

They spoke for themselves—or, rather, their note cards did. Students across the nation who participated in the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network's Day of Silence took nine-hour vows of silence April 21 to protest the silenced voices of queer youth because of prejudice, discrimination and harassment in schools.

When spoken to, they would simply hand the person a note explaining the purpose behind their silence. The end of the note dares the reader by asking, "What are you going to do to end the silence?" In Oregon, more than 50 high schools answered

## BREAKING THE SILENCE

Students take action to combat harassment in schools

by Adina Lepp

that question with their actions of silence. The collective exhale was signified with the second annual Night of Noise rally presented by Basic Rights Oregon's Youth Action Caucus. It is the only public queer event in Portland organized and led by youth.

After the school day ended, more than 150 youth shuffled into Pioneer Courthouse Square, breaking their silence to the tunes of The Discords, a Cleveland rock band. The trio's melodic muses made the cautious, swelling crowd start swaying.

Organizers and volunteers stood behind tables representing BRO, Planned Parenthood and other groups, while milling students grabbed for candy and stickers. GLSEN representative Larry Smith tied white balloons to the wrists of the wandering as a symbol of the fight for marriage equality.

David Wright, a graduate of Thomas Edison High School, ran around the square pinning white ribbons on the shirts of anyone who would let him. In between pinning, he would dance and shout, routinely announcing, "This is my song." Techno house music poured out into the square as poets and singers took to the stage.

Talking on a cell phone just behind the stage was Multnomah County Chair Diane Linn. A leader in the battle for same-sex marriage, she spoke concisely, admitting that she feared boring the anxious crowd.

BRO executive director Roey Thorpe also addressed equality. Speakers were broken up by poets and singers, many times unifying the swarming clusters in the square.

The issue of harassment in schools was brought up repeatedly, as many of the participants were students who continually face discrimination. Seven tattered biker kids took an active role in the rally



PHOTOS BY MARTI DAVIS

Roger S. Wert (left, with Blaine Reposa) serves as political outreach coordinator for Portland State University Queers and Allies

when they organized and taught the crowd how to play "Bombs and Shields."

The spontaneous, celebratory nature of the event was overshadowed at times by the implications behind forced silence. "It makes you think. I've never been quite aware of how much I wasn't able to say about my sexuality. It makes you think of all of the people who are forced into silence because of unpopular opinions," said Andrew Lapato, a sophomore at Pacific University in Forest Grove.

The students' demonstration seemed to serve as a reminder to the schools and community that there are people who are forced into silence every day. These people filled the square with cheers as a student proposed to her girlfriend of 1 1/2 months. The music of Queen echoed across downtown as everyone broke out in song, mouthing the words to "Bohemian Rhapsody." The eruption of noise was clear, even if the lyrics weren't. [C]

ADINA LEPP has been spotted contemplating the end of high school over lengthy games of Scrabble coupled with multiple cups of black tea.



An estimated record 300,000 students from more than 3,000 K-12 schools, colleges and universities in all 50 states participated in this year's Day of Silence



Up for anything,  
except noon.®



©2003 COORS BREWING COMPANY GOLDEN, COLORADO 80401 • BEER • CNW000350