



The Safe Zone Network

by Paige Parks, Safe Zone Coordinator

"As students it is assumed that we are able to look to our teachers for both knowledge and support. It becomes an issue of trust, and consequently learning, when certain students are fully aware of their teachers' fear and hatred for who they are. There is a schism in the classroom and this schism results in a lack of trust, an element which many, including myself, feel is key in the learning environment. This line fast becomes a wall blocking valuable lessons and needed friendships."

—A Junior at East Providence High School

Homophobia, defined as the hatred or fear of homosexuality, is a powerful social problem. If 10% of youth are not heterosexual, there are 4.5 million school-aged lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning (LGBTQQ) youth nationwide, 35,443 of whom live in Rhode Island. Yet, homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia remain acceptable forms of prejudice in many schools and other places where youth congregate. Perhaps most negatively affected are LGBTQQ youth who find themselves growing up as targets of this pervasive bias and hatred.

Schools continue to be a particularly painful experience for LGBTQQ youth. According to one national study, 84% of LGBT students report being verbally harassed and 39.1% report being physically harassed because of their sexual orientation (2003, GLSEN, *National School Climate Survey*). This same study found that harassment of LGBT students was significantly related to diminished academic achievement and future educational aspirations; LGBT students who can identify supportive faculty or staff do better in school than those

who cannot, with grade point averages more than 10% higher than their peers (2003, GLSEN). These findings mirror the personal experiences of many LGBTQQ students in Rhode Island, including YPI participants. According to one Rhode Island public school student, "It was really hard to go to school and concentrate on my work. I went from an 'A/B' student to barely passing.



On June 13, YPI's P.R.O.U.D. Leaders held a press conference at the Rhode Island Foundation (which funded the initiative) to announce that they had mailed a First Aid Kit to fight homophobia to every public high school in Rhode Island. Here, Edgar discussed the project in greater detail.

SEE **SAFE ZONES**, PAGE 2

GSA COALITION CONFERENCE

**From GSA to the Real World:
Queer Organizing In and Out of School**

October 22, 2005 * The Met Center * 325 Public Street Providence
Get more information and registration forms at www.youthpride-ri.org

Funded by Colin Higgins Foundation and Haymarket People's Fund

EDUCATORS!

Sign-up for Safe Zone's accredited professional development workshop on the RIDE webpage. Go to www.eride.ri.gov/RIDE/PD and search "That's So Gay."



YOUTH PRIDE, INC.

www.youthpride-ri.org

95 Cedar Street
Providence, RI 02903-1062
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ABOUT YPI

Youth Pride, Inc. (YPI), a tax-exempt 501(c)3 organization, is Rhode Island's only statewide agency dedicated to meeting the social, emotional, and educational needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning youth. YPI offers a Drop-In Center at 95 Cedar Street in Providence, and a satellite program in Newport. YPI is supported by grants, sponsorships, and contributions made by people who value fairness, justice, and equality, and who value empowering youth to achieve their full potential.

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SAFE ZONES

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

It was hard to go to school because it seemed like nobody cared."

To help educators, counselors, and administrators identify, prevent and eliminate the harassment of LGBTQQ students in school, YPI created the Safe Zone Initiative in 2003. Funded by the Rhode Island Foundation, the Safe Zone Initiative utilizes a multi-level, multi-modal approach to creating safe schools. We provide technical assistance and support to student organizations most commonly known as Gay/Straight Alliances (GSA) at middle schools, high schools and colleges; educational workshops and trainings for students and educators; a support network for educators called the Advocate Network; policy advice and mentoring for school administrators; and advocacy for students and parents. Equity Action's *Meet The Neighbors* ranks ensuring safe schools for LGBTQ youth a top priority for Rhode Island's LGBTQ community. Since its inception, Safe Zone has responded to the needs of thousands of students, parents, educators and administrators in all corners of Rhode Island.

YPI's Safe Zone Initiative's 2004-2005 school year was very productive. Highlights from the past school year included:

- "That's So Gay," Safe Zone's accredited professional development workshop, was offered to Rhode Island educators.
- The Advocate Network met quarterly to discuss how to create safe schools and support LGBTQQ students.
- The GSA Coalition Listserv was established. This weekly email-listserv provides an opportunity for over 100 student leaders throughout the state to receive tips and advice on establishing and sustaining their Gay/Straight Alliance organizations. (To join this listserv,

email safezoneypi@yahoo.com).

- Rhode Island schools experienced their largest observance of Day of Silence, a silent protest against the harassment of LGBTQ individuals; this spring, eighteen schools, 1,500 students, and the RI Department of Education participated, supporting the protest.

- The first Safe Zone pilot program was administered at Rogers High School in Newport. This program implemented all elements of Safe Zone programming, including climate surveys, student and faculty workshops, policy analysis and support.

- "Homophobia 101," an educational student workshop which meets Rhode Island Health Education Standards 1,3,4,5,6,& 7, was presented in over twenty classrooms, school auditoriums, and after-school centers throughout the state.

- Safe Zone provided technical support and advocacy for over 3,000 Rhode Island students and educators.

- More than 30 schools throughout Rhode Island partnered with Safe Zone to create safe learning environments for LGBTQQ youth.

91.5% of LGBT students report hearing homophobic remarks, such as "faggot," "dyke," or the expression "that's so gay" frequently or often (2003, GLSEN).

SEE **SAFE ZONES**, PAGE 3

ADVOCATE NETWORK

The Advocate Network Training Series and its related website are designed to give educators the opportunity to discuss and receive technical support addressing issues that impact LGBTQQ students, staff, and families.

The Advocate Network Trainings Series for school staff and faculty help support students, peers, and parents impacted by issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. All school personnel are invited to attend.

To subscribe, email:

advocatenetwork-subscribe@yahoogroups.com

or go to

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/advocatenetwork/>

and click "Join This Group."

SAFE ZONES

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

We are very proud of our accomplishments, and yet, we realize that there is still far more to do before our state's schools are safe for LGBTQQ youth. To do this, we need the support and participation of all people in Rhode Island who care about safety in schools. Students can help form GSAs or speak with teachers or administrators about ways in which schools can be made safer for LGBTQQ youth. Educators can volunteer as advisors to their school GSAs, establish Safe Zones within their classrooms, and advocate for LGBTQQ youth who are being harassed. Administrators can enact policies which hold community members responsible for their homophobic conduct. Parents can encourage school administrators to participate in Safe Zone. And everyone can support YPI's Safe Zone Initiative, either financially or in other ways.

Quotes from students who attended a YPI Safe Zone Workshop at Rogers High School, Newport: "Homophobia is a bigger issue in my school than I thought it was." "I learned not to be afraid and to stand up for myself." "Every kid in every school should experience a workshop like this."

*"YPI is my safe place— my home.
The staff cares more about me
than my family."
— Kevin*

*"This is the first time I've ever felt like
I have the power
not to be a victim."
— Crystal*

*55% of
transgender
youth report
being
physically
harassed
because of
their gender,
gender
expression, or
sexual
orientation
(2003, GLSEN).*

SAFE ZONE PROGRAM ELEMENTS

- School climate analysis and recommendations for change
- GSA support and technical assistance via the GSA Coalition, guidance with and coordination of event development and promotion (National Coming Out Day & Day of Silence)
- Hosting of Advocate Network activities workshops, panels, assemblies and performance-based student and teacher presentations
- Training and consultation to faculty and staff
- Advisement regarding policy and practice preparation of students and faculty for School Committee presentations

SAFE ZONE: LEVELS OF INVOLVEMENT

In addition to responding to requests for assistance and working to increase the visibility of LGBTQQ students and their needs, the Safe Zone Initiative now offers the following involvement levels:

Safe Zone Affiliates receive notices of all Advocate Network meetings, technical assistance, GSA support and opportunities to increase their involvement.

Safe Zone Advocates receive priority when scheduling student and faculty workshops, support for GSA activities, technical assistance, and notices of all Advocate Network, GSA Coalition and YPI events.

Safe Zone Partners receive all program elements.

Educators, administrators, school nurses, and counselors can now sign up to join the Safe Zone Network. To sign up, simply call Paige Parks at 401-421-5626, email safezoneypi@yahoo.com, or visit our website at www.youthpride-ri.org.

Congratulations, Isabel!

YPier Isabel was recently awarded the Destiny House Youth Empowerment Organization Unsung Hero Award for her outstanding all-around achievement as DWSG President of Harrison Street School. Isabel is also constantly making other people's lives better at YPI. We say:

You go, girl!

Come Out & Celebrate with YPI on October 14th!



Please join Youth Pride, Inc. at the Holiday Inn Downtown in Providence on Friday, October 14th for our 4th annual "Come Out & Celebrate!" event. More details are on page 6. See you there!

Empowering young people to fulfill their potential by supporting YPI? ...Priceless.

Yes! I/we will proudly support Youth Pride, Inc. with a generous gift.
Please add me/us to your fabulous list of supporters.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Visionary (\$5,000+) | <input type="checkbox"/> Check is enclosed. |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> Supporter (\$1-\$249) | <input type="checkbox"/> I'll host a house party to get my friends involved. |

Your Name(s): _____ Telephone: _____

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Please return to YPI, 95 Cedar Street, Providence, RI 02903-1062. **Thank you!**

Youth Pride, Inc. is a 501(c)3, nonprofit organization. All gifts are tax deductible to the extent permitted by law.

From the Board

By Beth Vorro, Board Chair



Ken Fish, YPI Board of Directors

As Chair of Youth Pride, Inc.'s Board of Directors, I am fortunate to work with some of the most talented, experienced, and passionate board members in Rhode Island. With each issue of this newsletter, I hope to introduce you to one of them. I hope you will be as inspired by them as I am.

This edition features **Ken Fish**, our board treasurer. Ken brings decades of non-profit board experience to YPI, as well as half a lifetime of work in public education.

As Director of Middle and High School Reform and Adult Education for the Rhode Island Department of Education, Ken oversees the implementation of a cutting-edge program that is the first of its kind in the nation. He began his professional life more than 30 years ago in the Cranston public schools, but left in disgust and without any hope that public schools would ever change. Now, in his current position, Ken has come full circle and speaks passionately about being an instrument of real educational reform.

Based on regulations instituted by the Board of Regents and supported by local business communities, Ken and his staff are reforming schools throughout the state with a real-world, applied learning approach to education. In this new world, students will work on long-term projects and internships that culminate in written and oral presentations and electronic portfolios. The aim, Ken says, is to develop the critical life skills of problem solving, decision making, planning, and communication by engaging students actively in their own education.

As a result of his regular contact with students, teachers, and principals, Ken has a front-row seat to the changing climate in schools for LGBTQQ students. While acknowledging that there is a great deal of work still to be done, he applauds the Board of Regents for passing regulations banning discrimination in schools on the basis of sexual orientation. Calling the regulations an "underused platform for student change," Ken explains that, although LGBTQQ students continue to experience discrimination and harassment in school, at least there is now a policy basis for creating change.

And YPI, he says, is making a difference. In his conversations with principals, Ken is finding that YPI's work is increasingly well known and respected throughout the state. For example, when Exeter-West Greenwich recently found itself in the middle of a controversy over a high school social studies textbook, Ken spoke with the school principal about how YPI could be supportive. Ken reports that the principal already knew about YPI, and simply needed to be reminded that the organization could be a resource to the school district. The progress is incremental, Ken says, but it is progress nevertheless.

Ken is passionate about YPI's work. He joined the board in 2002 because "the issue spoke to me strongly," explaining that his emotional connection to YPI's mission was stronger than anything he had felt since the early 1980's, when he was one of the founders of Rhode Island Project AIDS. Ken has also served on the School One board since 1985, and the board of Goodwill Industries since 1978.

Ken has been a witness to the gay rights movement and the AIDS epidemic from their beginnings. He remembers the first Gay Pride parade in New York City, which was staged while he was living in NY and working in the fashion publishing industry in the early 1970's. By the time RI held its first Gay Pride celebration, Ken was back in RI, and marched here, too. One of his most vivid memories of the movement is of an AIDS rally at the RI State House, when AIDS activists stood their ground against a vocal and confrontational group led by radio talk show host Steve White. Although it did not rise to the level of New York's Stonewall riots, Ken remembers the event as a moment when the activists stood up for what they believed and "would not be moved." In this way, he says, it was like our own little Stonewall.

Ken hopes to spend many years advocating for LGBTQQ youth as part of the YPI board. He finds tremendous satisfaction in watching individual young people mature, and in being part of the growth of YPI itself. Among the developments he is happiest about are the increasing stability of the board, and the burgeoning development of a solid volunteer base. Ken's leadership role in the Department of Education, his strong connections to the community, and his decades of work with other non-profits all enhance his unique contributions to the board.

Ken lives in the Knightsville section of Cranston with Trent Ferrara, his partner of 18 years. The next time you're at a YPI event, be sure to say hello to him!

60.9% of students who said their school had a GSA were less likely to report feeling unsafe at school (2003, GLSEN)



Youth Pride, Inc. Invites YOU to

Come Out and Celebrate!

October 14, 2005 • 6pm-midnight

Holiday Inn, Downtown Providence
Reception, Silent Auction, Awards, and Dancing

2005 Award Recipients:

William Baker, Jeannette Bessinger,
Marriage Equality Rhode Island, and The Rhode Island Foundation

Tickets: \$20 each

We expect a sell-out, so please purchase tickets early
Sponsorships Available

Please call (401) 421-5626 for more information

Youth Pride, Inc. is the only organization in Rhode Island devoted to meeting the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning youth and their allies. Utilizing support, education, and advocacy, YPI is building a strong and vocal community. Our work would be impossible without your generosity and support.

Do You Give at the Office?

Does your workplace participate in United Way, CFC, or SECA? If so, please consider designating Youth Pride, Inc. as the beneficiary of your support. You can write us in on virtually any workplace giving campaign form, and you can rest assured that your investment in YPI will be well spent. YPI's address is 95 Cedar Street, Providence, RI 02903. Thanks in advance for helping make sure that LGBTQ youth don't grow up invisible.



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