

Allies for Equity

SOUTH EUGENE HIGH SCHOOL
AND LGBTQ OUTREACH by Adrian Black

Toward the end of her eighth grade year, Phoebe Wihtol, now a junior at South Eugene High School, came out to family, friends and classmates. “I’m a lesbian,” she says. “People kind of knew. I hadn’t hidden it.”

Like other lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth and their allies, Wihtol is a member of South Eugene’s Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA). “What we want it to be is a safe, welcoming environment where, no matter what, we’re going to accept you,” says Onyx Huch, GSA president.

“Our [LGBTQ] students have a higher probability of not feeling safe in schools,” says Carmen Urbina, parent, family and diversity coordinator at 4J School District, referring to recent school climate survey data. Estimates vary, but the average coming-out age has dropped by half over the past 20 years, from around 30 years old down to 15. “Part of making people conscientious about gay people in school is just being really casual and not making it a big deal, but also making sure to mention it in normal life,” Wihtol says.

Wihtol feels pretty safe, but not every LGBTQ-identified student is comfortable being out. Urbina hopes that will change through GSAs and other initiatives. “It’s about them not having to deny who they are in our schools,” she says. Since freshman year, Wihtol and Huch have been friends, fellow GSA members and active participants in educating other kids about their identities. At Spencer Butte Middle School, Huch, who is bisexual, sat on a Bridges Panel, a speaking event designed to clarify LGBTQ identity to younger students.

Wihtol says this education should happen as early as



PHOEBE
WIHTOL

PHOTO BY ADRIAN BLACK

possible. “If we only teach it at puberty, that makes it weird. Little kids know heterosexuality. They see a prince kiss a princess in movies. You tell little kids about gay people the same way you tell them about straight people.”

Julie Heffernan is an education studies instructor at the University of Oregon and former social studies teacher at North Eugene High School. She facilitates panels like the one Huch did and has conducted them herself at multiple middle schools as well as McCornack Elementary School.

“Gender identity is interpreted by kids as sexual orientation in about the first grade,” Heffernan says. “The two are tied together immediately in harassment and hostility.” Male-to-female transgender children are usually incorrectly pegged as gay by classmates. “Whether a kid is attracted to their own birth gender or not is irrelevant to how they do or don’t conform to that gender,” she adds.

“We had a whole elementary school go through a whole year of training over that,” Urbina says about an assumed male second grader who consistently identified as female. Schools have taken steps to accommodate transgender students, such as providing gender-neutral bathrooms. South Eugene has only one gender-neutral bathroom, “and it’s not always open,” Wihtol says. South’s GSA, with Urbina’s help, plans to tackle that problem this fall. “A lot of the more active members in the GSA are trans,” Wihtol says. “We’re in the process of trying to turn GSA from being ‘Gay-Straight Alliance’ to ‘Gender-Sexuality Alliance,’ because that covers the whole [LGBTQ] spectrum.”

“GSAs are a place that’s about equity, not equality,” Huch says. “Equality is where everyone gets a parachute — same model, same size. Equity means everyone gets a parachute that *fits*.” ■

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