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Gay-Straight Alliance Club Growth In California High Schools

BARSTOW - While part of the Barstow High School student body ate lunch on Friday, a new club met in a classroom. About 25 students socialized, complained about parents, compared iPods and cell phones and planned T-shirts, fund-raisers and community service - men and women, freshmen through seniors, and the word "gay" was only mentioned once.

Students at Barstow High School recently started a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), a student group that brings together gay and straight students to raise awareness of gay, lesbian and transgender issues and encourages tolerance among students of different life-styles.

"We're really about people coming together and talking," Rebakah Michelson, the faculty advisor for the GSA club, said. "Our goal is to just make everybody feel comfortable with who they are."

Michelson, who teaches freshmen English at the high school, was asked by students from her class to serve as the faculty advisor. To start a club at Barstow High School, students must find a faculty advisor, write a constitution, get approval from the Associated Student Body and then be approved by the school board. The board unanimously approved the club at the Jan. 23 school board meeting. To become a member of the club, Michelson said students had to receive per mission from the parents.

A safe environment

Active for about a month, the club has grown since its beginning. One GSA member said new members come to each meeting. Michelson said about 10 percent of the club's membership is openly gay in some form. The rest, she said, are either straight or still figuring out their sexual orientation.

"They're unformed clay, and they're trying to figure out who they are and how they want to live," she said. "My goal is to provide a safe environment where kids can be social."

Students have attempted to form the club before, Michelson said. Matt Mendibles, 17, the club's vice president, said he tried to start the club in October but could not find a faculty advisor. Later,

a group of freshmen were able to bring all the necessary pieces together.

Carolyn Laub, founder and executive director of the Gay-Straight Alliance Network, a California-based non-profit umbrella group for GSAs around the state, said while most GSAs form without much resistance, some students do face a battle. Students from a school in Clovis fought for three years to establish a GSA she said. Many parents expressed opposition to the club, and the students could not find a faculty advisor.

"They couldn't find a single teacher to step up for them," Laub said. "That reflected how negative and hostile the school climate was."

Change in Clovis has been slow, Laub said, but the climate is getting better. Gay-Straight Alliances have formed in a couple of schools in the Clovis area. State-wide, however, Laub said it has become the exception not a have a GSA at a high school. More than 600 GSA clubs have registered with the Gay-Straight Alliance Network, a number that represents about 40 percent of the public high schools in California, according to Laub. Alliances have also started at some middle schools.

Under the federal Equal Access Act, it is illegal for a public school with at least one student initiated club to restrict or deny the formation of other clubs.

The law states, "It shall be unlawful for any public secondary school which receives Federal financial assistance and which has a limited open forum to deny equal access or a fair opportunity to, or discriminate against, any students who wish to conduct a meeting within that limited open forum on the basis of the religious, political, philosophical, or other content of the speech at such meetings."

Laub said some private and religious schools in the state have started GSAs clubs as well.

GSA growth in Southern California

Recently, Laub said she has seen the most growth of GSAs in Southern California. Hesperia, Sultana and Silverado high schools already have GSA clubs. In 2005, the GSA club at Silverado faced community opposition to six simulated gay weddings performed during the school's lunch period.

Laub also said there has been significant growth of GSAs in the rural and outlying areas of the state.
"Barstow is very representative of the type of community where GSAs are being started," she said.

Many of the students in the club at Barstow High School said they had not been discriminated against but felt that Barstow needed such a club. Michelson said one of the goals of the school's GSA are to promote tolerance at the high school and in the community and to build community through activities. Members of the club said there are many misconceptions and fears about homosexuality on campus and in the community at large.

"They're not exposed to it," member Ashley Chavira, 16, said. "People are afraid of what they don't understand."
Mendibles hopes the club will show everybody that people are people.

"We're not gay or straight first," he said. "We're people first."

Michelson said since the club has started, only two parents expressed concern to her. Faculty and administrators, Michelson said, have been excited and supportive of the club. Barstow High School Principal Claire Ellis said the club's values are ones embraced by the school and by the community at large.

"Tolerance and respect, those are principles that we believe in as a community," Ellis said. "They are not supposed to disrupt society. They are supposed to bring people together."

A safer school

Laub said school officials are realizing the benefits of a GSA to the campus and community and lining up behind them in support.

"Increasingly, administrators are open to it," Laub said. "A gay-straight alliance can be a helpful part of the school's environment."

Laub referenced a study conducted by the California Safe Schools Coalition, a state-based group against discrimination and harassment of students because of actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity, that found students feel safer at school when a GSA is present. According to the study, 76 percent of students at schools with a GSA said they felt safe. Only 69 percent of students at schools without a GSA said they felt safe.

The study found that 7.5 percent of students in seventh-, ninth-, and 11th-grade reported being bullied because of their sexual orientations. Students who are harassed based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation are seven percent more likely to earn grades of C or below, 20 percent more likely to miss school and 14 percent more likely to bring a weapon to school, the study stated.

In creating support for gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender students, many GSAs are creating a safer climate for every student, Laub said.

And while creating a safer, more productive school may be a residual effect of a GSA club, those outcomes appeared far from the minds of the students who met during lunch on Friday. They were more concerned with getting parental permission to attend an up-coming screening of "The Rocky Horror Picture Show," where they could volunteer in town, how they are going to pay for the field trips they desperately want to take and possibly most important - having fun. After all, they are high school students.

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