

Day of silence calls attention to bullying, harassment of GLBT community

April 18, 2008
By William Butte

Even before 15-year-old Lawrence "Larry" King came out to the few friends he had at E.O. Green Junior High School in Oxnard, Calif., the sweet-faced, slightly built boy endured taunts and anti-gay slurs spewed at him daily across campus, from cafeteria to classroom. As one friend was quoted in the *Los Angeles Times*: "You'd hear, 'Faggot! Hey, faggot!' That was happening in every class. A lot of teachers knew stuff was going on ... I guess they just didn't want to get involved."

However, the taunts and slurs didn't engender the desired reaction of fear and silence, but instead seemed to have had the opposite effect. Larry gained the courage to come out to the few friends he had, and he began to wear make-up and girl's boots with his school uniform. He also started to flirt with boys who taunted him, as a way to get back at them.

Larry told one boy, 14-year-old Brandon McInerney, that he thought he was cute. Brandon hated that, and the fact that the remark caused his friends to rib him for being gay.

After the incident, early one morning in February, Brandon walked into Larry's eighth-grade computer lab class and shot him twice in the head. As those two shots rang out, Larry's voice was silenced forever.

As horrific as the final result was, if you think the daily harassment Larry received in school was an aberration, think again.

A nationwide study on bullying by Harris Interactive found that actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender expression are two of the top three reasons why students are harassed in school, and that within the 12 months prior to the survey, 90 percent of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students had been harassed or assaulted.

The survey also found that just seven out of 10 secondary school teachers felt a strong obligation to ensure a safe learning environment for GLBT students; that GLBT students are more than twice as likely to not report being harassed or assaulted because they doubt anything would be done; and three times as many GLBT students as non-GLBT students do not feel safe at school.

Is it any wonder why?

On top of that, while most bullied teens can find support at home, many gay teens don't have unequivocal family support. Instead, at the most critical moment of their lives, many of these kids are abandoned. **One study noted by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in collaboration with the National Coalition for the Homeless found that 26 percent of youth who come out to their parents or guardians were told to leave home.** A friend of Larry King was quoted as saying he would never discuss his family or the reason he had become a ward of the state of California, living in a shelter for abused and neglected children, in the months before he was shot.

On April 25, hundreds of thousands of students in more than 5,000 schools across America will participate in the 12th annual National Day of Silence to call attention to the name-calling, bullying

and harassment of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students. For these students, it will be a day of silence to encourage schools to adopt and implement comprehensive anti-bullying policies that include sexual orientation and gender expression/identity along with race, gender, ethnicity and religion. For these students, it will be a day of silence in honor of the memory and silenced voice of young Larry King.

Participating students will be handing out cards that read: "Silent for Lawrence King: Please understand my reasons for not speaking today. I am participating in the Day of Silence, a national youth movement bringing attention to the silence faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and their allies. My deliberate silence echoes that silence, which is caused by anti-LGBT name-calling, bullying and harassment. This year's DOS is held in memory of Lawrence King, a 15-year-old student who was killed in school because of his sexual orientation and gender expression. I believe that ending the silence is the first step toward building awareness and making a commitment to address these injustices. Think about the voices you are not hearing today."

And while you're at it, take a moment to think about the voice of a small, sweet-faced boy that no one will ever hear again.