

# CU-Boulder's LGBTQ Jewish Union attends Shabbat 500

By Adrian Garcia

Many religious communities consider religion and non-heterosexuality incompatible or conflicting concepts, but the existence of CU-Boulder's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer and Transgender Jewish Union challenges that thought.

The co-coordinators of the union attended Shabbat 500 last Friday, a Jewish Sabbath day where 500 people were expected to attend. A Chabad rabbi, a teacher of the Torah from the Orthodox Judaism movement that does not recognize homosexuality, hosted the event.

During the Shabbat dinner Cera Merrik and Caitlin, the co-coordinators of the union, sat with one other member and a friend in the CU recreational center. Nothing about their appearance distinguished them from the rest of the people in attendance and no moment came where they were recognized as the LGBTQ Jewish Union.

Caitlin and Merrik unobtrusively sat at their designated table and participated in the traditional prayers, hand washing and eating associated with Shabbat. Only after the Shabbat dinner was over were they willing to discuss the union candidly.

"A lot of people who identify as LGBTQ and Jewish think they are compromising ideas, that's not necessarily the case, and usually they find themselves compromising their LGBTQ side," said Merrik, a 20-year-old psychology major.

"It's important to have the union on campus to show we are not compromising ideas," she added.

The LGBTQ Jewish Union has about 15 members and has been in existence for three-semesters. The co-coordinators expressed trouble spreading awareness on campus and the struggle to get those who were "in the closet" to participate.

"There's the issue of overcoming the stigma of being Jewish and gay," Caitlin said. "That's something we've had a hard time overcoming."

Caitlin, a 20-year-old linguistics major, is still undergoing the process of conversion to Judaism. Though she feels the religion and culture are right for her, she has chosen to keep her sexual orientation from the rabbi sponsoring her conversion.

According to Merrik the original founder of the union was

coming to terms with being gay at the same time he was converting to Orthodox Judaism.

"He ended up telling the rabbi after his conversion that he was gay," Merrik said. "The rabbi told him if he knew he was gay he wouldn't have converted him."

Though Caitlin is not converting to Orthodox Judaism she is still concerned; she described her feelings as "anxious".

"It's a hurdle to overcome, and really outside of Orthodox, the Jewish religious community probably is one of the more progressive and tolerant religious communities to [LGBTQ] issues," she said.

The two explained how many Jewish Laws revolve around "gender binary," like separating men and women during services, and the LGBTQ community gets lost in the way those laws are carried out. Also, adherence of the laws and the interpretation of the Torah, the Jewish Bible, depend on a particular Jewish community's views; there are different sects of Judaism such as Orthodox or Conservative perspectives.

The duo expressed desire for discussion about how the laws affect LGBTQ Jews and the need to have some reformed.

The group generates some of that discussion at their weekly meetings. Next month they are partnering with Keshet, a national grassroots organization that works for the full inclusion of LGBTQ Jews in Jewish life, to host an event.

Merrik said she would never be able to announce the union's events at Chabad gatherings like the Shabbat 500, however, she did call the Boulder Chabad Rabbi Yisroel Wilhelm "liberal" and covertly supportive.

During the dinner Friday evening Wilhelm stood on a chair and spoke to approximately three hundred people. He alluded to former CU President George Norlin's refusal to expel Catholics and Jews from the university and gave an ambiguous call for those in attendance to "do the right thing."

"Since the days of Abraham there has never been a better time to be a Jew," the rabbi said. "People are more accepting and tolerant now than any other time in history."

**NOTE:** Only Caitlin's first name appears for this story because she is trying to convert into Judaism, putting her in a sensitive situation.

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**Cera Merrik**

Co-Coordinator of the LGBTQ Jewish Union