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Students work for safer schools

By Magdalena Wegrzyn
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LONGMONT — Maria Delmonico calls herself “homo-flexible.”

It’s a term she coined to describe her attraction to both men and women.

But not everyone sees it that way.

“A freshman came up to me the other day and said, ‘Are you the school fag?’” said Delmonico, 17, a senior at Longmont High School. “He was just trying to be funny because it’s cool to make fun of gay people.”

It’s those types of derogatory remarks that make gay students feel unsafe at school, she said.

Delmonico and Marley Hamrick, a 2009 graduate of Niwot High School, founded the St. Vrain Safe Schools Coalition to address the needs of LGBTIQ — lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and questioning — youths in the St. Vrain Valley School District.

Since last fall, they have been meeting monthly with students, school counselors, retired teachers and members of the faith community. Delmonico said the group wants to work with schools to educate teachers, administrators and students about the challenges LGBTIQ youths face.

The coalition is putting together a survey to collect data about students in the school district. The survey will be available online at www.stvrainsafeschools.org in the coming months, said Melissa Marsh, program specialist for Boulder County Public Health’s OASOS — Open and Affirming Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Support — program.

Although Boulder Valley School District has a similar coalition, Marsh said members of St. Vrain’s group are making conscious strides to meet the needs of this community.

“We want to hold community forums to talk about what’s going on,” she said.

Delmonico and Hamrick met at a meeting of Longmont OASOS. With support from the program and the Boulder County chapter of Parents Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, they started the St. Vrain Safe Schools Coalition.

Hamrick, a freshman at Colorado College in Colorado Springs who is majoring in feminist and gender studies, is now open about being a lesbian and is involved in her school’s support and activist group for gay students.



Last fall, Marley Hamrick, left, now a freshman at Colorado College, and Maria Delmonico, a senior at Longmont High School, founded the St. Vrain Safe Schools Coalition. The district-wide group meets to discuss the needs of LGBTIQ — lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and questioning — youths in the St. Vrain Valley School District and brainstorm ways to address them.

Richard M. Hackett/Times-Call

Get involved

What: Monthly meetings of the St. Vrain Safe Schools Coalition

When: 3:30-4:30 p.m. on the fourth Wednesday of every month.

Where: OASOS office, 1030 Boston Ave. in Longmont

Information: Meetings are free and open to the public. Call 303-678-6259 for more information.

of this community.

But in high school, she wasn't out to anyone but her closest friends.

"I was just so afraid of what would happen if I did," she said. "I didn't want people to know me as 'the gay kid.'"

Even when other students used "gay" in a derogatory context, Hamrick said, she stayed silent because she didn't want to lose friends. Most people didn't question her sexuality because she buried herself in academics and "looked very feminine," she said.

Hamrick, who graduated salutatorian from Niwot's International Baccalaureate program with a 4.5 grade-point average, was co-president of her school's Gay Straight Alliance. In her senior year, she led the group to successfully lobby the school district to update the nondiscrimination policy to include the words "sexual orientation."

According to data from the 2007 biennial Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 32.5 percent of all gay, lesbian, bisexual and questioning students in Boulder County reported being harassed while at school or on the way to school.

Nearly 46 percent seriously considered ending their lives, and 23 percent reported attempting suicide.

As a sophomore, Delmonico was hospitalized for depression and placed on a weeklong suicide watch.

"That was really when I first started questioning my sexuality," she said.

She started going to OASOS meetings in Boulder and then to the group in Longmont.

"I was really frustrated when I first started going to OASOS Boulder because they had so many people coming out," she said. "And they had huge GSA with huge support."

Delmonico said she wanted that kind of support in her own community. Now, she's president of her school's GSA, and said she's out to most people.

"There's a huge difference with GLBT youth in Longmont and Boulder," said Delmonico, who plans to attend the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley in the fall and major in psychology and education. "I think Longmont people deserve schools that are safe."

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