Campus organization strives to support those in need

By Vincent Civitillo
Features Editor

For students making the transition into a college environment, acceptance amongst peers can be a difficult thing to attain. However, it can be even tougher when a student feels as though they are different because of their race, personality or sexual orientation.

Rider F.L.A.G. (Friends of Lesbians and Gays) is an organization on campus, which, according to Treasurer Gio Buscetta, hopes to provide those in need of a friend with somewhere to turn.

"F.L.A.G. is something I hold very important because it is a safe haven for me," he said. "To me, it is more than just a support group. It gives me a sense of pride, a sense of belonging and a sense that I'm not abnormal."

President Kyle Zack said that the organization acts as a means for students to find support in a friendly atmosphere that they, unfortunately, may not be able to find elsewhere.

"If you're made fun of for being black, you have a black family to go home to; if you're made fun of for being Jewish, you have a Jewish family to go home to; if you're made fun of for being gay, though, you don't have anyone to turn to unless you have a gay friend," he said. "Unlike a lot of other minorities, homosexuality is not something you can physically see in people, so you can't just see a group of people like you hanging out somewhere that you could make friends with."

According to Zack, the weekly meetings are run in a "laid back," relaxed format so that students can feel comfortable coming to have a good time.

"Some weeks we'll hit on serious issues and other times we'll have pizza, game and movie nights," he said. "We had a sex battle game once where I tested their knowledge on sexually transmitted diseases and gave out condoms for points. Another time I had a coming-out story-night on National Coming-Out Day and we painted a banner and put it up in the Student Center."

Because of the relaxed atmosphere, Vice President Jason Wooden said that meetings are not just open to lesbians and gays, but to anyone.

"There are many 'friends of' that come because F.L.A.G. is not people who are gay sitting around talking about being gay," he said. "We're not living a lifestyle, we're living a life just like you're living a life and people are tolerant of that. We've had meetings where the amount of 'friends' outnumbered the amount of 'out' gay people in the room."

Still, throughout the entire fun and games, Zack said that the ultimate goal of F.L.A.G. is to provide support for students in need, even when they may be too timid to come to a meeting in person.

"We have an e-mail address, RiderFlag@hotmail.com, and we're actually going to start a thing where people who are still 'closeted,' and don't necessarily have someone to turn to, can anonymously e-mail us for whatever support we can provide," he said.

However, one obstacle F.L.A.G. must still overcome, according to Zack, is their lack of university funding.

"We have such a very ambitious proposal for next semester and crossing our fingers," Zack said that included in the organization's goals for next semester is their continuing battle to rebuild their name in the Rider community and get better recognition on campus as the resource they are.

What brings an organization money is their membership and their presence on campus, so we want that because L.A.S.O. [the Latin American Student Organization] and B.S.U. [the Black Student Union] have a huge presence here," he explained. "These are minority groups for people who may not feel comfortable for whatever reason and need support, and I want F.L.A.G. to have the same thing."

Wooden said that in addition to just being there for other people in need, members could help their cause in many different ways.

"It's not like pledging a fraternity, it's just an organization so we just encourage people to come to the meetings and be involved however they feel comfortable," he said. "Whether it's getting behind a table at Awareness Day, speaking in public or even just being artistic and making a banner, you can contribute in any way that you feel you can. What you put in is what you can take away, and the best benefit that you can get from it is friendship."