



## Gay and Lesbian Political Action and Support Groups

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### Gay teens struggle to find support at school, form alliances peers

By [HOLLY EDWARDS, tennessean.com from the Web, March 8, 2003](#)

**Nashville, TN** -- When Cathy Mahan "came out" as a lesbian in ninth grade, students began pushing her in the hallway, repeatedly referred to her as a "dyke," called her at home and threatened to beat her up, and made her sexuality the topic of classroom discussions, she said.

After three years of threats and harassment about her sexual orientation, Mahan, 17, decided to drop out of school.

"I'm a really strong person and barely ever cry, but a person can only take so much," said Mahan, who now works at a child-care center. "I finally just broke down one day in the lunch room, and that's when I decided to drop out."

Mahan's experience reflects the stories of gay and lesbian young people throughout the area, who say they face persecution at school and rejection at home and often feel they have nowhere to turn for support.

Studies conducted by universities and health agencies show that homosexual teens are two to four times more likely to drop out of school, abuse drugs and alcohol and commit suicide, according to the National Mental Health Association.

Now a group of local teens is aiming to help gay and lesbian students overcome their sense of shame and loneliness by expanding the number of Gay Straight Alliances at high schools throughout Middle Tennessee.

The student-led clubs have been criticized by some who say the alliances are inappropriate for high school students because they deal with sexuality and condone immoral behavior.

But members of One-In-Teen Youth Services Inc., a Nashville support group for homosexual teens, say the student-led clubs provide gay and lesbian teens with a safe place to be themselves and talk about the problems they are facing.

"Schools right now are incredibly hostile places for gay and lesbian youth," said DeWayne Fulton, who volunteered to lead the Middle Tennessee Council of Gay Straight Alliances.

Fulton, a tech support specialist, added that it's even more violent and hostile in rural school systems. "The great tragedy is that right now many schools would rather let kids suffer in silence than risk getting parent complaints."

Only four high schools in Middle Tennessee have a Gay Straight Alliance, Fulton said, and all of them are in Nashville — Hillsboro High School, Hume-Fogg Academic School, Martin Luther King Jr. Magnet School and the University School of Nashville.

Members of the new Council of Gay Straight Alliances said they are working with students at several high schools who are trying to form Gay Straight Alliances. However, they did not want to say which high schools were involved in the effort.

Those involved with the alliances say the clubs are intended to serve as forums to build tolerance and fight discrimination.

But critics charge that the clubs condone immoral behavior and are inappropriate for minors because they are based on sexual orientation.

"Even Hollywood has an R rating for films with overt homosexual themes," said Richard Land, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of The Southern Baptist Convention.

"I don't personally believe it's right to have clubs in public schools organized around sexual preference."

Land said teens with sexual identity issues should turn to their parents, a school guidance counselor or their ministers, and not to other teens who are coping with similar issues.

While many gay and lesbian teens say they feel rejected at home and church, some churches in the area are reaching out to them.

The First Unitarian Universalist Church of Nashville offers classes on sexuality for young people, and the Rev. Mary Katherine Morn says one of the themes of the classes is what it means to be gay and lesbian.

"We believe human relationships and human sexuality are gifts, and it doesn't make sense to promote any particular kind of sexuality," she said.

Though some conservative Christian groups have criticized the concept of Gay Straight Alliances, the same law that protects the rights of students to form religious clubs has been used to defend their rights to form Gay Straight Alliances.

The 1984 Federal Equal Access Act applies to all public secondary schools that receive federal funding. Under the law, middle and high schools that receive federal dollars can ban Gay Straight Alliances only if they ban all student-organized, noncurriculum clubs. The law also requires the clubs to be student-initiated and attendance must be voluntary.

While the clubs are legal, some students said they encountered resistance when they told school officials they were interested in forming a Gay Straight Alliance.

A.J. Weston, 16, said she made no secret of being a lesbian, wearing gay-rights symbols and T-shirts to class at Cheatham High School. Weston said her sexuality was discussed by other students in class with teachers' consent, she was harassed constantly by other students and she received death threats by phone at home.

When she approached school officials about forming a Gay Straight Alliance, no one wanted to talk about it, she said.

However, Cheatham High School Principal Cheryl Richardson said no students had approached her about forming a Gay Straight Alliance. She also said she had seen no harassment of students based upon their sexual identity.

"We have no tolerance for social cruelty here," Richardson said.

Some school officials who have fielded complaints about Gay Straight Alliances from parents and their peers say they point to the law as their defense.

"When someone says, 'It's a sin, how can you condone that?', my response is, 'It's legal and it's really about fighting intolerance'," said Paul Fleming, the Hume-Fogg teacher who oversees the school's Gay Straight Alliance, the first in the state when it was established in 1999.

"I've asked teachers who are not supportive of the group, 'Would you allow disrespect based on race to go on in your classroom?' Anti-gay bias is society's last acceptable prejudice."

Some teachers say they have encountered as much criticism from fellow teachers as from parents.

Sara Smith, the teacher who oversaw the Gay Straight Alliance at Antioch High School last year, said several of her peers criticized her for promoting behavior that was "dirty, wrong and filthy."

The club fell apart at the end of the last school year when several members graduated, but it is reorganizing, she said.

"One teacher said, 'You're just running a sex club for fags,' which was most disappointing to me," Smith said. "Really, my goal in getting this started is to give gay and lesbian kids some place to go for support. Everyone else can talk to their

buddies or their parents, but these kids really feel so trapped."

One student at Hume-Fogg said she joined the club to develop a better understanding of her mother, who is a lesbian.

"People used to tease me at school and say, 'You and your mom are queers. You're going to hell,' " said Amanda Newton, 16. "But being part of this group of kids and teachers has changed my life. Now I'm not ashamed anymore, and I feel like my mom and I can be accepted."

Newton's mother, Lisa Newton, said the Gay Straight Alliance had given her daughter a sense of social acceptance.

"It's made Amanda a lot more comfortable with us as a family, because she knows there are a lot of other families like ours," she said.

But some school officials say young people who are confused about their sexual identity need more than an after-school club.

Alan Johnson, principal of Hillwood High School, said he thinks students grappling with such issues would reap more benefit from a professional therapist than from a group of students. And, he said, forming a Gay Straight Alliance could backfire by making students who belong to the club a target for harassment.

"There was some talk here of forming a Gay Straight Alliance in September, but I got the general sense from kids, staff and parents that it wasn't a real smart idea," Johnson said.

"My gut feeling is that if a kid has sexual identity issues, it may be a little beyond a bunch of other kids talking about it in a club."

Arthur Lipkin, author of *Understanding Homosexuality, Changing Schools* and associate editor of the *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education*, agrees that many gay and lesbian teens need professional help to cope with the emotional distress that accompanies the rejection they feel at school and at home.

Ultimately, he said, a cultural shift is needed in the way everyone, including teens, talks about sex.

"We live in such a sexualized society, where kids are encouraged to engage in sex through popular music, TV shows and even afternoon soap operas, but we still can't talk about sex at school," he said.

"Until sexuality in all its wonderful forms can be explored, destigmatized and made part of the curriculum, we will not reach equality."

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Last modified: February 11, 2004 by [Outstanding Web Stuff](#)