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On Guard

Being raised in a Roman Catholic household in a conservative town, I struggled to coalesce my religious beliefs with my sexual orientation. In fact, due to the stigma, I only decided to come out to close friends as bisexual in October 2014. Therefore, when one of my teammates “outed” me to my club and coaches in November 2014, I felt like my world was shattering. At that point, I was not ready to tell my parents, let alone my entire fencing club. As I sorted through a mixture of embarrassment and anger, the boy who “outed” me proceeded to make jokes that perpetuated bisexual stereotypes. Some people laughed, others silently stared at me. Suddenly, it seemed like my teammates did not know how to interact with someone who was not heterosexual, even though they had been unknowingly doing so for years.

I realized then that I could either leave the room or take the opportunity to educate them. After taking a deep breath, I proceeded to describe common bisexual stereotypes, disprove each one, and answer any questions. I also utilized knowledge and group facilitation skills I had gained over the previous year in *Between Women*, a student-run support group for non-straight women, to discuss the importance of creating a safe space in our team and on campus for all persons to feel comfortable being themselves. By the end, members thanked me for the open discussion and for seeking to eliminate biphobia on our team.

Although I knew the atmosphere of our club would not completely change overnight, I hoped the discussion would begin to foster a more accepting environment so others could come out freely in the future.

Throughout the following months after practice, my teammates took an active interest in the LGBTQ community. They would frequently bring up issues that the community is facing, such as the causes behind the consistently high assault rates against transgender individuals and how a high percentage of LGBTQ adolescents attempt suicide due to parental or societal rejection. I began to see that through these conversations, my hopes for transforming the club were becoming a reality. I also invited some teammates to events hosted by the UConn Rainbow Center and

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UConn's oSTEM (Out in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) chapter where they would be able to socialize with people who identified on different areas of the sexual orientation spectrum.

While many of my teammates made friends at these events, others still refused to even acknowledge the existence of the LGBTQ community. At times, it felt like I was trying to bridge two different worlds. I wondered if all my efforts had been in vain. Then in June 2015, one teammate came out to me as gay. He told me I was the first to know, and because I had sought to create a more tolerant environment on our team, he felt more comfortable being himself.

In accepting myself and educating others, I have become inspired to address the inequalities LGBTQ persons endure daily, particularly concerning healthcare. Currently, LGBTQ individuals experience major health disparities due to social stigma, discrimination, and a lack of understanding about their unique needs. As a physician, I will use my experiences and knowledge to ensure that my patients feel comfortable and receive the best possible care, regardless of their sexual orientation.