

the Who

Meredith G. F. Worthen, Ph.D.

I am an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Oklahoma. I live in Norman with my partner and my three furry children. My passions are education, equality, empathy, and justice. I created The Welcoming Project in 2011, a non-profit that promotes the visibility of LGBTQ-friendly businesses, organizations, health care providers, and churches. It has been an exciting journey thus far and I hope that The Welcoming Project will continue to contribute to differences in my community and others. Photo by Robin Dörner.



1. Tell us about how your early childhood shaped your thoughts on fairness & equality. I grew up in a suburb of Dallas in very a liberal and supportive family. As a child, I was always concerned with everyone being treated fairly. Later when I got a little older, I realized that empathy was my main goal. I didn't understand why some people that were labeled as "different" didn't get the same respect as those who were labeled as "normal." It was really frustrating to me. That is probably why I gravitated toward sociology in college. Fast forward a bit and as a professor of sociology, I continue to try and educate others toward empathy with the ultimate goals of equality and justice.

2. You are an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Oklahoma. How does

your career influence your development of The Welcoming Project?

As a professor, I have the unique privilege of exploring diverse topics and I have always been interested in examining LGBTQ sexualities through a sociological lens. Another exciting part of my job is that I get to work with energetic undergraduate students. In fact, my work with undergraduate students, along with my own experiences and conversations with other activists, inspired me to create The Welcoming Project. My undergraduate students were telling me about their experiences in this community and others, they were telling me about stigma, hate, and injustice. I felt that I could help make a difference through encouraging local businesses, organizations, health care providers, and churches to display rainbow "All Are Welcome" signs in their windows. I hoped that these

signs would contribute to a cultural shift toward awareness about LGBTQ issues as well as a culture of acceptance and ideally, support of diversity.

3. Tell us about The Welcoming Projects' first annual 'Activist Scholarship.' This year, The Welcoming Project team is pleased to announce our very first annual undergraduate activist scholarship program. We wanted to give back to the community and reward an undergraduate student who presents an outstanding contribution to LGBTQ activism. "LGBTQ activism" can be interpreted broadly, however, successful applicants will have completed (or are currently completing) activities that benefit the LGBTQ community. More details about the scholarship can be found on our website: www.thewelcomingproject.org/scholarship.php. **The application deadline is March 1, 2013.** The award winner will be announced at our anniversary celebration in April 2013 in Norman, OK.

4. What keeps you motivated and passionate about what you do? My students, community members, and other activists allow me to stay motivated. When a student tells me that the rainbow "All Are Welcome" signs make a difference in his/her life, this renews my passion for what I am doing. When community members reach out to me and inquire about The Welcoming Project, this shows me that this community is responding to our goal to make Norman and other communities more welcoming to diversity. When I have the chance to meet other activists, my passion

for empathy and equality is renewed. I had the opportunity to meet Judy Shepard, Matthew Shepard's mother, last year at the White House LGBT Conference. She told me that what I am doing is important and valuable. I am humbled by this experience and motivated to keep making a difference. I see The Welcoming Project as the beginning of creating a culture that supports and embraces diversity.

5. Goals for the future both personally and professionally? The Welcoming Project continues to grow and the future of The Welcoming Project is bright. In addition to our undergraduate scholarship program and our upcoming Anniversary Celebration in April 2013, we will continue to host events in October to celebrate LGBT History month. In October 2014, we are planning a live theatrical performance of *The Laramie Project*, a Moisés Kaufman play. Please check out our events on our website: www.thewelcomingproject.org

We need your help! Your tax-deductible donations are needed to keep The Welcoming Project alive and flourishing. To contribute, go to <http://www.thewelcomingproject.org/donations.php>.



www.thewelcomingproject.org



Meredith with Brian Eddins, co-founders of The Welcoming Project. Photo provided.