

# Basketball player at Catholic college comes out

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(RNS) Jallen Messersmith has been hearing gay slurs all his life.

They first started in middle school when the bullying was so brutal he decided to be home-schooled in seventh and eighth grade.

He still hears the “you’re gay” and “that’s gay” and other slurs. He’s even heard them from his teammates.

Messersmith, a 6-foot-7 college basketball player for Benedictine College in Atchison, Kan., is believed to be the first openly gay active player in U.S. men’s college basketball.

Messersmith said he informed his coaches of his sexual orientation last summer before revealing he was gay to his teammates. [Outsports.com](#) first reported the story.

Messersmith, who placed fourth in the nation in shot blocking as a sophomore, recalled his friend and teammate, Brett Fisher, once saying a gay slur nonchalantly. Fisher immediately apologized, not wanting to offend his friend. That was the first time the two friends addressed Messersmith’s sexual orientation.

“There was never a big sit-down with my teammates where I was like, ‘Here’s the thing, I’m gay.’ I sort of just let the news spread,” said Messersmith, 20, from Blue Springs, Mo. “Everybody eventually knew it, it was understood.”

“My teammates have been so supportive. They were like, ‘Dude, it doesn’t change anything. It’s not something you can change. If you’re comfortable, I’m comfortable.’

They've told me that they have my back if I ever need it."

Messersmith's announcement comes on the heels of Jason Collins coming out as the first actively gay NBA player, Women's NBA player Brittney Griner announcing she was a lesbian, and openly gay U.S. soccer player Robbie Rogers returning to Major League Soccer.

"It's been really comforting to see other (athletes) be comfortable in themselves with who they are," Messersmith said. "It's happening more and more. Sooner or later, a player being gay is not going to be a big deal."

Messersmith said he first started to feel "different" in high school but that it wasn't until one of his teammates died in a car accident that he was inspired to open up about his sexuality.

"I didn't want something that was such a big part of me to be hidden," he said. "I started telling my friends. Then I told my parents, who were 100 percent supportive. Then I told my coaches. Each time I told someone, a little weight was lifted off my shoulders. Once I told my teammates and they were supportive, I didn't care who found out. I didn't want it to affect the team chemistry. Nothing's changed between us, and now I can truly be myself."

Benedictine, a 2,000-student school, is affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church, which condemns homosexual acts but teaches that gay individuals should be treated with respect, compassion and sensitivity.

Messersmith grew up Mormon but said he is not currently practicing any religion. Benedictine athletic director Charlie Gartenmayer and men's basketball coach Ryan Moody issued a statement on Messersmith's announcement:

"We support Jallen as a Benedictine College student and as a member of the Raven basketball team. Obviously, it would be inappropriate for us to discuss the private lives of students. As an institution we treat students with respect and sensitivity."

Messersmith said that since his announcement became a national story he's received hundreds of emails supporting how "brave" he was and a plenty of positive feedback on social media networks. He believes that he can become a role model, encouraging people to be confident with who they are.

"If my story can help other people accept themselves, that's all I want," he said.

Off the court, Messersmith credits his close friends for inspiration to be himself. In his spare time, Messersmith keeps busy, working at Express and coaching youth basketball. He's also highly active on campus, serving as the junior class treasurer and as the manager for the Benedictine women's lacrosse club team.

One side effect of Messersmith's announcement could be heckling from fans, and he said he is anticipating some rude comments and chanting. But he isn't worried.

"Basketball has always been an outlet for me," he said. "Basketball helped get me through high school. I'd use the bullying as motivation to get better on the court. The more that fans or players poke and prod at me, the better I feel like I'll play. They're the ones who are losing at the end of the day."