

Not Out There Alone

Straight and LGBT teens reach out to one another.

By Ellen Piligian



Corbis

When Tyler C. reached eighth grade, he decided to come out to his classmates. The transgender teen had spent his entire life knowing he was a boy inside a girl's body. He'd struggled with declining grades, depression, and even a suicide attempt in coming to grips with his gender identity. "I was really fed up at that point with being, in my mind, the biggest freak that walked the planet," says Tyler, now 16 and a sophomore from Wyncote, Pa.

So he held an assembly. "I sat down the whole eighth-grade class," says Tyler, whose parents were by his side. First, they explained the word *transgender*: having gender expression or identity different from conventional expectations based on the physical sex a person is born with. Next they

showed a clip on the subject from an episode of the *Oprah* show. Then Tyler fielded questions.

"Why don't you just be a lesbian?" one kid asked. "Because I consider myself a guy," Tyler replied. "Can I 'catch it' if you sit next to me?" No. "How do you look like a guy?" Tyler explained that he had a naturally deep voice and small breasts. "These kids are sitting there staring at me. When I looked at the crowd, I saw faces that were confused," he says. "I had to [come out like that]." Since then? "There's been no negative stuff. I've actually gone from zero friends and zero girlfriends to popular and a new girlfriend every week."

What's Going On Out There

Not all lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) teens come out to their classmates in such a

bold way or with such positive results. Still, experts agree it's important for LGBT teens—the labels refer to sexual identity, not necessarily sexual behavior—to find self-acceptance and support if they choose to come out. “Students who are unable to be themselves in high school [don't find it easy] ... to build relationships, choose friends, and interact with others confidently,” says Judy Hoff, the national safe schools coordinator for Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG).

But just being themselves isn't always simple or safe for LGBT teens. “Harassment remains the rule, not the exception, for LGBT teens,” says Kevin Jennings, executive director of the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN). Research from GLSEN reveals the troubles that “out” teens often face:

- Real or perceived sexual orientation is one of the top two reasons students are bullied or harassed in school.

- More than 75 percent of the LGBT students ages 13–20 polled routinely heard derogatory names such as “faggot” and “dyke,” and nearly nine of 10 regularly heard comments such as “That's so gay” (meaning “That's so stupid”).

- More than one-third were physically harassed at school because of sexual orientation.

- More than one-quarter were harassed because of gender expression—in other words, “the very ‘sissy’ or feminine guy or very ‘butch’ girl,” explains Ritch Savin-Williams, a Cornell University professor and the author of *The New Gay Teenager*.



Like these marchers in Boston, teens across the country are coming together to promote tolerance.

Although things could be better, they're far from bleak. “In one sense, it's never been so easy to have a nonheterosexual identity as today,” says Savin-Williams. “Kids are more self-accepting now than ever before.”

You Can Make a Difference

All students—gay and straight—can work to promote tolerance, understanding, and acceptance.

Talk back. Antigay language must stop, says Jennings, and speaking up—either by telling a teacher or confronting it yourself—is the best way to counter it. Christian F., a gay 16-year-old junior from Maplewood, N.J., says he doesn't tolerate comments like “That's so gay.” “I'll say: ‘What do you mean by that? You're saying being gay is stupid?’” At the same time, Christian, who is president of his school's gay-straight alliance (GSA), a student-run

COMING OUT: Tips From Teens Who've Been There

“If you come out, you don't have to go around proclaiming you're gay. There's a difference between not hiding it and blaring it.” —Elizabeth D.

“I didn't just say, ‘I'm coming out tomorrow.’ I told a couple of people. And then people knew. I don't recommend ... pushing your pride in people's faces too much. Even in schools with [gay-straight alliances]!” —Christian F.

“Tell your close friends first. They will help you judge who's OK to tell.” —Zack T.

“I wouldn't [always advocate coming out] in school, but it worked for me. Don't come out to your parents if they don't accept you. Just accept yourself. That's a good place to start.” —Tyler C.

“Don't rush into it and tell everyone you're gay. Once you say it, you can't take it back. When you do come out, you'll feel good about yourself, and there's no better feeling than being true to yourself! Be patient with your parents.” —Cristina S.

club that provides a safe place for LGBT students to support one another, is not immune to name-calling. If he hears someone say “faggot,” it makes him “feel a little sick and anxious.”

Do something. Getting active in a GSA is another way for LGBT teens to empower themselves, says Jennings. He guesses that nearly one-third of the approximately 22,000 high schools across the country already have GSAs. In 2004, a California study found that in schools with GSAs, students were 23 percent more likely to feel safe and 16 percent less likely to be harassed based on sexual orientation.

Zack T., 17, a gay student from Oklahoma, started a GSA at his school last year. “I wanted a place for people to go and feel safe,” he says. So far, he’s been well supported. “The principal said, ‘It’s about time our school had that.’”

Meanwhile, for Cristina S., 16, a bisexual junior from Bastrop, Texas, starting a GSA has not been easy. “So far, the school is not very open to it,” she says, but she’s not giving up. Last year Cristina organized a Day of Silence protesting the silencing of LGBT people due to harassment, bias, and abuse. She passed out cards from GLSEN that explained what she was doing. “Even the tough football player types read them and passed them on,” Cristina reports.

Get connected. A support network is key for LGBT teens and can include friends, parents, relatives, religious leaders, counselors, even online support groups. “Connecting is crucial,” says Hoff.

Straight students can also be powerful allies. In fact, straight teens help LGBT teens gain acceptance among straight peers. “They have a unique and valuable role to play,” says Jennings, including supporting a gay friend who comes out or just watching for antigay language. And by simply getting educated about LGBT issues, straight teens can learn tolerance. “It’s hard to be antigay when you know Bill’s gay and Bill’s a good kid,” says Savin-Williams.

Kathleen Adams, a straight 19-year-old from Shaker Heights, Ohio, became a champion for LGBT

Recognize When You’re Ready

In deciding when—and how—to come out, gauge the potential reactions of family and peers. Many parents are loving and accepting, but that’s not always the case. “You may need to wait until you can be on your own,” says Judy Hoff of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays.

Zack T., now 17, came out in seventh grade to his father and stepmother when he lived with them. “[She] couldn’t handle it, and my dad was kind of shocked,” he says. Zack then went to live with his mom and worried that people in his new school would be judgmental. But he slowly told friends and, by ninth grade, was out to the school.

Meanwhile, plenty of teens question their sexual orientation. They need to know they’re not alone, it’s OK to be confused, and there’s no deadline for knowing. “It’s not something you have to decide now,” says Zack.

issues in her sophomore year after a student diversity leadership conference. “Before that, I hadn’t heard much about LGBT issues,” she says. At the time, her school’s GSA wasn’t strong, so she got involved. She was recognized for her support for LGBT issues by the headmaster at graduation. Adams even testified before the Ohio state Senate on an antibullying and harassment bill. “I asked [the Senate] to include ‘sexual orientation and gender identity,’” she says. (At press time, the bill was still pending.)

Don’t assume. Sexual orientation and gender identity don’t always align, so you can’t tell just by looking at a person. Anyone can be LGBT—the school football star, the computer whiz, or the straight-A student. About one in every 10 people is LGBT, and one in four families has an LGBT member, according to PFLAG. So when bias rears its ugly head, chances are it’s hurting someone you know.

DID YOU KNOW? Only nine states (California, Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, Vermont, Washington, Wisconsin) and the District of Columbia have comprehensive anti-bullying laws that specifically address bullying and harassment based on sexual orientation. Laws in only California, Maine, Minnesota, and New Jersey mention gender identity.

Make School Safe

Meanwhile, schools must support LGBT students and protect them from homophobia (prejudice against LGBT people), says Jennings. “Students tell us often [schools] don’t intervene. Or when they do, they aren’t effective.”

Elizabeth D., 16, a bisexual junior from Frederick, Md., recalls a ninth-grade class when a student made a vague gay reference and the teacher said, “Please shoot me if I ever look at another man that way.” Elizabeth admits that she let the remark slide but is now at a new school where she’s active with GLSEN’s Jump-Start National Student Leadership Team. She trains teachers, talks to the media, and supports students and teachers in creating safe schools.

What can you do? Research your school’s stance on tolerance and harassment issues, and determine steps students can take to have their concerns addressed. If you don’t like what you find out, work with other students and adults to change the policies.

Stay True to You

Perhaps the most important thing to do is accept yourself. “I have my moments when I wish I wasn’t gay,” says Zack. “Sometimes I just wish I fit in better. But overall, I love the fact that I’m gay. It’s part of who I am.”

As Tyler puts it: “I’d rather be known as Tyler. Not transgender Tyler—I do everything a normal teen does—I’m just another guy.” His advice to those still struggling? “I found that openness and educating people is the number-one way to guarantee you’ll be happy and accepted.”

STRAIGHT TALK

When a Friend Comes Out to You

Straight teens can be great allies to friends coming out. Kirk H., 16, a sophomore from Gilchrist, Colo., is a straight, self-described “total jock” football player and the vice president of his school’s gay-straight alliance (GSA). He says that even if you aren’t sure you agree with your friend’s choice, “Be open to it. And let them be who they want to be.”

You may not fully understand how your friend feels, says Kathleen Adams, 19, from Ohio, who spearheaded her school’s GSA, but don’t judge or treat your friend any differently than before. Most important, make your friend feel good about coming out and celebrate, she says. “Go out to dinner or throw a ‘coming-out’ party!”

Judy Hoff of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays offers these tips:

Feel honored. He or she trusts you and considers you a valued friend.

Respect your friend’s request for confidentiality. Doing otherwise could affect your friend’s well-being and safety and the friendship.

Be honest about your own feelings and needs. Feel free to say, “This is really a surprise to me. I’ll need some time to get used to it.”

Listen and ask your friend what you can do to support him or her. Then follow through!

For More Info

The Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN)

www.glsen.org

Focuses on ensuring safe schools for all students and offers advice on starting a gay-straight alliance

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)

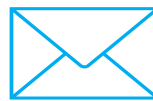
www.pflag.org

Provides support, education, and advocacy

OutProud, the National Coalition for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender Youth

www.outproud.org

Provides resources, including local sources of support



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