

History of Seminole Allies & Safe Zones at Florida State University by Josh Kinchen

Origins

The program started as Safe Zone-Tallahassee in 1997 by Lee McNeil, a counselor in the Student Counseling Center. Having been part of the Gay Liberation Front (the original predecessor of Pride Student Union), as an undergraduate student in the early 1970s, and one of the founders of Gay Peer Volunteers, a peer mentoring program, as a graduate student in the late 1980s, she recognized the need for a visible network of allies across campus.

Safe Zone-Tallahassee

In early 1997, a small grant of \$750 from the Parent's Fund was used to produce a mass mailing to all faculty/staff (around 4500 people) at FSU and purchase the original Safe Zone symbol magnets. During this process, an administrative assistant expressed concern about placing materials that affirmed a LGBT identity in staff members' mailboxes. The letter from this administrative assistant was subsequently used during Safe Zone information sessions to provide demonstrate the need for a visible network of allies. During this time, a steering committee was formed, to help increase the reach of the program and keep the campus community invested. Listserv emails were periodically sent to keep Safe Zone-Tallahassee members engaged. Anyone who was interested, could request a Resource Guide, which consisted of

It was decided that no screening process would be done to limit membership. Rather, the clear stating of the mission/ideals of the program and anyone who felt they agreed with the following could be a Safe Zone:

"People who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered are an invisible minority, and so are the people who are supportive of them. The Safe Zone program provides a way for supportive people to identify themselves in a subtle manner. Displaying a Safe Zone symbol means you are a person who is informed about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered resources, respectful of confidentiality, supportive of lesbigay concerns, and willing to make referrals as needed. A symbol does NOT mean that you are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered or that you will participate in any lesbigay activities."

Typically anywhere from 12-14 faculty, staff, and student would attend these information sessions. However, many faculty/staff contacted the Safe Zone-Tallahassee Coordinator to say that they could not attend but expressed their support for the program and requested the Resource Guide and Magnet.

In December 1997, the founding Coordinator Lee McNeal left the Student Counseling Center to pursue a new career in Information Technology. Another staff counselor, Gail Palo, took over Coordinator responsibilities. From that time, sponsorship of the program grew to include donations of resources from the FSU Police Department, the FSU LGBT Student Union/Student Government Association, the Family Tree (a local LGBT community center), regional organizations (Leon County Health Coalition) and national organizations ("Do Something" campaign). These contributions were used to purchase

promotional items such as magnets, stickers, lapel pins, door signs, desk cards, buttons, and drink cozies.

From 1997-2012, Safe Zone-Tallahassee was coordinated by Gail Palo through now called University Counseling Center. Periodic information sessions were still conducted, but the majority of outreach was done through individual requesting of a written Resource Guide and display of Safe Zone materials.

Transitions

In 2012, Student Government Association's Director Vicki Dobiyski approached the Counseling Center about taking over the coordination of the Safe Zone program. The goal of moving the program was a revitalization of the program in it becoming an interactive campus-wide program that would more actively engage the community in learning about LGBTQ+ topics and issues. All program activities were suspended until a new coordinator was designated and new curriculum was developed.

In expanding the SGA advising team, Paul Hafner was hired to re-design and coordinate the new program. Paul brought experience working with LGBT students at Rutgers University. With the other SGA advisors, he researched and constructed a community learning model of facilitation for the program. Also, a new name was produced: Seminole Allies & Safe Zones.

Seminole Allies & Safe Zones

Titles are important. Names are important. The names of trainings are important, as they reflect, at least in part, the goal of the workshop or training. For this reason the training was intentionally renamed Seminole Allies & Safe Zones, rather than keeping with the previous title of Safe Zone – Tallahassee. While the previous program and curriculum sought to actively engage the FSU community with the greater Tallahassee region, this revamped program will initially focus on creating solid in-house Allies & Safe Zones for the FSU campus community before we expand our reach, services, and limited resources into the Tallahassee community.

The idea of creating any "Safe Zone" training implies that safety is about spaces, not people. Spaces do not transform people. When a homophobic, transphobic, unsafe person enters a room, that space is no longer safe. Instead we seek to train allies who can in turn create their own safe spaces around them.

Philosophically, to be a "friend" to the LGBTQ community implies that privilege and power only exist on the individual level. In the same vein that we hear students say, "I'm not racist, I have Black friends," or "Some of my best friends are gay!" does not take into account the systemic and pervasive forms of racism, the same is true for the roots of heteronormativity and homophobia in our daily lives.

The term "ally," is not without its problems and limitations, however, within social justice education, across identities, the term "ally" has been adopted to offer a frame of reference for those individuals in the privileged social category to self-identify, marking themselves as working for a movement, able to see and assess their own privilege and power in relation to the marginalized group and committed to social change, beyond being social acquaintances to friends.

Seminole Allies & Safe Zones seeks to combine the personal, political, and professional by asking our participants to question their ingrained social stereotypes both in training and continuing into daily life. This method requires more effort, more time and can be confusing, frustrating, or even scary, but ultimately it allows participants to achieve a more fully realized identity as an ally.

Paul Hafner left FSU in June 2013, after the initial design work was completed. Student Government Association's Associate Director Danielle Morgan Acosta took over Coordinator duties to launch the program in the Fall of 2013.

The Seminole Allies & Safe Zones 101 workshop is a three-hour basic training in allyship and contemporary LGBTQ+ issues. Topics of discussion include: sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, biological sex, current LGBTQ vocabulary, how to be an effective ally, and exploring further allyship possibilities

With a hand-selected team of co-facilitators, nearly 200 faculty, staff, and students participated in the Seminole Allies & Safe Zones 101 workshops. This list included the Division of Student Affairs (DSA) Director-level Central Staff. In May 2014, the program was awarded DSA Program of the Year.

Further expansion

In June 2014, Josh Kinchen was hired to become the new Coordinator. Josh brought experience working with LGBTQ+ students from the University of North Carolina Wilmington. He was initially tasked with the continuation of the Seminole Allies 101 workshops and the expansion of the program into a second-level of programming.

In Fall 2014, the Seminole Allies & Safe Zones 200-level workshops were launched. These are optional, uniquely numbered, two-hour topical workshops that cover more specific, nuanced discussions of LGBTQ+ identities and issues. Also, the Coordinator introduced 30-minute Information Sessions for departments or organizations who want their employees or members to know more about Seminole Allies and entice them to attend a workshop.

In Summer 2015, Seminole Allies & Safe Zones 301: Train the Facilitator will be launched. This is a professional development opportunity for FSU Faculty and Staff to learn how to facilitate Seminole Allies & Safe Zones 101 workshops.

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