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Life Still Hard for Gay and Lesbian Students in Aurora Schools Despite a Push Back Against Bullying

Cory Barrett has heard the slurs and seen the abuse that countless high school students face. As the director of youth services at Rainbow Alley, a drop-in center for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and questioning teens, Barrett and his staff specialize in providing a safe place for those who feel targeted and bullied in their schools.

In addition to the simple resources like snacks and a cyber café, the agency in downtown Denver offers professional counseling and other services for youth from around the state.

While Barrett and other staff from Rainbow Alley and its parent organization, The Center, travel to schools in Aurora and beyond to spread a message of support, they don?t have to travel anywhere to witness firsthand the type of bullying many of these students face.

?When I was in high school, I felt like bullying and harassment were kept to the high school building,? Barrett said. ?Now in the days of texting and the internet, facebook and Myspace ... bullying and harassment is a 24-hour service, it happens constantly. I?ve had young people come and meet with me and show me their facebook wall, and you just see this barrage of aggressive language.

?It makes it very difficult for young people to escape that,? he added.

Local school districts are working to make that escape easier and offer safe havens for these student populations on school grounds. With a renewed focus on bully prevention and a modern focus on the toll of cyber bullying in mind, schools in both the Cherry Creek and Aurora Public Schools districts have outlined new anti-bullying policies and helped establish Gay Straight Alliances at campuses across the city. At Gateway High School in APS and Overland, Grandview and Smoky Hill high schools in Cherry Creek, student organizations designed to create a common ground for gay and straight students to interact have become commonplace.

?We?ve had a GSA for at least 15 years,? said Michelle Kleve, a counseling coordinator at Smoky Hill High School. ?The group that attends the meetings is pretty representative of all walks of life. Sometimes it?s a gay student, and they may bring some of their straight friends. It

has a social element as well as a support element.?

According to Barrett, such organizations show an important willingness to collaborate and coordinate between students of all backgrounds and orientations.

?It communicates a number of things: that there?s a level of value to the students, that there is a gathering place for them to connect with other like-minded youth and that there is a space for allies who want to support the well-being and safety of these students,? Barrett said.

With the added impact of national tolerance campaigns like ?It Gets Better,? a push for awareness and support in the wake of a rash of national suicides, the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered students have more resources and support on an individual school campus level than they did even a decade ago.

Still, for all the strides toward tolerance, targeted bullying remains a fact of life for many. According to the results of the Cherry Creek district?s annual climate survey presented at the beginning of the 2011-12 school year, for example, high school students in the district who described themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered were major targets for harassment, with 19 percent of the population saying they?d been bullied. That?s compared to 7 percent of heterosexual students. Thirteen percent of that population said they?d missed school because of the harassment.

Such trends persist, even as schools offer counselors specific intervention training and make a targeted effort to make daily life better for those students. The harassment may not always come in the form of direct intimidation, but instead in slurs overheard in hallways or off campus.

?All of the bullying that I witnessed firsthand wasn?t directly pinpointing someone. It was hearing someone say ?fag? down the hallway,? said Kierstin Miller, a Cherry Creek High School alum who graduated in 2006 and came out as gay during her junior year.

Miller went on to receive a bachelor?s degree in biochemistry from Colorado State University, but she still keeps a tab on the status of diversity in her native district, speaking as a Cherry Creek district representative at statewide diversity forums and communicating with students from around Colorado.

?Within the world of my high school, the problem was often the ignorance,? Miller said. ?If someone yells a hurtful word, they might not mean it in a hateful way, but it?s the ignorance of the problem.?

Such casual ignorance makes the need for organizations like Gay Straight Alliances even more poignant, Miller said. The concept of the GSA, refined over the past decade, was originally designed to make communication among a school?s different populations more commonplace. With that common goal in mind, the face of the alliances have varied from school to school.

?The goal is to address the entire schoolwide culture ... (But) some GSAs in areas that are maybe a little more isolated might be there more for support to make sure that there?s a safe place for the students to go to, as a lifeline,? said Jill Marcellus, a spokeswoman for the national

GSA Alliance Network centered in San Francisco. ?Part of the problem is that bullying isn?t necessarily always the best term. There?s specific harassment and discrimination that?s based fully on their identity or their perceived identity; LGBT bullying is a way of attacking an entire community.?

That sort of specific, identity-based harassment makes resources like Rainbow Alley all the more important, Barrett said. While school policies and resources may be complicated by parent input, school boards? decisions and teacher involvement, an independent center away from the campus often serves as a critical lifeline.

?Our goal is to provide a safe space for GLBT-identified youth and their allies. We?re going to provide services and support to all young people, no matter how they identify,? Barrett said. ?It is still very important for them to have a place to come where they can get away from all of that.?

Even so, school counselors and administrators say that in a perfect world, students should never feel the need to escape from their school campuses.

?We keep trying to gather the info and find an avenue to communicate with our students and support them any way we can,? Kleve said. ?Is it perfect? No. Has it improved? Yes.?

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