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Much has changed since King's death four years ago, but enough?

Middle school was tougher on Taylor Kennepohl than it was on most.

Even before eighth grade, when she realized she was gay, she endured a barrage of anti-gay insults. They called her a litany of derogatory names meant to sting. It made her feel like a freak.

The Ventura teen struggled with depression and thought about suicide, keeping her sexual orientation a secret.

"At that point in time, there was really no option to be open and not have your life become a living hell in middle school," she said.

But in the four years since, things have gotten better. The name-calling has stopped. Students accept her for who she is. Taylor, now 17, chalks some of it up to her and her classmates maturing. But something else also changed.

The nation started to address the issue of anti-gay bullying in schools, and many say that is partly because of what happened in Oxnard four years ago today.

In the weeks leading up to Feb. 12, 2008, 15-year-old Larry King began not only telling his friends at E.O. Green School that he was gay, he also began wearing high-heeled women's boots and makeup to class.

Some students were uncomfortable with it. Some thought it was no big deal.

Brandon McInerney thought it was a big deal.

During first-period English class, after the two had taunted each other for several weeks, McInerney shot King twice in the head. King's death two days later made news around the world and sparked what some said was the start of a national discussion on anti-gay bullying in the classroom.

"What happened to Larry King in February of 2008 was the opening salvo in a barrage of

horrifying stories that came to light from then to now," said Eliza Byard, executive director of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network.

The last four years have brought new laws and attention to an issue officials say was largely ignored. It's progress, Byard said, but more needs to be done.

"Not enough has happened yet," she said. "But there is significantly more interest nationwide in the issue to both save lives and improve our schools."

'BEGINNING OF AWARENESS'

McInerney, now 18, was charged with murder and a hate crime, but his nine-week murder trial ended last summer in a hung jury partly because jurors were torn over sending a 17-year-old to prison for 50 years. McInerney was only 14 at the time of the shooting.

In a deal with prosecutors, he eventually pleaded guilty to second-degree murder and manslaughter and was sentenced to 21 years. On Jan. 26, two days after his 18th birthday, he was transferred to a state prison in Chino.

The trial was an emotional one in which students wept as they recounted the days leading up to the two shots in the classroom that morning.

Some students said McInerney was part of the pack that made fun of King, calling him names and mocking him. Others said King taunted McInerney, flirting with him because it made him uncomfortable.

The prosecution said King was a hapless victim of McInerney's rage and white supremacist beliefs. The defense said King harassed a boy who came from a troubled and disturbed background.

About the only thing both sides agreed on was the vein of homophobia that ran through the tragedy. McInerney said he was raised to hate gays ? a hatred the prosecution said led to the shooting.

Although the trial painted a muddled picture leading up to the shooting, King's death sent a resounding message around the nation: bullying of gays in schools had to be addressed.

Ellen DeGeneres took to the airwaves saying, "It's OK to be gay." Newsweek splashed the story on its front page. People began talking about the issue.

"There was a beginning of an awareness that the level of victimization is something we can no longer pretend is not serious. We can't pretend it's not happening anymore," said Stephen Russell, a professor at the University of Arizona who studies adolescent sexuality and school safety for vulnerable youth. "I think Larry King's death was the beginning of that."

King's death was followed by a number of high-profile gay bullying cases and suicides that inspired the "It gets better" video campaign in which adults described how life improves after the

awkward teenage years.

Bullying and LGBT issues took center stage at national and state summits. The White House held its first conference on bullying prevention in March 2011.

A 2009 study of students 13 to 21 years old by The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found 80 percent of gay youths said they were verbally harassed at school and 20 percent were physically assaulted.

"It's no longer OK to say we're dealing with something like bullying without taking seriously issues of homophobia and LGBT victimization," Russell said.

CHANGE IN CLIMATE

Ten days after King's death, Assemblyman Mike Eng, D-Monterey Park, introduced the first of several bills and government resolutions bearing King's name.

"Larry's Law" sought to tackle bullying in part by requiring teachers and other school officials to report bullying incidents to the principal immediately and launch an investigation. Eng, teased as a kid because he was small and quiet, said bullying was just starting to be taken seriously as a cruel and violent act, not something that just happens in the normal realm of growing up.

"We seemed to be at a point where domestic violence was 30 or 40 years ago," Eng said recently. "We tolerated it and there were no clear consequences for someone who perpetrated domestic violence."

Like the O.J. Simpson case shed light on domestic violence, King's death forced people to look at school bullying in a new light, Eng said.

Larry's Law ultimately failed, which Eng said was more a function of the budget crisis than its ideas. He went on to author another bill that did pass and, among other things, defines school bullying and lets students transfer to another school if they feel harassed.

"It shows we are learning, but we need to do more," Eng said.

Rep. Lois Capps, D-Santa Barbara, said she had King in mind when she signed on to become co-chairwoman of the LGBT Equality Caucus. A year after the shooting, Capps filed a resolution to honor his life and condemn his death.

"It made us increasingly aware of what happens in public schools where there is a definite need for education and awareness," she said of the shooting.

The caucus has penned 33 bills since its inception four years ago, including a 2010 one to protect gay and lesbian students that was partly inspired by King's death. None of those bills has become law, but only a small percentage of bills ever do.

"That is only one way to measure progress," said Capps, adding the caucus has spurred a

"change in climate" in Congress, where LGBT issues are brought up now more than ever. She cited the repeal of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" military policy on gays as one of the successes in government since King's death and said his passing helped raise awareness.
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News Article
http://www.vcstar.com/news/2012/feb/12/much-has-changed-sinc... [1]
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