A RAINBOW AFFAIR: DARING TO PROVIDE VISIBILITY FOR EVERYONE

Sofiya Dahman, MLS, Resource Delivery and ILL Librarian, University of Memphis & Joi Phillips, MLIS, Assistant Director, Delta State University

BRANDING, COLLABORATORS & PROMOTION

We formed a committee that included library staff and university employees who have expressed their interest in diversity engagements. The Okra Out Front committee included library staff, faculty, students, and community members. We collaborated with QEP, DMI, DSU Department of Music, DSU Art Department, DSU Languages and Literature, the Gender and Sexuality Alliance, the DSU Gender Studies Group, The VP of Student Affairs, DSU Diversity Committee. The name: Okra - the unofficial mascot of Delta State University.

Okra Out Front - October is a great month for campus outreach initiatives. October is Coming Out Day: one month in the lead-up to the October 11th anniversary of the Stonewall uprising.

Okra Out Front: okraoutfrontdsu.com

ASSessment

We evaluated our REASONS & GOALS:

- Why Okra Out Front and similar LGBTQ+ celebrations are important in a small Mississippi town?
- Support for LGBTQ+ people based on religious beliefs.
- We INVOLVED OUR COMMUNITY & ALLIES: The Library and DSU Administration, Rob Hill - Human Rights Campaign MS, Dr. Jaime Harker - Owner of Violet Valley, Bookstore & Director of the Sarah Isom Center for Women and Gender Studies at OleMiss, Dr. David Bylais - former DSU faculty and our first Okra Out Front guest speaker, our fabulous Memphis drag queens - Iris Le’Fleur, Zoey Adams, Aubrey Ombre; Michelle Johannsen - Quality Enhancement Plan Coordinator; Dr. Vernell Bennett - Faux, VP of Student Affairs, Arlene Sanders - DSU Diversity Committee Chair; Free Mamm-Hugs - MS, My Brother’s Keeper; Danza Locke Rainfire - Delta Art Alliance; our talented student performers and the DSU marching band; local religious leaders; the Chief of Police, and all 500+ attendees who showed up in support of our cause.

We measured the success of the program based on attendance and engagement.

There was a need for LGBTQ+ outreach programming on college campuses.

Okra Out Front Planning Committee's supporters, brave performers, and caring humans. We wish there is room to acknowledge all discourses that support Queer people in MS and are grateful that you put your whole hearts into this one!

RESULTS

We have built a successful annual LGBTQ+ outreach event that allows us to bring awareness to campus, celebrates and gives visibility to people in the Queer community, includes educators from other state higher ed and nonprofit organizations, shares personal stories, and embraces the need to support ALL people in our communities.


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Next Steps

State our commitment to diversity and inclusion and publish a statement on our library site.
Create libguide with LGBTQ+ resources and information about organizations that support Queer people in MS and in the Southeast region.
Educate our staff, campus and local community by leading them to reexamine and reflect on their knowledge, beliefs, and understanding about Queer people.
Continue our collaboration with other higher education and nonprofit institutions.
Build an Okra Out Front online archive to collect and make accessible photographs, personal stories, recordings, recordings from the events.

Acknowledgements & Contact Information

Our gratitude for making Okra Out Front a success for the last three years goes to many enthusiastic supporters, brave performers, and caring humans. We wish there is room to acknowledge all individually, but without the Okra Out Front Planning Committee’s hard work and creative ideas this event would not have been possible. We have enjoyed your support for many library initiatives and are grateful that you put your whole hearts into this one!

We will be happy to hear from you and share our experience.
Sofiya Dahman - spdahman@memphis.edu
Joi Phillips - jphillips@deltaestate.edu


References


REASONS & GOALS:

- Harmful and discriminatory anti-LGBTQ legislation – MS HB 1523, the Religious Liberty Accommodations Act – which allows businesses and organizations to deny services to LGBTQ+ people based on religious beliefs.
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