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Gay Students at Reed Talkin' Tolerance

by Cat Cuttillo - For the Tribune

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Editor's Note: This article contains adult language. Some quotes were left uncensored to accurately portray the nature of the harassment experienced by a student at Reed High School.



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Image 1 of 2

For the Tribune/Cat Cuttillo - A member of the Gay Straight Alliance at Reed High School in Sparks holds a pin for Ally Week, which is a student-run event asking people to sign pledge cards and become allies in an effort to stop harassment of gay students.

High school students are usually encouraged to be exceptional, but in the case of 17-year-old Michael Aranda, being an exception is bittersweet.

Aranda is a junior at Reed High School in Sparks and president of Reed's Gay Straight Alliance. At the age of 14 Aranda came out as bisexual. He says his mother was very accepting and he has never been harassed or bullied because of his sexual orientation and, he says, he has never skipped school because of feeling unsafe.

But according to a new study by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), Aranda may be the exception.

The GLSEN 2007 National School Climate Survey found that of the 6,209 lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) middle and high school students surveyed, 9 out of 10 LGBT students have experienced harassment at school in the past year, three-fifths felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation and about a third skipped a day of school in the past month because of feeling unsafe. The survey found that students with a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) at their school reported hearing fewer homophobic remarks, experience less harassment because of their sexual orientation and are less likely to miss school because of safety concerns. About one-third of students nationally reported having a GSA at school.

Aranda, who participated in the survey, said that he's talked to students who have felt unsafe because of their sexual orientation.

"I've seen it a lot and I've talked to students who have felt unsafe," said Aranda, who indicated in the survey that the anti-gay talk at his school makes him feel oppressed.

"When I hear other students say derogatory things towards the gay community it makes me feel belittled," he said.

KT Russell, 16, a junior at Reed who came out her freshman year, is all too familiar with harassment and bullying based on her sexual orientation.

Last month, an article appeared in the school newspaper about the diverse fashion at Reed. Russell was one of the students featured for her unique style.

"They put my picture in there because of my faux-hawk and my style. I wear guy clothes. That's just what I feel most comfortable in," Russell said.

After the article appeared, Russell says she found three copies of the newspaper with slurs written on and around her picture, including "dyke," "I love pussy" and "I'm a bitch." Someone had also drawn a mustache and a goatee on her face and written the words "suck it."

"I was shocked when I saw it because I'm friends with everyone in this school and everyone knows I'm gay," said Russell, who is the gay liaison officer for Reed's GSA. "After seeing that I got pretty scared because it was on three newspapers. Someone really hates me for an issue I can't help."

Russell says the harassment started last year after she became more open with her sexuality.

"When I first came out I was very scared and over time I opened up about it. I didn't get much bullying until my sophomore year as I became more open," she said. "At school people would call me a dyke, faggot, or say, 'Get out of this school you fucking faggot' as they walked by."

Last year, Aranda and four other students started the GSA at Reed. The group has since grown to about 30 students.

"We had to start it because we saw a lot of LGBT issues and none of the teachers knew what to do," Aranda said. "They don't train teachers on LGBT issues or how to handle it. I see teachers just say, 'Stop that,' which may stop it for the moment but doesn't help."

Reed's GSA recently held an event called Ally Week, which asked students to sign pledge cards promising to stop the bullying and be allies. Last year the group held a Day of Silence.

"It's a student-led protest where students choose to be silent to show the impact on how the LGBT community feels oppressed," Aranda said. "It's a metaphoric way of saying, 'We don't want to be silenced but this is what it would sound like if the whole world was silent.'"

Teachers Richard Hoadley and Terry DeBarger act as advisors to the GSA.

"It's always been a really organized, self-governed club, so they really haven't needed much in the way of adult input," said Hoadley, adding that teachers don't undergo training specific to LGBT harassment but they do get trained on anti-harassment in a broader sense.

"When you're hired you have to do some of that stuff (like) watch videos," Hoadley said. "(It's) a little bit of a refresher but really not much in the way of formal training."

Principal Mary Vesco of Reed High School says all teachers have to go through harassment training by the district and that Reed does not accept any discrimination toward any students.

"I feel that (students) have the right to be whoever they want to be and we need to protect that right," Vesco said.

Some changes in district policies stem from the 2002 Henkle agreement in which the Washoe County School District unanimously endorsed a settlement for \$451,000 with a gay former student who sued the district for discrimination and failing to protect him from harassment. The settlement included changes in the school district on how to better protect LGBT students.

"One of the issues you deal with in a middle and high school is we don't want kids to be harassed," said Susan Rusk, counselor coordinator for Washoe County School District. "You have to be really careful. That's why we have a larger context of celebrating diversity, it might be different ethnicity, religious preferences, sexual differences, diversity in a larger sense."

Rusk attributes this change to the Henkle case.

"We've created an office of cultural diversity that tends to the variety of different needs," Rusk said. "Teachers, counselors, and educators get trained on a larger role, making it a climate that will not accept bullying, harassment for any reason. It's the larger context."

Nicole Harvey, an advisory board member for A Rainbow Place, northern Nevada's LGBT community center, believes diversity training is important but says there should be training within the school system specific to LGBT bullying and harassment.

"I think that's an important big step in the right direction and it's easy to see how that flowed from the Henkle case," Harvey said, "but I think it would be important to incorporate some understanding of what kids go through who question their sexual identity because it's not like being a different race or having a different religion. It's a different thing because with religion you generally have the family support but to be gay it's very rare to have a family member who understands."

Support is something that even A Rainbow Place has found lacking. Next month, a Rainbow Place will close the doors of its community center due to rising costs and declining contributions. However, the call center will remain open and clients receiving counseling services will continue to be seen by appointment. The community center plans to continue its active role while they restructure.

"We've made a point to move our focus back to the kids," Harvey said.

"It's our hope that we can offer a lot more support and structure to the GSAs."

Aranda continues working to enrich the GSA at Reed. He was one of 40 students selected nationally to be a student organizer for GLSEN's Jump-Start Team. As a student organizer, Aranda attends training seminars across the country geared towards LGBT awareness and anti-LGBT harassment and brings what he learns back to Reed.

After graduation Aranda plans to attend the University of Nevada, Reno and ultimately pursue a career as a high school English teacher.

"I want to be the difference in the student's life," he said.



By John Byrne

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