

**H**ave you spent a day in high school recently? If you did, you probably heard more than 25 derogatory remarks about homosexuals, and even more about people who don't fit neatly into their assigned gender.

If you were there as a vocal supporter of queers, even if you identify as straight, at least 10 of those remarks were directed at you. There aren't enough hours in the day to educate everyone who says that something is "so gay" or that someone they dislike is a "fucking fag."

You have to choose your battles. Sometimes, you have to choose silence.

Things have changed for the better since the days of Stonewall, but it still isn't easy to go through school as a gay, lesbian, bi, trans or questioning student. Although many have Gay Straight Alliances and policies against harassment, schools remain unsafe for many kids who must choose silence in order to protect themselves.

In 1996 students at University of Virginia decided it was time to reclaim silence and make it work for them. They had a novel idea: Why not spend an entire school day in silence as a way to start a community dialogue about the daily injustice in the lives of sexual and gender minority students? They called it the Day of Silence, and it was an overwhelming success.

The Day of Silence spread quickly across the country and internationally. By 2000 more than 300 middle schools, high schools, colleges and universities were participating.

In 2001 the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network became the official sponsor of the Day of Silence Project. It formed a network of regional organizers so that even more queer students and allies could participate.

Last year 1,900 schools, colleges and universities were involved, making it the largest student-led action for safer schools in the country. This year's event is set for April 9.

The Catlin Gable School in Portland was one of more than 40 institutions in Oregon and Southwest Washington that took part in 2002. Junior and GSA co-leader Sarah Smith was profoundly affected by the experience.

"The Day of Silence gave me insight into the feelings of those forced into silence because of social pressure and intolerance," she says. "I'm open about my sexuality, and voicing that is a huge part of my daily life."

"When I had an entire day to just observe reactions to my silence...it was stunning. There were a few who tried to make us speak or laugh or distract us from our cause, but mostly we were respected, and our silent group stuck together. We used our silence as a bond; it became our strength rather than a weakness."

"It felt incredible to have a large percentage [about one-fifth] of our predominantly straight



*"Many people don't realize...that we face verbal and physical harassment every day because of our real/perceived sexual orientation or gender identity"*

—Sophia Lanza-Weil

ful for students to use that same oppressive silence to change their situations to get to a point that their silence is not necessary.

"My own experience with being silent for a full nine hours is that it really makes a person think about what they do say. Because you can't talk, you listen more closely. For me, it not only made the normal barrage of 'that's so gay' stand out more, but it also made me wonder if I sounded like that to anyone. There are all kinds of silences we put people in, and my own silence gave me a chance to think about what I might be perpetuating through my actions/words in other areas."

This year students in Portland plan to congregate in Pioneer Courthouse Square after school in order to share their quiet plea for equality with the public. The Night of Noise, which begins at 5 p.m., is an opportunity for participants to break their silence together.

Organizers hope the event will allow those who have been silent to share their experiences and feelings and to celebrate what they have accomplished. They expect more than 400 students, teachers and parents to attend. **JW**

For more information about the DAY OF SILENCE PROJECT visit [www.dayofsilence.org](http://www.dayofsilence.org) or contact Sophia Lanza-Weil at [sophia@dayofsilence.org](mailto:sophia@dayofsilence.org). To make a donation for the NIGHT OF NOISE contact

Melissa Shepherd of Basic Rights Oregon at 503-222-6151.

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## USING SILENCE TO SPEAK OUT

**Students take action to expose daily injustice in the lives of sexual and gender minorities**

by Kat Wilson

school act out against the social isolation of sexual minorities. I gained new respect for the people involved, and I think we all gained a bit of perspective of the daily lives of those who feel oppressed by social taboos. As a community, I think it made us more accepting and open to sexual orientation and preference."

Chris Skrapits, an out gay teacher at Catlin Gable and faculty adviser to the school's GSA, was impressed by how many kids were willing to support sexual minorities by staying silent for an entire day.

"I was shocked about how many students were willing to take this on," he says. "The most important thing is for students who are in the closet or coming out to see all of their peers standing up...for LGBTQ acceptance. I think that one of the most powerful things we get out of it is that people get to identify themselves as allies and friends. We can see a critical mass of people who care."

Sophia Lanza-Weil, a senior at Franklin High in Portland, is so committed to the Day of Silence that she works on it behind the scenes year-round. As Western regional student organizer, her official role is to help kids in 12 states coordinate the project at their own schools. But

she uses her position to do more than that.

"I help GSAs get started/revitalized, and I answer questions," she says. "I started my GSA, so I have that experience behind me, and I feel like I have a lot of resources that I can offer."

"I am also working to network student groups, especially in states like Wyoming, where

there aren't a lot of GSAs. Isolation is my big thing: I want to get rid of it as quickly as possible, so I use DOSP work as a tool for reaching hundreds of students across the country and connecting them."

Lanza-Weil never expected she'd be serving in such a significant capacity. She had read about the position on GLSEN's Web site and applied on a whim; within a few weeks she found herself in Chicago meeting the rest of the Student Leadership Team.

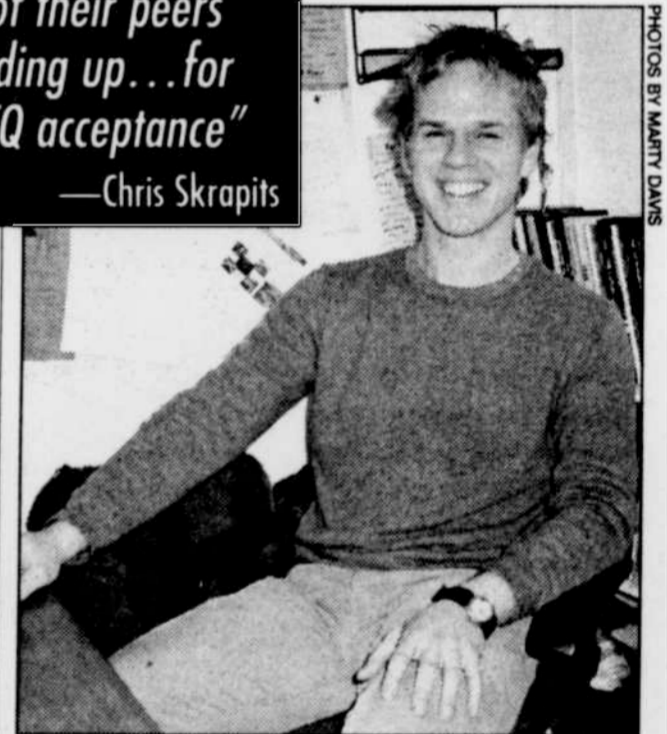
Why is she so committed to the Day of Silence?

"It is incredibly important to be constantly pushing the message that harassment still exists for queer youth and their allies," she says. "Many people don't realize that it still happens or that we face verbal and physical harassment every day because of our real/perceived sexual orientation or gender identity."

"DOSP is also a unique project in that it reclaims silence. Everyone has been silent in the face of some sort of harassment. It's very power-

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