

LGBT High School Students Organize to Educate Their Peers - And Their Teachers

BY GWYNN GUILFORD

In recent months, Vermont high schools have responded to a definite, though sometimes unacknowledged, need for the formation of LGBT groups within their walls. Most of the groups, which are usually referred to as Gay/Straight Alliances, have been created by the demand of students. Not only are the gay and straight youth involved in the creation and participation with the GSAs searching for support in social issues that are usually neglected in high schools. They also seek an end to the homophobic persecution that they frequently endure through increased awareness of homosexual issues.

Prior to this year, high school senior Palmer Legare, like other gay youth in the state, fulfilled his social needs through events sponsored and organized by Outright Vermont. In April of last year, he and one other openly gay classmate at Cabot drafted and submitted a petition to the faculty and principal of the school after receiving support from other classmates. The poignantly earnest petition simply called for an active remedy to harassment, hostility, and fear caused by the "school's homophobic environment." Furthermore, the petition criticized the classroom atmosphere in which continuous verbal abuse and lack of faculty response to the problem persisted.

Students at Rutland High School later borrowed Cabot's petition to bring administrative attention to the homophobic atmosphere in their school. Rutland is among the many high schools that has formed a Gay/Straight Alliance this year.

Cabot School's first GSA meeting took place at the beginning of the semester this year. The group has ten regular

members, only two of whom are openly gay. "In general, GSAs are great for closeted people because they can be wherever they want and feel comfortable, as well as [having the opportunity] to learn about homosexual issues," commented Legare. Unlike the LGBT group norm, the GSA is focused on maintaining anonymity through general, non-personal discussions. Said Legare, "If someone is going to say something, they don't say 'I'm straight, but...' or 'I'm gay, but...' The discussion is more, for example, 'What do you think would happen if you told your parents you were gay.'" Furthermore, Legare questioned if a closeted person would actually be safe coming out to the GSA due to gossip channels and the close interactions within a school of 100 people.

For those who are openly gay, the harassment is still intense, although, according to Legare, the homophobic persecution has dissipated significantly since the petition and the formation of the GSA. "The petition did a lot of great things—it got people talking in the student body and it made people think. It made teachers more comfortable to talk up [when harassment takes place]," explained Legare. However, for many others, the persecution persists. For instance, Shiloh Malzac, an openly gay member of Middlebury Union High School's GSA, continues to endure the verbal and physical harassment.

Legare and his fellow classmates' action at Cabot school exemplifies similar movements toward the creation of GSAs throughout other high schools in Vermont. Legare has counted thirteen GSAs formed recently, all but one of which was formed by student impetus. For Middlebury Union, the GSA

was formed under the umbrella group of the Students Coalition on Human Rights. "Most of the members who will attend the meetings are members who identify as straight; there is not really a visible need for a gay group so it's a gay-straight mix—an alliance," commented Malzac. He reported that students facing coming out issues often use the counselling resources provided by the school. Although the group follows the trend of other "alliances" in high schools, catering more to the need for awareness among the students, faculty, and staff. "I think the gay group will cause a big ruckus," surmised Malzac.

More headway has been made in recent weeks when queer youth in Vermont met with Governor Dean. Students emphasized the risks taken by high school students in striving to find support on LGBT issues and stressed the advantages of gaining state support in financing GSAs. This move would follow the steps taken by Massachusetts in 1995, which officially recommended each high school start a GSA. Furthermore, the state gave grants to each school district to encourage the interaction between different high schools.

In the absence of knowledgeable counsel from within the school, Legare cited Outright as a valuable source of information and guidance. Explained the Executive Director of the group, Tami Eldridge, "We provide them with information on contacts with other schools in the state that have groups and [serve as] a referral point for groups." Besides giving fledgling GSAs advice, Outright frequently meets requests from various different educational institutions, from the junior high level to the college level.

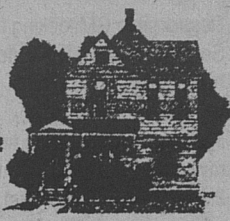
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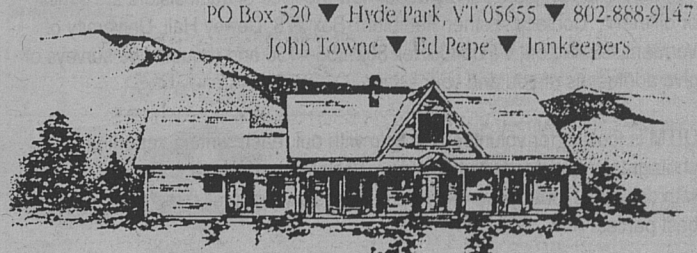
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