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Fatal shooting of eighth-grader in Oxnard became a national story

Melissa Crutcher looked around in disbelief, as she marched into Oxnard's Plaza Park on a Saturday in February, days after eighth-grader Larry King was shot inside his junior high classroom nearby.

Close to 1,000 people had joined her on a three-mile march in his honor, and when the crowd emptied into the park, she asked everyone to make a circle. There were so many people that we couldn't even fit everyone, she said. I was amazed, shocked.

Crutcher, 16, and a sophomore at Hueneme High School at the time, started planning the peace walk within hours of the Feb. 12 shooting at E.O. Green School. King, 15, died later at a hospital, and prosecutors charged his classmate 14-year-old Brandon McInerney with murder and a hate crime. He's pleaded not guilty.

It was messed up, said Crutcher, a former E.O. Green student whose mom works at the school. Any kind of shooting would have been horrible, but this one seemed worse. Students at the junior high said King was teased in the weeks leading up to the shooting for being gay and wearing high-heeled boots and makeup.

Crutcher, someone who sticks up for the underdog, said she hoped the march would send a message of acceptance. She expected 100 or 200 kids to show up.

But as the march that started in a park behind E.O. Green crept toward Plaza Park, it became clear Crutcher had grabbed people's attention. The line of marchers stretched for a mile down the sidewalk.

The fatal shooting that shook the local community turned a national spotlight on E.O. Green in the Hueneme School District. Vigils for King were held from coast to coast, and thousands of comments were left on Internet sites dedicated to the slain eighth-grader's memory.

In July, Newsweek magazine published a cover story on the shooting, calling it the most prominent gay-bias crime since the murder of Matthew Shepard 10 years ago.

Some E.O. Green students said they witnessed confrontations between McInerney and King before the shooting, including King teasing McInerney and saying that he liked him.

McInerney, being tried in adult court, faces a sentence of 51 years to life if convicted of all the charges. His attorneys have argued the case should be moved to juvenile court, but it has remained in adult court. A discovery hearing is scheduled for Monday.

Seated inside the courtroom, as they have been at every appearance over the past 10 months, will be representatives from the Ventura County Rainbow Alliance, a nonprofit that serves the gay community.

We have not stopped talking about this since Feb. 12, said Executive Director Jay Smith. Its that important to our community and to our county.

The shooting reaffirmed that there is a real level of hate, Smith said, and it hits close to home, because King was one of their own.

King had attended meetings of a support group for gay, bisexual and transgender youths at the Ventura agency. Since the shooting, the groups regular roster of 10 to 20 youths has jumped to 40.

The Rainbow Alliance and other Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender groups said they have noticed changes on campuses, too. More educators are coming forward, interested in addressing LGBT bias and name-calling, or asking what resources are available to help kids struggling at their schools.

I think we still have a long way to go in raising awareness, said Carolyn Laub, director of Californias Gay-Straight Alliance Network, which has student groups on hundreds of campuses throughout the state, including in Ventura County.

The shooting at E.O. Green and Kings death was a wake-up call, she said. Its really the worst kind of tragedy. I think its been on everyones mind, how to make sure Larry didnt die in vain.

In August, Kings family filed claims against the Hueneme School District and the County of Ventura, alleging their failure to protect the boy led to his death. In the claims, the Kings say school and county staff members failed to enforce the middle schools dress code. Friends said King wore makeup, jewelry and high-heeled boots with his school uniform, something the school district has said the teen had the freedom to do under his First Amendment rights.

The Kings claim says that put King at particular risk at a time when staff members knew he had unique vulnerabilities and was susceptible to abuse because of his perceived sexual orientation. His parents, Dawn and Gregory King, along with his younger brother, Rocky King, are seeking unspecified damages related to the fatal shooting.

Gregory King declined to be interviewed for this report. Hueneme High School Superintendent Jerry Dannenberg also declined to comment, citing the pending legal action.

Since the peace walk on Feb. 16, Crutcher has been recognized for her actions, including

receiving an award from the Human Rights Campaign, a nationwide LGBT civil rights organization.

When Crutcher came forward to plan the march, her parents weren't at all surprised. When their daughter sees a wrong, they said, she tries to right it.

Cheryl Crutcher, who has worked in E.O. Greens office for 11 years, was in the school office Feb. 12, fielding what seemed like thousands of calls from frantic parents.

She said she hurts for both King and McInerney. She felt sick to her stomach when she had first heard about what happened in the computer lab that morning, and talking about it again last week, she said it still feels overwhelming.

She said she still thinks about him every day and has a photo of him over her desk. It hasn't even been a year, she said. It's like yesterday.

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