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Showing support: Community joins in on national awareness against LGBT youth suicide

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By Donna Tam

Humboldt County gay rights advocates have joined a national campaign hoping to change legislation in order to stop the suicides of gay youth.

Today, members of more than 40 endorsing organizations are united to urge Congress to pass the Safe Schools Improvement Act and the Student Non-Discrimination Act.

Today marks the 12th anniversary of the murder of Matthew Shepard, a gay 21-year-old who was tortured and killed in Laramie, Wyo., in 1998. They've dubbed the movement the Make It Better Project, launched by Gay-Straight Alliance Network in response to recent lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth suicides.

Several of the more than 100 people at the Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) of Eureka-Arcata's Stand Up to Youth Suicide rally on Friday showed up with “Make It Better” signs.

There were several speakers, including Clovis resident Allison Murphy, who spoke about her transgender daughter Chloe Anne, who was living in Eureka. Chloe Anne, who was transitioning from a male to a female, killed herself Sept. 24. She would have been 19 on Oct. 4.

”She never wanted to put any burden at all on anybody,” Murphy said after the rally, adding that she wants to share Chloe's story so other young people may be encouraged to seek help.

Murphy said Chloe was her only child and meant the world to her. She said she supported Chloe, but Chloe was depressed nonetheless.

”I don't want these kids to feel like they can't talk to their parents sooner,” Murphy said.
Many others shared their stories of how their lives have been touched by suicide, both in personal attempts and the attempts of loved ones.

The Safe Schools Improvement Act of 2010 amends the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act to include bullying and harassment prevention programs, while the Student Nondiscrimination Act of 2010 dictates that no school program that receives public funding would be allowed to exclude children because of their gender identity or sexual orientation, be they gay, transgender or straight.

Humboldt State University Psychology professor Emily Sommerman said current research on suicide and LGBT youth has found that when kids do not face hostility in their environments about their sexuality, their risk for suicide is no different than any other teen.

”It's the hostility and lack of acceptance in their environment that leads these kids to feel and act in suicidal ways,” Sommerman said. “This means that it's imperative that schools and communities recognize how important it is to support and protect all adolescents and young adults through positive role-modeling, no-tolerance policies for any type of bullying and supportive communities that value diversity.”

While Eureka resident Chloe was never bullied, her parents said she did experience fear that the world would not accept her. They believe that those pressures contributed to Chloe's suicide. Sommerman said this may have been the case.

”When LGBTQ youth look to others for reflections of themselves, they often find very negative messages. Friends may use terms like 'that's so gay' to mean something stupid, parents may comment negatively about an LGBT issue and they are likely to see LGBT characters on TV who are the target of jokes,” she said. “Whether those messages are directed specifically at them or at others who are LGBTQ, adolescents take that information to help them understand how they will be perceived and what their value in society is.”

Mike Goldsby, senior program manager with the county's public health branch, said isolation and not having a sense of belonging is one of the risk factors for suicide. While the county does not have numbers on LGBT youth specifically, from 2005 to 2009, there were nine suicides in Humboldt County involving people ages 15 to 19, and 20 suicides for those ages 20 to 29. Goldsby said rural areas have higher rates of suicide than urban communities.

For two years, the county has been using Mental Health Services Act funding to focus on early prevention, stigma reduction and transition age youth services.

As a part of its mission, the county holds three to four Question, Persuade and Refer (QPR) workshops a month to address suicide myths. Participants learn tips about talking with people directly and how to persuade them to get help.

”A number of times, individuals don't know what to say, so they don't say anything,” Goldsby said. “I think many people have the erroneous belief that if you talk about it, it will happen.”

The Six Rivers Planned Parenthood Spare Change Peer Education and Teen Theatre Program has attended two QPR workshops. Spare Change is a program where teens teach their peers about the realities and responsibilities that come with their developing sexuality. Trained peer educators offer one-on-one support to other students. The group was in attendance Friday at the rally, as well.

Gina Figueroa, a program assistant for Spare Change, said sexual orientation and suicide are both issues that Spare Change addresses often. The students decide in the beginning of the year what issues are important to their peers.

Figueroa said the workshops gave students the tools to help destigmatize suicide.

”It really assured the teens that it's OK to ask questions and to be direct,” she said.

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