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DOWNEY – It is 2:30 on a Thursday afternoon and room S3 at Downey High School (DHS) is buzzing. The school day has already ended, but students keep filing into Mr. Zakour's classroom, chitchatting with friends and enthusiastically plopping down into desks. Before long, a slight, seventeen-year-old named Samantha Delgado walks to the front of the class and attempts to get everyone's attention. It takes a few tries, but the 30 or so teenagers eventually quiet down so that the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) meeting can begin.

The Gay-Straight Alliance Network is a youth leadership organization that connects school-based GSAs. Originally founded in 1998 in the San Francisco Bay area, the Network's goal is to empower youth activists to start GSA clubs to fight homophobia and transphobia in their schools.

DHS and Warren High School's (WHS) GSAs are less than a year old and just two of the more than 800 GSA clubs in the state. It is estimated that more than 53 percent of the public high schools in California have a GSA and with LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) teens being twice as likely to report suicidal thoughts and feelings of depression, many Downey students consider their school GSAs to be a welcome addition.

Downey High's GSA has its fair share of allies, which are those who don't identify as LGBT, but want to help stop harassment and intolerance. As president of the Alliance, it's Delgado's job to lead each meeting and at this particular session, members are having a lengthy discussion on bisexuality. While many express their opinion that bisexuality is for those who are "confused" or not "brave enough" to come out as gay or lesbian, Delgado remains even keeled despite later sharing that she identifies as bisexual and has had a same-sex partner for two years.

The conversations are lively and opinions are shared freely. At one point Chaz Bono comes up. Bono previously identified as a lesbian woman, but recently went through top surgery and

transitioned using hormones. Bono now identifies as a heterosexual male. The GSA members discuss which gender pronoun is appropriate to use, though many can't get past their confusion regarding Bono's sexual orientation.

To some these conversations may seem trite, but it's difficult to verbalize how crucial a GSA can be to a closeted student who is afraid of revealing their sexual orientation. Finding a community while still in high school can make all the difference in the world and until very recently, these frank discussions about sex and sexuality were almost unheard of on high school campuses. Without fully realizing it, youth such as those in the DHS GSA are normalizing once taboo subjects and shedding light on the complexity of human sexuality, making their peers feel welcomed and accepted in the process.

One GSA member shares that despite identifying as lesbian, she has a boyfriend and can't really explain her attraction to him. "It's not about gender," she says, "It's about how you feel about a person." The students all nod their head in agreement as Delgado explains that it's not necessary to label your sexuality.

"If you want to just be a soul in the world, be a soul in the world. If you just want to identify as awesome, identify as awesome," Delgado said.

Not all of the GSA's meetings are this lighthearted. A few weeks prior, Rose, a 16-year-old ally, brought in the letter that her friend wrote before committing suicide because of the hardships he encountered as a gay 19-year-old in a less than accepting school and home environment. During the emotionally-charged meeting, Rose shared the letter with the GSA members and counselors were brought in to speak to those who felt distraught.

"My friend killed himself because of the way he was treated. He'd get slammed into a locker and called a 'fag.' I've never seen anyone physically bullied here, but you hear whispers and rumors. I've heard people say that certain gay students have AIDs," Rose said. Rose was in her former school's GSA and decided to join at Downey High as a way of supporting her LGBT classmates. "It may be getting easier to come out, but it's not easier to fit in. Sometimes a friend or two isn't enough. You have to have a support system and our GSA provides that," she said.

For a while, stories of gay teen suicides flooded the media. Last year five teens committed suicide within a period of three weeks after suffering from years of bullying. Despite being a small, somewhat conservative suburb, Downey is more progressive than many assume. Mathew Cerda, Warren High's GSA president, considers himself "ridiculously lucky" to have never been bullied for his sexual orientation, even while spending a majority of his life in Catholic schools, but none of the openly gay students at DHS have experienced physical bullying either. Sadly, a majority cite their families as their most prominent source of pain and abuse.

Some GSA members went as far as describing their parents as hateful and homophobic.

High school can already feel like a hostile environment for a multitude of reasons, but when the gender you identify with in your brain does not match the gender you were assigned at birth, high school can be its own kind of hell.

According to Cerda, being gay is not a topic of discussion at Warren High School; it's a "non-issue," but being transgender is a different story.

Cerda has witnessed his friend, a female-to-male transgender classmate, get bullied mercilessly during P.E. and this kind of harassment is all too common. An October 2010 survey released by the National Center for Transgender Equality found that transgender youth face extreme harassment in school, even more so than their lesbian, gay, and bisexual peers. It was found that 41 percent of transgender people in the United States have attempted suicide.

It sometimes seems that young people's actions only reflect the treatment that trans individuals receive from mainstream society, as it's still legal in 31 states to discriminate against a person based on their gender identity.

According to Karina Samala, a Downey resident for over 20 years, the biggest challenge transgender people face is finding the courage to be their authentic selves in a world that doesn't understand them or accept them.

Samala is a trans woman and a huge source of inspiration to others in her community, so much in fact that the many trans women she mentors refer to her as "Mother Karina." Not only does she do sensitivity training at local schools, but she's also an activist who's been honored with numerous awards and she serves on a number of boards that advocate for the rights of LGBT individuals, including West Hollywood's Transgender Advisory Board, the first board of its kind in the world.

When Samala first came out, there were almost no organizations in place that could lend her support and Samala still remembers what it felt like to be alone, which is why she encourages each and every school to form its own GSA.

"We still live in a world that doesn't understand trans men and women," Samala said. "Even our own LGBT brothers and sisters discriminate against us. You need to stand up for your rights and go to the authorities if you're being harassed or abused. If you keep quiet, the problem will only escalate. There is strength in numbers and in this way especially, GSAs are so important and can be a good starting point for a young trans person. Every school should have a GSA, but sometimes they're not enough. In life, some of us have to find our own community and if your family doesn't accept you, you have to build your own family with people who love you for who you are, not what they want you to be."

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