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GSAs more common in high schools: Focus on safety helps ease coming-out process

National Coming Out Day is having a greater presence on high school campuses these days. As with Transgender Day of Remembrance and the National Day of Silence, many high school gay-straight alliances (GSAs) observe National Coming Out Day in hopes of educating faculty and students about the importance of GLBT students? safety on campus.

?We want to make everybody at our school as aware as possible,? said Lauren Lydiard, a senior at Scripps Ranch High School and chair of their GSA. ?People have come up to us and said, ?Wow, I didn?t know some of these things; I didn?t know how these slurs I had been saying affect people,? or ?I?ve been so upset; I didn?t know there was some place I could go to talk about these things that are affecting me.? So it?s great to know that we do have an impact.?

National Coming Out Day, which was created by the Human Rights Campaign, takes place this year on Monday, Oct. 11.

?GSA Network doesn?t currently track how many schools are participating in the day, although we do promote it and individual schools can choose to do whatever kinds of activities they want,? said Carolyn Laub, executive director of California?s Gay Straight Alliance Network. ?And lots of GSAs do participate, and they do all kinds of things, from assemblies and speak-outs, or public announcements at the beginning of the day, maybe a speaker on campus for the event, posters or flyers that they put up around campus ? all kinds of activities.?

In conjunction with National Coming Out Day, Lydiard and fellow members of the school?s GSA are holding a fundraiser on Oct. 8 to raise money for their club?s activities. The event will feature six local bands and take place at the Mira Mesa Epicentre.

The club is hoping to attract 400 people to Friday?s event, and plans are in the works to hold several more fundraisers over the course of the year.

?We want to be able to have huge things for the Day of Silence and the Transgender Day of Remembrance, and it takes a lot of paper and a lot of money,? Lydiard said, adding, ?Activism is not cheap.?

Gay-straight alliance clubs have become more common on high school campuses in recent years. The federal Equal Access Act requires that any federally funded school that allows non-curriculum clubs must allow for a GSA, or risk losing their funding. The act was initially championed by Christian students who wanted to organize religious clubs on campus, and has since been invoked to set up on-campus GSAs.

There are currently more than 1,700 student-led GSAs in the nation?s public high schools, over 400 in California and approximately 35 in San Diego County. Laub said in the six years that California?s Gay-Straight Alliance Network has existed, they?ve seen the network grow from approximately 40 clubs to 425 clubs, a tenfold increase.

?GSAs 10 years ago typically were support groups,? Laub added. ?And they were either sort of a social environment or they were there primarily to just provide a supportive place for people to gather. There?s many, many more clubs ? the vast majority of clubs now are engaged in some kind of activism or education that is aimed at changing the school environment.?

Lydiard said 330 out of approximately 1,200 students at Scripps Ranch High participated in this year?s Day of Silence.

?We had the most kids [participate] in California? and I think we were something like third in the nation,? said Lydiard, a member of the national GSA network?s council for Southern California. ?Other high schools had a higher percentage than us, but we had so many students? it was amazing.?

Part of their success Lydiard attributes to getting the word out early and in earnest.

?At Scripps, we do huge campaigns,? she said. ?I mean, when we have something like National Coming Out Day, it?s not just like one flyer that we pass out; we have statistics everywhere, we have things in the quad, we have them way in the bungalows in the corners [of campus] and sometimes we get things over the PA and we have bulletin announcements. We find every possible medium of reaching our student body.?

Though the main focus is usually on safety and inclusion, GSAs are not without their share of controversy, especially when they hold school-wide memorial events that encourage other students? participation. The recent ?Poway T-shirt? case, in which a white male student wore antigay messages taped to his shirt to protest this year?s National Day of Silence, is moving its way through U.S. District Court. The student, Tyler Chase Harper, with assistance from the Christian legal advocacy group Alliance Defense Fund, sued the Poway Unified School District in June, alleging violation of his First Amendment rights. A ruling in the case has been postponed until next June.

Though students at Scripps Ranch High have also protested events like National Day of Silence and Transgender Day of Remembrance, Lydiard said the club encourages participants to keep their cool.

?We?re not going to talk down to other people because we wouldn?t want them to do that to us,?

she said.

Laub said that, though media attention can make it seem like a bigger issue than it is, the number of lawsuits attempting to ban GSAs are a small fraction compared to the amount of clubs that actually exist. ?What we recommend for individual students when they?re coming out or starting a GSA is that they assess their safety,? she noted. ?Students always have to think about their own personal safety when they?re taking a stand, starting a GSA or participating in their events.?

When Scripps Ranch?s GSA was founded three years ago, the club consisted solely of its board members and Lydiard. Though its initial startup was a ?sticky process,? Lydiard said the club now has between 40 and 45 members.

?I know a lot of the kids, they can?t go home and talk about [being gay]; and sometimes school isn?t a safe environment either, and all they have is GSA,? Lydiard said. ?It?s so important to me and to our club to make everybody feel safe.?

Laub agreed, citing a recent report published by the California Safe Schools Coalition called ?Safe Place to Learn? which found that GLBT or questioning students who had a GSA on their campus ? whether they went to the GSA or not ? felt safer at school, reported lower levels of harassment and reported that teachers intervened more often on their behalf when students were confronted with derogatory slurs or threats. ?And actually those students reported that they had stronger, what?s called ?youth resilience?; they felt more connected to school, they felt more connected to adults, they felt like adults cared about them, supported them and respected them,? she said, adding, ?It?s the first time we?re seeing some data that shows that GSAs are making a difference in school safety.?

Scripps Ranch High?s GSA has recently started working with the National Conference for Community and Justice and UC San Diego?s Queer Coalition, which holds several all-ages dances annually where various members of local GSAs can network.

The recent AIDS Walk provided another opportunity for area GSAs to network with each other and other student and GLBT youth organizations. ?We?re going to hopefully do some stuff with the Poway High School GSA ? I?ve heard their pretty cool,? Lydiard said.

Though there are no official activities planned at the Hillcrest Youth Center for National Coming Out Day, the HYC is hosting its third annual leadership training for GSAs on Dec. 4.
The San Diego GLSEN chapter could not be reached for comment as of press time

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News Article
http://www.gaylesbiantimes.com/?id=3541 [1]
Gay and Lesbian Times
Rachel Ralston

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