

GLBT STUDENTS AND THEIR ALLIES CONFRONT  
OSTRACISM AND ISOLATION AT SCHOOL

BY LISA BENNETT

ILLUSTRATION BY ARTHUR J. GIRON

# Break the silence

● *Four out of five gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered students report being physically, sexually or verbally harassed at school, according to the 2003 National School Climate Survey. Further, such harassment directly affects student outcomes: GLBT students who are exposed to constant verbal harassment possess lower GPAs and are twice as likely to opt out of college as part of future plans. This article from the Fall 1997 issue of Teaching Tolerance showcases gay-straight alliances — one way to help create safer and more welcoming schools.*

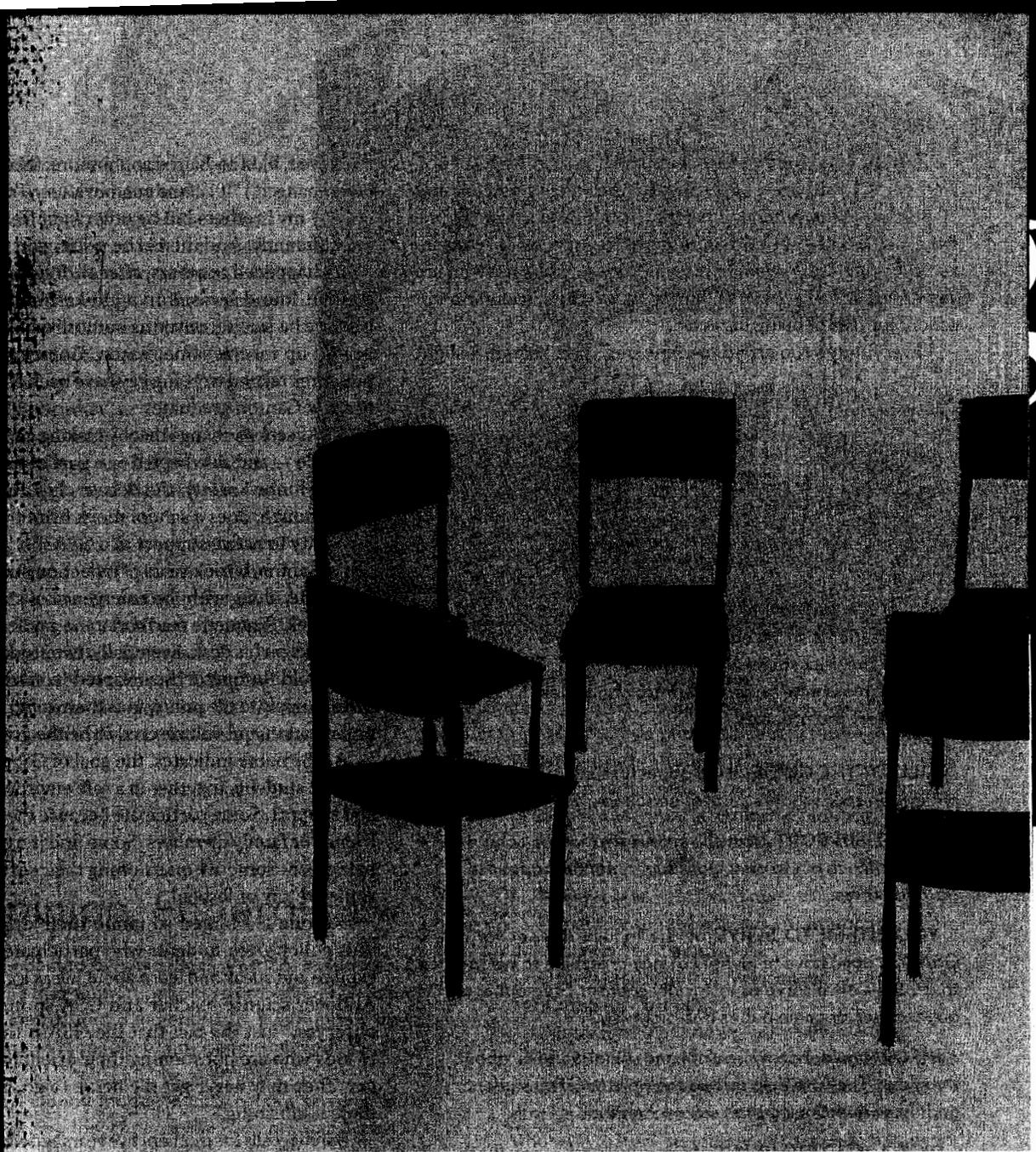
Robert Rinquette, who heads the guidance department at Canton High School in Canton, Mass., is a former Navy man, the father of four, and one of those extraordinary adults that teenagers believe they can talk to about almost anything. His office provides an array of conversation starters: There's a "Best Dad" poster, a "We Support Canton Wrestling" plaque on a bulletin board, a pile of suicide-prevention booklets on the desk and a pink triangle on the door.

The pink triangle, a symbol that recalls gays and lesbians killed by Nazis during the Holocaust, has become in recent decades a symbol of gay pride and support for gay rights. But its very visible

placement on Rinquette's door symbolizes something else, too: the increasing willingness of schools to acknowledge and support gay and lesbian students.

This isn't the triangle that students see in geometry classes, however; the gay and lesbian triangle is properly poised on its tip rather than its base. Rinquette, who is heterosexual, did not know this when he put the emblem on his door. So one of the first symbols of gay pride displayed in Canton High School remained upside down for almost a year, until a health teacher told him it went the other way.

This small irony demonstrates the fact that, like Rinquette, many people who are taking the lead in supporting gay and lesbian young people are not gay rights experts or even gay. In some communities, educators are putting themselves, and



sometimes their ignorance, on the line to ensure an equal and safe education for all students.

Canton, a predominantly conservative, Irish Catholic suburb 40 miles south of Boston, seems at first glance an unlikely home for a Gay-Straight Alliance. GSAs are school-sanctioned student organizations meant to give gay and straight kids a safe place to discuss sexual orientation issues. But in recent years, GSAs have become increasingly common not only in metropolitan areas but in suburbs like Canton and Andover, another largely Catholic community north of Boston.

"The lesson we have learned is when students have a voice in this, it cuts through the homophobia. It makes teachers realize that these kids are just kids — like their own kids," says David LaFontaine, chairman of the (Mass.) Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth.

Four years ago, LaFontaine, a 1976 graduate of Canton High, and his mother, an activist with the national advocacy group Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), met with Canton school administrators to recommend that the school form a GSA. The recommendation was respectfully but promptly rejected with the reply "We have no gay or lesbian students at Canton."

It was a typical reaction, according to LaFontaine, who says that administrators often assume there is no need for a GSA where they live. One reason for this is the stereotype that gays and lesbians live only in cities and "liberal" towns. Yet, as LaFontaine points out, most high school students — gay or straight — don't get to choose their place of residence. Another factor that obscures the issue is the effort by many gays and lesbians to closet, or hide, their sexual orientation because of the social stigma on homosexuality.

"Fitting in" is never more important than in high school. According to surveys suggesting that between 2 percent and 10 percent of the general population is homosexual, anywhere from 14 to 68 of Canton's 680 students might be gay or lesbian, not counting those who are bisexual. But no students who are gay or lesbian have been willing to reveal their orientation in school for fear of being harassed.

"Everybody's too afraid to come out," says Leland, a slight

blue-eyed, blonde-haired sophomore. (Names of students have been changed.) "If I came out, obviously, I'd get beaten up — not only by my brothers but by other kids. Teachers would look at me differently. And there'd be writing on the bathroom wall."

It's happened to others, after all. In recent years, one Canton student found himself in a choke-hold up against a locker because he was perceived as homosexual. Another student was beaten up for the same reason. Counselors suspect that the pressures related to being gay have been a factor in the suicides of a few Canton graduates.

GSA's seek to change that by making gay and lesbian students as visible — and as accepted — a part of the school community as the Honor Society, the debate club and the football team. How, though, does a school move from the "we have no gays" mentality to active support of a GSA?

At Canton, it took years of reflection and lobbying by Robert Rinquette, along with the emergence of student leaders. Week after week, Rinquette read about the gay/lesbian issue, piling up the books on his desk. Eventually, two students who noticed the books told Rinquette they wanted to start a GSA. He advised them to apply to the principal as they would for any other student organization and volunteered to be the group's advisor.

As the name indicates, the goal of GSA's is to bring gay and straight students together in a safe environment for discussion and support. Some participate because they have gay or lesbian friends or family members. Some find it trendy, like dying one's hair green. Some are questioning their sexual orientation. And some are gay or lesbian.

No one is obliged to name their orientation, however. This policy gives students who participate greater freedom to explore and speak and learn about life as a gay or lesbian person. Andover science teacher and GSA sponsor Deborah Burch observes: "Just the fact that the GSA is there says something to kids who are questioning their orientation or know they're gay. They may never get the nerve to go, but the fact that it is there is affirming."

Burch recalls the moment five years ago when an announcement came over the loudspeaker at Andover: "For anyone interested in starting up a Gay-Straight Alliance or who wants more information, there will be a meeting in the Career Center after school."

Burch attended, along with five students and five teachers. One by one, people introduced themselves, many saying, "Hi, I'm not gay, but ...." When they reached Burch, she said, "Well, I guess I'm the token gay person here."

Now the faculty advisor for the GSA, Burch remains the only openly homosexual teacher on a faculty of approximately 100. Still, she insists that being gay, or out, is not a prerequisite for helping gay and lesbian students.

"When we first started the GSA," Burch recalls, "I didn't know anything about my own history — about gay history." She spent the next two years researching gay and lesbian issues in the schools and tested all of her ideas in the GSA, discovering through trial and error what works and what doesn't.

"What doesn't work," she cautions, "is saying to the kids, 'I

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## How to Start a GSA at Your School

Start a GSA to provide refuge for GLBT students and to help students of all sexual orientations find common ground. The Massachusetts Department of Education ([www.doe.mass.edu/hssss/GSA/Intro.html](http://www.doe.mass.edu/hssss/GSA/Intro.html)) offers 10 steps to jumpstart the process.

**1 FOLLOW THE GUIDELINES** about forming new clubs as outlined in your school's student handbook.

**2 ENLIST SUPPORT** from the administration as soon as possible. Reach out to principals, superintendents, counselors and others.

**3 VOLUNTEER TO SERVE** as the faculty adviser for a GSA. You don't have to identify as gay or lesbian to belong to a GSA — or to serve as its faculty sponsor. Step out as a gay teacher, or come out as a straight ally.

**4 INFORM** guidance counselors and social workers about the group. They can help spread the word to GLTB students and those questioning their sexual identities.

**5 PICK A MEETING PLACE.** At first, locate a space that's off the beaten path to provide privacy.

**6 ADVERTISE.** Follow school procedures; put up fliers and place notices in the school newspaper and in TV and morning announcements.

**7 GET SNACKS.** Provide — and publicize — the availability of food at your meetings. It will give everyone something to share immediately.

**8 HOLD YOUR MEETING.** Ask: Why are you here? Or, watch and then discuss a film.

**9 ESTABLISH GROUND RULES** about what can be shared outside the group.

**10 SET GOALS FOR THE FUTURE.** How prevalent is harassment against GLBT students in your school? What can the GSA do to stem the tide?

need someone to research the following topic and present it: They don't want it to be school."

Burch also surveyed her colleagues about their knowledge of gay and lesbian issues and discovered a wide range of misinformation and stereotypes, with one remark in particular standing out: In response to the question "Should homosexuals be able to work with children?" one teacher wrote: "I did have a problem recommending a boy who I knew was homosexual to be a Big Brother."

"That comment," says Burch, "made me realize that more than hurt feelings were involved here. Lack of knowledge about gay and lesbian issues was affecting these students' futures."

She responded by offering a 10-week voluntary in-service training on gay and lesbian issues to her colleagues. For the first session, 15 teachers gathered in a circle in Burch's lab. Some were fresh out of college; some had been teaching for 20 or 30 years.

Burch wrote a word on the blackboard: "Identity." Then she asked them to name the elements that made up their identity. Ideas flooded out: family, religion, occupation, gender,

ethnicity, sexual orientation and so on.

"Now," she continued, "think about which two of these are most important to you as a person. You don't have to share it with us. Just think about it."

A minute passed. "Now," she said, "imagine the principal and superintendent of schools come in and say, 'I'm sorry, you can't express that.' How do you feel?"

"I feel resentment," said one.

"I feel like the things that are important to me don't matter," said another.

Others responded: "I feel isolated," "Ostracized," "Withdrawn," "Invisible."

Bingo. Burch put down her chalk.

These feelings, she went on to explain, are what most gay and lesbian students feel at school every day. Understanding this is the first step for teachers who wish to help truly integrate them into the school environment. It is a step, many believe, that will help not only gay and lesbian students but the larger community as well.

Now that gay and lesbian students have begun to come out in high school, Andover's Ellen Parker predicts more will follow. But, given the ongoing fact of prejudice against gays and lesbians, administrators like Parker hope to control the process to the extent that they can. They want to avoid a backlash and inspire an ongoing learning experience among students, teachers and parents alike.

"I'm sure some people in the GSA would like us to go faster," Parker acknowledges. "But in the big picture, for this community, I think the slow pace is OK."

*Lisa Bennett is the director of the Human Rights Campaign's FamilyNet program.*



#### BUILDING COMMUNITY

## Public Opinion, Federal Law

In a 2001 survey, conducted by Lake, Snell, Perry & Associates, 86 percent of parents said they support policies to protect GLBT students from harassment at school, and a majority said they support the inclusion of "positive information" about gay people in middle and high school curricula.

Despite such broad support for gay-friendly actions, the creation of GSAs can spark controversy. In such cases, the Federal Equal Access Act can provide support for students and their allies. The Act requires public high schools to treat non-curricular clubs, including GSAs, equally. To learn more about the Federal Equal Access Act's relationship to GSAs, download these free publications:

**Q & A About Gay-Straight Alliances**  
American Civil Liberties Union  
[www.aclu.org/safeschools/resources.html](http://www.aclu.org/safeschools/resources.html)

**Defending Gay-Straight Alliances and Other Gay-Related Groups in Public Schools Under the Equal Access Act**  
Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund  
[www.lambdalegal.org](http://www.lambdalegal.org)  
(click on "search," then do an all-words search for "Equal Access Act")

**The Equal Access Act**  
Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network  
[www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org)  
(click on "Library," then search for "EAA")