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Gays battle social, self-rejection

By KAY BELLOR

"I guess I started coming out about it a year ago. I've always known," recalls Sam, a second-year student. "I had my first homosexual experience when I was 12. I told my brother last winter. He took it real well. His best friend is gay. I had to tell someone. He's helped in a lot of ways.

"I don't think shouting it out loud and coming out in the middle of the Lawn is the best way," he observes. "All of my good friends are gay now. Eventually I hope to have good relationships with people who are straight. But first I have to feel comfortable about myself."

Sam (not his real name) pledged a fraternity last year. This year he lives

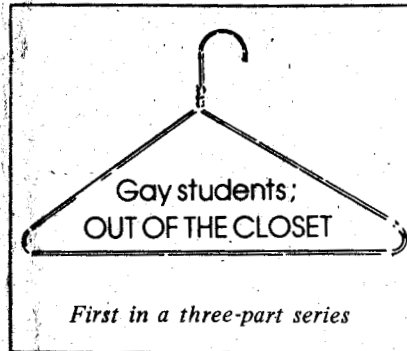
in the house. Only two brothers know he is gay.

Coming out involves more than declaring one's homosexuality to others. The intense social pressure against homosexuality often results in the individual denying to himself his own orientation and makes the task of confiding in others that much more difficult.

For the University's and Charlottesville's gays, living "in the closet" often means lying to friends, parents and sometimes to themselves.

Most of the 10 men and women interviewed have come "out" to some extent. Some have told their parents, others have told only a few friends.

According to Robert "Elmo" Sch-



wartz, a third-year law student who is a Student Council representative, "there are many 'comings out,'" or many steps to revealing ones homosexuality.

The first step takes place when a

person decides to admit to himself that he or she is homosexual. According to Schwartz, many gays recognize sexual feelings toward members of their own sex when they reach puberty.

The feelings often frighten or confuse them because "you can't identify it, you just don't know what it is," said Schwartz.

Robin, a University graduate who works in Charlottesville, and asked that her real name not be used, described it: "There was a woman I really had a big crush on, it thrilled me to have her touch me. I knew that I shouldn't be feeling that."

Young gays, like other children, are usually brought up in a world that views homosexuality as an aberration

and a sickness. They learn early in their life that they must confront this "homophobia" when they first acknowledge feelings towards members of the same sex, several gays said.

"You probably haven't seen homosexuality so you don't know what it is," Schwartz said, "you may act on it and be put down. More likely you've seen just enough homosexuality to know that it's bad."

"You've seen the jokes about swishes, you bottle it up inside you."

Schwartz, like many gays, rejected the notion of homosexuality and attributed his feelings to a phase. He

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denied to himself the possibility of being gay.

"Most people do what I did: they say, 'No, I'm not homosexual,'" he said.

Many gays try to pursue a heterosexual lifestyle and attempt to prove to themselves they are not homosexuals. "You try for a long, long time to be what it is the world wants you to be," said John Curtin, a second-year law student.

High school often aggravates their confusion. "High school was very traumatic," according to Mike, who asked that his real name not be used.

Mike attended a small rural school where "everyone who didn't know me thought I was homosexual. I didn't come out. People would get to know me and then justify liking me by saying I wasn't gay."

Homosexuals "come out" when living their lives as heterosexual men and women takes too great a toll, Schwartz said. "Finally you say, 'it's costing more than it's worth,' and you come out. Often only to yourself."

Once a gay man or woman comes out, they often do not have someone or someplace to turn to for help. Some, like Schwartz, turn to the library to read on homosexuality.

Other gays get support from friends and relatives. Often, however, the initial reactions of others is hostile. Curtin's parents found out and confronted him in an emotional scene he hesitates to describe today.

Robin's father criticized her growing relationship with another woman.

Living with peers in a university increases the threat of social ostracism and even outright hostility and prevents gay students from revealing their homosexuality sometimes even to their closest friends.

First-year students in particular, have difficulties because of the lack of

privacy in the dormitories.

"Dorm life is hard enough with out having to deal with being gay," said Susan, a first-year College student.

"If you're suspected of being gay everyone is scared of you and you get the whole bathroom to yourself," recalls James Gallagher, a third-year college student.

"If they know you're gay they shun you or they may have a violent reaction and try to beat you up," he added.

Gay students who pledge fraternities often find their brothers unsympathetic. Gay fraternity men rarely come out to brothers for fear of getting kicked out.

Sam said "last year after I pledged I was told the one thing they didn't allow was gays. Little did they know I was gay. I pledged before I realized the situation."

"Living in the house didn't cause any problems for a long time. Then as the year progressed, I became more conscious of my orientation. I was having a lot of problems dealing with it," he added.

Many gays interviewed said little

deviation is allowed from the "straight" mold of the University students. The men especially find themselves passing as heterosexual to avoid hostility.

"Everyone automatically assumes you to be straight," said Gallagher. "You're living a lie and you're not happy. You have to go out with people you don't like because of the image they present."

"I was shocked at the atmosphere here," recalls Max, a first-year woman. "The girls are all the same; half of them are sorority members. You can pick out the dissenters."

Schwartz and Curtin did not come out until after college. "I was 24-years old," said Schwartz, "I said to myself, you are a homosexual. It's not a phase."

Curtin spent much of his college life, "trying as long as possible to transform myself. I had a long term relationship with a woman. At the end of college I realized it wasn't going to go away."

[Tomorrow, "Coming out:" why gays say it's better than hiding in the closet.]

