

Lesbian Coach's Exit From Belmont U. Has Nashville Talking

By CAMPBELL ROBERTSON
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NASHVILLE — The day before Thanksgiving break, the members of the Belmont University women's soccer team gathered in the locker room after a strength training session. Their coach, Lisa Howe, had something to say.



Enlarge This Image

Christopher Berkey for The New York Times
Former Belmont University soccer coach Lisa Howe, left, with her partner, Wendy Holleman, who is pregnant with the couple's first child.

She told them that she was a lesbian, and that she and her partner of eight years, the team's former assistant coach, had decided to have a baby.

"She said she wanted to talk about her personal life one time only and there would never be a discussion again," recalled Erica Carter, a senior on the team.

But the topic was far from finished. It continued the next week when the players learned that their coach was leaving her job. And it has swelled into a full-blown existential

debate at this fast-growing private university.

Belmont, once a small Baptist university whose students were mostly commuters, has had a remarkable decade. Student enrollment has roughly doubled since 2000, and 10 new buildings have gone up. A college of entertainment and music business, the showpiece, was established in 2003, and next year Belmont will open a law [university has rapidly risen in national rankings](#), and scored a high profile as host of one of the [presidential debates](#).

But the growth has not come without growing pains.

Three years ago, the university severed its 56-year-old ties with the state Baptist convention after a debate about whether the board could include non-Baptist trustees. But the university promised to remain Christian, if nondenominational.

Still, some see a continuing identity crisis — on the one hand, the university has a long reputation as conservative and Christian, a reputation safeguarded by the board of trustees, which includes several Baptist ministers; on the other hand, Belmont has aggressively earned a reputation as a progressive, artsy place to study the music business.

"What are we trying to do?" asked Cassidy Hodges, a senior. "It's kind of back and forth, push and pull, between what we want at the university."

That identity crisis is now in full public view.

The university will not comment on the circumstances of Ms. Howe's departure, nor will Ms. Howe, citing contractual reasons. They refer to her departure as a "mutual agreement."

Ms. Howe did say in an interview that her decision to become a mother is what prompted her to talk to the players, many of whom knew she was a lesbian anyway. Ms. Howe's partner, Wendy Holleman, left Belmont in 2008 to coach at a private high school; she is due with the couple's first child in May.

"By continuing to hide, I felt like that was the wrong message to send," said Ms. Howe, 41,

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who describes herself as a churchgoing Christian. "I thought maybe they assumed I was ashamed or that I was doing something wrong because it wasn't coming straight from me."

Ms. Carter said most of the players were excited about the baby. But the Tuesday after Thanksgiving, Ms. Howe called Ms. Carter and told her that the father of one player had complained over the weekend. Ms. Howe also said that she had been told by the athletic director that morning that if she did not resign, she would be fired, Ms. Carter said.

Ms. Howe had led the team to two conference championships, but the 2010 season was a disappointment, and on Dec. 1, Sari Lin, the team captain, asked the athletic director, Mike Strickland, if that was the cause for Ms. Howe's departure.

Mr. Strickland told her that team performance was not the issue, Ms. Lin said, but that the baby "was going to be a problem" and would conflict with the university's "[don't ask, don't tell](#)" approach.

The story has dominated headlines in Nashville, though the facts remain unclear. [Students staged protests on campus](#). Members of the faculty passed a resolution of support for gay faculty members and students. Nashville metro council members introduced a bill to rescind an agreement that allowed Belmont to use a city park for a soccer field. The state Baptist convention commended Belmont officials for appearing to take a stand that "respected their Christian mission as well as their heritage."

Nothing resonated quite like the surprise statement by Mike Curb, a trustee emeritus of the university and the deep-pocketed donor for whom the college of music business is named.

"It's time for Belmont to change," Mr. Curb, a prominent record executive and successful [Nascar](#) owner and sponsor, [told The Tennessean newspaper](#). "Belmont has to decide whether they want to be a national, recognized university, particularly with their school of music business, or they want to be a church."

A day later, Robert Fisher, the university's president, made his first public comments, declaring that sexual orientation was not a consideration in hiring, promotion, salary or dismissal decisions at Belmont.

While many welcomed this statement, others said that the issue seemed to be whether gay faculty members could openly be in relationships and start families.

"We've always had gay faculty as long as I've been here," said Michael Awalt, a professor of philosophy who has been at Belmont since 1970. But, he said, "it's been a 'don't ask, don't tell' kind of mentality."

In 2001, after a business instructor named Michael Burcham was outed by a student, he was told he would need to defend himself in front of the board. Mr. Burcham, who now teaches at [Vanderbilt University](#), said that he did not feel that the faculty, students or even the administration had a problem with his sexual orientation, but that he sensed the board would not approve. He resigned.

In a joint interview, Dr. Fisher, who has been the engine behind the university's decade of rapid growth, and Marty Dickens, the chairman of the board, said the Belmont community needed to have a serious discussion before making any official changes or clarifications of its policy.

Dr. Fisher has met with some of the faculty and with a gay Christian student group whose requests for recognition have been denied.

He said he welcomed the discussion. But, he added: "I would have envisioned this kind of discussion being a lot more measured and taking a lot longer and probably producing a lot less heat in a typical, structured university approach. But we've got what we've got."

Asked if having openly gay faculty and staff members could create a conflict with the university's Christian character, Mr. Dickens said, "there could be."

"But everything needs to be taken in a proper context, and we are continuing as a university to dialogue on all of these issues," he said.

Mr. Dickens also said that this controversy had little to do with the university's recent growth.

But others said that a debate like this was bound to arrive at some point.

"We feel at Belmont that we've moved academically to a very different place," Mr. Awalt said. "I'm not sure a lot of other things at the university have fully caught up."

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