

Gay straight alliances raise awareness, courage in youths

BY AMY LAM
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

The back-to-school season marks the end of summer vacation for students. While some students may be looking forward to a fresh start, they may have

classmates who dread returning to school.

Although schoolyard bullying has long been considered a part of the rite of passage for

young people, it is facing greater scrutiny in light of recent violence directed toward LGBTQ (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and Queer) youth. According to a 2001 Washington Post article examining this issue, three out of 10 LGBTQ students drop out of school due to harassment and discrimination, a number that is three times the national average for their heterosexual classmates. Four out of five LGBTQ youth say that they do not know of any supportive adults at their schools.

Khalil Edwards, coordinator for PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians & Gays) Portland Black Chapter says that queer youth of color tend to face even more hardship because they are dealing with two layers of discrimination. "When a black student gets picked on at school, they can go home and talk to their parents. But

if they are being picked on for being queer and a person of color, the student often can't get the support from home or from school."

Even for someone like Khalil, who grew up in a supportive household, it was difficult for him to embrace his whole self. "My parents have always been advocates for social justice and equal rights," he said.

In middle school, he started developing feelings that made him feel uncomfortable, but he didn't know how to tell his family even though they had never said or done anything homophobic. "It was because I knew how it was perceived in our society, among my friends and peers. I never heard anything positive about being gay."

When Khalil finally came out to his family a couple of years after graduating from high school, they were supportive. He counts himself fortunate to have a network of people that cares about him unconditionally, and he knows that there are many queer students of color who do not have this type of support.

"PFLAG is for parents to come get support and ask questions about how to understand their child's sexual orientation. PFLAG Black Chapter goes beyond being a support system for parents who struggle with these issues, and we go into the community to reach everyone."

Antoinette, Khalil's mother, was one of the founders of the PFLAG Portland Black Chapter in 2009. She also started the first Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) at Jefferson

High School, where she worked. The GSA helped students to create their own network of support amongst queer youth and straight allies. "There are fewer homophobic remarks, and students feel more safe to attend classes at schools with GSAs," said Khalil.

"Not being alone is a major factor. The mere presence of a GSA gives students courage to come out to their families. A GSA is a network of support that they have never had."

PFLAG Portland Black Chapter is part of the Uniting Communities project at the Western States Center, which works towards pairing racial justice and LGBTQ equality. "Uniting Communities helped us to acquire the skills to be able to go into different schools to speak with leaders and faculty in order to help assess and start a GSA if needed," said Khalil. Currently, there are GSAs at predominantly black high schools, Jefferson and Grant.

"We were also formed partnerships with other community groups through Uniting Communities. It's crucial that there are groups we can reach out to for support and they can reach out to us," Khalil says. "Uniting Communities works to raise the visibility of queer people of color in our communities, recognize their experiences, and address their needs. Being able to intersect all these things that align with our mission has been a huge opportunity and benefit to the work that we do."



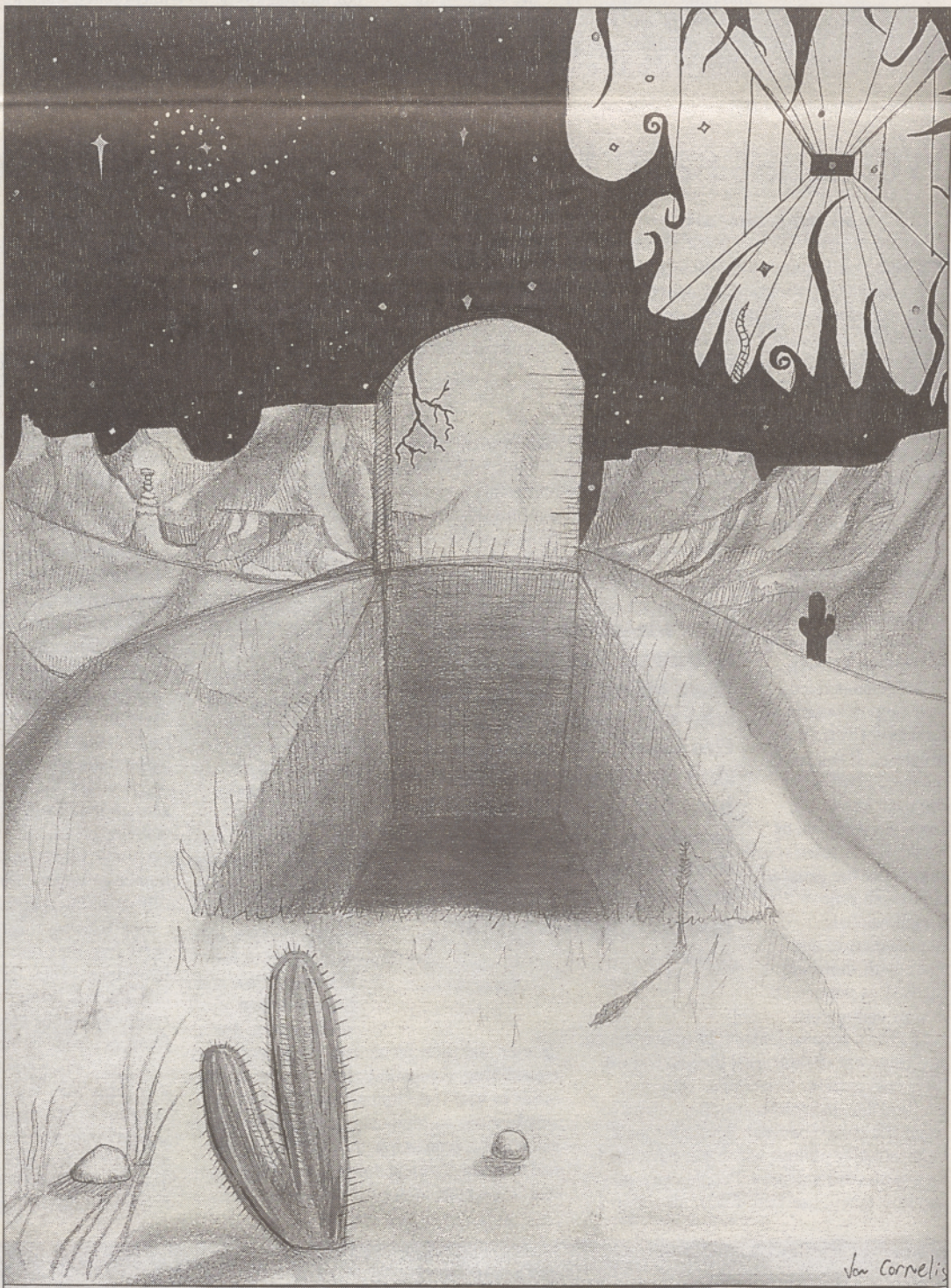
Amy Lam is the Development & Communications Associate at the Western States Center, which aims to build a progressive movement by supporting grassroots organizations. The Center's Uniting Communities project works with organizations based in communities of color to advance LGBTQ equality.

My Show

By Jason Wolf

Sometimes I don't see the forest for the trees
I look at the challenges ahead and crumble to my knees
I feel bombarded with obstacles that lay in my way
Then I tend to do nothing or whatever I may
Sometimes I have to be someone other than me
At times I don't want to live, don't want to die, but just be
I feel myself deteriorate in this shell of a man
I have goals I want to accomplish but never have a plan
I get bored quickly, always wanting something new
With myself I usually don't know what to do
I try to avoid looking at myself when I see a mirror
Because the person I don't want to be becomes clearer
Reality is a game I don't want to play
I have no choice but the rules I don't obey
So I have to climb the wall that is forever high
Thinking to myself that the limit truly is the sky
No rest for the wicked, the show must continue
Until the day I am relieved from this venue

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By Jon Cornelison

street roots
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July-November 2011
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