

tion program. She says she has submitted hundreds of class synopses and only has had one denied by the college's administration in more than three years. When she submitted the class "How to be happy and single in the couples world" with "How to be happy, single and gay in a couples world," she received a terse written response from an administrator: "Not at this time."

It was a pretty big message, Kenney says. "We don't want your kind. We don't condone that. Stay in the closet, don't talk about it."

While the rejection was difficult, Kenney's resolve to make a difference at her college only strengthened. She got involved in the American Association of Women in Community Colleges, helped start a scholarship fund, networked with faculty and administrators around campus and became the adviser for the Pride Students' Alliance, a struggling support group for sexual minority students.

Most importantly, Kenney started speaking out. The benefits offered to heterosexual employees exceeded those provided to domestic partners, so she approached the human resources department.

The college never had offered or required diversity training, so she invited a speaker to come and talk about issues in the sexual minorities community. She complained to administrators about anti-gay graffiti on campus left untouched. "I refused to be shamed," she says.

But in the midst of Kenney's quest to make a real difference, she found herself faced with serious personal and health problems. She was diagnosed with diabetes and then Graves' disease. She almost was killed in a car wreck when she blacked out at the wheel. The accident left her in a coma with a bruised heart. Her 10-year relationship had ended as well.

Kenney says she knew the chain of events either would send her into a "downturn" or onto a higher road. She had to choose which course she'd take; she decided to do something truly meaningful with her life.

Kenney resolved not only that her college must treat all people well but that she needed to treat herself well first. She started by taking a running class at the college. Within a few months, she was running the Portland Marathon and had dropped 80 pounds.

THE SIGN

When Measure 9 successfully qualified for the November 2000 ballot, Kenney grew increasingly frustrated and angry that she didn't have the same rights as her own staff. During her 3 1/2 years at Mount Hood, she says she has worked hard, improved her program by doubling the number of courses offered in the continuing education program and grown to love the people she works with.

But that hasn't been enough. "I've done my job and yet the message I get is, 'You're not as good as us,'" she recalls thinking. "I was sick of being treated as a second-class citizen."

Measure 9 failed to pass, but the race was uncomfortably close, Kenney says. When the

holidays rolled around, she says she was feeling increasingly frustrated.

During a December meeting for the American Association of Women in Community Colleges, Kenney's mind was wandering. She wasn't listening to the speaker at the podium. She was thinking about a meeting she attended earlier in the day in which she heard about the progress that Clackamas Community College has made in changing the climate for gays on campus. She was thinking about how far she'd come in her life and how much still needed to change at her college. She was thinking about moving on—about quitting.

"I was right at the brink of giving up," Kenney says. "As much as I love this college, I was about to give up."

But as her attention turned from her internal dialogue to the speaker, she realized the woman's words sounded familiar: Leadership. Undaunted. Struggle. Funny. Gusto. Champion.

Kenney received the Carolyn Desjardins Leadership Award that afternoon. Her friends, mentors, protégés and onlookers stood in a thundering ovation. The award—a lavender-colored plaque—was inscribed with these words: "Because you have inspired, championed and celebrated the talents within each of us."

"It gave me back my strength," Kenney says. "It was a huge sign to go forward."

PROGRESS

Kenney says things are changing at the college. All staff now receive equal benefits across the board.

The college administration soon will begin offering diversity training. Complaints about harassment against sexual minorities are being investigated.

Anti-gay graffiti has been removed from bathroom walls. A safe bathroom has been designated for trans students.

The Pride Students' Alliance is meeting regularly and growing in numbers. And the college recently sent Kenney to the Oregon Hate Crimes Conference, a gesture that has meaning to her.

"Mount Hood is looking at diversity issues at a much deeper level than it has ever before," she says. "Look at the incredible changes."

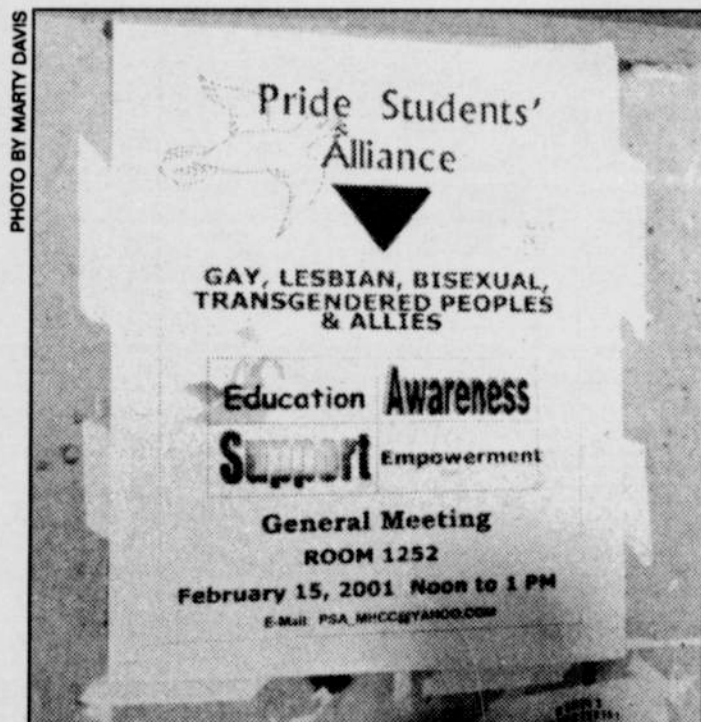
But most significant to Kenney is a letter sent to all staff from college president Dr. Bill Becker denouncing harassment against any specific group—including gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people. "You can imagine how traumatic this is for those targeted by such a message," he wrote. "We at Mount Hood Community College do not tolerate any behavior that attacks a specific group or person."

The college will have a new president this summer. He already has asked to meet with Kenney.

"For the first time on this campus I feel wholly supported from the top," she says. "We can't ever go back. We're moving forward." □

For more information about the PRIDE STUDENTS' ALLIANCE send e-mail to psa_mhcc@yahoo.com or call 503-491-7428.

JONATHAN KIPP is a Just Out staff reporter who can be reached at jonathan@justout.com.



The Pride Students' Alliance is a growing support group on the Gresham campus

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