

Professor wins award for LGBTQ advocacy

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<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/830/professor-wins-award-for-lgbtq-advocacy/>

Denise Clark's belief in equity for students in all areas of education, both inside and outside the classroom, is apparent in her teaching and support of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) students, faculty and staff within the University of Wisconsin System.

On April 5, Clark received the P.B. Poorman Award for outstanding achievement on behalf of LGBTQ people at the third-annual UW System LGBTQ Spring Conference held in Green Bay.

Clark, assistant professor of special education at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, was recognized for her dedication to LGBTQ student advocacy, work that not only affected those at UW Oshkosh, but also made an impact system wide.

The inaugural award commemorates the work of Paula "P.B." Poorman, a founder of the UWS LGBTQ Inclusivity Initiative and UW Whitewater faculty member, who died in an automobile accident in 2007.

"This award was important to me in several ways," Clark said. "I had a personal connection to P.B. Poorman before her death, so receiving an award in honor of a person I highly respected was doubly meaningful."

Ann Malain, UW Oshkosh Counseling Center associate director, introduced the P.B. Poorman Award. "Dr. Poorman's contributions to improving the lives of LGBTQ students, faculty and staff through research, teaching, service and advocacy all served to define and lay out the identity and activities of the system-wide Inclusivity Initiative," she said.

Clark serves as an advisor to the Rainbow Alliance for H.O.P.E. (Helping Others Perceive Equality), a LGBTQ and ally organization at UW Oshkosh.

"When I see the students' growth, pride and hard work to achieve equity, it inspires and motivates me to continue to advocate for change," Clark said.

Clark believes that involvement in the Rainbow Alliance for H.O.P.E. can be helpful for both students and faculty. "Students need to see role models of LGBTQ people. They need to know there are safe places on campus," she said.

One student wrote the following in nominating Clark for the award: "Her unique perspective heavily influenced positive changes on our campus, both behind the scenes and with the already visible queer culture, ensuring that UWO's queer community would not stay in the shadows of heterosexuality."

Clark includes the issues of the LGBTQ community in her course curriculum and works to have other faculty members mirror this in their own courses.

“When students get to know an LGBTQ person and take a class from him or her, they improve their understandings of LGBTQ people and break down some of their misconceptions,” Clark said. “When students see real people struggling for fair and equitable treatment, they become aware of why these basic civil rights are important for everyone.”

Clark worked to develop a SAFE (Students and Faculty for Equality) training program on campus that teaches students, staff and faculty how to become an ally and source of support for other LGBTQ people at UW Oshkosh. Attendees also learn about gay and lesbian issues and stereotypes.

Clark co-chaired the LGBTQ Advocacy and Education Council with Elizabeth Cannon, interim women’s studies director at UW Oshkosh, before it included other UW System schools. Cannon nominated Clark for the award.

“The council’s success is due in a large way to Denise’s commitment,” she said. “I cannot think of a better recipient for the Dr. P.B. Poorman Award. Denise has been a major force for good on both our campus and system wide.”

The LGBTQ Advocacy and Education Council’s mission is to “affirm the lives, experiences and presence of LGBTQ faculty, staff and students at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh,” according to the council’s Web site (www.uwosh.edu/LGBTQ). The council focuses on education, building a positive campus environment and evaluating the University’s progress in terms of LGBTQ issues.

Cannon credits Clark with the system-wide transformation of the council and the three working subcommittees, which focus on advocacy, education and pride.

The pride subcommittee has created a Lavender Graduation ceremony to celebrate the achievements of LGBTQ students at UW Oshkosh, while the advocacy subcommittee has championed a referendum opposing the Statewide Marriage Ban.

Clark also previously served as the director of the Inclusivity Initiative, working to advance a system-wide climate study first envisioned by Poorman. She organized the inaugural UW System LGBTQ conference in 2006.

Clark had joined Poorman in working with the Inclusivity Initiative.

“For me, P.B. Poorman provided a confidential listening ear, a reality check when others said LGBTQ rights were not important, a strong moral compass in a place steeped in bureaucracy and perhaps most importantly, a good swift kick in the pants at times of hesitation,” Clark wrote of Poorman.

The P.B. Poorman Award committee specifically looks for nominees that extend their involvement beyond any assigned responsibilities. Award recipients must be currently working in or attending a UW System institution at least half time.

Susan Simmons, Poorman’s life partner of 19 years, expressed her gratitude for the award’s creation at the ceremony.

“I know Paula would be incredibly proud that it was the Inclusivity Initiative that honored her with an award named after her. Paula would not, however, be surprised or baffled at the first recipient, who she held in the highest esteem and considered a good friend,” Simmons said.