

# feature

## Coming out in adolescence

BY BRIAN VAN DE MARK

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### This week

**Part One** Study shows teens are coming out at younger ages – but are our schools equipped to keep them safe?



### Next week

**Part Two** Some students pioneer on campuses; transgender children face different set of challenges

Oct. 12 marks the 10th anniversary of Matthew Shepard's death. The gay 21-year-old University of Wyoming student was robbed, tortured, tied to a fence in a rural area near Laramie, Wyo., and left to die.

As Shepard's family and members of the GLBT community reflect, they're faced with the reality: in 10 years, no federal hate crimes legislation has been passed, and students, many younger than Shepard, still face violence and discrimination as a result of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

One need look no further than the case of Lawrence King, the 15-year-old Oxnard, Calif., boy who was shot and killed by a 14-year-old classmate, Brandon McInerney, who King allegedly asked to be his Valentine.

Just one day before the anniversary of Shepard's death, Oct. 11, marks the 20th anniversary of National Coming Out Day, an event founded in 1988 by psychologist and author Robert Eichberg and activist, politician, and former nun, Jean O'Leary. National Coming Out Day is aimed at raising awareness of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community among the general population in an effort to put a familiar face on the gay-rights movement.

The annual Coming Out Day encourages GLBT and questioning individuals and allies to wear gay pride symbols, such as the pink triangle for gay men, the black triangle for lesbian women, rainbows, or the Greek letter lambda. Straight allies are also encouraged to wear insignias or clothing that indicates their support.

As the community rallies for visibility, some of its youngest members face what may seem to be an uphill battle.

Yesterday, the biennial National School Climate Report by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) was released.

"We produce the National School Climate Survey every two years to provide an objective snapshot of what LBGT students experience in schools across the country," said Daryl Presgraves, media relations manager for GLSEN.

The study, based on statistics from 2007, showed that three-quarters of the adolescent students surveyed heard homophobic or sexist remarks often or frequently at school, and nine out of 10 students heard the word "gay" often or frequently used in a negative context.

### I'm 13 and gay – no, really

Last month, San Francisco State University released a four-year study of GLBT youths conducted by clinical social worker Caitlin Ryan showing the average age a teenager comes out as GLBT is 13.

Tim\*, 14, is an eighth grade student in the Sweetwater Union High School District. Tim self-identifies as gay.

“I’m pretty open about being gay, and I have been since, like, fifth grade,” Tim said. “People always told me, ‘It’ll be better in middle school’ or, ‘You would think people would have gotten used to it.’ Actually, they have. But what they got used to is being able to call me ‘fag’ or ‘queer,’ or shove me out of the way as part of some weird male testosterone ritual.”

Tim is not alone. According to the National Mental Health Institute, the average secondary school student hears an anti-gay slur 26 times a day; and 31 percent of kids who are gay or are perceived as gay were physically harassed or assaulted last year at school.

And where are the adults – staff, faculty, administrators – when this happens?

“They’re usually standing around just shaking their head and walking away,” Tim says. “When I first came out, I thought, like, well, I would just start walking toward an adult when someone started harassing me, because that’s what you’re taught to do; funny though, when the adults bolt in the other direction.”

Tim is not alone. In fact, the National School Climate Report indicates that two-thirds of students heard homophobic remarks from school personnel, and less than a fifth of students reported that school personnel frequently intervened when hearing homophobic remarks or negative remarks about gender expression.

Thirty-nine states do not have legislative protection for GLBTQ youth in schools, and tens of thousands of schools across the country do not have Gay-Straight Alliances or adequate professional development for faculty and staff. And the results of systematic turning of the blind eye can be devastating.

### Tragedy in Oxnard

On Feb. 12, in Oxnard, Calif., 15-year-old eighth grader Lawrence King took the bus from Casa Pacifica, a center for abused and neglected children in the foster care system, and arrived for his 8 a.m. first period English class at E. O. Green Junior High School in the Hueneme School District.

That day King was uncharacteristically dressed in tennis shoes, baggy pants and a sweater. Most days, King was known for his hot pink finger nails, glitter make-up, bouffant hairstyles and stiletto shoes. Although he was asked on numerous times to “go scrub that off,” King asserted it was his right to self-expression.

At 8:30 a.m., King’s classmate, 14-year-old Brandon McInerney stood up and allegedly shot King in the head with a handgun he smuggled onto campus. As the teacher and fellow students panicked, McInerney reportedly tossed the gun to the ground and walked calmly through the classroom door.



This Dec. 2006 photo provided Thursday, Feb. 14, 2008 by Greg King shows Lawrence King as he holds a caterpillar during a visit to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C., before his 14th birthday. Lawrence told people he wanted to be an ‘ickytologist,’ because people told him that bugs were ‘icky.’ On Thursday, Feb. 14, 2008, King was removed from life-support after having been shot in the head Tuesday morning during a class at E.O. Green Junior High School in Oxnard, Calif., the victim of an apparent hate crime. (AP Photo/Greg King via Ventura County Star)

King, who had self-identified as gay and disclosed his orientation to classmates as early as third grade, was pronounced dead as the result of brain injury two days later. McInerney, arrested just a few blocks from the school, was jailed and placed on \$770,000 bail. McInerney is being charged as an adult with murder as a premeditated hate crime and gun possession, and faces up to 52 years to life in prison. The prosecutors added the hate-crime enhancement, which could bring three more years if he is found to have acted on the basis of the victim’s race, religion, nationality or sexual orientation.

Investigators believe that the incident is a result of an encounter between the two students a few days earlier. King's circle of friends, mostly girls, arranged a Valentine's Day dare, in which each of the friends wrote down the name of the person on whom they had a crush. Once the names were revealed, each student was to approach his or her crush and ask him or her to be his or her Valentine. King wrote down McInerney's name.

Never one to shy away from boldness, friends say King stepped into the middle of the basketball court where McInerney was playing and asked McInerney to be his Valentine. McInerney's friends began teasing him and suggested King and McInerney could make "gay babies." The faculty present during the exchange, King's friends say, turned a blind eye.

Weeks before King's murder, on Jan. 29, Sue Parson, assistant principal of E.O Green Junior High, sent an e-mail to all faculty, staff and administration. It read: "We have a student on campus who has chosen to express his sexuality by wearing make-up. It is his right to do so. Some kids are finding it amusing, others are bothered by it. As long as it does not cause classroom disruptions this is within his rights. We are asking that you talk to your students about being civil and non-judgmental. They don't have to like it, but they need to give him his space. We are also asking you to watch for possible problems."

District superintendent Jerry Dannenberg agreed that students of both genders have the right to use make-up and clothing to express themselves.

"If girls are wearing jewelry, you can't stop boys from wearing it, too," Dannenberg said. "Each gender has the right to wear what the other does."

It was Dawn Boldrin, King's English teacher and the teacher on duty in the computer lab when King was shot, who had done the most to reach out to King. According to a statement released by the District, Boldrin presented King with a green evening dress that once belonged to her daughter, as a way of softening his transition to Casa Pacifica.

Not all teachers were supportive, though, say King's friends.

That isn't altogether surprising. James T. Spears noted in the landmark study, "Coming Out of the Classroom Closet: Gay and Lesbian Students, Teachers, and Curricula," that nearly 80 percent of the prospective teachers surveyed harbored negative feelings toward gay men and lesbians.

Those pursuing elementary education were more likely to harbor homophobic feelings and express homo-negative attitudes than those planning to teach in secondary school. Nearly two-thirds of the school counselors surveyed expressed negative attitudes and feelings about homosexuality and homosexual persons.

Despite difficulties at school, others in the community and King's friends, held the boy in high regard.

At King's memorial service, Rev. Dan Birchfield of the Westminster Presbyterian Church said, "God knit Larry together and made him wonderfully complex. Larry was a masterpiece."

One of King's friends, who asked to remain anonymous, said, "Larry was one of those awesome friends. He and his mom even, like, sewed or knitted scarves for soldiers fighting overseas. He had even been asked to sing the national anthem at his younger brother's first baseball game. But that ain't gonna happen now, all because he decided to be a little different, maybe wear some flashy clothes. I mean, what teenager doesn't want to be fabulous? And he was everything fabulous, from the 'f' to the 's.'"

## Much ado about make-up

In the wake of King's death and, perhaps also perpetuated by findings in



studies, many schools have begun to crack down on students' freedoms of expression.

On Sept. 22, a 13-year-old student at Garfield Middle School in Hamilton, Ohio was asked to remove his make-up. Matt Allsup was asked to wipe off his black eye-liner, black fingernail polish and black lipstick, something he says he uses to express his love of "goth and rock culture."

According to Allsup's mother, Mindy Ball, the school violated its own code.

"They're gender stereo-typing," Ball said. "He's being sexually discriminated against. Nowhere in the rules does it say that males can't wear make-up."

When Ball approached an administrator, Ball said she was told her son's makeup was distracting. Ball offered to have Allsup wear pink makeup, and, according to Ball, the administrator said no, "because he's a male, he's not allowed to wear it; the public don't accept males wearing make-up."

Allsup and every other student at Garfield is, however, required to wear a badge that reads, in part, "Respect. Personal Responsibility. Honesty. Compassion. Acceptance." And "Do you value the uniqueness of others?"

Diego, a seventh grader in the San Diego Unified School District, wears make-up daily, and said he wasn't surprised by the Ohio school's demands.

"Do you really think that the people who run schools have any idea of youth culture?" Diego said.

When Diego arrived at middle school this year, it took almost a full month of a daily ritual of showing up to school with make-up and being told to go wash it off before administrators finally gave in. Diego argued with teachers and administrators and even skipped school, but none of it did any good.

"So, one day, we had this assignment to research how past world cultures influence today, and so I just listed all the men in the world who wore make-up: kabuki actors, Thomas Jefferson, pharaohs – I had over 10 pages of men who wore make-up," Diego said.

Diego still battles some of his teachers, so he skips those classes as often as he can – which leads to another troubling issue that plagues GLBTQ teens.

The new GLSEN study indicates absenteeism is one of the leading issues GLBTQ youth face. The absences are a result of the harassment that occurs at school. Thirty-one percent of GLBTQ students missed a class because of feeling unsafe, compared to an absentee rate of only 5.5 percent in the national general population, and nearly one-third of all GLBTQ students missed a day of school because of feeling unsafe, compared to an absentee rate of only 4.5 percent in the national general population.

## The triple threat

One way Carly finds places to stay is on the Internet – but she knows she must exercise caution.

While the Internet poses risks, it has also become a significant resource for young men and women coming out.

Even GLSEN's Presgraves notes the importance of the Web.

"We advertised on MySpace for the first time," Presgraves said, referring to GLSEN's recent study. "This allowed us not only more than triple the number of students who took the survey, but also to find students who in the past have been more difficult to reach. Because of those factors, this is the most comprehensive report we have ever produced."



A note left by a student is seen at a makeshift memorial honoring 15-year-old Lawrence King at E.O. Green Junior High School, Thursday, Feb. 14, 2008 in Oxnard, Calif. King was declared brain dead Wednesday after being shot in the head in class by a fellow student on Tuesday, February 12, 2008. (AP Photo/Phil McCarten)



In this file photo, Jerry Switzer, right, wipes tears from his eyes as he hugs Cathy Renna, center, as they visit the fence in Laramie, Wyo., on Tuesday, Oct. 12, 1999, where Matthew Shepard, an openly gay University of Wyoming student, was beaten to death a year before. Jeremy Atencio, left, looks on. Oct. 12, 2008 is the one-year anniversary of Shepard's death. The group shown here were among those participating in the "Hike for Hope," a 70-mile trek from Ft. Collins, Colo., to Laramie, to raise awareness about hate crimes. (AP Photo/Ed Andrieski)

In the meantime, Carly isn't going to school, doesn't have a job, and has no idea where she'll be sleeping "after Friday" because that's when her friend's parents come back to town.

Presgraves explains that the National School Climate Survey is also intended to provide guidance to parents, schools and education professionals.

"The report is important not just because it shows us that LGBT students are harassed at alarming rates," Presgraves said, "but also because it shows that there are steps schools can take to make their hallways and classrooms safer for LGBT students. The picture is as hopeful as it is grim."

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*\*In order to protect the privacy of minors, only first names or pseudonyms are used throughout this story.*

## Comments

### jan stankus says:

Thank you for the feature story on adolescence coming-out. As the director of the SDYCS Storefront, a shelter for homeless youth, located in Hillcrest, I applaud your sensitivity in approaching this topic. LGBTQ youth are disproportionately represented in the homeless youth population in our country. The Storefront and Hillcrest Youth Center have worked for years to provide a safe places for youth. Teaching and developing tolerance and acceptance is a big part of the picture when working with youth in our community and I see progress made daily. Thanks for presenting the big picture. If youth need help or assistance we have a 24 hour hotline 1-866-place2stay. Thanks again  
Jan Stankus  
Director-SDYCS Storefront Shelter

Oct 09, 2008 12:05 PM

### John Paul Osborn says:

The death of young Larry King was an incredible tragedy. King was a victim in the truest sense of the word, however the State of California and the local prosecutor and judge are making the tragedy exponentially worse by charging King's alleged murderer, Brandon McInerney, as an adult. Brandon McInerney is a 14 year old CHILD who's life could be dramatically changed if given the appropriate counselling, education and psychological help it is obvious he is in desperate need of. That help will

only come from his being treated in the juvenile justice system and through juvenile facilities, should he be found guilty of this crime. Instead, the prosecutor and judge are insisting on the application of a "living death sentence" on this young boy. Giving children who commit crimes hope is the only way to begin work towards their rehabilitation. Hope cannot be provided if Brandon McInerney is sentenced to die in prison or given a sentence which will only release him as an embittered old man. End the tragedy NOW by imploring these unthinking authorities to move Brandon McInerney's case back into juvenile court, where it belongs. Give this kid a chance at life, a chance to change and a chance to tell others how terribly wrong violent discrimination can be.

Oct 10, 2008 9:38 AM

**ZK says:**

The caption under the Laramie, WY photo has a typo: "Oct. 12, 2008 is the one-year anniversary of Shepard's death." I think you meant to say ten-year anniversary.

Oct 10, 2008 11:10 PM

**Andrew says:**

An article in Newsweek said that the murdered kid in Oxnard was sexually harassing his straight classmates, not just being "out" about his sexuality.

What 14 year old straight boy can take someone spreading rumors that he's gay when he's not?

That's the kind of thing the murdered kid apparently was doing.

The kid had a number of behavior problems, which is why he was living in a half way house instead of at home with his parents.

At least one school administrator and several teachers knew what was going on.

An administrator -- who I believe was lesbian -- decided to do nothing.

I think it is wrong that the killer is being charged as an adult and being held on such high bail.

I hope that the truth comes out in court.

And the gay community should think twice before automatically assuming that this was a straightforward hate crime motivated by bigotry and nothing else.

The right to be gay is not a right to sexually harass others and spread rumors about them.

Oct 12, 2008 7:07 PM

This story is now closed for comments. Commenting is available only on stories in the [current week's issue](#).

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