Growing up, I just didn’t know who I was. I was who everyone else wanted me to be, but I just wasn’t who I was meant to be.”

This sentiment may be a familiar one to LGBTQ youth who grew up without being able to discover their sexuality, but for Jaqueline Torto, it could be a life or death situation.

Torto was born in Ghana but moved to a country in the Middle East at a young age. She spent the rest of her youth there before coming to Kent State in 2014 to study psychology.

Now a senior, Torto is out as a member of the LGBTQ community. She has also served the international community as the International Student Senator for Undergraduate Student Government.

While state-sanctioned violence isn’t specific to Middle Eastern countries, many countries in the Middle East consider homosexuality a crime punishable by jail time or death.

Due to the taboo nature of being queer in her country, Torto is only out to a select amount of people.

“But, I’m out here (in Kent),” Torto said. “I’m out to my friends. But, I’m just not out to my family at home.”

Viewing homosexuality as worthy of repression isn’t specific to the Middle East, despite popular misconceptions that Middle Eastern nations are uniquely homophobic. Remaining closeted may also be a familiar situation for queer Americans.

In the United States, many LGBTQ youth find themselves in danger of violence, homelessness and homophobic sentiment just for being open about their sexuality.

In 2017, the Human Rights Campaign tracked at least 28 instances of fatal violence against trans people in the U.S. Only a few months into 2018, they already know of at least six transgender individuals who were killed.

While the U.S. government may not sanction this violence as outwardly as Middle Eastern governments, it can make the thought of coming out daunting for many Americans. For people who grew up under especially oppressive regimes, this fear can be heightened.

Torto said she has many queer friends here in Kent and interacts with many international students, but rarely sees the two groups intersect.

“I don’t think I have queer international friends that are actually out,” she said. “I mean, I try not to judge people or try to out people, but sometimes some of the international students I meet talk like they are [queer] and I’m like, you know what? I’m here, I’m gonna wait. I’ve been there.”

In February, Haaretz released a piece called “What it’s like to be gay in Gaza.” In it, the subject of the article, going by the name Jamil, mentions that he doesn’t know any lesbians because it’s even more difficult for women to explore their sexuality in Gaza.

“There are too many restrictions on girls, things that are controlling them,” Jamil told the publication. “Women don’t dare to talk about those things, even among themselves.”

In the U.S., religious texts like the Bible can be twisted into supporting homophobic ideas. Similarly, the Koran can undergo the same treatment in countries where Islam is the most common religion.

In 2016, following the shooting at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Doha News published a piece written by an anonymous Muslim man titled “What it’s like to be gay and Qatari.” In

From Ghana to the Middle East to the U.S., a Kent State student shares how she went from the anguish of internalized homophobia to the contentment of self-acceptance.
it, she man - going by the name Majid - writes about the homophobia he witnessed in his coun-
try following news of the shooting.

Majid looming the intersection of his faith and 
his sexuality, writing:

"I am in constant turmoil and anguish – how do I reconcile who I am with my faith that says I shouldn't exist? I am the worst of the worst, I am vermin."

Torto, too, has had to work through internal 
homophobia fostered by living in a society that 
believes you shouldn't exist.

"I used to be very homophobic, which is very 
hard on myself considering that I'm also a part 
of the community," Torto said. "It's just hard 
'cause I learned to hate myself."

Internazional, homophobia, as well, is not spe-
cific to people who grew up in the Middle East.

American LGBTQ youth often grow up in 
households and communities that won't accept 
them, which can lead to internal hatred. With-
out a support system, young people may struggle 
to reconcile this self-hatred.

According to the Trevor Project, "each instance of 
LGBT victimization, such as physical or verbal 
harassment or abuse, increases the likelihood of 
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Internal homophobia, I think, is worse than 
anything because it's the virus within," Kam-
moson said in the article.

In May, Torto will graduate with a degree in 
psychology. She intends to stay in the area to 
pursue her masters. As for going home, Torto 
says she's "not ready to go home."

"I haven't been home since I came here as a fresh-
man," she said. "It doesn't really bother me. I 
mean, I miss my family, but then again, I get 
to be happy."

Returning to the country where she grew up isn't 
out of the question, though. Torto intends to 
return home sometime after her graduate stud-
ies to try to create change in the mental health 
field there.

"That's something that really bothers me," she 
said, referring to the way mental health is over-
looked. "Growing up, I just had to deal with it 
on my own and I recently just got help and it 
feels great, you know? And I want to do that for 
other people back home."

Torto believes that coming to Kent helped her 
become more confident about her sexuality, 
instead of trying to be the person that people 
expected of her.

"No one can come up to me and tell me who I 
am because no one knows me more than I know 
myself," Torto said. "Coming here helped me 
unlearn that hatred and I actually started to love 
myself more." ▲

“A December 2016 article published by the New 
York Times, titled "Coming Out in Lebanon," 
profilied six LGBTQ people living openly in 
Lebanon. One of the women, Joyce Kammos, 
spoke with the Times who referred to her com-
ing out as a "struggle and a slow process."

"Internal homophobia, I think, is worse than 
anything because it's the virus within," Kam-
moson said in the article.

Words by | Natasha Gaj
Photo by | Dustin Massengill

LGBTQ-AFFIRMING STUDENT GROUPS AT 
CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITIES

What's it like to start an LGBTQ student group at a 
Christian college? Students from three northeast Ohio 
Christian schools explain.

I t's there a place for LGBTQ people and allies 
who practice Christianity? Despite the belief 
that you can't, LGBTQ Christians exist 
and they're able to live without self-hated or 
spreading hate towards the queer community.

LGBTQ affirming is a term commonly used to 
describe Christianity that does not condemn 
queer people as sinners. Since the Bible has 
multiple different interpretations, LGBTQ af-
firmation typically either reinterprets specific 
Bible verses which homophobic Christians use 
to justify bigotry or deems verses as ir-
relevant when they contradict the ideology of 
"living thy neighbor".

Maddox Strawd is a sophomore music studies 
major and history major at Walsh University, a 
private Catholic college in North Canton. 
Being an LGBTQ-affirming Catholic, she said and 
hers peers are currently establishing a monthly dine-
and-chat called the "Walsh LGBTQ Family 
Dinner" for students, faculty and community 
members who are LGBTQ or allies. Though 
Walsh University is a Catholic institution, peo-
ple of different beliefs are welcomed, as well.

"Walsh prides itself on its diversity, so they've 
been pushing to stop any kind of discrimination 
or bullying on campus," said Strawd. "It isn't 
intolerated at all, and unlike in high school they 
actually take care of it."

The dinner is growing, now with about 25 at-
tendees, but it has faced limitations. Before the 
Walsh LGBTQ Family Dinner was approved, 
there were 14 previous attempts to initiate an 
LGBTQ organization at Walsh University.

"The conditions at first were we weren't allowed to 
advertise, everything was through word of mouth 
or invitation only, so we couldn't send out emails, 
we couldn't put up posters," Strawd said. "We 
didn't have a name really at first, either."

The dinner is still not recognized as a Walsh or-
ganization. With the obstacles students at Walsh 
face, will their dinner survive? LGBTQ groups 
are not always welcomed well at Christian affili-
ated institutions.

In 2010, a student of Walsh's Evangelical 
student group, Malone University, attempted to start an 
LGBTQ support group called MU Safe Space. 
There was significant pushback, according to the 
group's founder and graduate of Malone, Sam 
Smith. Smith said the university didn't allow the 
group to be a campus approved organization. It 
briefly ran until it disbanded in 2014 for un-
known reasons.

"There's a lot of queer students at Malone, there 
always will be and as far as I know they don't 
have a group anymore, they don't have a place to 
go," Smith said.

Another Catholic institution in northeast Ohio, 
John Carroll University (JCU), initiated an LG-
BTQ club called Allies. Unlike Malone's group, 
Allies has been recognized as a JCU organization 
for almost two decades as a group for LGBTQ 
students and supporters to discuss LGBTQ top-
ics and issues.

Justin Spayde is a freshman political science ma-
ajor and communication major who is starting his 
first year at JCU as treasurer of Allies.

"I joined at the beginning of last semester be-
cause a lot of the people here are not the most 
open-minded," Spayde said. "And because of 
that I kind of wanted to seek out people that I 
know would have similar viewpoints and experi-
ences as I did."

Not only has JCU's Allies been successful, but it 
hosts a drag show for the whole school every 
fall semester. Two drag queens who graduated 
from John Carroll and were involved in Allies 
performed at Kent State's Queen Esther's Ball, 
put on by Hillel and the LGBTQ student center 
in March.

Allies isn't the only LGBTQ program at the uni-
versity. Q@JCU is essentially the faculty version 
of Allies and Safe Zone is a program to train 
faculty on how to create safe spaces and appro-
riately address homophobia.

Director for the Center for Student Diversity 
and Inclusion at John Carroll and Allies' advi-
sor, Salomon Rodeno, said he believes these 
types of programs and groups allow people to 
acknowledge their identity.

"I think it's important for representation, I think it's 
important in terms of legacy," Rodeno said.