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[Home](#) > Coming Out In Middle School

Coming Out In Middle School

[Excerpt from pages 7-8] On the national Day of Silence last April, I visited Daniel Webster Middle School in Los Angeles, one of 21 middle schools in California with a G.S.A. California is one of only 12 states that have passed laws to protect students from bullying and harassment on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity or expression. (In May, Representative Linda Sanchez of California introduced the Safe Schools Improvement Act, a federal anti-bullying bill that would require schools to implement comprehensive anti-bullying policies that include protections for gay students.)

I arrived at Daniel Webster, a school of some 850 students, most of them Hispanic or African-American, at lunchtime. About 50 kids milled around two large wooden tables at the center of the school's leafy courtyard. Many of them wore pink T-shirts, and some filled out cards that would later be strung together and displayed: "You Are What You Are? Embrace It," "Never Put Someone Down, and Never Let Someone Put You Down." Others communicated using hand gestures or by writing notes to one another. But most had given up trying to be mute. "Good luck getting middle-schoolers not to talk," the school's counselor and G.S.A. co-adviser at the time, Ruben Valerio, told me with a smile.

One of the loudest students at the tables was Johnny (a nickname), a tall, handsome seventh grader. A leader of the G.S.A., he had only managed to stay quiet for about 30 seconds that morning. "It's just really exciting to be at a school where it's O.K. to be gay," he told me as he bear-hugged his friend, an outgoing seventh grader known to her friends as Lala, who'd come out earlier that year as bisexual. At his previous school, Johnny didn't feel safe and had little support when he came out to his mother. "She would go back and forth between saying things like: 'I love you. I just don't understand why you would choose this lifestyle at this age,' to 'It's disgusting what you're doing. Are you a faggot now?'" No one would ever use that word here.

Johnny estimated that there were about 35 girls and 10 boys at Daniel Webster who were out as bisexual, lesbian or gay. (The vast majority of those girls identified as bisexual.) He introduced me to a handful of them, including two members of the G.S.A.: Tina (also a nickname), a seventh grader who considered herself bisexual and was dating a boy at another school; and a popular

eighth-grade girl who used to date Tina.

They were joined at the tables by dozens of their straight friends and a handful of teachers. One teacher, Richard Mandl, approached me and asked what I thought of the school. I told him that I'd never seen so many happy gay kids in one place. "It's a little disorienting," I told him. "I feel like I'm in a parallel gay universe."

He laughed. "Yeah, it's pretty unusual what's happened here," he said. "It definitely wasn't always this way."

When Mandl began teaching at the school in 2002, he said that there weren't any openly gay students and that it was common to hear anti-gay language. "Kids would run by you and be screaming at another kid: 'You fag! You're so gay!'" he said. "It wasn't until a few years ago when the faculty sort of came together and said: 'You know what? We need to stop this.'"

That became a lot easier two years ago when one of the school's most popular boys came out to his classmates. Because he was so well liked, and because so many of his friends rallied around him, "it became cooler at Daniel Webster to be accepting and open-minded," Mandl said.

The principal, Kendra Wallace, told me that she didn't hesitate when the school's science teacher approached her (on behalf of the boy and several of his friends) about starting a G.S.A. "I had some staff who were livid at first, because they thought it would be about sex, or us endorsing a lifestyle," she said. "But the G.S.A. isn't about that, and they've come around. This is a club that promotes safety, and it gives kids a voice. And the most amazing thing has happened since the G.S.A. started. Bullying of all kinds is way down. The G.S.A. created this pervasive anti-bullying culture on campus that affects everyone."

Read the entire article:

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