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Gay Youth Become Movement's Ambassadors

The half-dozen lobbyists who crowded into a lawmaker's office here recently didn't come bearing campaign cash or votes to swap. Instead, they recounted tales of high school torment as fresh as their faces. Ignacio Pitalua, 19, spoke about having a trash can dumped on him by other boys who suspected he was gay.

"It's a big obstacle to learning," Pitalua said, pressing Assemblyman Curren Price to co-sponsor a bill that sets specific requirements for schools to stem anti-gay discrimination.

Young people, some barely in their teens, are becoming the gay rights movement's newest ambassadors at statehouses from Olympia, Wash. to Montpelier, Vt.

Their advocacy, unheard of as recently as a decade ago, reflects the slowly growing acceptance that is emboldening gays and lesbians to come out of the closet while they are coming of age.

Veteran activists credit the political participation of gay youth, their straight friends and children of same-sex parents with a string of recent legislative victories, including last month's passage of an anti-bullying bill that provides specific protections gay and lesbian students in Iowa.

The law's adoption came after the Iowa Pride Network issued a report saying more than 83 percent of the state's gay, lesbian and transgender students said they had been verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation.

"We kept getting comments from legislators of 'There aren't gay kids in Iowa, this is an East and West coast problem,'" said Ryan Roemerman, the network's director.

The group also arranged a news conference attended by Iowa's lieutenant governor and three students who provided firsthand accounts of discrimination. They included a girl who was kicked out of her Roman Catholic high school after she came out as a lesbian and another who said she wasn't allowed into the locker room to change with other girls.

Brad Anderson, spokesman for Iowa Gov. Chet Culver, said the organized lobbying effort, which also included a 1,000-person rally at Drake University, was "absolutely critical" in getting the legislation approved.

"They added a loud voice, just physically being in the Capitol, and you saw them working all

hours of the day lobbying to get this stuff passed," Anderson said.

Lluvia Mulvaney-Stanak, director of Outright Vermont, thinks young people have an advantage when it comes to persuading lawmakers, especially hostile ones, to hear them out. Painful stories of isolation may remind hardened politicians of their own children or awkward adolescence, she said.

"Young people no matter who they are, command this really tangible sense of empathy with adults. We've all been there," Mulvaney-Stanak said. "Maybe we were geeks or the athletes, but when it comes to victims of bullying and harassment, everyone has had a role in that cycle."

Yet the most effective spokespeople are not necessarily gay youth, but the straight students who joined with them to form more than 2,500 high school gay-straight alliance clubs across the country since the early 1990s.

Carolyn Lamb, director of California's Gay-Straight Alliance Network, estimates that up to 40 percent of the 400 high school and college students recently bused to Sacramento for Queer Youth Advocacy Day were not gay, lesbian or transgender.

"Most of the adult-driven (gay) civil rights work doesn't have such large numbers of straight allies who see it as a civil rights cause," she observed.

Children with gay or lesbian parents also have been instrumental in building support for same-sex marriage, said Meredith Fenton, national program director with Children of Lesbian and Gays Everywhere.

"For someone who isn't sure how they feel about gay people, when they are hearing a message about supporting a LGBT family from someone who is really impacted by homophobia even though they are not gay themselves, they can really hear and receive that message in a different way," Fenton said.

While previous generations waited well into adulthood before identifying themselves as gay, the average age at which gay children came out to friends and families in 2005 was 13 years and four months, according to Caitlin Ryan, a San Francisco State University researcher who studies the social and psychological development of gay youth.

"There were never historically any positive role models for LGBT young people," Ryan said.

"Now, of course, we see more and more young people coming out because there are ways for them to be who they are, to socialize and live their lives as adolescents instead of coming out as an adult and then going back to live your adolescence."

Apr. 2, 2007

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