

G-4 Friday, June 24, 2005

PERFECT WORLD

Anchorage Daily News

Gay Straight clubs busy through year

■ **MISSION:** Groups promote tolerance with dances, potlucks.

By JESSICA AGI

Perfect World

There's no doubt that high school is a stressful and confusing time. But if you're standing up for a cause, tomorrow might be a little more gratifying. Take a page from the high school student members of the Gay Straight Alliance.

GSA's are school clubs that promote tolerance and aim to diminish the prejudice surrounding homosexuality while creating a safe environment for students of all sexual orientations to discuss gay, lesbian, bi, sexual and transgender (GLBT) issues.

GSA's occasionally work with organizations like Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays and the Gay and Lesbian and Straight Education Network. These and other GLBT-friendly groups come together annually for Anchorage Pridefest, a week of festivities to celebrate and take pride in the city's diversity. Anchorage Pridefest 2005 runs through Sunday. Visit the Web site, www.anchoragepride.com, for more information.

The 49th state wasn't first in the world of Gay Straight Alliances. The first two high school GSAs were developed in Massachusetts in 1989. In 1996, the idea moved north to Alaska when David Lowenfels, a Dimond High student, urged for the formation of a local chapter.

Months of controversy stirred from his suggestion, causing some members of the community to second-guess the Federal Equal Access Act, which states that school districts either allow all school clubs — regardless of personal views — or only academic clubs. Eventually a one-vote margin in the School Board allowed the GSA to exist.

Nine years later, GSAs are common at schools throughout the Anchorage School District. "I joined in my freshman year because equality for those of other sexual orientations is something I'm very passionate about," said Laura Herman, a soon-to-be senior and vice president of the West High GSA.

"Always in my house, we were taught that there were many ways of living, and having a partner instead of a husband was OK. I thought that this was a way for me to assist in breaking down the barriers of stereotypes in our school," she said.

Lana Tyson, a recent graduate and president of West High's GSA, said, "We provide a place for those who just want to hang out and make friends, a place for those who wish to take action against homophobia in our community."

GSA's may have big ambitions, but their membership is fairly small. This year, GSAs from the high schools held two well-attended area-wide meetings at the University of Alaska Anchorage. During the school year, each club tries to meet weekly to discuss gay issues and events in which they will participate, but sometimes they just hang out and eat lunch. Members try to broaden participation with fliers and posters, but spreading the word isn't always easy — considering that some

Perfect World is reported, written and edited by and for local high school students. All submissions become the property of the Anchorage Daily News. This includes the right to republish such material in any format.

We provide a place for those who just want to hang out and make friends, a place for those who wish to take action against homophobia in our community.

— Lana Tyson, president of West High's GSA and recent graduate

students aren't always accepting.

"GSA posters are typically short-lived," said Clint Holloway, the adviser of Service High's GSA, adding that non-GSA students often tear them down.

"While it may sound minimal," Tyson said, "it's a hassle, and it's discrimination."

GSA members keep their heads high, however. The district recently asked the need for permission slips to join school clubs. With the change in policy, more people are now able to join. About a decade ago, getting rid of permission slips was one of Lowenfels' goals.

"This was a great victory for us because then (prospective members) whose parents were unsupportive could still join," Herman said.

GSAs also host the annual Pride Front at the Russian Jack chalet. This year was the first time the dance was sanctioned by the district, allowing announcements and promotion in schools.

"(GSA) dances are held down, without a doubt, the best school dances," Holloway said. The fun doesn't stop at prom, though. GSAs put on dances and potlucks throughout the year. Steller Secondary School, for example, held a fund-raiser dance and donated the proceeds to the Gay and Lesbian Community Center of Alaska.

But one of the most widely recognized events of the past year in which the clubs participated was the Day of Silence, an annual project formed by GLSEN and the U.S. Student Association. Students take a vow of silence to symbolize those who are trapped "in the closet" and unable to talk about their sexual identities. The nationwide event is intended to encourage people to think about people with different sexual orientations.

At Service High, posters and announcements promoting the event attracted some attention. Over 40 armbands dotted the hallways, and more than 60 staff and students supported the silence. Students at other schools were just as passionate.

"We tell others to think about the voices they are not hearing on the Day of Silence, and ask them what they are going to do to end the silence," said Steller GSA member Tony Glavinic, who will be a sophomore in the fall. The next Day of Silence will be in April 2006.

Few but proud, GSAs have proven that even in an uncontroversial school year, they're still as active as ever.

■ Jessica Agi will be a senior at Alyeska Central School in the fall.

US SHOT



IAN MCKEEVER / Perfect World
Ian McKeever catches a disc during an Ultimate Frisbee tournament earlier this week. McKeever will be a senior at Polaris K-12 in the fall.

NINE YEARS LATER



TEENS CAN FACE DISCRIMINATION AND HARASSMENT BECAUSE OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION. THE GAY STRAIGHT ALLIANCE, BROUGHT TO ANCHORAGE IN 1996 BY DAVID LOWENFELS, ALLOWS OPEN DISCUSSION IN A SAFE ENVIRONMENT. PRIDEFEST EVENTS IN ANCHORAGE CONTINUE THROUGH THE WEEKEND, INCLUDING THE CELEBRATING DIVERSITY PARADE, WHICH STARTS AT 11 A.M. SATURDAY AND RUNS DOWNTOWN FROM E STREET TO SIXTH AVENUE TO K STREET. CHECK OUT OTHER ACTIVITIES AT THE PRIDEFEST WEB SITE, WWW.ANCHORAGEPRIDE.COM.

David's legacy

Former Dimond student founded district's first Gay Straight Alliance

By JESSICA AGI

Perfect World

There were a lot of different in 1996. The world hadn't yet been introduced to G-Unit, Ryan Seacrest or "Family Guy." More importantly, high schools in the Anchorage School District hadn't yet been introduced to the Gay Straight Alliance. GSA is a school club that aims to create a safe environment for students to discuss sexual orientation in a tolerant and non-judgmental atmosphere. Who was the daring initiator of the first local chapter of this national organization? David Lowenfels, a student at Dimond High School.

In response, the School Board nearly banned all noncurricular clubs, but the initiative failed by a single vote. Lowenfels also co-organized a conference and rally called "Breaking the Silence" in summer 1997 to show that gay youths had a presence in Anchorage and needed supportive resources.

Now 26, Lowenfels has been living in the real world since he graduated high school a semester early and hasn't looked back. Though he has moved on, he left a mark on the School District and no doubt changed people's lives. Lowenfels spoke with *PW* about his activism.

Q. What have you been up to since high school?

A. After I graduated, I went to Massachusetts Institute of Technology for electrical engineering, then Stanford University for computer music. I specialized in music software, like synthesizers and stuff, but it's hard to find work in that area. I'm sort of in a mad-scientist phase right now. I'm thinking about going to medical school or getting a Ph.D.

Q. Back in 1996 there was a lot of controversy about the formation of the GSA. If the push for the club had waited until 2005, what do you think the reaction would be?

A. Definitely not as negative. At the time, I don't think anybody really understood why I was doing it. Others saw it as a really radical idea.

Q. Why did you decide that there needed to be a GSA?

A. I believed there needed to be a safe space for dialogue, an environment where it was OK to talk about being gay. I wanted to help foster a supportive environment for future students, because I knew it could get really lonely to the point that some kids even commit suicide. I think the administration turned their heads on a lot of harassment. It was like they felt it was my fault for being harassed, for being different. Teachers often ignore homophobic language. There was nowhere at school where I felt that people understood what I was going through.

Q. Did you have a lot of support?

A. My friends were very supportive, and I was an early member of a PFLAG (Parents, Friends and Families of Lesbians and Gays) youth group that met a few times a month. I didn't have much contact



Photo courtesy of David Lowenfels

"I wanted to help foster a supportive environment for future students, because I knew it could get really lonely to the point that some kids even commit suicide."

— David Lowenfels

with the adult gay community, because I think they were hesitant to be with someone so young. I met Willow Teebo, another student at Dimond, who also helped getting the GSA under way. The hardest part was finding the teachers to facilitate the group. They really put themselves on the line.

Q. Had you heard of GSAs in other parts of the country?

A. I was originally inspired by a Web page that was Cambridge Ridge and Latin High School in Massachusetts, called "10 Steps to Creating a GSA." Their GSA was called Project 10 East (www.project10east.org). The school district of Wisconsin was another (gay)-youth-friendly state, and had produced a handbook for parents and educators. I got all this information from the Internet, which was a life raft for me.

Q. Which do you think has the greater effect on a teenager's view of homosexuality: family and upbringing or the media and peers?

A. I think the family is stronger, especially if they have negative religious views. But if a kid can put a positive face to someone who's gay, like an uncle, family friend or even a classmate, then it becomes more personal and not just about demonizing

the abstract.

Q. Do all the recent overly homosexual TV shows like "Will and Grace," "Queer as Folk" and "Queer Eye" help or hinder the way gay people are seen?

A. I think (these shows) demonstrate a progression of society of homosexuality being more culturally acceptable; they show flavors of human diversity. But I put them in the same category as "Survivor" or regular sitcoms. Ellen (DeGeneres) was certainly a landmark though. The shows now are enforcing stereotypes, but gay people have all kinds of personalities.

Q. GSA is for gays and straight alike, but a lot of straight students are worried that if they join people will question their sexuality, and gay students are sometimes hesitant to join because they don't want to "out" themselves yet. Whose presence in the club do you think is more valuable?

A. One of the fundamental guidelines of a GSA is to not pressure anyone to identify their orientation or to make assumptions about others. What's most important is that people know the club exists. It's there to spark dialogue and provide a safe zone. The presence of gay and straight students is equally valuable.

Q. Having had the life experience you've had since high school, would you have done anything differently in trying to form the GSA?

A. I'm pretty happy with how everything turned out. Maybe I could have started it earlier, because I graduated right after it was formed. My primary motivation was just to make things better for future students.

Q. On a personal note, did pushing for the formation of a GSA help you "come out"?

A. I had already come out about a year earlier, just after my 16th birthday. First I told my close friends and then later my parents. (My parents) were supportive and accepting but thought it might just be a phase. I had struggled with it for many years, being in mental and emotional denial, so I had to allow them some time to work it out as well.

Q. What did you take a lot of courage. Do you have any advice for high school students who are different in one way or another and are dealing with intolerance and self-doubt issues?

A. I was really lucky to have such understanding and supportive friends, and my parents are really cool. I was seeking out resources on my own to support me, but believing in myself and knowing that my cause was good and would have a positive effect was important. Hang in there. High school is only one chapter of a long book. Pursue what inspires passion and excitement, and it will lead you where you are supposed to be.

■ Jessica Agi will be a senior at Alyeska Central School in the fall.