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Students' silence speaks for gay peers

Marti Maguire, Staff Writer

Hundreds of Triangle students did the unthinkable Wednesday in an effort to support their gay and lesbian peers -- they kept silent.

Students at about a dozen local middle and high schools joined an estimated half-million students nationwide by keeping mum on the national Day of Silence organized by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network.

Today will mark a smaller, newer counter-movement by some Christian groups that is expected to involve a dozen schools statewide and a handful in the Triangle.

The Day of Silence, now in its 10th year, is meant to draw attention to the harassment and alienation that gay and lesbian students experience at school.

"It's representative of how much silence there is around the issue," said Melissa Weiss, director of Safe Schools NC, a local group that supports gay students in public schools. "Even if there is no overt harassment, the fact that these issues are never talked about is another form of discrimination."

The Arizona-based Alliance Defense Fund expects more than 2,500 students in 700 schools nationwide to wear Day of Truth T-shirts and pass out cards today, more than twice the number who participated last year.



N.C. School of Science and Mathematics students Katie Tygielsky and Brandon Byers adjust a Day of Silence poster.

Staff Photo by Pailin Wedel

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The cards will say, "I am speaking the Truth to break the silence. ... Truth tolerates open discussion, because the Truth emerges when healthy discourse is allowed."

Steve Noble, chairman of the Raleigh-based Christian group Called2Action, said the Day of Truth is needed to keep from crowding out a Christian perspective on homosexuality.

He called the Day of Silence a "Trojan horse" that allows gay-rights activists to lobby for issues including sexual orientation in anti-bullying policies at schools under the guise of protecting gay students from harassment.

Eventually, he said, such a step could end up labeling a Christian perspective on homosexuality -- that it is a bad lifestyle choice -- as hate speech.

"We should be able to present the biblical perspective to students who may be grappling with homosexual attraction," Noble said.

In a nod to the ever-present tension between some Christian and gay-advocacy groups, Weiss has advised the students who participated in the Day of Silence to stay silent should other students pass out religious material during the Day of Truth.

But she is also telling them to keep track of the materials they pass out.

"We want to make sure that whatever happens, there is no harassment or intimidation," Weiss said.

For high school students, the struggle to keep silent isn't always easy.

"It turns into a lot of note-passing," said Enloe High junior Rebecca Putterman, who has participated since she was a freshman.

At Enloe, about 100 students kept silent, said Gay-Straight Alliance Co-President Lily Dancy-Jones, also a junior.

Putterman said one of her friends confided in a small group of his friends earlier this year that he was gay. But he was too scared of ridicule to join in the Day of Silence.

"It's part of the whole message," Putterman said. "We're standing up for those who are silent."

Dancy-Jones, who is straight, said Enloe students are generally supportive of the Day of Silence. But this year, as in others, a few shouted insults as they passed the table at school where GSA members passed out ribbons.

Brandon Byers, who spoke at a "Break the Silence" rally in Durham, said the day was about reflecting on his own experience as a gay high school student.

Now a senior, Byers told his parents three years ago that he was gay.

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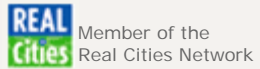
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"I got to reflect on the years that I was afraid to take a bold step," he said.

Leesville High principal Stephen Gainey said he didn't notice the silent students but that their cause was welcome if they didn't disrupt the school day. He will treat any Christian counter-protest the same way.

"We have kids with many different interests on campus, and we try to respect them and their rights," he said.

Staff writer Marti Maguire can be contacted at 829-4841 or mmaguire@newsobserver.com.



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