

The LGBTQ+ Story

The One Where We All Come Out

The LGBTQ+ community, historically pushed to the margins of society, has been brought to the center of attention exponentially more in recent years, particularly since the beginning of the internet. Sometimes negative, disrespectful, and unaccepting—but other times, nothing short of powerful, positive, and loving. Despite the endless backlash the community has faced, LGBTQ+ people have never stopped existing.

Teachers can play one of the most influential roles in one's high school career. Apart from their main goal of helping students achieve academic success, teachers have the power to facilitate copious amounts of personal growth. The struggles teachers have faced in their own lives make them the best-suited mentors for guiding teens to work through their own experiences. This is especially true with LGBTQ+ teens, who often are unable to open up about their issues with their family. Having teachers who are willing to talk to students about the hard parts of life can be transformative for teens who are struggling.

Mr. Long, a new teacher at Standley Lake who identifies as a queer transgender male, described his struggles with his gender identity as a teenager, how being a teacher has impacted him, and how his openness has impacted the students as well as how the students have impacted him.

Although he was focused on his studies most of his life, Long has also found ways to get involved with his local LGBT community, such as being part of The Mile High Freedom Band, a 35 year old concert marching band that began in a time when other community bands refused admittance to LGBT people. Long emphasized that his involvement with them has been a great experience.

“Growing up is hard for everyone, but I think for me, one of the things that made it hard was trying to transition at the same time... It's important for young people to be exposed to a lot of different people while they're growing up.” Long said, continuing “But, knowing students and seeing them in their most vulnerable parts of their lives while they're trying to figure out who they are and what they're doing has taught me a lot about people.”

Having the privilege of getting to know students, Long understands how important being inclusive is, and does his best to bring that inclusivity to the classroom.

“Biology is studying living things, and historically it hasn't included a certain kind of living thing, which is people that have diverse genders and sexualities. I see biology as a big opportunity to cover more of that and to do so from a different angle because it is a part of living things and diversity in gender and sex is present in not just humans but in animal species,” Long stated.



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The acceptance of gender and sexuality studies in the sciences is something that a lot of teachers across the United States are working towards. Long began training other teachers on how to make their lesson plans more inclusive as well, pushing for the use of gender inclusive language when talking about the differences between sex and gender.

Long has been pushing inclusivity at Standley Lake, and his presence as an advocate and member of the LGBTQ+ community creates a more welcoming teenage environment at school.

Around the SLHS community we have many other teachers open about their identities and how it affects their lives.

Social studies teachers at Mandalay Middle School, Ms. Koch and



Mr. Long, a new science teacher at Standley Lake, in his old classroom.

Ms. Schaefer, shared their personal stories of growth with The Lake

“I think it’s evolved a lot. When I was first hired, I was told that you can’t talk about your personal life, you can’t talk about your private life, you can’t mention people, things like that. And now, it’s a lot better than it used to be. It’s hard because I think we can see students struggling with either their identity or in general, and that makes it difficult to figure out how can we help, and so now, it seems more okay to open up about how we can help students with that. But before,, seventeen years ago, you did not even talk about it,” Koch said.

Although sexual orientation could be a large part of day to day life, it certainly doesn’t make up the entirety of someones personality. One’s existence or personality outside of who they are attracted to is just as important as sexual orientation and can be hard for everyone to figure out. Figuring out sexual orientation throughout life is just a journey, not a personality trait.

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“I don’t feel like whom I happen to be attracted to is everything about who I am.”
- Ms.Schaefer

everything about who I am. Like there are so many elements of every person’s personality and who they become as adults and how I continue to grow even as an adult, that it’s one element of my life, and it’s an important element of my life, but just because the person I’m with is a woman doesn’t mean that that’s everything about who I am, or I would ever want to be judged just on that one thing,” Schaefer stated.

Echoing Shaefer, Koch recognizes the importance of considering others as people rather than limiting them to a sexual or gender identity.

“Your sexual identity, preference, whatever you want to call it, is part of you, but that doesn’t mean it’s all of you. And some people weigh their ancestry as more of who they are, or their language as who they are, and so it is just a piece, but it’s such a personal piece that... because it’s been criticized before, and discriminated against before, it’s been labelled as not okay.”

Having both LGBTQ+ identified teachers and LGBTQ+ teacher allies in a student’s everyday life creates a safer, more open environment. Seeing adults in a school setting that have faced the same struggles with their identity and that are open to helping reminds students that they are not alone. Mr. Cohara, an open ally and teacher at Standley Lake, believes that it’s a very simple path to being supportive.

“It’s important to not suck at being human. We all need to support each other. We obviously need more love. More compassion. More understanding. More empathy. It’s so hard to think that there’s still people out there [and in our own school] who take issue with someone else’s orientation or

how they identify, but, unfortunately, we know that’s the reality,” Cohara continued, stating that, “It’s pretty simple--if you’re not in the LGBTQ community, be an ally. Share your love and support.”

Being an advocate for his students has had a serious impact on students at SLHS with Mr. Cohara described this impact specifically in regards to his creative writing class.

“It’s an outlet for some students, even a platform, in a safe, comfortable environment. It helps students discover and develop their voices,” Cohara stated.

In order to be an ally, one must openly show support for the community to make the environment more welcoming and friendly towards LGBTQ+ people. This can take many forms but one of the most powerful ways that a person can convey their support is with their words.

Making sure you say the right words can make a massive difference, according to Cohara, and many others in and out of the community.

“I always talk with my students about their own diction and how their words can and do affect others. I try to educate myself and share what I learn with other students who may say things that they don’t even realize are offensive. I’m not perfect--I make mistakes, but I’m constantly trying to help people think about what they’re actually saying, you know. So many little things--too, I think, can make a huge difference,” Cohara said.

Both at school and throughout their lives, LGBTQ+ teens face discrimina-

tion and bullying. Allies often witness acts of aggression towards people in this community and have the power to help others out.

“Oftentimes when I call a kid out for saying something lame, they’ll get all defensive and say something like, “No, I didn’t mean it like that. I have lots of gay friends.” Like that’s an excuse or something. It’s really sad when people change who they are and how they act around different groups of people to be “cool” or fit in,” Cohara stated.

There is no excuse for the hurtful actions of other students towards their own peers. Allies can advocate for LGBTQ+ students, and are essential to creating a safe space for those teens.

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One important area in which growth has been seen is in the media representation and normalization of the LGBTQ+ community. Being apart of a generation so closely intertwined with technology allows for a significantly larger outreach than what was capable in the past. Through social media and digital entertainment, people, especially students, are being exposed to topics that were previously not up for discussion.

While representation in movies and TV shows has become increasingly more inclusive, an even more impactful component of media representation has been seen in the open discussion and information about LGBTQ+ related topics on social media and websites in general. Having access to that information and the opportunity to interact with and see people who embrace their sexual and gender identities can completely change the attitudes of teens who are questioning themselves and of people in general who haven’t been exposed to the community in any real capacity. Growing up in a community where it’s common to see people embrace this part of themselves and openly have conversations about their identities, many teens are much more willing to explore this topic further.

For many LGBTQ+ teens, social media has become a safe space—a place where they can find many other individuals experiencing similar struggles. Mr. Long, stated that, “The internet was (...) a primary resource that I used. There were people making personal websites about their transition, people talking on [social media] giving advice to one another, and there were a lot of pretty young people,

like me, like teenagers, in various stages of trying to figure out how this works into their life because their families and them had never really seen that as a path.”

Many teens use social media as an outlet, documenting their journey as they find their identity. Whether these stories are heartbreaking or inspiring, many teens find comfort in the fact that someone else has been dealing with the same issues as them.

Unfortunately, media can spread negative messages just as quickly and easily as the positive ones. As fake news becomes a bigger and bigger issue in our society, discriminatory and anti-LGBTQ+ messages can spread like wildfire. These messages can drastically harm the mindsets of teens who are working to accept their own identities as part of the LGBTQ+ community.

At the end of the day, it’s all about what the media decides to present about the community that will shape the public’s opinion about it. That’s why it’s essential that students advocate for the positive messages, create accounts to support the community, and speak out against any false and discriminatory messages being spread over social media.

If there was one thing the various teachers agreed on, it’s that the students are the ones who create the community and drive the culture of inclusivity both at school and in their larger communities. Long states that, “I think students do the majority of the work, whether they’re aware of it or not, in creating the community,” and that the LGBT community is, “all built on the foundation of the students.”

While having the support of teachers and GSAs or GSRMs at schools are incredibly important to creating a safe LGBTQ+ community at school, students are the core of these organizations and need to be the voice for larger change. It’s essential for the students to work to make a community at school.

Schaefer believes that, “the more [the students] want that community to exist and be supportive of one another, the more it does exist.” Marches and protests for equality will always be a form of activism that helps empowerment happen. More important than large scale protests though is the day to day support and kindness students can offer to others. Protests bring awareness to the issues faced by LGBTQ+ people but they don’t really fix anything unless people internalize inclusivity and exercise it in real life every day.

The student body is the catalyst for change. While the world around us, like teachers and media, play a major role in the thought process of a student, it is ultimately up to us to shape our school community and world.

| Jay Keodonexay | Kaitlyn Pierce | Kylie Rold
| Bella Tucker-Sandoval



Advice from Teachers to Students

Cohara

Love yourself. Love others. Know that you are loved. Be proud of who you are. Continue to help educate people and lean on all the people who support you.

Schaefer

There are people who you can talk to, and who will listen. Although my experience might not match your experience, I can listen and share my experience, and so far, things have been really good for me, so I would like to think that it can be good. It's definitely the process of life, and things change all the time, and the [only thing] we can do is accept that you are not going to be the same ten years from now.



Long

Know who your allies are. In the world, diversity is more the norm than the exception. You're the only one that determines who you are and what's best for you.

Koch

I would say that it takes time to figure out who you are, and you don't have to define anything, and that's okay. And there's this societal pressure to know who you are or what you want to be. My advice is just experience things, and travel, and meet people, and ask questions, and know there are resources out there. But don't ever feel like you have to identify with any label, period. Enjoy the journey, and then figure it out along the way.

The Colors of the Flag: What Does Each Stripe Mean?



The pride flag we have known to associate with the LGBT community today was created in the late 70's by Gilbert Baker. The original pride flag had eight colors: hot pink, red, orange, yellow, green, turquoise, indigo, and violet. Nowadays, the flag has been simplified so it has the standard rainbow colors. Each color represents a different aspect of the LGBT community. Red is for life, orange is healing, yellow is sunlight, green is nature, blue is harmony, and violet represents spirit.

The light blue, pink, and white are representative of the transgender flag. Blue indicates the people who identify as trans-masculine, pink is the indicator of people who identify as trans-feminine, and the white is an indicator of people who identify as nonbinary or gender non-conforming.

The black and brown colors on the pride flag were put on the flag to symbolize inclusion of people of color in the LGBT community.