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High School Climate for LGBT Youth in Missoula

Op-Ed

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The Missoulian did well earlier this month when it published an article written by *Billings Gazette* reporter Cindy Uken. "LGBT teens face bullying, harassment." Though the article focused on suicide, it touches on the much broader problem of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students not feeling accepted within the Montana school system. D Gregory Smith, a former Catholic priest who is gay and HIV-positive, was featured in the article. "[Smith] recalled a gay south-central Montana teenager who killed himself several years ago. The youth believed if he had sex with another boy he would be banished to hell... 'So, before his sex drive got too strong and he would jeopardize his soul, he had to take himself out of the way'" (Uken). In the rural state of Montana, many students feel pressure to conform to what their friends and family consider 'normal' and result in hiding an integral part of their identity as a person. If Montana wants to improve the state's climate for LGBT people, it needs to start in its schools. Even in a liberal university town, Missoula's high schools have a long way to go before they can be a safe and accepting environment for the younger generation.

There is an extreme avoidance of LGBT related topics in the school curriculum. This is not necessarily out of any kind of ignorance or direct malice towards the LGBT community; teachers often simply have a fear of talking about such topics in the classroom. Just as any other hot-topic is side-stepped in class to avoid backlash from angry parents, the LGBT community is lucky to be mentioned in any class at all during a student's four years. Teachers do not want to feel as if they are taking a political stance or being too influential over a student's opinions, and collectively avoid the topic at all costs. Not only does this make LGBT students feel somewhat avoided, it fails to give students role models to look up to. While the civil rights movement is

focused on so heavily in classes, the gay rights segment is completely missed. Students graduate without ever hearing of the Stonewall Riots, one of the most influential events leading to the gay liberation movement. They are never inspired by the struggles of Harvey Milk, the first openly gay man to take public office in California before being tragically assassinated later that year. Even literature classes would benefit from touching on Oscar Wilde's *A Picture of Dorian Gray*, which only very briefly touches on the love of one man for another. While avoiding conflict is a good strategy, being a good example to the entire student body is an even better one.

There is also a complete bias towards heterosexual couples in health education classes. As teachers migrate away from the model of pure abstinence, realizing that it is better to educate about safe sex than to ignore the fact that it happens, there is even a greater avoidance of LGBT people in this kind of classroom. Briefly, a teacher may touch on the controversial notion that gay men are more likely to contract the AIDS virus than straight couples, but that is as far as the conversation persists. LGBT students do not get educated about safe sex in a way that applies to them, which leads to more dangerous risks when those students choose to engage in sexual activities. Transgender people have especially distinct health issues which are never even spoken of in health classes; hormone therapy, its effects, and its consequences would particularly be beneficial to cover. Schools need to show they care about the safety of all their students and not simply the heterosexual ones or the ones born with the gender they identify as. One of the most effective ways to begin educating students about LGBT people and recognizing they exist is to acknowledge their differences in the classroom.

Teachers can demonstrate this understanding no matter what subject they teach. When a teacher hears a slur which is likely offending another student, it is their moral obligation to intervene and tell the students that kind of language is hurtful and not accepted in the classroom.

The commonly attacked phrase, "That's so gay," has died out of popularity in the recent years. Still, LGBT people are too often the butt of jokes among high school students. Someone may be teased for looking or acting, "too gay," or students may tell a joke with, "and it was a dude instead of a chick!" as the punch line. Transgender people especially have to deal with these kinds of jokes. Even students who do not identify as LGBT suffer as they experience the mocking of minority groups by their peers. While teachers are more likely to ignore this language than intervene, they should begin to take a more active role in how the students respect each other. If a student were making a joke about an African American, a person of lower class, or a disabled person, teachers would intervene out of habit. Because LGBT rights is a more contemporary and controversial issue, teachers are less inclined to do so. However, it is the teacher's job to stop this kind of offensive language, regardless if they agree with it or are repulsed. Students should feel welcome in their school environment, not shunned, and not mocked.

Even though Missoula high schools have a long way to go before they can say they are a welcoming place for students regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, there have been many notable progressions over the last couple of years. Sentinel High School, for instance, had its first drag show last February; students dressed up as the opposite gender and competed for prizes, crowning the best dressed of them King and Queen of Sparta. After much talk with the school's principal on how transgender students felt uncomfortable in the binary men's / women's bathrooms, Hellgate High students have successfully attained a gender-neutral bathroom in their school. When Big Sky High's Gay-Straight Alliance approached the English department about getting LGBT literature in the curriculum, both teachers and student-teachers jumped on the idea. When the curriculum was being reviewed later that year, their suggestions helped add *A Streetcar*

Named Desire, which has an LGBT character with a minor role. This progress, though small, has taken place in a short amount of time. As Missoula continues to be a progressive example for the rest of the state, students of all types will be able to attend school without fear or shame of who they are. Someday, being LGBT will not correlate with Montana's suicides. LGBT youth will be indistinguishable from others, because ultimately, no one is defined by who they love; they are defined by who they are.

Works Cited

Uken, Cindy. "Suicide in Montana: LGBT teens face bullying, harassment." *Missoulian*.

Missoulian, 04 Mar. 2013. Web. 11 Mar. 2013.