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School's Out

by D.L. Murphy
photos by BJ Smith

We need to
demand that **HISD** be made
safe for *all* students

I was kinda out in high school. And it was awful. Now, having spent many years as an all-the-way-out lesbian, served a brief stint as a teacher, and seen enough of the world to want things to be better for the next generation, I decided to talk with those involved in secondary education to see if anything has really changed.

It's not easy figuring out the state of GLBT issues in HISD. The Houston Indepen-

dent School district operates as a network of islands: Individual school principals decide what training teachers receive, what materials school counselors display, and how supportive or homophobic will be the overall atmosphere.

I did some research to see what resources are available to administrators, staff, and teachers. Surprise! Both PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) and the Gay Lesbian and Straight Education

Network (GLSEN) have packages for teachers and administrators to help them handle homophobic behavior in the classroom, while the Southern Poverty Law Center provides anti-bias teaching materials and curriculum.

One problem. Without exception, none of the 19 working teachers I surveyed had ever seen any of these materials at the schools where they teach.

Susan Wingfield, local art teacher and artist, has taught grades 6 through 12 at both

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HISD and Pasadena ISD schools. We once worked together at George I. Sanchez Charter High School, an East Side school targeting "at-risk" kids. Has she ever received any training about GLBT issues? "[It] never even came up," she said. "If it weren't for the fact that I have gay friends, there is so much about GLBT issues I wouldn't know. I wouldn't be sensitive to this at all."

Next, I talked with the principal of another inside-the-loop HISD high school, this one on the southwest side. He asked me not to use his name in the story.

"Look, you have to understand the pressures I am under to make sure my students perform well on the TAAS," he told me. "All of my in-service re-

Arvey says she regularly provides PFLAG and H.A.T.C.H. (Houston Area Teen Coalition of Homosexuals) materials to each school counselor. The Southern Poverty Law Center's "Teaching Tolerance" materials are available on the district's website. But sending materials out and having counselors use them are two different things. "It's an uphill battle to make people aware of the resources we have," Arvey said. "Nobody is going to make somebody display information at their schools."

Or, let us say, the district is not stipulating or even strongly urging that anyone display the information at their schools. Without such official sanction, even well-meaning counselors

"If they tell a kid it's OK, they are afraid of the family and administrative repercussions. They don't feel they can stick their necks out for these kids." —Carol Petrucci

sources are focused on helping teachers better prepare students for the TAAS."

But, I pointed out, the schools do take time out from their TAAS preparations for celebrations of African-American and Hispanic-American culture. When I asked the principal why the same wasn't done for GLBT students, the interview was terminated.

So, where do students with serious personal questions go within the schools? They go to the school counselors. To find out more about how counselors are trained to deal with their GLBT students, I spoke with Dr. Harriet Arvey, the assistant superintendent at HISD over counseling and guidance. "We do have to address the needs of individual groups who have special circumstances," Arvey said. "We do have a responsibility for that. It is difficult [to do so] in an organization where many different people make the decisions."

find themselves in a tricky spot.

"They don't know how to deal with this situation," said Carol Petrucci, executive director of H.A.T.C.H., who deals with both schools and teens on GLBT issues every day. "If they tell a kid it's OK, they are afraid of the family and administrative repercussions. They don't feel they can stick their necks out for these kids."

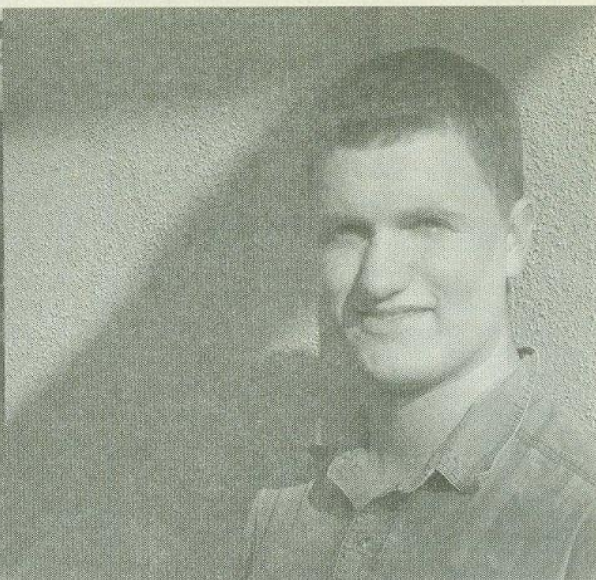
Such widespread fear makes it difficult to get off square one. For example, so far no Gay-Straight Alliances have been started in HISD, despite the fact that GSAs are joining the ranks of other student activity groups in schools across the country. Both the students and teachers I talked with said that the problem was getting a faculty sponsor. What a message this sends: If even the adults are afraid to come out of the closet, that tells kids pretty loud and clear how safe it's go-



Young and Queer and Out: Standing from left: Sparkles, Tara-marie Martinez, Rebecca Mahoffey, Shelly Harvey, Yvonne facts, Lee Longoria, and (kneeling) David Narstrom.



Susan Wingfield has taught art to middle school and high school students in both HISD and Pasadena schools. Has she ever received any training about GLBT issues? "[It] never even came up." Eliot Cardenas was not getting any help from Bellaire High School, when one day he saw "half a H.A.T.C.H. pamphlet" behind some other materials in the counselor's office.



ing to be for them to be honest about their sexual identity.

Since no one is yet willing to make a stand within the school system, H.A.T.C.H. becomes vital as one of the few places locally where sexual-minority youth can turn. Functioning independently of any school, H.A.T.C.H. was formed a decade ago to provide a supportive place for kids to be themselves and explore the never-easy questions of adolescence, sexuality, and selfhood. "Part of the fun was being outside of the norm," said Eliot Cardenas,

now 20, at a recent meeting. "It is cool hanging out at H.A.T.C.H. with the other gay kids."

Cardenas recently received his GED after attending Texas Military Institute in San Antonio and Bellaire High School. He's been working part-time at the Hollyfield Foundation while he attends the University of Houston.

"I didn't have the best high school experience," Cardenas said. First he was kicked out of the military school when they found a gay magazine in his room. When he arrived at Bellaire, he found himself being threatened

and called "faggot." "When I went to the assistant principal, I was told, 'What do you want me to do about it?'"

Left on his own, Cardenas had no idea where to turn. The word "gay" was banned on the school Internet. Bellaire had a few gay books in the library, but he was afraid to check them out. "It was really annoying," he said.

Then, one day, as he describes it, "Way in back of the counselor's office, back behind the other pamphlets, I saw half a H.A.T.C.H. pamphlet." →

YOUTH RESOURCES

Adult, teacher, and parent resources

- **PFLAGHOUSTON** (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays): Monthly meetings around town and in the Woodlands and Galveston. For info 713/467-3524, or e-mail helpline@PFLAGHouston.org, or see their website www.pflaghouston.org. Or nationally www.pflag.org.
- **GLSEN** (The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network): Excellent resource for news and actions on everything pertaining to supporting GLBT youth—www.glsen.org.
- **SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER:** The SPL's mission is to "combat hate, intolerance, and discrimination through education and litigation." Their Teaching Tolerance project provides excellent curriculum and support for teachers dedicated to "fostering equity, respect, and understanding in the classroom and beyond." See www.tolerance.org and www.splcenter.org.

good news

TEACHERS ORGANIZATION SPEAKS OUT

On February 8, the National Education Association's board recommended the adoption of antiharassment policies for GLBT students and the development of materials for classroom and community discussion on these issues. Representing 2.6 million teachers, the NEA board recommended expanding NEA efforts to provide students, education employees, and the general public with accurate, objective, and up-to-date information regarding the needs of, and problems confronting, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students. "It is clear that, in too many places, students and education employees who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered face a hostile environment," NEA president Bob Chase said. "For students, a safe, hospitable environment means the right to learn. For education employees, it means the right to work. For all, it means the right to be free from harassment, bullying, and insensitivity."

4 OUT OF 5 PARENTS SUPPORT PROTECTING GLBT YOUTH

A GLSEN poll found that 4 out of 5 parents favor "expanding existing anti-harassment and antidiscrimination policies to include lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students." Released late last year, the poll also showed that 80 percent of parents support "teacher sensitivity trainings on tolerance that include instructions on dealing with gay and lesbian harassment in schools." Sixty-three percent favor "including positive information about gay and lesbian people in middle and high school health and sex education classes," and 60 percent favor "information about transgender people" in those forums. The nationwide poll was conducted by phone in August 2001 and surveyed 1,000 parents of students ages 5–18 (with an over-sampling of African-American and Hispanic parents).

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Needless to say, we cannot rely on such quirky twists of luck and lurking half-hidden H.A.T.C.H. pamphlets to connect our up-and-coming generation to the supportive GLBT community on which we adults rely. So what's to be done? How can we break out of this standstill of fear and immobility? Assistant superintendent Arvey suggests that we might need the help of some good straight allies.

"Teachers need to let schools know that such training is needed," she said. "You need to get someone who is, or who is perceived to be, heterosexual to push the issue."

Given that HISD is still letting such decisions be made school by school, we all need to push the issue directly at the schools that serve our neighborhoods. We need to insist that teachers receive training on handling homophobia in the classroom. We need to check and make sure that H.A.T.C.H. and PFLAG materials are on the counselors' rack with all the other pamphlets, in plain view. We need to ask that scholarship information be provided to students who may benefit from it. We need to help start Gay-

Straight Alliances, and help solve the problem of finding a faculty sponsor. We need to push for a nondiscrimination policy for HISD faculty and staff. And, most importantly, we need to demand that our schools be made safe for all students.

There is some good news, as reported by H.A.T.C.H.'s Petrucci. "All of our kids who wanted to go to their proms with a same-sex partner could. I think the schools are afraid of the lawsuits that would happen if they couldn't."

And there's some even better news, and it has to do with the precious resilient nature of youth. Regardless of what school they attended, without exception, every gay and lesbian student I spoke with was full of life, full of hope for the future. This is what we want to protect; this is what we want to encourage; this is what we need to give us hope. Let's hope that when one of them, 30 years from now, is asked to write about GLBT students, they will ask their editor, "Why?"

D.L. Murphy is a freelance writer who lives and works in Galveston and Houston. She may be reached at possumproducts@cs.com.

YOUTH RESOURCES

hotlines

- **TEXAS YOUTH HOTLINE** Operating out of Austin, this toll-free Texas hotline is answered 24 hours a day in both Spanish and English. (In fact, when a Spanish-speaking staffer is not available, they use the AT&T Language Line, which can translate more than 100 languages.) Those who staff the hotline are prepared to discuss callers' problems, explore options, and help them develop sensible plans of action. Information and referrals are available to callers in need of community services. Although this hotline is for all youth, staff and volunteers are given training in GLBT issues, which are one of their main priorities. 800/210-2278.
- **FENWAY COMMUNITY HEALTH PEER LINE** This GLBT community health center in Boston offers Peer Line, a nationwide toll-free number staffed by GLBT youth for other gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth. Monday-Friday, 6-11 p.m. Call 800/399-PEER (7337).
- **GAY AND LESBIAN SWITCHBOARD HOUSTON** Although the switchboard is not specifically set up to deal with gay youth, they are well trained in coming-out issues, available in a crisis, and have referral information on local youth resources. Run by the Montrose Counseling Center, the switchboard is staffed 24 hours a day, although only crisis calls are accepted after 10 p.m. 713/529-3211, or www.gayswitchboardhouston.org.