

Rainbow Over ECU

Monday, 31 January 2011

In Volume XV of my Journals I describe how after Mother's funeral in 2005 I met Dr. Marilyn Sheerer, Dean of the ECU College of Education. We immediately connected and that fall she convened a group of ECU faculty and staff, Scott Wells and myself to discuss issues of diversity at ECU. Out of those meetings Chancellor Steve Ballard in the spring of 2006 convened the Chancellor's Diversity Council and shortly thereafter the Diversity Center was established headed by Dr. Lee Maril. I was honored in the spring of 2009 with the dedication of the Diversity Center, which I also wrote about in the Journals.

One of the first studies sponsored by the Center was done by Dr. Linda Mooney, a Sociology professor who did a campus climate study regarding LGBT issues on the campus at East Carolina. The University came up lacking. Then Summer Wisdom, a master's graduate student in the Department of Sociology, started research on LGBT issues and the resources available to LGBT students in each of the schools within the University of North Carolina system and a like number of comparable schools from all over the country. She did in-person or telephone interviews with the individual at each school responsible for LGBT issues and ECU again came up sorely lacking. Summer met with Marilyn Sheerer about her research and invited her to the defense of her presentation to the Department of Sociology Faculty. She also invited Chancellor Ballard, but she had no idea whether either would attend. When she arrived at her defense, Dr. Ballard and Marilyn were seated on the front row. The Chancellor was very engaged and asked lots of questions. Summer apparently made a very persuasive presentation. When they walked out of the conference room, Chancellor Ballard told Marilyn, "You need to get to work on this." Marilyn was able to identify a part-time temporary position to head up a LGBT Resource Office and Summer Wisdom indicated that she would be interested in the position. She also located an office in the suite with Women's Studies. Thus with no budget, one part-time, temporary staff and scant office space, was born the ECU LGBT Resource Office. Chancellor Ballard asked Linda Mooney to chair an Advisory Board and she invited me to serve on that Board. My primary reason for coming up to North Carolina the week was to meet Summer Wisdom and to attend the first meeting of the Advisory Board which Linda has called for tomorrow evening.

It is incredible how quickly all of this has fallen into place. Who would have guessed five and a half years ago that a "chance" encounter at Mother's funeral would evolve into such as this. I fear that if she knew she would be spinning in her coffin, but maybe not. She might have been proud to have had a role in accomplishing something that is the right thing to do. Chancellor Ballard has gone out on a limb on this issue and I feel it is my responsibility [and an opportunity] to protect his back and to vindicate the wisdom and the courage of his decision. This is going to be fun!

I drove up on Friday, leaving Atlanta before 9:00 AM. I drove 500.1 miles in eight hours, with an average speed of 70 mph and 26 mpg. I had some trepidation about driving up here solo, but it was a beautiful day and it really was an easy drive. Linda Mooney had emailed me a couple of weeks ago, very complimentary about the pictures of the Quilt in the Diversity Center which I had donated and she asked if I might be able to help out in a similar fashion in the LGBT office. She and Summer and I exchanged emails about what they wanted and it quickly became clear to me that they were going for "dorm room casual." The Resource Office shares a three office suite with Women's Studies. There is a reception / common area which they want to furnish as a gathering space for LGBT students. Summer also asked if I had any LGBT books I would donate. I immediately pulled all the LGBT titles from my shelves and I emailed Theron, Ted Barnett, Mark Fritz, Mark Rinder Alan Holloway, Troy Evans and Dixon Taylor asking them to donate as well. In addition to six sets of Journals I brought up three boxes of books from me, Ted, Mark Fritz and Dixon Taylor. I feel certain that I will be making subsequent drives up here to make additional deliveries.

In addition I brought up a "Gay America Loves You" t-shirt, an "R-U-1-2" t-shirt from San Francisco Pride, 1992 and a couple of Atlanta Pride t-shirts. I got a selection of AGMC concert posters and I went by Office Depot and had them do an 11" x 14" enlargement of the "Play Safe" poster with the Olympic Rings in colored condoms. I have collected my various buttons and pins and when I return to Atlanta I plan to make a display of the collection to present to Summer for the Office. Finally, I brought a set of my Journals for Summer and the Resource Office. I am really eager to see what the response, if any, there will be from the students who might read a bit of the material.

I arranged to meet Summer at Brewster to unload the gifts from Atlanta and to present to her a set of the Journals. She seemed quite gaga, but I will only know her reaction for sure when I see her tomorrow. She had Katy Ross, President of the LGBT Student Union join us. Katy is a vivacious Junior Communications major. She is very well connected on campus and is very high energy and highly motivated, as is Summer, to see this initiative succeed. I have two recruits who are eager to serve and who seem most receptive to my offers to work with them. This is going to be fun!

After unloading my stash we went to Winslow's on 5th Street for a two hour lunch. We talked about lots of strategies for fundraising and ways to engage the Greenville / Washington communities in support of this project. I feel that fundraising is going to be quite a bit easier than some of my previous efforts. I think there are a lot of gay men and women, and ECU Alumni who have been sitting on their hands waiting for a signal that the University is serious about its support of LGBT issues. Aaron Lucier has said that his Rolodex is ours when the University acts in support of LGBT issues. What stronger signal could Chancellor Ballard have sent? Now it is up to me and this Advisory Board to help validate and support that decision.