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# =RAINBOW SIG NEWSLETTER=

NAFSA: Association of International Educators, Spring 2004, Vol. 10, No. 2

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## **Changing Scenes: Bo Keppel in Rainbow Spotlight**

*Interview Submitted by: Eero Jesurun,  
Newsletter Editor*

As Director of International Programs at East Stroudsburg University in East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, Roberta "Bo" Keppel, has developed a deep commitment and outstanding presence in the field of international education. Bo is retiring this year after years of involvement with NAFSA and granted an interview as she changes scenes. Bo is an alumna of Middlebury College, Harvard University, Trenton State College and Rutgers University where she studied English, special education, continuing and adult education. She taught English and special education at the high school, junior high, and elementary levels for many years. For the past twelve years she has been the director of international programs, serving international students and scholars, American students studying abroad and through the National Student Exchange, and faculty interested in developing programs abroad. Of the many awards she has received, Bo is most proud of those that reflect her 20 years of work in the field of HIV/AIDS, serving as a buddy, co-founder of three HIV/AIDS education and case management organizations and working with FACT (Fighting AIDS

*(continued on p.3)*

## **Alternative Study Abroad: Short Term Language Study Program in Mexico for Gays and Lesbians**

*Submitted by: Peter Voeller, University of  
Washington*

My partner, Ricardo, and I were interested in exploring a gay and lesbian friendly language school abroad and were planning for four years to attend a two-week course in Mexico. Finally, we were able to coordinate our personal schedules and other trips this past January and flew from Seattle to Mexico City on New Year's Day to attend Cetlalic, an alternative language school founded in 1987 to teach the language and culture of Mexico, based on Paulo Freire's philosophy. They welcome all students regardless of nationality, ethnic origin, gender, age, creed, sexual preference, etc., and widely considered to be a gay and lesbian friendly school that offers gay and lesbian home stays, too.

From the airport, we caught a bus to Cuernavaca, a beautiful drive through the mountains. Once there, we gave our self-identified gay host family a call and caught a taxi to their house. Soon we were eating *huevos y nopales con tortillas de maiz* and we were able to use our existing Spanish skills immediately.

When we woke up the next day, we found our way through the busy city streets to the school. Behind the gate and walls was a three-story house with offices and classrooms, a small cafeteria to buy a Mexican coffee during class breaks, and a

*(continued on p.2)*

## Alternative Study Abroad

(continued from p. 1)

large veranda and outside tables where we were would take our language classes.

Our lesbian and gay oriented language program was one of three that were going on at that time. There were study abroad students from Massachusetts and Nebraska, and a women's study group came later. We had grammar classes in the morning while conversation, or *charlas*, were held in the evening on topics such as Zapatismo, Mexican history, gay and lesbian life, etc.. In addition, we went on one of the all-day excursions. On one such field-trip, we visited the home of a culinary chef whose partner ran an AIDS awareness program called CD4. The house was filled with artwork painted by the chef's partner that included the host chef in various Frida Kahlo poses. The chef also showed us how to make a proper *margarita* drink and a nice Mexican dish of *chiles rellenos y frijoles con nopales*.

On another trip, we visited the Metropolitan Church and the Condoneria where we learned about Saint Alfonso, who has sacrificed his time and health and energy to provide a spiritual outlet to the local gay population. Various students who self-identify as gay volunteered during their stay in Cuernavaca serving bread and coffee to patients at the local hospital.

We took day trips to Xochicalco (Aztec city of flowers) and Taxco (Spanish city of silver), Mexico City and Coyoatan (home of the bi-sexual Frida Kahlo), and Tepoztlan (an temple located high in the hills). Our gay and lesbian teachers also acted as our tour guides and took turns showing us around.

Our classes were mixed with the students in our program and those from the other programs there at the time. As an English teacher, I have renewed respect for my students who take intensive English for ten weeks at a time. I was mentally exhausted after two weeks of Spanish. Of course, many of the all night parties at our host family did not help with this matter.

It was an education for everyone. The bonding was incredible. To be with

other gay students, sharing the challenges of living and studying in another country, meeting local gay and lesbians and having gay teachers all added up to an unforgettable experience. For further information: [www.cetlalic.org.mx](http://www.cetlalic.org.mx)

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The Rainbow Special Interest Group of NAFSA Association of International Educators publishes the Rainbow Newsletter periodically.

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## **Bo Keppel in Rainbow Spotlight** (continued from p. 1)

Continuously Together,) a gay and lesbian-founded and supported organization in her region. Bo is also one of the most active members of the Rainbow Special Interest Group of NAFSA.

### **1. How did you get professionally involved in international education? Was there a particular experience that motivated you?**

I lived in Barbados in the West Indies when I was a young mother and did some traveling within the Caribbean while there. I had also traveled in England with my cousin some years later. However, I became involved in international education not by choice, although I certainly would have chosen it had I been given the opportunity. Rather, I was assigned to it and was placed in an untenable position at my university at the time, supervising a segment of academic affairs that was not valued by the then-provost. His goal was to eliminate my position and me with it. Fortunately, the vice president for student affairs knew my commitment to diversity and persuaded the president I was the person to take over what had become a rather stagnant office of international programs and student exchange.

### **2. Tell us a bit of history. How did you get involved in the Rainbow SIG?**

Answering this question requires a little more history. By the time I became involved in international education and found the SIG, I had been working in the HIV/AIDS field since the early 80's when the disease was known as "GRID," the gay disease as folks actually believed back then. In any case, working in the HIV/AIDS field at that time meant working with gay men and the lesbians who cared for them. (My sister kept asking me how I expected to find a man when all my time was spent with gay men and lesbians!)

I learned of the then-Lesbigay SIG at my first NAFSA annual conference.

Unfortunately, I don't now remember where it was, but at that time the SIG was about three years old, I think. Because it's in my nature, I immediately volunteered for something and in a few short years found myself a co-chairperson.

### **3. In many countries, there is a growing criticism that U.S. educators like to use politically correct words, for example, when they address issues regarding culture and sexual orientation on their home campus. Has U.S. culture and consequently the manner in which many U.S. educators approach their work become too sensitive as to not offend anybody?**

I really don't know how to answer this question, as I find being sensitive to people's feelings something to laud.

In the 1970's -- well before the term "political correctness" was coined -- I was teaching in a residential school for what was called "socially maladjusted teens." Many of these kids, young men in particular, chose Muslim names because they felt these new names better represented the change they had made in their beliefs, behavior and lives. The administration advised teachers not to honor their requests. I felt I had to let them name themselves, knowing how important the name I choose to be called is to me. I am "Bo." I am certainly not "Roberta," although that is the name on my birth certificate, passport and checks.

In a broader sense I claim the right to identify myself in ways that I believe best represent who I am, what I believe, what I value and how I live my life. Should I not offer that same right to others?

A colleague defines PC as "polite and considerate." Is it wrong to be polite and considerate? In what way does it hurt anyone else if I call you by what you have indicated you'd like to be called? Actually, whose business is it, anyway, but yours?

(continued on p. 4)

## **Bo Keppel in Rainbow Spotlight**

*(continued from p.3)*

### **4. Beyond political correctness, can you tell us why sexual orientation matters for our work in international education in 2004?**

As Martin Luther King said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." As long as men and women anywhere face an abridgement of rights, second-class status, harassment, persecution, torture or even death based on their sexual orientation, none of us is free NOT to educate the ignorant or raise our voices and fists against the tyrants.

I remember Reverend Martin Niemoller who said: "In Germany they first came for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist." He chronicles how they then came for the all the other despised groups until - "Then they came for me - and by that time no one was left to speak up." A powerful warning to us all.

### **5. Do you have a personal GLBT student story you can share with us?**

Ironically, I have no GLBT student stories to share that are also international stories. I have been privileged to have had a young American student choose me as the first "adult" to whom he came out.

For several years I also assisted a computer technician (for whom my GADAR always flashed brightly) in planning his travel abroad adventures. This spring I received an email with lots of pictures of Thailand and the man of his dreams whom he had finally met face to face over the Christmas break!

My very favorite GLBT student stories, however, are those from the teenagers, aged 14 - 21, who attend Rainbow Youth, a social group founded in the Poconos for GLBTQ (for "questioning") youth by PALS, Pocono Action Lambda Society. These kids, like any other teenagers, just want to be accepted and come to RY twice a month

so they can be who they are, hold hands with their girlfriend or boyfriend, be cool or be silly, play board games, meet new kids, learn gay history, dress like every other teen in their school or just be themselves.

It's kids like these that tell me every day I cannot stop doing what I do until every child in every country in the world knows she or he is ok no matter what sexual orientation each was born with. And that is why our work is important in 2004 and in 2008 and beyond (if G.W. Bush lets us live that long!)

### **6. On a very intimate and personal note, where do you get those fabulous and sublime hats you have each year at NAFSA?**

(Editor's Note: This remains Bo's secret).

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"The illiterate will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn."

- Alvin Toffler

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## **Student Testimonials from China, Netherlands and Spain**

*The student testimonials on the following pages were submitted with the assistance of Bradley Rink, CIEE Program Director for Africa, Middle East and Eastern Europe and were written by CIEE participants in China, the Netherlands and Spain from the following institutions: Trinity College, St. Lawrence University, University of Washington and University of Maryland - Baltimore*

## Learning about *Tongzhi* in Shanghai, China

By: Cody Eldredge, St. Lawrence University

*Tongzhi* – It is one of those words you heard thrown around a lot in the revolutionary days of China. It means “comrade” but in modern Chinese culture it has been appropriated for a different use -- it has become an epithet equivalent to our English word “faggot” or “dyke.” Thankfully, it is rarely heard on the streets.

Compared with the United States, GLBTQ culture in China appears very clandestine. It is mostly underground, or cleverly disguised, so most Chinese are not wittingly exposed to it. Chinese contentions of gender roles, while perhaps equally rigid, are much different than those of the United States. Same-sex public affection is much more common nowadays among young Chinese – often more so than opposite-sex affection. This contributes to a “closeted” existence which is relatively easy to maintain for Chinese GLBTQs. To a discerning eye, two men or two women walking along the street holding hands and smiling at each other in that “quirky” way are most definitely lovers, but to the average Chinese eye, they are nothing more than friends. In my travels through Shanghai, as well as Xi’an and Beijing, I recognized many such couples. On rare occasions, I would encounter them being more affectionate with one another, sometimes kissing or caressing one another.

China’s psychiatric association ruled out homosexuality as a mental illness in 2001. Social restrictions have gradually eased on all forms of relationships in China over the last couple of decades, and growing GLBTQ social acceptance has accompanied this movement, albeit more gradually.

When superstar Leslie Cheung leapt to his death from his lavish high-rise apartment in Hong Kong in 2003, much of China was in mourning. Cheung self-identified as transgender as well as homosexual, and still achieved success and fame. While the “gay” themes in *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) have not transformed mainstream-China, they still hold a place in the hearts of millions of Chinese, who remain sympathetic to the gay man who

loved his stage-brother. Although homosexuality is understood and interpreted from within the romantic framework of the film, this sort of “gay exposure” has been good for GLBTQ social acceptance [and recognition] in China.

A close Shanghai college friend of mine used to feel that homosexuality was “dirty” and “wrong.” When I convinced her that she had gay and lesbian friends who were closeted, she was forced to reevaluate her position. While she still insisted that being gay was “abnormal,” she admitted that she still loved and accepted her friends very much. The seeds for social acceptance [of one’s sexual orientation] are gradually being planted in this way in China’s cities. And, of course, there are those more liberal and more conservative than others. Some Shanghai writers such as Wei Hui, for example, are pioneering a movement of (pan)sexual awakening in China which is received with surprising and refreshing support.

There is very little visible GLBTQ presence in professional expatriate communities. For foreign students and younger expatriates, the situation is different. There are a variety of clubs and bars in Shanghai, a large cosmopolitan city (many of which are located in Pudong) which cater to GLBTQ persons – both Chinese and foreign. The atmosphere of such bars and clubs is surprisingly non-obtrusive and comfortable. Any Shanghai veteran is also intimately familiar with 24-hour entertainment salons. Many of these salons have an openly GLBTQ presence as well. I would add here that late night foreign visitors – whether GLBTQ or not -- should always be wary of trouble in such environments.

Regardless, many Chinese – both GLBTQ and otherwise – are very interested in discussing issues of sexuality. Foreign students with GLBTQ interests should not feel hesitant to discuss any topic related to this issue, but should naturally exercise common sense caution in being publicly affectionate.

## Imagining Nanjing

By: Kyle Brillante, Trinity College

When I stepped off the train in Nanjing, China, I prepared myself to have no expectations. Jet-lagged, sleep-deprived, hungry and sweating, I was greeted by hoards of Chinese people. Also sleep-deprived, hungry and sweating, they pulled and pushed at me, trying to take advantage of my foreign naiveté. Somehow, amidst the mayhem, I was able to use my broken Chinese to hail a cab to the international dormitory, which would be my future home. And as I sat in the back of the cab, wiping my brow of sweat, instead of feeling relief at finally arriving, my eyes went frantically searching. Resuming a search I had just momentarily paused, I felt utterly lost and disappointed when I arrived at my dormitory and my search had found no one [with whom I could identify]. I, despite my own blatant attempt to have no expectations about China, and especially [about the city of] Nanjing, had indeed expected something after all. I had been in China for two days, traveling by plane, train, and now *mianbaoche*, and had not seen any openly gay Chinese person.

Despite my own prior knowledge of the illegality of homosexuality in China, I had always expected that China would surely have them. I imagined that one day while walking in the market, I, speaking wonderfully fluent and colloquial Chinese would brush the arm of the man haggling next to me. He would smile at me and then I would smile back at him. He would inquire about where I learned to speak Chinese, and like all the friendly Chinese people I heard about, would invite me to practice English with him while we had coffee. We would ask each other's names, and then discuss the weather, the changing political times, and gradually I would also talk about my sexual identity. He would smile once more, and admit that he, too, was a homosexual. I would discover that he has experienced the same problems, the same discomfort, and the same pain as I have. With wavy black hair, sun-darkened skin, and a crooked smile, he would be the gay man I met in China.

To calm my surging anxiety about being the only gay man in China, I turned to the residents of my international dormitory. Surely, amongst one of them was a homosexual. Weeks passed, and I had met many international and Chinese students, and had become friends with many of them. But none of them, to my knowledge, was gay. The constant leaning, hugging, holding-hands, sitting on laps, and other effeminate actions from the heterosexual Chinese boys, didn't help my search either. As my program neared completion, I still longed to find evidence of one Chinese homosexual. In my class we discussed the subject of homosexuality, and my professor insisted that China had homosexuals – in Shanghai, Beijing, and Hong Kong. I was disappointed that all of China's openly gay population had fled to major special economic zones and that none were left in the alleyways, side streets and public squares that embody the real China. But, I rest assured knowing that China did indeed have a gay community.

Although I had not seen one, I was comforted, knowing that they at least existed somewhere in China. With that malleable sense of security, it was one night, after returning from the *Fuzimiao* market, that my friends and I decided to bar hop along some of the cross side streets. Entering a bar, thinking it comparable to other Chinese establishments (complete with overpriced beer and bikini-dressed waitresses), we were surprised to discover a giant rainbow flag greeting our entrance. The presence of a man dressed in a black leather vest and chaps, complete with a matching rhinestone studded cowboy hat confirmed my initial excitement. I had finally found one. My friends, cognizant of our location, without trepidation, immediately sat down, ordered beer and later sang karaoke with some local patrons to Michael Jackson's "*Billy Jean*". I, on the other hand, had a more difficult time adjusting. All around me, lounging, dancing, falsely singing, even standing next to me, were the men I ached to meet since my arrival.

(continued on p. 7)

## **Imagining Nanjing**

*(continued from p. 6)*

I do not know exactly what I expected to gain when I decided to study in China. I heard from many other people, whom had recently returned, "Have no expectations. China is very giving." So, I read all the culture books, studied the language, packed lightly, and prepared myself for nothing, which is exactly why I yearned to meet someone - a gay man in China - like me, expecting nothing.

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## **Breathing Free Air: Living in Amsterdam**

*By: Kathryn Rouse, University of Maryland, Baltimore County*

I have to tell you, I feel like I cheated. [As a student with a Philosophy major and Women's Studies minor] I chose to study abroad in the city that could rightly be called a queer world capital - Amsterdam, Netherlands. I had originally thought to study in Rome [Italy], but after I realized that I would probably be dealing with even more sexism and homophobia than here in the United States, I changed my plans. Still, some part of me felt guilty for having the privilege to go to a place where queer people are accepted as a valuable part of society and as first-class citizens (at least in the eyes of the law). As a middle-class, college-educated, English-speaking white girl, I felt living in a place where my sexuality was accepted was almost too much to ask. With all the [political] battles on the American front, such as sodomy laws, anti-discrimination acts and now marriage, I felt I was retreating to a safe haven that most people did not (and still do not) have as an option [in the U.S].

One of the funny things about retreats, though, is that they often lead to personal awakenings and renewed energies.

## **Living in Amsterdam *(continued)***

Queer people in the U.S., even in the most accepting communities, still live in discrimination like fish live in water. We all can feel this. It surrounds us, filling our eyes and ears and mouths. While it is getting better, it is still there, tacit, below the surface, filtering down over our hearts and minds and bodies, clouding our feelings and thoughts and actions. I am still anxious stepping out into the world with my partner, still hurt and angry when people give us ugly looks on the street, still nervous that if I stop to kiss her someone might take the matter of my soul into their own misguided hands. I am lucky enough to live in Baltimore, a city where it is relatively safe to be out, but the fear never goes away. It seeps into every day, and while I fight it I eventually find myself doubting things that I know to be true.

Except in Amsterdam -- I never, not once, not for one moment felt unsafe or afraid in that city. I could walk through the Red Light District [a neighborhood with government regulated sex shops and prostitution] at midnight as a queer woman and not feel threatened. It helped that the number of violent crimes in the Netherlands was nearly nil, but I knew there was something else going on. After three weeks of living without that sort of daily apprehension, I finally realized it was that the citizens of Amsterdam had basic respect for their fellow people, that they recognized that no matter how much they may not like someone, all people are human beings with human rights.

Imagine having a constant headache that burrows deep inside your skull and sets up residence, throbbing every day until you do not even feel it anymore, until it is just a fact of life. Then one day your headache suddenly stops, and for the first time in a long time you can see and think and feel clearly. Amsterdam was a place where I could relax, wash that film of hatred and

*(continued on p. 8)*

## Living in Amsterdam

(continued from p. 7)

fear off, breathe deeply and really feel in the center of my being that I could trust people to respect me as a human being like themselves. After the absolute joy and relief of that feeling, imagine my pain reflecting on the lack of it at home. You never know just how bad it is until you see something different.

Living in Amsterdam, being able to experience a society where sexuality is not a life-threatening issue, and seeing, finally, an example of my most distant hopes for humanity realized, that was how living in Amsterdam gave me hope for the U.S.

We are wishing and acting and arguing and hoping and fighting and dreaming for a place where we are safe albeit that I did not have any idea what that place would really look like. I have a much better idea now. I am not saying that Amsterdam is a queer Never-Never Land; the city struggles with human nature as much as any other and operates on a system of government crucially different than our own. Living in Amsterdam gave me a shining example of what to work toward and where to start. It let me breathe long enough—in some way—to heal myself of long-forgotten wounds before jumping back into the fray here at home.

I cannot say yet that studying in Amsterdam truly 'changed my life.' Looking back brings happy, peaceful memories and also a shocking realization of how much further we have to push our country before achieving that sort of peace. One thing I can say for certain: Living in Amsterdam sure as hell improved my outlook.

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“Courage is fear that has said its prayers.”

- **Dorothy Bernard**

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## Making a Home in Seville

By: Charles Pangan Diaz, University of Washington

Before leaving for Seville (Sevilla), Spain, I had always wondered what my life would be like over here across the Atlantic, and imagining the possibilities and thinking about what this city had to offer. It had often times made me wide-eyed and impatient to go. When signing-up for study abroad programs, you can not help but get excited and think about what amazing things you are about to embark on and discover. Yet these brochures never tell you that the greatest lesson you can and will ever learn from this experience is the one about yourself.

From the moment you step on that plane and leave behind that which is familiar, you face a reality of re-learning who you are without the same variables that have helped to shape you before studying abroad. This means facing what seem like age-old issues and idiosyncrasies that vary from culture to culture, and what you thought would be socially accepted in one, may not be in another. I feel that this is especially pronounced in those who fall under a minority group (though this is usually the case, since a study abroad student automatically falls under this category by leaving his/her country).

My reality of being a homosexual American male did not hit me until arriving in Seville. Since southern Spain is a very *machista* society, it is easy to feel ostracized, but only if you let it happen to you. True, you have come to immerse yourself in a new world and a new culture, wherever it may be, but never let it compromise who you are. This means that when your host-family asks you at the dinner table about those kinds of things [such as sexuality and dating], you tell them the truth instead of playing along, because there are so many consequences that can come out of it, especially since many Spanish host-mothers enjoy playing the role of "match-maker." Do not follow my example of "playing along" because it led to an awkward blind-date [with a woman] where I had to  
(continued on p.9)

## Making a Home in Seville

(continued from p. 9)

confess in the end and wishing the whole time that my host mother had set me up with a nice Spaniard instead. Remember, you can teach them something, too, and help to eradicate their own ignorance.

Additionally, gay life exists no matter where you study. To the degree in which it is outwardly displayed is another question. At first, I thought that there was no gay community in Seville, but after being here for seven months, I can say that there is a plethora of gay bars, clubs, and institutions. How I came to discover this was by meeting people at bars by coincidence that did not even cater to homosexuals. However, if you do not find yourself as lucky as I was, I encourage doing a little research before going abroad. The Internet is a fantastic resource filled with websites of a multitude of gay and lesbian support groups and

organizations, and have a lot of information about where you're headed and how homosexuality may be perceived in that culture.

As I sit under the sun, which illuminates the Guadalquivir River here in Seville, I look back at the past seven months that I have spent here in Spain. Though I have faced many challenges and have been confronted by many self doubts, there are no words to describe how enriching this experience has been, and it would not have been as rewarding had I not faced this challenge. Though George Orwell and Antonio Machado wrote literary masterpieces about their experiences in Spain, this is a small, less beautifully-written one of my very own. I am proud to call Seville my home, no matter where I may be in the future.

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### RAINBOW SIG 2003-2004 MEMBERSHIP FORM

#### NAFSA: Association of International Educators

All members pledge to support the goals of the Rainbow SIG: to counsel international students and study abroad students who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered; to support gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered professionals in international education; and to combat homophobia, heterosexism and transphobia within NAFSA.

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I can assist the SIG by:     Doing a session at a local or regional NAFSA     Contributing to the newsletter  
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