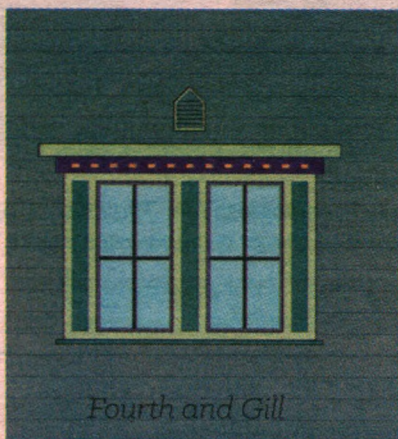
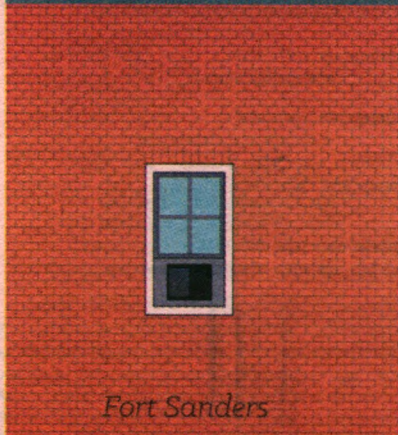




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Donna Braquet
Hannah Cather ·
The Daily Beacon

OUtreach Center director celebrates five years of mentorship, inclusion

Tanner Hancock
Copy Editor (@TannerHancock26)

When she realized she was gay at the age of 15, Donna Braquet said she was faced with three choices: get married and live a lie, come out and risk losing her family or take her own life.

Despite the bleak set of choices, Braquet chose to press on and embrace her own identity and has since committed herself to helping others do the same.

This February will mark the fifth anniversary of the foundation of UT's

OUtreach Center, one of the only two college LGBTQ resource centers in the state and the only one to be found at a public university.

In many ways, this unique center represents the embodiment of Braquet's efforts to create a more welcoming and secure environment for LGBTQ students on campus. Since coming to UT in 2004, Braquet has facilitated several milestones for UT's LGBTQ minority, including the creation of the Chancellor's Commission for LGBT People in 2006, the inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity in the college's non-discrimination policy and the establishment of the OUtreach

Center, of which she has been the director since its creation in 2010.

A native of New Orleans and one-time Atlanta resident, Braquet said the "culture shock" she felt after moving to Knoxville was almost more than she could bear. Originally hired as a biology librarian, she said she only truly found her niche at UT when she began involving herself with the rights and well-being of the university's LGBTQ population.

"It was seen as sort of controversial at the time," Braquet explained of her initial efforts.

See **BRAQUET** on Page 3

Volume 128
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DONNA BRAQUET

continued from Page 1

Save for a discouraging blog post from then-state representative Stacey Campfield, the opening of the OUTreach Center was met with hundreds of supporters rather than protestors. This and other encouragement Braquet has received since her arrival in the Scruffy City, she said, helped convince her that Knoxville may in fact be her new and permanent home.

"If I were to lose my job or get fired for that then this probably wasn't a place I wanted to be anyway," Braquet said. "It's given me a purpose to be here."

Like many openly gay and lesbian people across the world, Braquet eventually had to face a moment of revelation. When she shared her true self with her mother, she chose not to mince words on the emotional weight and difficulty that the act still carries in her mind today.

"I still think it's the hardest thing I've ever done in my life," Braquet said. "Everything after that seems easy."

Braquet's mother reacted by initially blaming

herself for her daughter's lesbian identity while being gripped with fear by what her future might hold.

Fortunately for Braquet, her story didn't end with the familial estrangement or rejection common for some in the LGBTQ community. No longer consumed by stereotypes of lesbians, Donna's mother now lives with her daughter and her wife in their home.

Kayla Frye, a junior in global studies and staff member at the OUTreach Center, said she views Braquet as someone more than willing to sacrifice her time to help others discover who they are.

"She's very relaxed and really just engages with all of us," Frye said. "I don't think I can overstate enough of how much of herself she puts into the center."

Ultimately, Braquet's greatest joy comes in interacting with the students, helping them to accept themselves for who they rather than the labels placed upon them by others.

"I find it so rewarding," Braquet said, "being able to meet with students and say 'you are fine just the way you are. There is nothing wrong with you, not matter what you've been told or what you might say.'"

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