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Excelsior club promotes tolerance

Their watchwords are ?Don?t ask, please tell,? but for members of the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) at Excelsior Middle School, the phrase is less about sexual orientation than it is about tolerance, acceptance and support.

?You know middle school can be a tumultuous time for kids, and oftentimes name-calling that is seen as harmless fun can hit the core of a young person, and that?s not OK,? said Byron Union School Superintendent Eric Prater. ?From my perspective, the GSA is an opportunity for our school to promote intolerance of bullying on any level.?

Founded at the end of the school session last year, the GSA club at Excelsior was born of a desire by students to participate in the National Day of Silence: an annual event designed to bring attention to anti-gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender behavior. When teacher Matt Colbert noticed that some students wanted to continue on with the Day of Silence theme by forming an on-campus club, he offered to serve as the GSA faculty advisor.

?I?ve been teaching for 21 years and this is easily the best thing I?ve been a part of,? said Colbert. ?This is not a political group ? we make no assumptions. It?s just a place to come and feel safe and socialize. These are an amazing group of kids.?

And it?s a growing group. At the beginning of the school year, one of GSA President Demi Neal?s goals was to increase the club?s membership. By the end of May, that membership had expanded from 13 to more than 20. But the changes, according to Demi, should be expressed in more than numbers.

?I?ve seen a major difference in the attitudes on campus since the club began,? said Demi. ?This (GSA) is about more than being gay; it?s more about non-hate and acceptance and feeling safe no matter who you are.?

Haley Rollins, now a freshman at Liberty High School and one of the original members of the Excelsior GSA, said that when the program first began, there was a contingent of students who didn?t support the club.

?At first lots of people thought it (GSA) was dumb, but that?s exactly why we wanted to start it: to

put an end to stereotypes and intolerance,? said Haley, who is straight. ?I have lots of family members who are gays and lesbians and I don?t care. I love them just the same. And a lot of other students (at Excelsior) felt the same way. We felt very strongly about who we are, and who we love, and about acceptance.?

The GSA was formed, said Prater, along the same lines as other Excelsior school clubs ? under the education code and existing school board policy. The GSA meets once a week at lunchtime and for the occasional after-school activity and charity event. This year, the group spearheaded a food drive with the Brentwood-based Delta Community Services organization to provide needy families with groceries.

But the group hasn?t been without its share of controversy. ?There have been some conversations about the group by some parents who see it as a potential recruiting tool,? said Colbert. ?But I have to say that it has always been a civil discourse. On the other hand, I have had far more parents tell me how happy they are to have this club on campus.?

?One of the things I liked about the club at Excelsior,? said Haley, who is also a member of the Liberty High GSA chapter, ?is that it is a positive thing. I really felt like we were making a difference and bringing a positive aspect to campus.?

Colbert agreed that the club?s purpose is purely positive and that the GSA is making an impact on students both gay and straight. ?I believe that the tide has turned and ?gay? is no longer a bad word on campus,? said Colbert. ?It?s been a ride, and I?d definitely say we?re breaking ground.?

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