

# AT THE CENTER OF IT ALL

Bob Schoenberg has been leading Penn's LGBT Center since before there even was one, really. As he retires after 35 years of caring counsel and fierce advocacy, the campus home he built is being renamed in his honor. **By Dave Zeitlin**





**A**lmost every day, from the end of summer into the start of the 2017-18 school year, Erin Cross Gr'10 watched with interest as a diminutive, soft-spoken freshman walked into Penn's Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) Center with the same question.

"Where's Bob? I want to talk to Bob."

After a while, Cross, then the Center's senior associate director, asked the freshman why he always sought out Bob Schoenberg GrS'89, the longtime director and a campus fixture since the early 1980s.

"And he goes, 'I like him'" Cross recalls, "He's genuine. He's friendly. And he has a personality."

That freshman—Oscar Moguel—never knew anything about Bob Schoenberg until last October, when he was flown to campus through the Penn Early Exploration Program (PEEP), which is designed for students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and/or historically underrepresented groups. A first-generation Guatemalan American from Houston, Oscar was hurting at the time, looking to start a new chapter, far from Texas. And when he stumbled upon the LGBT Center, which he hadn't even known existed, he broke away from the other PEEP visitors to sit down with Schoenberg, opening up about his difficulties back home.

For the next hour, Oscar told him everything. How he struggled to come out to his deeply religious family. How, as a high school sophomore, he briefly ran away from home, only to find his way to one of his two sisters, to whom he finally blurted out, "I'm gay." How his sister cried when she heard him say that and how her husband relayed the news to his mother, even though he told them he wasn't ready for that. How he still hasn't come out to his brother and father because he's afraid of how they'll react.

As he always does, Schoenberg listened intently, offering the kind of empathy Oscar rarely got back home, before connecting him to other gay Penn students, including one whose family also hails

from Guatemala. For Oscar, the sitdown was so "impactful" he decided to apply to Wharton Early Decision. And as soon as he arrived on campus, in late July for a pre-freshman transition program, the first thing he did was go visit Schoenberg. He returned often to his new place of acceptance, his new home.

"I never met my grandparents, and I never had those figures in my life," Oscar says. "I'm not close with my family. At school, my teachers I'd consider my closest friends. When I came here, I was looking for that figure, a father figure, or a friend, or someone who would fulfill that role. Bob just fit it."

For the last 35 years, Schoenberg has been that kind of figure to countless other students looking for support, growing the LGBT Center from a tiny office with one part-time advisor (him) into one of the country's oldest and most active college institutions of its kind.

But Oscar was one of the last students to whom he offered such guidance, at least in an official capacity. On September 12, Schoenberg retired as the LGBT Center director, passing the torch to Erin Cross, hired as his successor after a national search. He was then showered with praise on October 14 by many of the alums he helped during a celebration for the LGBT Center's 35th anniversary and the renaming of the Carriage House—its beautiful home at 39th and Spruce since 2002—in his honor.

"He was such a kind and concerned person—that's what strikes you first," says David Goodhand C'85, who spoke at the ceremony and whose gift in 2000 made the Carriage House renovations possible. "He's going to listen and pay attention. Nothing was too slight or too insignificant for his concern. It really gave you a warm feeling. And I also have to say he was the first person a generation removed from me that personally said to me that it was quite OK to be gay."

Three decades after David Goodhand first met Schoenberg, Oscar Moguel felt the same thing. And even though he was

sad to find out his new mentor was retiring, he felt at peace thanks in large part to Schoenberg showing him the way. During Oscar's first semester on campus, he grew close to many other people at the LGBT Center; he joined the Wharton Alliance, an LGBTQ pre-professional organization; and he began working at a digital marketing company in Center City.

On Schoenberg's last day in the office, the newly confident Penn freshman delivered him a letter and some Hershey's Kisses. Then, he said goodbye to a man he only knew for less than a year, but who undoubtedly changed his life.

"People like Bob are why people are proud to be in the LGBT community," Oscar says. "They see someone who embodies hope and moving forward. The Penn community was really lucky to have had him for as long as it did."

## Rooting for the Underdog

**T**hings at Penn did not always feel as hopeful for the University's gender and sexual minorities. Alumni from the early 1980s who went on to become the LGBT Center's most active supporters can remember how different it was back then.

Susan Miller C'83 GEd'83 G'95 Gr'01, now a professor of childhood studies at Rutgers University-Camden, remembers death threats, anti-gay graffiti, and obnoxious behavior from fraternities, including one whose members sat on a roof and held up a special sign for her that read: "*Susan Miller, you're a dyke.*" Liz Cooper C'83, a law professor at Fordham University, recalls that same fraternity yelling slurs as openly gay students walked by. Even worse, one of her friends was sent a dead animal through the mail.

"Going back to the early 1980s, Penn was a very, very hard place to be gay," says Cooper, who decided not to come out at the time. "It was a place many of us felt physically and emotionally unsafe."

"It was bad," adds Miller, who was publicly out and involved with gay and les-

bian politics on campus. “I took a lot of heat in those years.”

The tinderbox moment came when a flamboyant sophomore was sucker-punched while walking down a hall in his college house, causing him to bleed profusely from the ear. The incident drew campus-wide attention, and a group of students, including Cooper and Miller, banded together to lobby Penn’s administration for more support.

Luckily, they expected their voices to be heard. While there may have been some bigotry from the student body (as there was around the country at the time), the University had a fairly progressive LGBT policy. Not long before, Larry Gross—an openly gay professor who taught communications at Penn from 1968 to 2003 before moving on to USC—helped persuade Penn to adopt a policy prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in admissions, and hailed the University as being “ahead of the curve” in that regard. But both he and the students, many of whom were part of a group called Lesbians and Gays at Penn (LGAP), knew there was more work to be done. According to Gross, they pushed then-Vice Provost for University Life Janis Somerville for “designation of a full-time designated LGBT staff member in student life.”

Enter Bob Schoenberg.

Schoenberg actually first arrived at Penn in the mid-1960s to pursue a master’s in social work after getting his undergraduate degree from the University of Rochester. The move came with plenty of internal deliberation, though. While in college, he was “in counseling because my gay sexual identity was burgeoning,” and he wasn’t sure how it might affect his career ambition.

“I said to a therapist, ‘I don’t know how I’m presuming to go to social-work school when I’m dealing with this thing in my life,’” he recalls. “And she said, ‘*Au contraire*, people who are dealing with issues and have successfully dealt with issues are the best people to help other people.’”

**“I said, ‘I’m not gonna be in the closet anymore. I’m gonna be starting with a bunch of new people. And I’m just going to be completely out.’”**

He was glad he took her advice. And after completing a two-year program at Penn in 1968, Schoenberg started on his quest to help people in Philadelphia, taking a job at St. Christopher’s Hospital for Children to counsel special-needs kids. It was gratifying work that came with another memorable message.

“My mother used to say to me, ‘You’re always rooting for the underdog,’” he says. “Little did she know that I thought of myself as an underdog.”

When Schoenberg returned to Penn in 1976 to work on a dissertation at Penn’s School of Social Policy & Practice—then called the School of Social Work—he wanted people to know he was an underdog. So he decided to publicly come out.

“In my sense, my dividing day was when I came to Penn a second time,” he says, borrowing the ‘dividing day’ line, like the “good gay man that I am,” from the Broadway musical *The Light in the Piazza*. “I said, ‘I’m not gonna be in the closet anymore. I’m gonna be starting with a bunch of new people. And I’m just going to be completely out.’”

Years later, while active in gay and lesbian peer counseling at the progressive Christian Association, Schoenberg applied for the new job that Larry Gross, Susan Miller, Liz Cooper and others helped push for. He recalls being hired as a point person for gay and lesbian concerns in the fall of 1982 after the University “cobbled together a very small amount of money.” Initially, he worked two days a week, tucked away in a corner of the Student Activities office. He soon

took a second part-time position as a therapist for gay students through the University Counseling Service, but at that point there wasn’t so much of a “center” as there was an “office.”

Still, it was a big deal—and quite rare. Schoenberg believes he was just the second or third professional staffer hired to counsel gay students by any college, and the *Gazette* underscored that point in a November 1983 story headlined, “Bob Schoenberg Has an Unusual Advisory Role.”

“It sounds so trite and so simple,” says Miller, his first work-study student, “but it really is about having an open door.”

“At least until Bob came on campus, there was no safe place or safe person for gay people to turn to,” adds Cooper, a former chair of the Undergraduate Assembly. “The fact that the University made a commitment to create Bob’s position and bring Bob to campus was a huge commitment to changing the status quo.”

By the time Schoenberg finished his dissertation in 1989, the position had evolved into a full-time administrative one. From there, he was able to hire more full-time employees and steadily build the center up to the point where Penn was recently ranked No. 1 in the country for LGBTQ students by *Best Colleges*.

“I don’t think any of us really imagined at the time that it would work out so well,” says Sam Fager GM’75 WG’87, who was then director of Penn Student Health and whom Schoenberg called “instrumental” in the LGBT Center’s creation. “He was the right person for that position ... And I’m very proud of the University because they

recognized the need. The Center's become not only an institution but also a meaningful place for people all around the country to see how things can be done well."

## A Transformative Experience

While some students in the early 1980s faced bigotry, David Goodhand's experience as a Penn undergraduate was positive. He had a great circle of friends, most of whom he had met as a freshman at Hill House. He organized Happy Hours and gay and lesbian dances at the Christian Association (then located on Locust Walk in what is now the ARCH building), where he met his long-term partner on the last day of classes of his sophomore year. And he grew close with Schoenberg soon after his position was created in 1982, remaining in touch with him after graduating and moving to Seattle to work for Microsoft.

In large part due to these "fantastic" memories, he wanted to give back to Penn and follow the lead of other "newly minted Microsoft millionaires" who viewed philanthropy as an investment. During a visit with Schoenberg in the late 1990s at his then-office at 3537 Locust Walk, he realized exactly what he wanted to invest in.

"Their new office was so scrunched—better than what it had been before, but it was incredibly chaotic," he says. "And I don't respond well to chaos. I think that's probably why I said, 'You need a new home.' And that's where the discussions on the Carriage House started."

While bigger than the previous space inside the Student Activities Office, the 3537 Locust Walk building was not ideal. Erin Cross, hired as the Center's second full-time employee in 1998, sat next to a photocopier and squirmed as she heard squirrels chewing through the wall. Schoenberg sat in a tiny room next to her—a "Pepto Bismol pink room," Cross laughs—on the third floor. There were no elevators, and it was not handicapped-accessible.

"We were bursting at the seams," Schoenberg says. "We needed more space. In effect, I was told if you want more space, you're gonna have to get someone to buy it for you."

Enter Goodhand, who, along with his then-partner Vincent Griski W'85, donated \$2 million toward the creation of a new center. Schoenberg then worked with former University president Judith Rodin CW'66 Hon'94 to find a suitable location, settling on the Carriage House—a historic building in need of major renovations.

"I think they designated this space in a kind of 'Give it to the gays, they'll make it beautiful' way," Schoenberg says wryly. "And they were right."

Schoenberg worked closely with an architect—"I sat in on so many meetings about sewer systems and HVAC," he says—while putting on his fundraiser hat to raise more money for the project, successfully soliciting donations from many people he said had never before donated to the University. "They finally found something that resonated with them," he says of the new and improved Center, which opened its doors in 2002.

"I would say Bob as a director of the center was absolutely a key factor in making a gift in the size we made it," Goodhand says. "We had confidence it would be a smart investment. And all of that analysis turned out to be true. The Center in the Carriage House has exceeded my wildest dreams. It's on the shortlist of one of the most satisfying things I've ever done."

For Goodhand, who now splits his time between New York and Philadelphia, seeing new batches of students enjoy the Center every year is "a bit of a high." They come for a variety of reasons. Some use the printers and computers that are refreshed every three years through a grant from the David Bohnett Foundation. Others enjoy the reading room that once was a hay loft. Each semester several new work-study students, some heterosexual, work the desk

and carry out other tasks supporting the Center's operations. Many more enjoy eating meals with friends in the part of the building that sometimes hosts lectures, parties, and even weddings.

"Now students arrive at Penn today showing up out and loud and proud—and that's fantastic," Goodhand says. "But I still hear stories of people who talk about the Center as a transformative experience for them."

Although he didn't become involved with the Center until his senior year, Sydney Baloue C'11 is one of the many former Penn students who feels that way, calling it a "space of home." As an undergrad, he identified as a lesbian and founded a group called Queer Ladies of Penn, something he said Schoenberg encouraged. Now he identifies as transgender and returns to the Center often, while pursuing a doctoral degree in Africana Studies.

In the five years in between his two stints at Penn, while living in Europe, Baloue followed from afar as Schoenberg and Cross successfully lobbied for the University to adopt transgender health coverage for students, faculty, and staff members through Penn Student Health, which includes both social and medical transitioning. For him, that proved once again that the LGBT Center—which officially added the *T* to its name in 1999—is not just an after-school space of solidarity but a crucial space for advocacy.

"I don't think people understand how big of a deal that is," Baloue says. "Literally there is a gorgeous building and people who are paid full-time to care for students who are otherwise completely marginalized in society. That's insane."

"I've been through a series of highly transphobic doctors, people that do not see me as human, who do not see me as legitimate, who do not see me as anything. And the fact that people like Bob and Erin made sure students wouldn't have to deal with any stigma around who they are as human beings and would have access to healthcare in that way is, honestly, incredible."

## End of an Era

As she lounges on one of the LGBT Center's couches, her three-legged dog Mack hiccuping on her lap, Erin Cross projects an aura of mellowness. When she first interviewed at Penn—wearing “business casual” attire, she was told—she got a little worried. There was Bob Schoenberg, meeting her for the first time, with a polo shirt buttoned all the way up to his neck.

“I was like, ‘Oh my gosh, this is a really stuffy place,’” Cross recalls. “At first, I was a little intimidated by Mr. Button Up. But I’ve gotten him to relax.”

“I still think that’s a nice look,” Schoenberg says, sitting next to her on the couch, on one of his last days as director.

Cross smiles, continuing: “But as I got to know Bob throughout the day and his commitment to the students and to supporting them and really being a groundbreaker—not just here but nationally—it was pretty phenomenal.”

Indeed, the two ended up working quite well together, to the point they could finish each other’s sentences (and sometimes bicker as work couples do). Cross even learned to appreciate some of Schoenberg’s quirks. How he loves language and argues about word usage. How he’s “one of the slowest walkers in the world.” How he’s the king of “Broadway musicals and TV,” and may be one of the few people who’s watched every season of *Survivor*. How he collects art, frogs and glasses, and still has typewritten notes from the 1980s and earlier. How he can be a perfectionist and fastidious and quite particular about certain things ... but is also as passionate as anyone she’s ever known.

“He leads with his heart,” Cross says, “and I think a lot of people don’t know that because he can be seen as brusque at times.”

Schoenberg’s big heart has been on display for 35 years, throughout the many pivotal moments in the Center’s, the University’s and the country’s history. In the 1980s, he created the first-



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ever campus brochure about AIDS as the epidemic began to engulf the gay community. When the planes struck the World Trade Center on 9/11, his social work background kicked in and he stayed by a frantic student's side all day and all night. And after last year's election of Donald Trump W'68 as president, which left many LGBT students shaken and worried about the future for sexual minorities, he offered as much support for students as he could muster.

Recalling that Penn President Amy Gutmann had also stopped into the Carriage House unannounced days after the election, just to check in on everyone, Schoenberg said that she has followed in the line of University presidents who have treated the LGBT Center very well. "I asked for something, I got it," he says. "More money, bigger office space, more staff—and so on." And the University, in turn, appreciates all he's done to engage alumni. Elise Betz GED'03, Penn's executive director of alumni relations, called Schoenberg "the facilitator of that connection for Penn, and for that we are immensely grateful."

Many alumni are active in PennGala, the University's official LGBT Alumni Association. That includes Joan Lau EAS'92 WG'08, a pharmaceutical executive who used to be on PennGala's board and credits Schoenberg for giving her "a sense of what's going on" and, more importantly, "making Penn a better place for everyone," whether or not they were gay.

"His passion goes beyond the LGBT community; his passion is Penn" she says. "Yes, it's an LGBT Center. But at the end of the day, I treat it as a place that welcomes all without regard for the curliness of your hair or the grayness of it or the lack of it. It's a place that doesn't ask but really envelops you with open arms.

"He has been a rock for the place. And a rock for me, too."

Like others, Lau knows Penn will feel a little different without him—one surprised alum told Cross, "I thought he was gonna die in his chair!"—but is confident

that Cross can fill his very big shoes. For her part, Cross is excited for the challenge that lies ahead and has a slew of objectives she's striving to reach. Among them: reengaging alums even more through PennGala, bringing in speakers from the community, continuing transgender initiatives, and working even closer with faculty and staff. (With Schoenberg's prodding, Penn granted domestic partner benefits to employees in 1994 and the LGBT Center, according to Cross, is "one of the few centers that works with staff, faculty, alumni and community members, in addition to graduate, professional, and undergraduate students." But she thinks a lot more can be done and that a list of out faculty members, for example, would serve as a great resource for students.)

"I want to put my own stamp on things," she says. "I think it's really important to acknowledge all of the work Bob has done. He is *the* trailblazer. We would not be where we are without him and there's not enough gratitude in the world that people at Penn can give him. But at the same time, as times have changed, I think there are different directions we can go and expand."

Tiffany Thompson, an associate director of the LGBT Center, said she "already felt a little bit of the loss" just a week after Schoenberg's official departure, lamenting those times when she heard him scream or gasp in his office because, well, "he doesn't hide how he feels." But in the three months they worked together, she learned valuable lessons of his thoughtfulness toward colleagues (before leaving, he presented her with an original sampling of Carriage House flooring because he knew she liked history) and of all the students he counseled since he was hired in 1982 (when she was 1 year old).

"He'll drop everything to talk to students," she says. "He'll just sit with a student and talk for as long as they want to talk."

Of course, the student body has changed dramatically in 35 years. Early

in his tenure, Schoenberg figured he knew every openly gay student on campus, and tried to financially and emotionally assist those whose parents said they'd cut them off. Nowadays, parents sometimes drag their kids to the LGBT Center because they heard how well-regarded it is nationally—a testament both to Schoenberg's good work and the changing culture. And it would be impossible to know every LGBT student, and even hard to keep track of the growing number of gay student groups on campus. (He also feels like he's more "out of touch" with college kids these days. Not long before he retired, he fired off a few texts to a student, who responded with "DRTL"—which, much to his bemused chagrin, he later learned was shorthand for "Didn't read, too long.")

In many regards, then, the 35th anniversary of his hiring felt like the right time to leave. He's excited to do new things, to rest, to travel more, to spend more time at his house in the Poconos, to do yoga, to stay involved with community service projects. And, of course, he'll spend his well-earned retirement reflecting on his wildly successful—and unlikely—journey at Penn.

"When I'm asked for career advice, I always say careers make much more sense retrospectively than they do prospectively," he says. "You can't know. If anyone had told me in 1982, when I was hired for the job I'm in now, that 35 years later my entire professional career was going to be devoted to LGBT stuff when a few years before I wasn't even out, I would have told them they were crazy."

"Oh gosh, it's the absolute end of an era," Cooper says. "He's been an indelible part of my life, and the lives of thousands upon thousands of Penn students. He should receive a lot of congratulations for all the amazing work he's done. He's made the world a better place—and what greater gift could he give to the rest of us than that."

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Dave Zeiltein C'03 writes frequently for the *Gazette*.