



Links – North Shore Youth Health Service
Day of Silence 2011

On April 15, students across the North Shore will participate in the Day of Silence to bring attention to the silencing effect of bullying and harassment on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students.

Students at the University of Virginia founded Day of Silence in 1996 and worked to make it a national project. The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) became the official organizational sponsor of the Day of Silence in 2001. Today, Day of Silence has become the largest student-led, in-school action toward creating safer schools for all, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression.

According to Erschel De Leon, who directs the Pride Youth Program at Links – North Shore Youth Health Service in Northfield, many high schools in the area including Evanston Township, Glenbrook North, Glenbrook South, Hersey, New Trier, Niles West, Niles North, Stevenson, Lake Forest, Lake Zurich, Rolling Meadows, and Warren Township will participate. De Leon pointed out although many students will choose to remain silent throughout the day, other students and teachers often lead discussions on LGBT issues, including current events, student experiences, human rights, literature, and more. “The overall goal is to raise awareness – and then make a commitment to address these injustices,” De Leon remarked.

Cheryl Hope, Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) sponsor at Glenbrook South, reported that about 60 students will choose to be silent on April 15. These students are given a permission slip to be signed by their teachers which explains the day. Other students will wear a pin in support of the day. The GSA has designed a t-shirt for the day and will set up a table near the cafeteria during lunch periods in order to educate the school community about the meaning of the Day of Silence. Participants will celebrate with a “Break the Silence” party after school.

While the Day of Silence is an important event to raise awareness about the challenges faced by LGBT youth, the needs don’t stop there. LGBT youth are at increased risk for depression, truancy, dropping out of school, substance abuse, and suicide. Links recognized these critical issues and founded the Pride Youth Program in 1992.

Each week, 15-20 LGBT youth gather at Links’ Northfield office to discuss issues such as the coming out process, dealing with homophobia, healthy relationships, and the prevention of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. Just as important, Pride becomes a strong and supportive community, a safe haven for many youth who may not experience acceptance in other areas of their lives. As one participant recently explained,

“Pride is three hours a week of an environment in which you can shed any fear of being judged and be completely and openly able to be the person you are.”

De Leon, who has directed the program since 2001, also works with youth participants to help educate others. Throughout the school year, a small group of Pride participants travels to area high schools to serve as a panel, speaking about their coming out experience and what it’s like to be gay in high school. De Leon describes the power in this experience: “Youth panelists show tremendous courage and really make an impact. By sharing their personal experiences, which can be emotional and difficult to discuss, these panelists bring the issues home to their fellow students. They teach more in that class period than I ever could.”

It’s empowering for the panelists as well, and can be a springboard for further activism. As one panelist said, “Pride taught me that a single person can make a difference. Changing one person’s opinion of homosexuality through a panel in their health class on Monday morning can change a lot of things for the better.”

If the Day of Silence achieves its goals, it will be yet another step forward in addressing discrimination and improving understanding – and making our schools a safe place for all students, regardless of differences.

For more information on Links’ Pride Youth Program, contact Erschel De Leon at 847.441.6191 ext 3 or erscheldeleon@linksyouth.org.