

Movers & Shakers: From out of the shadows

Mary Elizabeth Lennon, a senior at Charlotte's Providence Day School, remembers some of the first meetings of her school's LGBT and straight ally student club.

"We weren't recognized by the school. We had to meet in the loft above the theater and we sat in the dark," she said. "We couldn't have the lights on because we didn't want anyone to know we were there."

A lot has changed at Providence in the few short years since. Lennon, 18, was among several student leaders who successfully petitioned her school's administration for recognition of their "Human Rights Alliance," or the HRA.

For her work as the HRA's president, she'll be awarded the Equality Award at this year's HRC Carolinas Gala. She was shocked when she found out.

"My parents had nominated me without telling me, so I had no idea I was in the running for it," she said. "You don't even know that you're making a difference until someone else recognizes it. I was just doing what I



Mary Elizabeth Lennon
Photo courtesy Mary Elizabeth Lennon

thought was the right thing to do."

The journey from darkened lofts to fully-recognized student club required Lennon and her peers to work around conservative parents and a cautious school administration.

"We had to go through the long process of writing up a constitution and a mission statement and presenting it to the board and administration," she said. "We really had to fine tune a lot things."

She said the group went from being the proposed "Gay-Straight Alliance" to the now active HRA. In their constitution, the group had to approach the topic of sexual orientation and gender identity carefully.

"Because we are a K-12 campus, there was concern that they didn't want younger kids to be confused and ask questions of parents and have teachers talk about sexual orientation at such a young age," Lennon said.

Despite all the hoop-jumping, Lennon said her administration was largely supportive when dealing with concerned parents and she feels confident the HRA will live on after her graduation this May.

"Especially last year going through so much controversy, a lot of students stood up and said, 'I want to help keep this going as long as we can,'" she said. "I think we have underclassmen showing up and becoming the driving force. We're leaving it in good hands." ::

Movers & Shakers: Green hearts, Green dollars

Since 1996, Greensboro's LGBT community groups and the people they serve have profited financially, culturally and socially from the work of Guilford Green Foundation. This year, the organization will be honored by the Human Rights Campaign at its Carolinas Gala, receiving the Equality Award for an Organization. Other honorees include Individual Equality Award winner Mary Elizabeth Lennon and Legacy Award winners Dave and Joan Parker.

In the past 11 years, GGF has used its community grant funding to promote diversity and inclusiveness throughout greater Guilford County, distributing over \$550,000 to organizations serving the LGBT community or those seeking to implement programs reaching out to the LGBT community. Since 2000, the group's grant awards have more than doubled from \$30,000 to \$65,000 annually.

Like any group, GGF started out with a small but dedicated group of volunteers. In late 1995, community members sought a way to support the work of Triad Health Project, Greensboro's local AIDS service organization. The first Green Party was held to raise funds for THP's work and in less than a year's time, GGF was born.

In the time since GGF's first community outreach, the group has continued to contribute positively toward the social and cultural scenes of its hometown. Each month, the group hosts a Triad Takeover at an LGBT-friendly restaurant, bar or other establishment. The event serves as a chance for community

members to get to know GGF and its staff and board and allows the group to get to know the community it serves. Four times a year, GGF also hosts its immensely popular Green Queen Bingo, a take on the gay bingo craze that has now swept the entire nation. Part fundraiser, party, social and cocktail hour and drag show, Green Queen Bingo attracts hundreds of citizens — gay and straight — from across the Triad area.

GGF's leadership has also proven a landmark in Triad LGBT organizing. Its current executive director, Luck Davidson, and its past director, Cecelia Thompson, are both straight. The group annually reaches out to Greensboro's straight community through its Straight Ally Campaign.



Guilford Green Foundation
uniting community

GGF's board is chaired by Cile Johnson and Ivan Canada. Board members include Bill Baites, Jehan Benton, Tom Campbell, Jay Charles, Bill Falcon, Clark Goodin, Marshand Hager, Danielle Ruth Heyd, Hoversten, Harvey Lineberry, Alice Mitchell, Jeff Oleynik, Neda Pitt, Rusty Powell, Marco Paul, Barbara Shyloski, Jamin Slone, Doug Spencer and Brian Quinby. ::

— by Matt Comer :: matt@goqnotes.com
[Ed. Note — This writer is a former member of the GGF Board of Directors.]



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