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Palm Springs is known across the country as a gay-friendly place to live and visit.

While that atmosphere of openness can provide some benefits for LGBT teenagers in the valley, it doesn't eliminate their struggles.

“For a young person, just because there's a visible gay population in Palm Springs, doesn't necessarily mean it reflects them or their community,” said Angela Kinley, a youth development coordinator with SafeHouse of the Desert.

The highly publicized suicide of college student Tyler Clementi, as well as the suicides of gay teens across the nation, has brought bullying, especially the treatment of gay students by classmates, into the public spotlight.

While many teenagers in the Coachella Valley have gay parents, neighbors, teachers or friends to serve as role models and to break down stereotypes, others struggle with cultural norms that prevent them from being open about who they are.

A visible and available support system that lets teenagers know that they are not alone means “life and death,” for LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) and questioning teenagers, said Kinley, who previously operated a nonprofit support organization for gay youth in the valley.

“If you're miserable and you hate yourself, you make bad choices,” she said.

Important alliance

Most high schools in the Coachella Valley have a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) club and

educators say that plays a significant role in the high level of tolerance many describe in valley schools.

An active GSA at Palm Desert High, combined with top-down support from school staff, creates a school atmosphere where students aren't ostracized for their sexuality, adviser Ron Fanelle said.

The GSA also gives straight students more confidence to stand up against inequality without automatically being labeled as gay themselves, Fanelle said.

Still, even students who are open and feel that their campus is accepting don't feel particularly comfortable with outward displays of affection.

“Like that,” said Indio High School sophomore Jose Garcia, pointing to a boy with his arms wrapped around a girl's shoulders in the quad.

He tried it out once with a boy at the fair, but felt the eyes of everyone passing him, Garcia said.

“When they're staring at you, they're not thinking, ‘Oh, that's cute,’” he said.

Without the GSA, students would probably feel even less comfortable being open, he said.

Sometimes the real impact can be seen when a group such as GSA is taken away.

The openness of LGBT students at Coachella Valley High School in Thermal has been diminished since the GSA there dissolved, director of activities Megan Ramirez said.

The popular GSA group ended when the former adviser was laid off.

A new adviser has not stepped up and now that many of the former members and outspoken supporters have graduated, the group that used to be visible at all campus events has become more hidden and silent.

“It wasn't just the students that had come out, it was the students who were openly supporting them,” Ramirez said. “It's not spoken of any more. It's become a non-entity on campus.”

That can be a particularly crushing blow to students living in the far east valley, where many immigrant families believe strongly in traditional values and gender roles and don't accept their children's homosexuality, she said.

Some students with cars can make the trek to Palm Springs for gay youth programs, but others have to stick it out until they move away.

“When they were here they were straight, when they went away they were able to be themselves,” Ramirez said, referring to students who graduated.

Ally Week in Indio

The Associated Student Body is working to bring in tolerance training to the school, to try to

tackle issues of bullying online and in person and to set up safe places and anonymous comment boxes for students to ask for help, she said.

Other student groups across the valley have mobilized for tolerance and suicide prevention as well.

Members of the Indio High School GSA handed out information cards and yellow ribbons to bring awareness to suicide prevention.

In two weeks, the group plans to hold Ally Week so all LGBT people and their allies are visible on the school campus.

GSA Vice President Cicily Ward, 17, wants to help the group become more visible so all students — gay or straight — feel safe and supported.

Ward knows how tough it can be — and that there is no where to go but up when you hit rock bottom.

She had little support from family and none from friends when she came out her freshman year at an Arizona high school.

Did she consider suicide?

“Of course,” Ward said.

She is now pushing GSA to be an outlet for students who are struggling.

“We don't want others to go through all that,” GSA president Gianna Chavez agreed.

Group vanishes

While the Coachella Valley community still offers many resources for the LGBT population, a group designed specifically for the youth has also disappeared.

Gay Associated Youth provided a gathering place in Palm Desert and support services for teens but a lack of money led to its closure in 2009.

Just having a place where teenagers can hang out and talk without fear about who they think is cute or who they kissed — trivial topics and teenage rites of passage that many people took for granted — can dramatically impact how a teenager feels about him or herself, Kinley said.

More than 30 percent of homeless or runaway youth identify as LGBT, and LGBT youth are at a higher risk of suicide, depression and drug addiction.

“These are huge, life changing things,” she said. “That's not just feeling sad.”

Sexual minorities are the most at-risk population at schools, but only because of bullying and rejection, said Judy Chiasson, a bullying expert who works in the office of Human Relations,

Diversity and Equity and recently spoke in Palm Springs about student bullying.

“When our gay youth are in a supportive environment, then all of those risk rates disappear,” she said.

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