



## - Laramie could happen anywhere -

By Zach McGinnes  
Staff Writer

"This is not just another avocado festival. This is a real community event," said Charles Rice, executive director of the non-profit Gay Santa Barbara organization, referring to the Santa Barbara Pride Festival that begins Friday, as part of Santa Barbara Pride Week.

Rice attended City College four years ago, and observed very little support or a gay presence on campus. Unlike UCSB, no organized group sharing his sexual orientation existed for him of which to feel a part.

He believes this lack of identity fosters ignorance and ignorance leads to violence. Whereas the Queer Student Union at UCSB allows a place for a Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgender population to support each other, the absence of this organized acceptance leaves people feeling isolated.

Through being isolated, they are vulnerable. Because of all this, Rice believes that an event similar to the beating and death of Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming is very possible on campus.

The College has taken measures to promote understanding. On Wednesday, October 16 at the Business Communication Forum, a Laramie Project Panel Discussion will be held. This panel is sponsored by Student Health Services & Project HOPE. Rice was married for 20 years before he came out of the closet.

He divorced in 1991. The factor that made him come out was when his lover asked him where he stood. This inspired him to start going to a gay group at UCSB. "I was very nervous when I reached that door," Rice remembered, "but when I opened it, doors opened for me."

He was 40 years old at the time and had been working in the motorcycle business for nearly as long as he was married. "The world of motorcycles is not a gay-friendly environment. All that machismo and testosterone," Rice said.

Yet, it was actually through his motorcycle business that he had his "first real coming-out experience." He had procured a rubber stamp stating the words "gay money" which he stamped on all of his outgoing bills.

"When I gave that stack of bills to a guy at the post office he just looked up at me and said 'All right Charles!'" Rice gives teachers the credit for his motivation to start GSB. Rice said he "owes it all" to Bonnie Chavez, a City College business teacher who gave him the courage he needed.

He also names City College's Chief Financial Officer teacher Carla Long as a great influence on his success with GSB. Pacific Pride originally held the annual Pride Festival but dropped it two years ago because it was no longer part of their mission.

"We let it go for four months. We weren't quite ready to start it up right away," Rice said. But they finally did take advantage of the opportunity to run the festival. "The key is visibility," Rice said. As the head of GSB, it is his responsibility to make sure his organization has enough funding.

This means appealing to local businesses and chains such as Borders, by pointing out that gay tourists will bring and spend money in the city. It is important, Rice said, to make it clear that a GLBT-friendly city is a profitable one.

With the goal in mind to spread awareness about and provide support for Santa Barbara's gay community members and tourists, Rice works with international organizations such as Interpride. "We

[Back to Features](#)

help each other learn," Rice said, "We want to make sure that we are more diverse. We ask people questions."