into the health field and so that's how I landed at the Women's Health Collective. What the Women's Health Collective gave me was the practical piece. I had developed lots of skills at UCSC, and then I got to roll up my sleeves and practice being a health practitioner; I got to practice being a teacher; I got to practice being an activist and an organizer. We had a newsletter, so my journalist self got to research and write articles, and publish them. I developed the broadest range of skills in the six years or so that I was there, and developed friendships that are my closest still.

Brashear: What years were you involved with the Women's Health Collective?

Abbott: 1977, until 1983 or 1984, when I left. It is not called the Women's Health Collective anymore. It's [now] called the Women's Health Center, because it has a director and a board of directors, and a more traditional style. Decisions are not made collectively, but it's alive and well and flourishing. I'm really proud. The thing that's wonderful about living in the same community all these years is that I can look at that. It's still in the same building. I can go in there, see how it's flourished, and feel thrilled that I was one of the early founding mothers that helped that still vital organization.

Brashear: What did you do when you left there?

Abbott: When I left, I worked at another non-profit in town called Food and Nutrition Services, in the child care food program, helping women who were daycare providers—either in their homes or in facilities—with nutrition. They got reimbursed by the federal government for being part of the program. So I was once again staying under that health umbrella, doing nutritional counseling and helping providers with some child care-related, but mostly health-related issues.



I continued to volunteer in the community. I started volunteering for the Parent Center, co-leading parenting classes. I was doing a lot of volunteer work. I was being a single parent, co-parenting. My ex-husband had the kids half the week; I had the kids half the week, which worked very well in terms of me being able to be a mom, but also having half the week to explore other things. During this time, I was also having relationships with women and learning about myself as a lesbian.

I started volunteering for Environmental Travel Companions, an organization that took a variety of folks on outdoor adventures, mostly people with disabilities, and inner city kids. So I learned to be a river guide, and sea kayak. On the weekends when I didn't have my kids, I would go off to the river and row my brains out, have great sex with a fellow guide, then come back late Sunday and show up for work on Monday morning.

I finally got a big tap on the shoulder around this time. I had a variety of friends who were putting the pieces together for me. Once again there was the writing on the wall that I wasn't reading for myself. My friends were basically saying, "Deb, you are volunteering in all of these organizations, and you are working at your little non-profit job and struggling so hard. (For probably ten years I had less than twenty dollars to my name at one time.) Why don't you consider going off and being a counselor?" But I didn't come from a family that had gone to college. It was kind of a fluke that I had gone to UCSC. I didn't know how to make the next step. But once again there was a local school, a local graduate program. I knew someone who was affiliated with it and it didn't seem so big and scary. I knew that I couldn't go away to school because I had my kids here. So, with a lot of encouragement from friends and lovers, I ended up being part of a graduate program that trained marriage and family therapists.

There were several years when I worked and raised my kids and went to graduate classes and got my master's degree. And then more years of accumulating clinic master's training hours towards my license. When I look back on it, I am just amazed. My kids tease me. My one son is a gourmet cook. He says, "Mom, thank you. I'm a chef because [laughter] of all those grilled cheese sandwiches I had to endure. I had to learn to cook to save myself."

I finished graduate school and once again was working in the non-profit world. I had a part-time private practice. One of my lovers had been volunteering at the Women's Cancer Resource Center up in Berkeley, and I also had a young friend who had cancer. There were no resources for her. I was aware of the Santa Cruz AIDS Project in town and



all of the incredible resources for someone with HIV. If you had HIV, your dog could get a walk; you got food delivered, and you got rides to doctor's appointments—there was a whole range of services. If you were a woman or a lesbian with cancer, there was nothing. I was struck by how many lesbians were involved with the Santa Cruz AIDS Project, and at that time were primarily caring for gay men with HIV. I just thought, oh my gosh, we have nothing for ourselves if we have a cancer diagnosis. I was motivated out of a variety of those factors to bring a women's cancer resource center to Santa Cruz.

The first meetings were up here at the University. There were a number of staff members who had had breast cancer and they did a forum. I literally brought a clipboard and a piece of paper and passed it around and said, "Any woman who's interested in building a resource center for women with cancer here in Santa Cruz sign up." When the forum was over, I had a page full of names. Three or four of us launched the first meeting ten years ago, in the spring of 1992. There I was, using all of those skills I had used in my non-profit work over the years. I became the first executive director of the organization. I plugged in the phone and set it on a card table in one of the bedrooms in my little apartment. I was very dedicated to WomenCARE. This was WomenCARE's home for its first couple of years. It was my life for about five years. I worked with a great group of women to launch it. I'm really pleased that ten years later it is alive and well and flourishing. I feel like a proud mama.

I ended my work at WomenCARE and began teaching in a graduate psychology program at John F. Kennedy University over the hill, training students how to be therapists, working in the clinic as a supervisor. Then someone tapped me on the shoulder again and said, "Deb there is an opening at UCSC for the first director of the GLBT Center and I think you'd be fabulous for the job." I thought, how amazing it would be for me to come full circle back to campus. When I'd been here as an undergrad I didn't have much of an inkling that I was a lesbian. To come back, with all of the gifts UCSC gave me, and with all of the great experiences I had had in the meantime, and bring those back to the University, and provide young queer and questioning students [with] what hadn't been here for me, was a really thrilling prospect.

My other motivation in coming back to UCSC was that I had spent many years working in nonprofit health care organizations, but ironically, had no health insurance. One of the personal appeals about working at the University was that I would finally have health insurance. As a woman with a disability who was getting older, I realized I really needed to take care of myself in that way. So honestly, part of the motivation was not only the



challenge of the job, but saying it's time for me... I'd been taking care of so many women out there in the world. But it was time for me to be taken care of, and to make enough money so that I could save some and to have benefits so that if something happened around my disability I would be covered.

Brashear: Can you talk about the history of the GLBT Center?

Abbott: I was hired a little over four years ago. I stepped into this space and thought, oh my God, what a beautiful building! Cathedral ceilings, floor-to-ceiling glass windows looking out over the redwoods. I was also struck by how shabby all the furnishings were. It seemed like everything was duct-taped. There had been no paid staff and no budget to speak of. Under these circumstances, students had done a remarkable job of running the Center by themselves.

Brashear: How long had they been doing that?

Abbott: For around seven years before I arrived, there were student leaders; the space was here for them to use. It was dedicated to GLBT students and they were here for, I would say around five years, passing a torch of leadership. They would come, and then graduate. There were several student organizations that did everything from activism, to staffing the center, having meetings, doing the very best they could with networking and welcoming queer students into the campus.

Brashear: Do you know how the space was given for this purpose?

Abbott: Yes, a staff member here at Merrill College gave the space to GLBT students. She who was, interestingly, a woman I had worked with years ago at the Women's Health Collective. At that time she identified as a lesbian. When she worked on campus she was married to a man. She was a strong ally for queer students, and supported their need for a dedicated space. In 1990, there was not such a huge space crunch on campus. This space has a colorful history. It had been a recreation room, the Kosher Co-op. It's been a pottery studio and a dance studio. When I was a student here in the 1970s there was a fireplace in the middle of the room. I came here for poetry readings.

When I arrived four years ago, I had a sense that there was a lot of affection for the place. But it was also sorely neglected and very shabby. I had my work cut out for me. I had a three-quarter time position, a very small budget and no staff. But because I had done all



sorts of start-ups—I had built WomenCare from the ground up and was involved very early with the Women’s Health Collective—I was not daunted. Plus, I came from a good working-class family, who taught me about squeezing blood out of the proverbial turnip. I have an aunt who literally still hangs her tea bags on the line to dry to re-use them. I believe they hired the right person. I had done start-ups and I was extremely thrifty. One of my great sources of pride in the last four years is how much we’ve done with the very few financial resources we have had.

The University system is so vast. So many offices. The first year was about building relationships with the different campus units and the colleges, and of course all the great students. My early role was about being watchful and learning, discovering how I could best be of use.

It was really clear that we needed to have a space that was accessible, and had resources that were readily available. So I worked on nuts-and-bolts things like going down to the Surplus Barn on campus and upgrading our furniture slowly but surely. I’m also a thrift store maven. I would go to garage sales and ditch the really bad couch for a slightly better one. One thing that makes me proud is that when people walk in they are struck by the beauty of the place, even though our furnishings are still somewhat funky. People nonetheless see how colorful it is, that we have plants growing and the tea kettle is on, and they say, “Oh, it feels like home.” It has felt really important to me to create a feeling of home, of welcome, for queer students, who don’t often have a home they can go back to, who get cut off from their families, either partially or completely.

When I arrived, students gave me a lot of feedback that it had been fairly cliquy at the Center. I worked to change this right away, so that students who were really strong and out in their queer identities would feel welcome, but also students who were tentative, who weren’t sure, could come in here and not feel intimidated. A huge ongoing task has been making sure that the whole campus is a safe and welcoming environment. I didn’t want queer students to feel that they had to be here under this roof to feel comfortable and safe. And I wanted non-queer students to come into the Center to hang out and learn about queer culture. I especially wanted to make sure that queer students of color, who can often feel betwixt and between, felt that this was their home. From the beginning, we began collaborating with the other ethnic resource centers on campus and did co-programming, so that queer students of color would see a queer presence at more ethnically focused events and could also feel completely at home at queer-focused events.



Brashear: Have you seen that grow stronger over the years?

Abbott: Absolutely. The thing that's a blessing on this campus is that there are not only a lot of queer students, but there are also a lot of out queer staff and faculty. There is a broad range of ethnicities represented among those staff and faculty. So there are diverse models and mentors for students. I have so many queer colleagues on this campus who are helping. The good news is that the Center is by no means the only player as far as educating around queer issues.

Brashear: What do you feel are some of the challenges you face as the director of the Center?

Abbott: Well, I think one of the biggest struggles, which I've already alluded to, is that as soon as we started hanging out our shingle, as soon as we started developing relationships with various campus units, and got a group email lists going, we got too big for our britches almost immediately. One of the biggest challenges, personally, is how to keep from getting overwhelmed and burned out by the volume of demands. It's been a struggle to add more staff. Our budget is painfully small. Now we're in the midst of a University-wide freeze and cutbacks. It's really hard on us, because there is so much work to do, and our budget is so small. We are constantly prioritizing, because we can't get to everything. All of these fabulous ideas get generated but we've got to pace ourselves, do a good job with what we can, and not expand beyond our capacity. I would say that the biggest frustration and challenge has been having adequate financial and staff resources for us to be able to do our job.

The other part that has been a challenge is that I fiercely see this as being a Center that's not only queer-focused, but that's a multicultural Center where people of all genders, and sexual orientations, and ethnicities feel absolutely welcome and supported, and get appropriate referrals and resources. Because our budget is so small, we're not able to do all of the programming that we'd like to do. We do a lot of collaborating. But it's kind of like having a bake sale to do every event. We're getting \$25 from this place and \$100 from that place. It's very labor-intensive to have to do programs in that way. Now I am full-time and we finally have a three-quarter time program coordinator. We were able to hire a few work study students. It concerns me that because our staff is so small (the professional staff is not even quite two of us), it's hard to have a representative staff. I feel that the best way to have a Center that draws the broadest group of students, serves staff and faculty on this campus, and reaches out into the community, which we do a lot



of, is to have that kind of diversity represented in the staff. We just simply can't do that. That's an ongoing source of frustration for me. We need to triple the size of our staff. We could easily keep everyone busy if we had half a dozen people working here. And we would also have a more representative staff that would make the Center be even more responsive to the various folks on campus.

Brashear: Can you talk about the different groups that meet here?

Abbott: There are so many student organizations that meet here. I think we have almost a dozen. Some of the oldest ones are: the GLBT Network; Sappho, which is the queer women's group; Stonewall, the group for queer men; and Bi the Way, for bisexually focused folks. Queers of Color has been a fantastic group for forever, too. They are one of the most dynamic, and they do amazing programming. There is a group that's at a low ebb now, called Genderation X, which is for folks questioning gender. We have a group of queer graduate students. We have a fantastic student organization called CLUH. They do a great job of helping to educate the campus community, not only about heterosexism and how it works, but about how the other isms link with heterosexism. We have a group called Queer Geeks. We have a new group which I am really pleased about, which is called Kids of Queers. It's students who have grown up with queer parents or queer family members, who may or may not identify as queer themselves, but have felt really identified with the queer community. They may have been in their strollers in Gay Pride marches. We have a group called OyGayValt! which is for Jewish students.

Brashear: Do most of those groups meet here in this space?

Abbott: Almost all of them meet here. They love meeting here in this space, although I encourage the student organizations to meet in various places around campus, and collaborate with non-queer student groups, and they do.

Let me tell you about some of the other services. We have a library. When I got here, we had a very small collection of books that were in pretty poor condition, although we had a few valuable items that went over to Special Collections. Now, I'm proud to say we have more than a thousand books in our collection, ninety-five percent of which have been donated. We have the collection cataloged on a database. It's a circulating collection with a very high circulation. We have local and regional magazines, journals, and newspapers. We have our group email lists. We have several hundred people who are either on the undergraduate list, the graduate student list, the staff list, the faculty list, or



the news list. That's one of the best ways that we network. A college will sponsor a queer-related event and they know we'll get the word out. We partner with folks in helping to publicize queer-related events. We have a great website, and a fabulous new webmaster.

The Center is a safety net for students. I can't tell you how many times we have students who literally come in in tears and say, "I'm not sure why I'm here, but could I talk to you?" I close my door and we spend the next half hour with the Kleenex box close at hand, and a student beginning to put voice to their sexual orientation or gender issues. We don't function as therapists exactly, but students trust us as a safe place to get help. We do make referrals to Counseling and Psychological Services, so that students can get ongoing support.

Students will sometimes say, "What do you do here?" It's amazing. Over the course of a day, I'll be writing a letter of recommendation for a student who wants to go to graduate school; I'll be counseling a student who is in tears over the breakup of his first relationship; and I'll be providing supervision for the field placement of a student intern who is working with a community organization. We go around campus and into the community and give lectures on GLBT-related issues. Our programs coordinator just went to a class and did a lecture on domestic violence within the queer community, which happens to be a specialty of his. A couple of weeks ago we went to the Cowell Health Center, and gave the new psychology interns a lecture on clinical issues in working with young queer clients. We do trainings for the health center staff, for the doctors and nurses, helping sensitize them to medical and health-related issues for queer students.

Every fall quarter we train hundreds of residential assistants who oversee the dorms on campus. We also have a safe space program, so every fall we distribute thousands of very visible pink triangle cards that say "Safe Person, Safe Space," and convey that there is not a tolerance for homophobia at UCSC. Queer frosh come to UCSC, see all of the pink triangles all over campus and know that they are welcome.

When a hate incident occurs on campus, if it's GLBT-related, we become involved. We serve on a variety of committees that are related to hate bias. We have an art gallery. We sponsor art exhibits and receptions. We have a number of programs throughout the year, [such as] celebrating African American history month. In our gallery right now you will



see a beautiful multimedia display that our students put together that features famous queer African Americans. We'll do a film night and serve sweet potato pie for dessert.

We do Rainbow Graduation. This will be the fourth annual Rainbow Graduation. That's a beautiful event down at the Women's Center, where we honor all of the queer students who are graduating. We've had an amazing outreach program into the high schools in the area and gotten UCSC students to be involved. We've sponsored high school proms. We have high school seniors come up and take part in the Rainbow Graduation.

We're also an HIV test site, so people are able to come here and have an HIV test done. We were very instrumental in launching a high school project for GLBT and questioning youth, and we work with the Queer Youth Task Force in the community. We partner with the Diversity Center, which is the community's GLBT center. I'm really proud of our community involvement. UCSC's had a reputation of having a pretty big town-gown split, and I've worked really hard to make sure that we're in the community. Many of our students live in the community, and graduate and continue to live in the community. I've really wanted to cultivate that relationship.

We advise faculty members. Faculty members will often call and we'll either be guest lecturers in their courses, or we'll provide them with links to videos and to different materials that would be useful to them in their courses. We work with graduate students similarly in their research.

We are working with alumni. We're launching a GLBT alumni affinity group. We have got our work cut out for us there, because there was never a database that captured queer alums. We're starting from scratch in terms of being able to locate and identify queer alumni, and build a core group of queer alums. We just got a little grant to create an addition to our website that allows GLBT alum to find us more easily, and network with each other. So that's an area we're growing in. We're also about to launch a Friends of the GLBT Center group, whose mission will be to help us financially. We've had fabulous volunteers, but what we need is a group of dedicated volunteers who will recognize that we need to build our funding base in order to really move and grow. We want to be able to offer emergency scholarships to queer students who come out to their parents and get cut off. We want to provide mentoring opportunities between older queer folk, including alumni, and current students. We have all kinds of ideas, but we really need an organized volunteer base and funding to do that. That's a project very much in the works.



Brashear: Have you encountered any resistance along the way that you've felt was coming from a homophobic place?

Abbott: Quite honestly, the entire time that I've been on campus I've been astonished at the absence of homophobic responses directed at me or at our program. I know that homophobia exists on campus. Part of our work is addressing it. There's harassment. Our flyers get torn down on a regular basis. But I would say overall there has not been resistance to our work. I have developed great working relationships with administrators and other staff in the colleges, at the health center, at Family Student Housing.

I think that's testimony to the quality of staff who get hired at the University, the fact that there are a lot of queer people on the staff and in the administration, who in their own ways help educate and challenge the homophobia that exists. There certainly were staff and faculty who came before me on campus who had done a lot of that work already. It feels really good to work in an environment where we don't feel just tolerated. I know that there are Centers around the country at different universities that are tolerated, at best.

Brashear: Do you think that that has something to do with Santa Cruz, with the town itself having a large queer population?

Abbott: I do. Santa Cruz is well known for being a progressive community. UCSC has been considered the maverick within the UC system, so it has drawn people who are more progressive. It's certainly drawn queer people. We have a kind of critical mass. We're considered one of the top-ten universities in the country in terms of queer friendliness. The more we're out with that reputation, the more we draw faculty, staff, and students. We're also close to San Francisco, so the appeal for a lot of queer folks coming here is that they don't have to live in the city, but it's easy to be able to bop up to San Francisco and take advantage of all of the queer stuff that happens there.

Brashear: Why do you think you were picked to be the first director of the GLBT Center?

Abbott: Well, I'm not exactly sure what the hiring committee had in mind, but I think folks recognized that I had really varied experience. I had the experience of being a student at UCSC. I had been in town ever since, so I knew the community of Santa Cruz. I had been out for a lot of years, so I was well-established in my lesbian identity. I knew a



lot of folks on campus, even though I hadn't worked on campus before. The fact that I had been involved in the Women's Health Collective and at WomenCARE in their early years, meant I knew how to take a very low-funded organization and build it from the ground up, I think that had appeal. I also think there was a recognition, an it's accurate, that I was a jill of all trades. I had worked with everyone from kids to adolescents to college-aged folks. I had counseled them. I had taken them river rafting. I had taught in a college setting before, so I knew what it was like to be faculty. They recognized that if someone fell apart in my office I had the tools to help do some triaging. And I think I convinced them I could build a Center without having a million dollar budget.

I look back on these first four years, it was a really good match, both for me personally, and for the University, because I'm a stable person, I've been very dedicated, shown up and provided the kind of foundation that I think the Center needed. It used to be that people would come and the Center would sometimes be open and sometimes closed. I've made it a priority to keep the doors open, to be a dependable presence. I'm also an idea person. The Center is perpetually exciting to me because we can bring different speakers; we can start new programs. It's dynamic. The Center is really dynamic. I think that students would probably say that we're pretty responsive to their ideas and we do the best we can within our budget restrictions to capitalize on the great ideas and energy that they bring.

What I haven't talked about is being a writer, that part of my coming out process was elaborated through being a writer, writing and publishing my own work. I put out an anthology about women who had been heterosexually married and then came out of their heterosexual marriages into their lesbianism or bisexuality. My writing has helped me in my coming out process, in my developmental process. I think it's also been a very positive influence at the Center in so much as I've really supported 'zine projects. We've worked with journalists at the various student newspapers. I really understand the power of the word and the power of getting the word out. So we've had a column called "Homos on the Hill" that's in the community's queer paper called *Manifesto*, and we've also made sure that we regularly are visible in campus papers, not only student papers, but papers that go out to alums as well. I think my writer's sensibility in knowing how the printed word and when broadcast can make an impact has been helpful.

Brashear: When you look back to when you first came here as a student, and then think about where things are today, what kinds of thoughts come up for you?



Abbott: It's been thrilling for me to be here. Every time I step out of my vehicle in the morning and I smell that wonderful woodsy smell, it brings me back to thirty-one years ago, when I was a student here. That's a good chunk of my life. I've come full circle. It's really wonderful to see how my personal development has also paralleled the development of the Center. Queer folks have always been on campus, but for so long they were invisible. I was queer when I was here, although I was invisible even to myself. It's wonderful to see how we are flourishing and providing a lot of valuable resources, that we're actually seen as one of the best places in the whole country for queer students to come and matriculate. That's thrilling. I don't even have words for how exciting it is for me to have gotten the opportunity to be instrumental in that process. We have established a good foundation and a good home and our basic program is set.⁵¹

⁵¹In 2003, *The Princeton Review* rated UCSC as the number one public university in the United States in terms of acceptance of GLBT students. According to the SERU [Student Experiences in the Research University] 2001 UC-wide survey, UCSC is the number one campus in the UC system for GLBTI student enrollment; in fact UCSC has more than twice the GLBTI students of other UC campuses.

