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Mother's crusade

Woman whose son hanged himself helps build support for LGBT kids

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LANCASTER COUNTY, PA - Bullies surrounded him in the locker room and urinated on him.

Classmates branded him a sissy and a queer and worse.

Jim Wheeler sought to ease his torment by composing poems.

"i saw horses last night," he wrote. They were black. Yellow. White, gray and purple ... "maybe i can lasso one and Ride aWay."

He did. He came out at age 18. A gifted writer and artist, he graduated from Cedar Crest High School and won a scholarship to The University of the Arts in Philadelphia.

He attended the university briefly but then dropped out, feeling isolated and depressed. Shortly afterward, according to the Web site, jiminbold.com, he died "alone in a cold room," a suicide by hanging.

Ironically, in the 10 years since his death, the support network for gay youth has blossomed.

Jim's mom has thrown her support behind the fledgling Lancaster chapter of Common Roads support group for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and questioning youth, ages 14-22.

Susan Wheeler of Lebanon is also promoting the second annual meeting of the Central Pennsylvania LGBT Collaborative, to be held 7 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 25, in Miller Chapel at Lebanon Valley College.

She and other advocates acknowledge that tolerance has grown.

Many schools, including Cedar Crest, already have gay-straight alliances.

Bills pending in Harrisburg would protect people who live or work in Pennsylvania from discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity or expression.

But society still stigmatizes gays.

Life in conservative central Pennsylvania is hard for those outside the sexual mainstream, Mrs. Wheeler said. Stories like Jim's, and his family's, are all too common.

"There's nothing special about the Wheelers," she emphasized. "We had seven kids and the fourth just happened to be gay. We didn't try to change him. We just loved him."

Jim in bold

Mrs. Wheeler said she knew early on that her son was gay, and that he had no choice in the matter.

He played with dolls. He wore edgy clothing and displayed effeminate mannerisms.

"He came out in high school," Mrs. Wheeler recalled. "He was tired of hiding, and he wanted to say who he was."

The news hardly raised eyebrows in her open-minded Quaker household.

But teenagers to a large degree define self-worth through the lens of their peers, said Malcolm Lazin, executive director of Equality Forum, a civil rights and educational advocacy group in Philadelphia. The hazings and humiliations Jim endured apparently hurt him more than anyone knew.

"I don't think Jimmy ever got over that," Lazin said.

His family put him in therapy. Not long after, his mother and his sister found him dead in his apartment.

Out of the tragedy of his death came "Jim in Bold."

Named after a Jim Wheeler poem and produced by Lazin, the 2003 documentary tells Jim's story and intersperses it with footage of a cross-country trip by members of Young Gay America online magazine.

The award-winning movie was screened at more than 50 film festivals in three countries, according to Lazin, who grew up in Lebanon County and graduated from Lebanon Valley College. It remains a defining statement about the impact of homophobia.

Thanks in part to increasing media coverage of gay issues and gay exposure in popular culture, however, the cultural landscape had already begun to shift by 1997.

Gay kids started to see gay bashing as a social disease instead of an indictment, Lazin said.

The average coming-out age dropped from 21 or 22 in the early 1990s to 16 today, said Michelle Simmons, the executive director of Harrisburg-based Common Roads.

That's both good and bad.

Simmons noted that "It's very important developmentally for young people to come out, to identify and, additionally, to have the family/peer support."

Indeed, gay advocates report, peers and parents are increasingly understanding.

But coming out remains a most perilous passage.

Stories abound of kids who pack their bags should their families kick them out after the big announcement.

Lebanon Valley College chaplain Paul Fullmer recalled an incident a couple of years ago in which a student barely graduated because his parents disowned him and cut off tuition payments.

Too, advocates say, the cultural liberalization trend is centered on college campuses and offset in many other venues by the religious right.

The Central Pennsylvania LGBT Collaborative met last year for the first time in response to a now-defeated proposal to ban gay marriage throughout the state.

Thursday's gathering will continue the work of building a gay/straight support network, according to Mrs. Wheeler.

Sponsored by Freedom Rings, the Gay-Straight Alliance at LVC, the event will include representatives from more than 25 groups and churches.

Joining in the socializing and speeches, among others, will be the Value all Families Coalition, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, also known as PFLAG, Unity Churches, Metropolitan Church of Christ, the Central Pennsylvania Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce and Equality Advocates Pennsylvania, a legal advocacy and policy reform group.

Performances by the Central Pennsylvania Womyn's Chorus will open and close the session.

Research on the impact of discrimination against gays is not without controversy.

Critics, including some gays, say studies of troubled youth paint an overly dark picture because they exclude well-adjusted respondents who do not acknowledge their sexual orientation even on anonymous surveys.

Still, according to Common Roads, gay youth are two to three times more likely than their heterosexual peers to try to kill themselves.

Simmons said local gay students endure frequent bullying even though about half of their high schools now have nondiscrimination policies.

Life here "continues to be difficult" for gay youth, she said. "There is a very strong conservative streak" and many kids experience profound isolation.

Thus did Common Roads partner with the Unitarian Universalist Church of Lancaster last November to form a "safe zone" for gay youths here.

The Lancaster chapter meets from 7 to 9 p.m. every fourth Friday at the church, 538 W. Chestnut St.

Simmons said Common Roads, which incorporated about five years ago as a nonprofit, works with schools to defuse bigotry and provide youth and their families with support and advice.

"This particular generation is way ahead of adults on this," she added, but many gay kids still do not know where to turn.

Gay youth programs came too late for Jim Wheeler.

But they might help others, his mother said. And they might move society to accept the kids.

"I always say we're all coming out of the closet," Mrs. Wheeler said. "The gay community and the straight community. We're able to talk about things."

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