

School's Out: Student Groups Grow

The following chapter is reprinted from Alyson Publications' forthcoming book, *School's Out*, due for release May 7. It chronicles the experience of gay/lesbian/straight alliances at schools in Chapel Hill and Brookline, MA.

By Dan Woog

To a casual observer, Brookline High School, just outside Boston, might seem an ordinary school in an ordinary town — except for one thing. Every Wednesday at 2:30 pm, on the fourth floor of the Unified Arts building, where just minutes earlier students studied automotive mechanics, construction electricity, architectural design, and desktop publishing, Brookline High School's Gay/Straight Alliance meets.

In the winter of 1994, most of the 1700 Brookline students leaving the building wore baggy pants and backward-pointing baseball caps, and carried backpacks in that very uncomfortable-looking, single-strap way. But the girls (and, with one late-arriving exception, they were all female) who wandered into room 48 for an early February GSA meeting were a bit more individualistic than their peers: a nose ring here, an all-black outfit there, even a long granny skirt. Two were Asian-Americans; all the rest were white.

They greeted each other casually, picking up conversations where they had ended a class, a day, perhaps even a week before. A visitor wandered over to the bulletin board — not the one that advised proper safety precautions when operating equipment, but the one the Gay/Straight Alliance uses for its notices. There was plenty to read: a message from a faculty member announcing her availability to talk with any student wanting to chat about gay and lesbian issues; a letter from an instructional aide expressing regret at missing meetings because of work; newspaper clippings, brochures, flyers from other gay-straight groups; AIDS information; and several notes of thanks, encouragement, or support from individuals and groups.

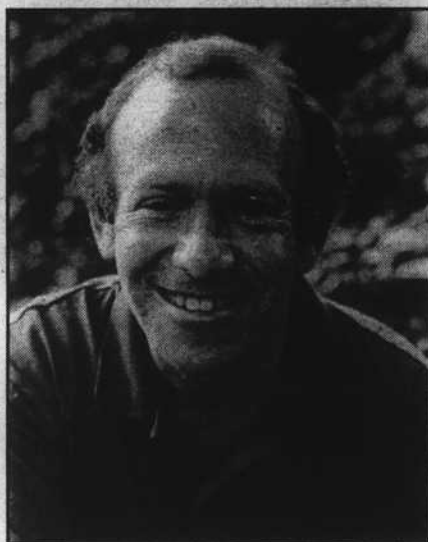
When the chatter subsided, the meeting began. Announcements centered on an anti-homophobia program scheduled for the following month; speakers would include an openly gay teacher from another school, a politician addressing gay rights legislation, and a Boston police officer working in the hate crimes division. The final word was directed at the visitor: he was expected, one of the two teachers in charge said, to participate fully in the GSA session that was about to begin.

However, the meeting never really got started. One girl mentioned Valentine's Day; a Brookline tradition, it seemed, was to send messages to loved ones via the school paper. This put lesbian and gay students in a quandary, so the girl who raised the subject suggested the GSA buy an ad reading, "For all you '1 in 10's' who feel lonely: you're not alone." There was a murmur of approval.

The talk soon degenerated into what different people had done the previous weekend, with much laughter. Some students had seen the recently released AIDS movie Philadelphia they chattered about that for a while, then moved on to Schindler's List and a Murphy Brown TV episode involving a gay bar. But the talk petered out after a few minutes; two girls got up to leave, and the meeting soon dissolved.

The mere fact that Brookline, the town in which John F. Kennedy was born, has a high school gay-straight alliance might have been front-page news several years ago — for that matter, such a group at any school would have warranted publicity. In 1994, however, Brookline's GSA is one of at least three dozen such organizations at public and private schools across Massachusetts. It was not the first; it is not the biggest; it is, simply, typical of similar groups around the Bay State.

The Brookline GSA was formed midway through the 1992-93 school year. Three girls did most of the organizing: they hung posters, invited



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friends, found faculty sponsors — and then waited nervously for the first meeting.

A dozen students attended that initial session. They talked about why they were there and what they hoped to accomplish. They decided they wanted to support and celebrate all sexual orientations, purposely not including the word "tolerance" because they sought more than that. They also discussed ways they could educate the school and community about the dangers of homophobia.

It did not take long before they came up with several rules: no assumptions were to be made about any member's sexuality (in other words, no one was to assume anyone was either gay or straight); all meetings were to be confidential (attendees were not to tell anyone else who was there, although they could repeat in general terms what was said), and teachers and students were to participate as equal members. All members of the school, including support staff, secretaries, and custodians, were welcome.

By 1994, Brookline's GSA boasted a core group of thirty people, with up to a hundred attending the parties it occasionally sponsored. Throughout the school year a total of about 120 students and teachers came to room 48 for meetings, making it one of the largest clubs on campus. As the group evolved, it focused on two areas: political-educational and personal. Included in the political

and educational realm were lobbying for the statewide gay rights bill for students (nearly forty-five members were involved); participating in the March on Washington; developing a health education curriculum; getting information into school and local newspapers; and decorating the halls with posters (one explained the meaning of pink triangles; another listed famous gays and lesbians in history).

On the personal side, GSA members shared stories and discussed problems, such as how to react when friends or parents made homophobic remarks. And, said one faculty leader, "We have a regular old good time. That's important, because talking about gay and lesbian issues can be so

serious." (Food, she noted, is very important for a successful meeting.)

Of all the activities, the March on Washington in April 1993 drew the biggest raves. "It was awesome!" one participant said. Twenty-five students and five teachers traveled to the nation's capital; the feeling, one said, was like the Celtics winning the playoffs. The GSA members strode behind a large banner identifying both Brookline High and their organization. "The cheering didn't stop," one marcher marveled. "It was overwhelming. People kept coming up to us — a lot of graduates from Brookline, including one from the Class of '46, and a lot of people who said they were in the PTA at their school." Many spectators could not believe Brookline was a public high school.

One marcher was not a Brookline student; she attended a different school in a nearby town, where she had been harassed. "This was her first positive experience as a lesbian," a faculty member said. "Two weeks later she was gay-bashed when she got off her bus. That's what this group is all about — being persistent about making change. The students' gay rights bill was passed in Massachusetts, but our posters are being defaced again. That's the nature of homophobia; civil rights don't instantly happen. We have to keep pushing, pushing, pushing for them."

The teacher, who asked not to be identified by name, said that the GSA has had an effect on Brookline High simply by raising lesbian and gay issues. Her colleagues now tell her that previously they had no idea of homophobia's reach. "We've also brought out a number of straight allies," she said. "But I don't know if we've made the school any safer for gay or lesbian teachers. I think perhaps we've also raised some people's hatreds."

The administration, she noted, has been great. "The principal has made it very clear that gay and lesbian youth must be supported. He's said that homophobia is right up there with racism and sexism." He attends occasional

GSA meetings, and because of the rule that everyone present must participate as equals, the students make sure he contributes.

The teacher said the best times for her come when she sees students realize they're not the only ones who have questions. She feels as comfortable as they do raising issues and seeking answers. She said she has experienced no frustrations — only "challenges, and that's what education is all about. Helping kids figure out the best way to get their message across; helping them balance the good feelings about being out with the realities of gay-bashing — those are important things that schools have not done much of in the past. I'm glad we're doing it here at Brookline."

GSA co-founder Sarah Lonberg-Lew agreed. She noted that while no specific incident fueled her desire to organize the group, "there doesn't have to be blatant homophobia for there to be a need for a gay-straight alliance. Just the fact that everyone assumes everyone else in a school is straight is a good enough reason. It leads to isolation and fear, and students need to know they're not alone."

Sarah emphasized that straight students need

the organization as much as gay students. "Everyone in school is dealing with sexuality in some way. It might be a friend who came out to them, or they might think somebody has a same-sex crush on them. Or they just want to talk, and bring up questions they might not have a chance to have answered any other place." She is proud that at Brookline, the GSA serves that function.

And, apart from occasional scribbled-over signs and nasty newspaper articles, there have not been many obstacles to the group's existence. However, there have been misconceptions. "At first everyone thought we were a gay and lesbian alliance. They didn't realize we include straight people too," Sarah noted. "People worried about being stigmatized. I think we've gotten over that, even though some people probably don't come to the meetings because of it."

How has Brookline's Gay/Straight Alliance managed to get its message across — the message that it welcomes heterosexuals as well as homosexuals, so long as they want to help educate schoolmates and have a good time? "We just kept going," she said simply. "At first people thought maybe we were a freak group, meeting in an out-of-the-way place. Now they see our signs all over the place, and they know that we're just another part of Brookline High School."

But Brookline and several other Massachusetts public schools are not the only ones where gay-straight alliances meet as openly and proudly as the chess club or Young Republicans. Halfway across the state, on the remote campus of Deerfield Academy, a few hardy students fight the difficult battle against homophobia at one of America's oldest, and most conservative, private boarding schools.

Deerfield traces its origins to 1797, and many of its attitudes seem stuck in another century. It is not a place where students or faculty members easily discuss emotions, or even feel free to hug one another or show affection. It is, said Bradley T. Bowers, a "very safe, secure place, with a strong sense of community — but there's not much individuality. Most of us come from the same kind of background: middle class or upper class. People are generally accepting, although if I walked in tomorrow with a Mohawk, I don't know how people would react." And, because Deerfield is so isolated (the closest store is three miles away), "we're pretty sheltered from the rest of the world. World War III could happen, and we wouldn't know it."

In a school filled with bright, articulate youngsters, Brad Bowers stood out. A musician, actor (he played the emcee in Cabaret) and honor student (he won a major prize for his English "declamation"), the easily-smiling-despite-his-braces, relatively long-haired senior was, everyone agreed, a real personality. At Deerfield, it took a Brad Bowers to plant — and keep from being trampled — GROH!

GROH! (the exclamation point "keeps it positive," Brad said) stands for Get Rid of Homophobia! He and his friend Allyson Mount formed the group at the end of eleventh grade, a year after a classmate came out to the school (to primarily negative reaction; she subsequently transferred away), and several months after two gay graduates gave a talk about their experiences there. Brad had been active in social awareness organizations; for him, this seemed a natural progression.

The summer before they were seniors, he and Allyson discussed the future of the group. "We had to figure out whether to be small and quiet, or outward and vocal," Brad recalled several months later, not long before graduation. "Was our aim going to be support, or education?" The answer they settled on was "low-key, educational"; that, they believed, would work best at Deerfield.

On a campus of 660 students, GROH! attracted a core of about five students to their weekly

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