

Panel: We all can help stop bullies

In wake of suicides, teens and adults talk of the need to speak up against anti-gay slurs.

By Tim Funk

tfunk@charlotteobserver.com

Posted: Monday, Oct. 18, 2010



From left, Laurie Pitts with Time Out Youth, Loan Tran, 15, and Dang Pham, 15, talk about their experiences with bullying during a discussion Sunday at the Jewish Community Center.

ROBERT LAHSER - rlahser@charlotteobserver.com

More Information

- [Bullying statistics](#)

Nearly nine out of 10 LGBT (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender) youth have been harassed at school.

Three-fifths (61 percent) have felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation.

More than one-third of gay/lesbian/bisexual youth report having attempted suicide.

It began with the lighting of a candle - a flickering memorial to the nine American teenagers, eight of them homosexuals, who have died in the last month after being bullied.

It ended with a prayer from Rabbi Judy Schindler that no more candles will need to be lit because others - friends, family, teachers, clergy, politicians - stood up and spoke out against torture and torment of the vulnerable.

In between, a fervent crowd of 50 at Charlotte's Jewish Community Center spoke Sunday about words that have wounded and about ways to end the harassment than can - and has - led to suicides.

Dang Pham, one of two gay teenagers on a panel that also included three adults who are trying to stop the bullying, said he's been a frequent victim at school.

In his homeroom at Butler High, a fellow student tried to get his attention by calling him "faggot."

"It made me feel underpowered, like the others were on a pedestal, higher than me," Pham, 15, told the gathering. "I was afraid to report it... I just have to walk away, and wait for it to be over."

Of the 20 or so teachers he's had during his years in school, only one has ever come to his defense, telling the bully that "We don't use the word 'faggot' here."

"That meant a lot to me," said Pham, who's known he was "different" since he was 7.

Loan Tran, also 15, said she was harassed in middle school because her family was Vietnamese and English was her second language.

But by high school, she had cut her hair short and come out as "queer," the non-gender-specific word she prefers.

She, too, was pelted with hateful words - "fag" and "dyke" - every day she rode the school bus to Philip O. Berry Academy.

"Nobody stepped up" to help, said Tran, who finally resorted to a semi-bogus excuse - the bus came too early - to get her mother to start taking her to school.

The stories of hurt weren't limited to those on the panel. From the audience, Elle Puritz, 58, of Charlotte, tearfully recalled a recent phone conversation with her son, an 18-year-old West Point cadet. The subject was the digital camera he wanted for his birthday.

"Just don't get me one of those gay colors," he said to his mother, a lesbian who's been out for decades and who got pregnant with him with the help of an anonymous sperm donor.

Sunday's dialogue also included words of advice and suggestions on how to end the painful and insensitive attacks.

Steve Bentley, who heads Time Out Youth, a support and advocacy group for young homosexuals in Charlotte, said people can start by speaking up when others make belittling or joking comments about gays and lesbians.

"It begins with saying, 'I'm offended by that remark,'" he said. And to public officials who try to stir up prejudices, Bentley said, "Tell them, 'I expect and demand better.'"

Deb Kaclik, who's in charge of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools' response to bullying, called for creating an environment - in school and beyond - in which differences are celebrated.

"If we develop a culture of differences, then does it matter if I'm different? No," she said.

Even everyday comments such as "That's so gay" can make gays and lesbians feel less than human, said Laurie Pitts, also with Time Out Youth.

"What we're trying to figure out is how to keep our kids alive," added Pitts, who said homosexual teens are four times likelier to commit suicide than straight teenagers - and eight times more likely if their home life is hostile to their sexual orientation.

Celebrities such as Ellen DeGeneres and TV shows like "Will and Grace" have helped gay teenagers feel better about who they are, several people said Sunday. And an inclusive school curriculum, which notes the contributions of famous homosexuals, such as writer Langston Hughes, also help, said Bentley.

But Pitts said it would be a mistake to assume the culture and the lives of young gays and lesbians will "just get better."

"We have to make it better," she told the crowd.

Read more: <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/2010/10/18/1769861/pleas-for-tolerance-of-the-different.html#ixzz12k5QePdt>