

## ABSTRACT

EATON, LUCILLE ELIZABETH. Constructing Rainbow Classrooms: Non-heterosexual Students Journey Toward Safer Schools. (under the direction of Anna Victoria Wilson and Bonnie Fusarelli)

According to the 2003 National Student Climate Survey (Kosciw, 2004), there is a widespread existence of victimization against non-heterosexual students in U.S. high schools. 80% of the students surveyed experience some form of verbal, sexual or physical harassment at school (Kosciw, 2004). In nearly 75% of these harassment incidents, neither a teacher nor an administrator intervened, providing an unsafe environment for these students. Recent research (Kosciw, 2004; Evans, 2000; LeCompte, 2000; Schneider & Owens, 2000) suggests that creating safe schools for non-heterosexual students improves their academic performance, their relationships with faculty, and their general attitude toward school.

Using Narrative Inquiry, I interview three non-heterosexual female high school students in order to give voice to their experiences of alienation, harassment, and struggle with sexual identity. Additionally, the students discuss their visions of safe schools and their roles in creating and maintaining safe and welcoming school environments. Within the matrix of queer theory and queer pedagogy, I examine the components of safe schools that currently exist in these students' schools and relay what the students are doing to improve the level of tolerance and safety in their schools. I interview three other non-heterosexual females in order to contextualize the high school students' experiences. One teacher, one youth support group volunteer, and one young woman currently out of school provide additional layers of perspective as I analyze the narratives and suggest modifications in curriculum materials,

instructional practices and administrative policies that will construct safer school environments.

**Constructing Rainbow Classrooms: Non-heterosexual Students Journey Toward Safer  
Schools**

by

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## DEDICATION

I could not have completed this work without the love and support of my family and friends. My children, Matthew and Elizabeth, have been an unwavering presence of support in my life, encouraging me to actualize my potential and fulfill my dreams. Their loving support has guided me through numerous difficult moments. For many years, I have been in awe of my mother, Edith Eaton, whose strength, courage and determination has inspired me to continue this journey despite the multitude of hurdles that emerged in the path. I appreciate my siblings for their support, especially Cathy and Allyson, who believed in me when I had difficulty believing in myself. I may not have made it through the final months of writing if it were not for the delicious breads baked by my brother, Bob, and his wife, Pat. My cousin, Kathy, has been both a wonderful relative and a great friend – a beacon of light illuminating the darkest of nights. There are a number of friends who have contributed to the completion of this endeavor, and to all of them, I am truly grateful for their encouragement. I thank Robin for her endless faith in me, Beth for her loving patience, and Teresa for visualizing this moment long before I could. I thank Mary Robyn for the weekly cheerleading phone calls and BJ for her warmth and laughter. I appreciate my Whole Foods Market family for providing a haven for me when life became overwhelming, and I appreciate my soccer team for the healthy distractions from the stress of graduate school. I am thankful for my co-workers, especially Anna, Shayne and Suzanne, and their confidence in my ability to accomplish this goal. I also extend appreciation to my graduate school classmates, especially Annie, Julie and Kristin, whose camaraderie facilitated my growth as a person and a professional educator. I am grateful to my committee, Dr. Anna Wilson, Dr. Bonnie Fusarelli, Dr. Paul Bitting, and Dr. Barbara Sparks, for fostering my development as

a scholar. I extend additional gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Anna Wilson, for seeing the realm of possibility dwelling within me that I could not see myself. I dedicate this dissertation to my loving family and wonderful friends. It truly takes a whole village to raise a doctor.

## BIOGRAPHY

I was born on November 6, 1963, in Eastport, Long Island, New York, where I lived until I went to college in upstate New York. Eastport was located on the south shore of Long Island, just a few miles west of the Hamptons. I was the sixth of seven children born to my Russian-German-Irish family, and many hours of my childhood were spent playing with siblings and friends in the school yard across the street from our house. My early years were shaped by a strict Roman Catholic upbringing and the long-held traditions of my large extended family. As I grew, teachers and school activities impacted the direction of my life, helping me to discover and hone my talents and abilities.

In my sophomore year of high school, I became bored with school and informed my guidance counselor that I wished to quit school. He patiently listened to the whining of a fifteen-year-old, and then told me about a Rotary Club exchange student program that allowed students to study abroad during their junior year. I applied, was accepted, and lived for one year in Sydney, Australia, an experience that forever changed my life and the way I made meaning of the world around and within me.

I returned to the United States to complete my senior year, and then went on to college to study Forestry. In my junior year, I transferred to Cornell University, where I unexpectedly got pregnant, another event that drastically altered the course of my life. I gave birth to twins, Matthew and Elizabeth, two blessings that have become the pillar of my existence. Shortly after their birth, we returned home to Long Island, where I earned a teaching scholarship, completed my undergraduate degree, and earned my teaching certification in science.

After graduation, I accepted a teaching position in Raleigh, North Carolina, and migrated south with my children. After a year of teaching, I started working on a Masters in Science Education at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. The responsibility of two elementary-age children, middle school teaching and graduate courses soon proved to be too overwhelming to juggle, thus I decided to postpone graduate school. Ten years later, in the fall of 2000, I returned to my goal of earning my graduate degree, but this time I applied to North Carolina State University for a Master's in Curriculum and Instruction. On the first day that I met my advisor, Dr. Anna Wilson, she suggested that I pursue a doctorate in Curriculum Studies once I had completed my master's degree.

I followed my professor's advice, and soon found myself focused on researching how females experience school, a general interest that I later narrowed down to non-heterosexual females and their school experiences. I discovered my passion was in educating youth, especially those who were marginalized for their 'difference,' whatever that might be. I desired to help these students realize their potential and utilize the opportunities education could provide for them.

Now that I have earned my doctorate in Educational Research and Curriculum Studies, I intend to continue following my passion, developing curriculum materials and methods of instruction that foster safe and welcoming classroom environments. By bridging the resources of public schools, universities and community centers, I hope to catalyze positive changes that will maximize educational opportunities for *all* students.

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## CHAPTER 1: CONSULTING THE BLUEPRINTS

A young woman walks into the locker room after playing basketball in her high school physical education class. Three of her classmates gather together near the bathroom sinks and whisper about ‘that butch who just walked in.’ They turn their backs to her as they continue to whisper, giggle and occasionally peer over their shoulders to sneer at her. No one else is around to witness this behavior. No one intervenes.

A young man, laden with a pile of notebooks, textbooks and various school supplies, maneuvers his way down the hall between classes. Two of his classmates sneak up from behind and push the young man, one against each shoulder. The motion sends books, paper and pencils flying, scattering the supplies up the hallway. The two guys laugh as they walk on, then turn their heads and shout, “Hey, fag, you need to be more careful where you walk.” Laughter resonates down the hallway as they sprint to their next class. Through this entire event, the hall is filled with people, both teachers and students. No one stops to help the young man or reprimand the two guys who pushed him. No one intervenes.

A young woman enters the cafeteria late in the afternoon, trying to grab a snack before her last class. As she bends over to get her candy bar, two football players push her against the machine, bracing her hands above her head, shoulder width apart. One of the athletes leans his body against hers, hip to hip. “I just want you to know what a *real* man feels like, honey. Maybe if you had that, you wouldn’t be a filthy dyke.” The guys hold her against the snack machine for a few more seconds, releasing her when the voices of other students catch their attention. A few students are milling about, but say nothing to the three pressed up against the vending machine. There are no teachers supervising this group of students. No one intervenes.

A sixteen-year-old masculine-looking female lives with her single mother in a small Southern town. She wears black leather and has multiple facial piercings. Her peers verbally and physically harass her daily for being a 'butch', for being 'weird' and for generally not fitting in. Her teachers do not support her; they believe she instigates the problem by looking and acting so different. School administrators identify *her* as the problem, not the harassment. They pressure her to change her looks and behavior so as not to provoke the attacks. The young woman's mother tries to defend her daughter, but tension grows in this conservative, rural community. With the help and support of the Lambda Youth Network, the mother sends her daughter to a high school for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth in Dallas, Texas. Finally, someone makes the choice to intervene.

A high school junior sits quietly in the back of her English one afternoon when the teacher directs two male students to step outside as she needed to speak with them. As the young men exit the room, another male student jokes that the 'gay couple' is getting in trouble with the teacher. The class erupts into laughter, and the teacher laughs, too, shaking her head as she walks out the door. The young woman in the back of the room, a self-identified lesbian, is disturbed by this display of disrespect, but remains silent through the remainder of class. After class, she debates with herself whether she should confront the teacher and fear the consequences of approaching an authority figure or remain silent and maintain the status quo. The young woman decides to return to the English classroom after school and talk with her teacher. The young woman suggests that the teacher has reinforced a negative perception of homosexuals by laughing along with the class instead of using that moment as an opportunity to teach a lesson about tolerance and respect. The teacher listens to the student and agrees that her response had been inappropriate. The next day, in front of the entire class, the

teacher apologizes to the two young men for the disrespect she and the class had displayed the previous day. Intolerance was addressed that day, because someone chose to intervene.

These stories are not excerpts from some young adult fiction novel. They are based on true stories. The first two scenes are derived from data collected by the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network in their 2001 National School Climate Survey (Kosciw & Cullen, 2003). The last three scenarios, however, are stories told to me by the individuals who experienced them. Why am I interested in these stories? I am an educator. The safety of students and staff is important to me. Why am I interested in stories about ‘butches,’ ‘fags’ and ‘dykes’? I am a lesbian educator, and the safety of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender<sup>1</sup> students is *very* important to me.

There are those who would argue that non-heterosexual students instigate hostility, because they exhibit behaviors that are socially unacceptable, and could avoid the harassment if they ‘chose’ to be heterosexual. It is not the intention of this dissertation to argue whether non-heterosexuality is right or wrong. The issue of safe schools for non-heterosexual students is not a moral<sup>2</sup> issue, but rather a human rights<sup>3</sup> issue. The United Nations’ Declaration of Human Rights states that “all humans” have, among a list of other rights, the “right to education” and “the right to freedom from torture and degrading treatment.” It continues that these rights “are inherent rights to be enjoyed by all human beings,” and “not ‘gifts’ to be withdrawn, withheld or granted at someone’s whim or will” (United Nations, 1948). In the United States, education is not only a right, it is a requirement for all youth between the ages of seven and sixteen. It would be unjust for educators to ‘withdraw’ or ‘withhold’ a non-heterosexual student’s right to an education and a space free of verbal,

physical, or emotional harassment. It is the responsibility of educators to provide as safe an environment as possible for *all* of the young people in their care.

As a lesbian educator-researcher, I want to delve deeper than just hearing the non-heterosexual students' stories. I want to know how their sexual identity impacts their feelings of safety, success and their general attitude toward school life. I want to know how they cope, who they talk to, where they find support. I want to know if they walk through it all in silence or if they try to make changes, and what all that means for them and for the entire school community. I want to know how we can work together to make schools safer, more welcoming places to be, for everyone.

### **The Data Are Limited**

According to Kevin Jennings<sup>4</sup> (Kosciw & Cullen, 2003), the 1995 Add Health Study and the 1999, 2001 and 2003 National School Climate Surveys are the only national studies that have evaluated the experiences of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students in their schools. California and Massachusetts are the among the few states that include questions regarding sexual orientation and same-sex sexual experiences on their Yearly Risky Behavior Survey, a survey given annually to high school youth. Needless to say, the data on our LGBT, or non-heterosexual, youth are limited. As educators, we need to better understand the daily lives of these students, to hear directly the lived experiences of non-heterosexual youth. This understanding will aid in the development of safer schools that support students in their exploration of sexual identity. In fact, I contend the development of safer schools for non-heterosexual youth will result in safer schools for *all* youth.

This dissertation uses narrative inquiry to describe and interpret the lived experiences of non-heterosexual females in local high schools. This inquiry examines the following

research questions: 1) How do non-heterosexual females experience high school? 2) Is school a safe and supportive environment? 3) How did coming out affect these students academically and socially within the context of school? 4) How do non-heterosexual females envision a safe school and what role, if any, do they take in creating and maintaining that kind of environment?

### **Queering Our Gaze**

The context within which these stories will be told is constructed within the matrix of queer theory (Doll, 1998; Kumashiro, 1999; Morris, 1998, 2000; Pinar, 1998, 1999, 2000; Quinlivan & Town, 1999; Steinberg, 2000; Talburt, 2000). This branch of critical theory examines, explores, and critiques historical or current issues through various lenses and from multiple angles, uncovering ignored or hidden voices. My lens is both female and queer. Here, queer is both a noun and a verb. It is that which is examined and the action used to do the examining. Using this lens, I seek to peel away the layers of text and expose the messages embedded within the subtext. As a scholar committed to liberation, it is my responsibility to listen to and understand the meanings of the subtext, and then use that understanding to catalyze emancipatory change in the arena of education.

Mainstream America is a patriarchal text of normalized heterosexuality, or heteronormativity, and its subtexts are the people who dwell outside these confined boundaries of sexuality and gender expression. The domination of this heteronormativity polarizes sexual categories, defining heterosexuality as good, normal and natural, while its binary, homosexuality, is deviant, unnatural and perverse. Queer theory questions the assumptions, practices and restrictions of heteronormativity. It also stands against the violence and ignorance of heterosexism and homophobia<sup>5</sup> (Morris, 2000).

Queer theorists sift through events and illuminate the injustices and inequities from a gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender perspective. According to Quinlivan and Town (1999),

Queer Theory draws on the philosophies of the gay liberation movement and aspects of lesbian feminism in its aim to destabilize and critique heterosexuality, emphasize sexual diversity, draw attention to gender specifics and sexuality as institutional rather than personal (p. 511).

The norms of our society assume all people are heterosexual, and that it is the only acceptable way to be. These expectations construct a binary relationship between heterosexuality and homosexuality. In this binary relationship, homosexuality is pathology juxtaposed to the norm of heterosexuality with no room for diversity between the two extremes. Kumashiro (1999) uses the term ‘queer’ to denote a deviation from and even a rejection of the normative sexuality (i.e., heterosexuality), ‘proper’ genders (i.e. a particular type of masculinity for men, femininity for women), and natural(ized) sexes (i.e., male and female)” (p. 492). To be queer allows one the freedom to move along the continuum of sexuality or at least not feel pigeonholed into any one category.

There are numerous angles from which to view and make meaning of the word ‘queer.’ Pinar (1998), Doll (1998), Morris (1998), Rodriguez (1998) and others approach queer theory, queer, and ‘queering’ from multiple standpoints. Pinar (1998) contends that “Queer has become the chosen term for many who have come to be dissatisfied with what they perceive to be the assimilationist<sup>6</sup> politics associated with the terms *gay* and *lesbian* (original italics) . . . queer pedagogy displaces and decenters; queer curriculum is noncanonical” (p. 3).

Doll (1998) speaks to this decentering by transforming the noun, ‘queer’, into the verb, ‘queering.’ Not only do queer people live their sexual lives differently than those self-defined as heterosexuals, but they also view every aspect of their world through a different

lens. They “queer the gaze of their perception” (p. 293). Queered perceptions shift the paradigms, the images of everyday, commonsense life. It makes the familiar strange; it makes the familiar queer.

Along with these sensory shifts is the need for a new language or new meanings applied to existing words. Indeed, just the reclaiming of the word ‘queer’ by those with non-heterosexual lifestyles is the beginning of such a movement. Rodriguez (1998) calls for the rewriting of “our sexual vocabularies [and practices] . . . [thus] turning them inside out, giving them a new face” (p. 178). We journey in a positive direction when we, as a population, are able to profess our sexual identity without shame, discomfort or judgment.

Another perspective of queer theory comes from Morris (1998) who asserts, “It is by queering texts (used in its broadest sense, beyond the written word) that curricularists may begin to tear down the walls of the sex = gender paradigm” (p. 279). Queer theory expands the definitions of sexuality and broadens gender roles and definitions of femininity and masculinity. Queer theory seeks to permeate the boundaries of sexual identity so that individuals are free to explore and define themselves (or not) in ways that best suit them. Sexual identity is not something to be imposed upon us, but something that is inherently woven into the very fibers of our being (Doll, 1998). Queerness is an integral part of one’s identity, one’s ideology and one’s political perspective (Steinberg, 2000). We are the only ones who can accurately announce to the world who we are and how we experience the world. It is not for others to make that announcement for us.

### **A Queer Reading of the World**

The oppressed are often ignored, decentered and pushed to the margins of the community, imprisoned by the language and constructs of the dominant structure. From these edges



emerge movements of resistance, political acts against the oppressive structures of gender, race, class and sexual orientation (hooks, 1993). In addition to the physical and political acts of resistance, there is the struggle with language. hooks (1994) explains that “private speech in public discourse, intimate intervention, making another text, a space that enables me to recover all that I am in language, I find so many gaps, absences in written text” (p. 147). There is a need for the oppressed, the queer youth, to be heard, in their own words and in their own voices. Gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgenders have been absent from the curriculum and content area textbooks, and have often been ignored by the school community (Kosciw, 2004; Uribe, 1994). Queer theory supports the youth’s desire to be visible, audible and represented. It supports their choice to move out of the margins and dismantle the structures of oppression.

The bands of resistance are not restricted to the members of the oppressed group. All are invited by hooks to join the movement, to unify against the dominant group. In this space of collective despair, resistance struggles for freedom of expression (hooks, 1993). Freire (1998), noted liberator of Brazil’s masses of uneducated poor, echoes these thoughts. Men and women are by nature beings of action, “praxis” (p. 79) in Freire’s terms, and because of this, they have the ability to transform the world. What we believe to be true is not something to wear on the surface as rhetoric for others to hear; it becomes a part of our daily lives, a seed in the very core of our being (hooks, 1994). Through education there can be emancipation. Education opens our eyes and our minds and allows us to “read the world” (Freire, 1998, p. 17) in a radically different way, to queer our gaze, if you will. It is through this reading of the world that we comprehend, we communicate and we seek to understand.

It is within this contextual framework that this study gives voice to non-heterosexual women, their lived experiences, and their understandings of sexual identity.

### **High School and Sexual Orientation**

This dissertation addresses an issue that has historically been ignored in education – the acknowledgement of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer - youth as a significant population found within our schools. Because sexuality is not as visible as race, gender or physical disability, many of these youth are overlooked, isolated and alienated. As a result, many of these youth are at risk for dropping out (Kosciw & Cullen, 2003; Uribe, 1994).

According to the 2001 National School Climate Survey (Kosciw & Cullen, 2003) conducted by the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network, more than eight out of ten LGBT students report verbal, sexual or physical harassment at school. In addition, more than 90% report hearing homophobic remarks such as ‘faggot’, ‘butch’ or ‘dyke’ frequently or often; 75 % of these students report that faculty or staff rarely or never intervened when such remarks were made. Approximately 33% of the LGBT students surveyed skipped one or more classes a month because they felt unsafe. This contrasts with other national data that reports general skipping of classes at a rate between five and six percent (Kosciw & Cullen, 2003).

Some states have put forth policy changes in order to protect LGBT students. In 1999, the state of California enacted legislation that “protects students in California public schools from harassment and discrimination the basis of actual or perceived orientation” (Russell, Seif, & Truong, 1995, p. 111). Massachusetts Governor Commission’s Report, *Making Schools Safe for Lesbian and Gay Youth*, (1993), demonstrates another state effort to influence change through legal protection. Thus far, eight states and the District of Columbia

have legal policies and/or laws protecting LGBT high school students from discrimination. The Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (Kosciw & Cullen, 2003; Kosciw, 2004), Equality National and other gay activist organizations continue to lobby nationwide for state and federal legislation that includes 'sexual orientation and gender expression' as protected classes.

Even with legislation changes, however, acts of violence against non-heterosexual students continue. The 2003 National Student Climate Survey (Kosciw, 2004) reports that 65% of LGBT students have experienced sexual harassment, while 20% have been the victims of physical assault. According to the students surveyed, verbal harassment has occurred more frequently than physical harassment, with 20% claiming that homophobic remarks are from teachers, administrators, and other adults in the school community. About 40% of gay and bisexual students have attempted suicide as compared to about ten percent of their heterosexual peers.

Few studies have focused on females, and even fewer on bisexual individuals (Hillier & Rosenthal, 2001; Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001). Russell et al.'s 2001 study revealed that female adolescents who are romantically attracted to other females experience more depression, less school success and weaker relationships with their teachers. This study also suggests that bisexual females experience even less academic success and more depression and alienation than their lesbian counterparts.

The findings from my own pilot study (2001) do not support the above findings regarding student-teacher relationships. The bisexual high schools females that I interviewed had close relationships with their teachers and excelled academically. These young women had been enrolled in an independent school, however, and as the 2001 National School Climate Survey

(Kosciw & Cullen, 2003) notes, LGBT students attending independent schools feel safer and have a more positive attitude toward school than the peers in public school. These two females also felt it was easier to be bisexual, which is consistent with the data from the National School Climate Survey, but inconsistent with Russell et al's (2001) findings. More information is needed in order to ascertain more accurately whether or not the young women's experiences were anomalous or something shared by a larger population.

### **Their Voices and Their Stories**

I am using a qualitative approach to this topic in order to excavate beneath the quantitative statistics thus far compiled by these various state and national surveys. I am using narrative inquiry to listen to the lived experiences of lesbian and bisexual women in a high school. The structure of this study utilizes many aspects of the narrative inquiry model developed by Leiblich, Havika and Zilber (1998). The study was conducted from October 2004 to January 2005, using local high school students who attended community support groups, primarily a Gay Straight Alliance network that brought together students from several adjacent counties. The purpose of attending these meetings was to listen to the stories and observe the actions of non-heterosexual females within the context of their daily lives. I interviewed several females members of the network in order to better understand their experiences in high school, how they 'come out,' or disclose their sexuality, to the school community, and determine whether they have safe, supportive environments in which to explore their sexual identity. I also inquired as to the roles they have, or think they have, in creating a supportive environment for LGBT students. I use the "insider/outsider"<sup>7</sup> approach to the research. As a lesbian, I am an insider to the non-heterosexual subculture, but I am also an outsider since I am older, a doctoral student and an educator.

I interviewed three females who currently attend high school, and their experiences helped to shed light on what is presently happening in schools, and the current challenges as well as the current solutions to the problems of harassment and intolerance. I textured these in-depth interviews with the voices of three older women: one lesbian woman who left school three years ago, before she graduated; a lesbian middle school teacher who has been a long-time colleague; and a lesbian activist/volunteer who facilitated the alliance network. The range of women provided me multiple perspectives in which to contextualize the voices of the high school students.

I gained access to several of the LGBT youth support groups in the local area by phoning or emailing the contact person as directed by each groups Internet website. I was invited to attend two alliance network meetings, a school board protest and a youth leadership summit, playing the role of observer initially, and then later evolving into the role of participant as I grew more comfortable with the group. After each meeting, I recorded extensive notes in both my field and reflexive researcher journals (Hatch, 2002; Janesick, 2004). My field notes included ‘thick,’ or very detailed, descriptions of settings, observed behaviors before, during and after the informal meetings as well as the in-depth, structured interviews (Adler & Adler, 1994; Bogdan & Bilken, 1998; Creswell, 1998; Gertz, 1973; Glesne, 1999). I collected documents on organizations and support groups for non-heterosexual youth from meetings, conferences and Internet sources. I gathered statistics and news stories from local newspapers, non-heterosexual publications and websites. I triangulated these texts with the field observations and the interview transcripts (Hatch, 2002; Seale, 2003; Wolcott, 2003).

I created interview guides that reiterated the basic questions of my research, allowing space for each woman to share her story and her vision of a safe, supportive school

environment. I probed this last issue more deeply, examining roles students, teachers, and administrators played in creating those safe and supportive environments. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim (Bogdan & Bilken, 1998; Creswell, 1998; Kvale, 1996). Each interviewee was assured confidentiality, and it was clarified that all tapes and transcripts would be destroyed no more five years after the completion of my dissertation.

All interviews, notes and journal entries were coded using concepts borrowed from structural, poetic and discourse analysis (Gee, 1999; Leiblich, Havika & Zilber, 1998; Reissman, 1993). I also utilized the coding and webbing features of the Atlas-ti computer software to enrich my analysis, allowing for themes to emerge from the text. The themes were organized concept maps, which I translated onto sheets of chart paper to better illustrate how each theme informs another. My goal was to scrutinize the narratives and gain a deeper understanding of high school students' experiences, thereby informing educators how to successfully develop more accepting and safer school communities.

### **It Starts with Feeling 'Different'**

I begin the research journey with a story about my own childhood experience. This is the perspective, the lens, through which I view and analyze all of the data. Schneider and Owens (2000) report that many students do not have a name for what they are sexually, they just feel 'different.' I remember that feeling well. As long as I can recall, I have felt 'different,' as if I just did not quite fit in with my peers. I grew up in a small, relatively conservative town in the Northeast. We were one of the few Catholic families in the area, and my parents were the only registered Democrats living on our street. I was one of seven children growing up in a three-bedroom house. I spent as much time as possible outdoors, riding bikes, playing ball, climbing trees, and getting dirty. My family considered me a 'tomboy.' It was generally

accepted that I was not like my sisters, who conformed to the traditional gender expectations of females. I was the only girl in my family to not receive a hope chest, a chest that stores linens and other items needed for that ‘expected’ future marriage. Perhaps my family somehow knew that marriage would not be a part of *my* future.

I was involved in many activities at school, from chorus to student council, from theater to softball. I interacted with every group of students, although I never felt like I belonged to any one group in particular. Throughout junior high and high school, I would tell my eldest brother that I felt like I did not belong. He used to tell me that it was just growing pains or that my mind was bigger than this small town, and that I would grow out of that feeling once I graduated and moved on to college. I saw his point, but I felt there was more to it than that. Interestingly enough, at that time, I did not equate this feeling of difference with my attraction to females.

My conscious interest in females originated in elementary school. I had crushes on teachers and classmates, as well as actresses and singers. I covered my bedroom walls with collages of Charlie’s Angels, The Bionic Woman, and Wonder Woman. My younger sister said that I had an unusual fascination with the female body’. Well, to be honest, she actually told me I was ‘perverted’ because of my fascination with the female body. I believe that I was eight or nine at that time.

I did date boys throughout my adolescence, and I did have feelings for a few of them, but I continued to spend as much time with my female friends as possible. During sleepovers, I would purposely maneuver myself next to the girl I liked the most. I would wrestle and play fight with my friends just to have an excuse to be closer to their bodies. I never spoke of my attraction to women with anyone. I left high school and my hometown without ever ‘coming

out,’<sup>8</sup> or revealing my sexual identity. It was not until two years later, when I was in college, that I began to connect my feeling of difference with a difference in sexual orientation. I understood then that living a sexually alternate lifestyle lent itself to having an alternative, or queer, perspective, not just of sexuality, but of the world in general.

As a researcher and scholar, I understand that I read the world through queer-colored glasses. I am a lesbian, a woman who loves women, and, to me, there is nothing more fascinating and more important than the issues that surround all women. I focus my research efforts on the females in my study, and I am honest about that focus. It is not my intention to ignore the males who participate in the Gay Straight Alliance Network or other youth organizations, and I respectfully explain my position to the group so that no one is offended during the course of my research.

### **Plans Are Moving “Gay-ly” Forward**

In this introduction, I illustrated snapshots of non-heterosexual students’ experiences in high school. I explained my purpose for this study, what I learned and what I intend to do with the results of this research. I gave a brief review of my theoretical framework and the literature related to this issue. I then outlined the methodology I employed to successfully conduct my research. I completed my introduction with my own subjectivity statement, a recollection of feeling different throughout my childhood.

In chapter two, I expand my theoretical framework, and provide a more in-depth exploration of the literature related to non-heterosexual high school students. I discuss common themes and findings that emerged from the data and acknowledge the “holes” in the data, those areas where more research is needed. In chapter three, I outline my research methodology, and chapters four through seven, I introduce the women that I had interviewed,



reveal the negative and positive aspects of their narratives, concluding with my interpretations of their experiences.

Following the theme of the dissertation's title, I use the analogy of constructing a building to the establishment of safer school communities. Chapter two's literature review becomes the structure's foundation, and chapter three's methodology translates to the architect's blueprints. In the later chapters, I introduce the participants of my research as the construction crew who encounters a variety of roadblocks as they frame, sheetrock and paint their construction of a welcoming school environment.

## **CHAPTER 2: ASSEMBLING THE FOUNDATION**

The research published since 1994 on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues as they relate to education, emphasizes the negative psychological and social effects of accepting an identity that exists beyond the margins of the socially constructed norms of heterosexual identity. Much of the recent research examines the negative results of rejection and isolation, and then proceeds to investigate solutions to current problems and proactive measures that will hopefully eliminate issues before they develop. The review of the literature begins with an explanation of sexual identity and the theoretical framework of queer theory, which I use to contextualize this research. The review then progresses through the negative impacts of the school environment on non-heterosexual students, concluding with the positive contributions of school-based advocacy groups and other systems of support.

### **Sexual Identity Development**

Exploring the intersection of non-heterosexuality and educational environments has grown increasingly important in the last ten to fifteen years, as more adolescents are ‘coming out’ and self-identifying as a ‘non-heterosexual’ at an earlier age, thus representing a larger percentage of our middle schools and high schools (D’Augelli, Pilkington & Hershberger, 2002; Morrison & L’Heureux 2001; Schneider & Owens, 2000; Uribe, 1994). The term ‘non-heterosexual’ is used in this study to denote all students who describe their sexuality as ‘different,’ although they may not necessarily identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender<sup>9</sup> or queer (Evans, 2000; LeCompte, 2000; Russell, Seif & Truong, 2001). In some cases, students choose to use the ‘Q’ in LGBTQ to mean that they are ‘questioning’ their sexuality and do not identify with any one particular category.

Sexuality is a complex component of personal identity. It is an ever-evolving characteristic that continuously reconstructs itself as personal identity alters with maturity and experience. Schneider and Owens (2000) asserted that adolescent identity development is a greater challenge for LGBT youth than it is for their heterosexual peers, because these adolescents undergo a “unique set of stressful and potentially harmful experiences unlike any faced by heterosexuals” (p. 353). While identity and autonomy are hurdles for all adolescents, it is the integration of sexual orientation and identity that generally overrides other aspects of change for the LGBT individual.

It is important to differentiate sexual orientation with two other similar, yet non synonymous, terms – sexual identity and sexual behavior. Sexual orientation develops early in life and is defined as a “consistent pattern of arousal that includes sexual feelings, affectional attractions, thoughts, fantasies, and emotional or romantic feelings” (Schneider & Owens, 2000, p. 354). The feelings can be toward the same sex, the opposite sex, or both sexes (Schneider & Owens, 2000). Sexual identity develops at a later age and is a more explicit sense of one’s own sexuality and repeated sexual feelings, thoughts or behaviors. Sexual behavior is independent of both orientation and identity. It refers to the sexual acts one chooses to practice and with whom one chooses to practice them. According to Schneider and Owens (2000), individuals have control over the categories in which they place themselves (sexual identity) and how they wish to engage or not engage in sexual activities (sexual behaviors), but they do not have control over their sexual orientation. Individuals can choose to accept or deny their orientation, but it remains woven into the very fabric of general identity formation (Cramer & Gibson, 1999; Schneider & Owens, 2000). People can have same-sex romantic attractions, ignore the existence of those attractions, and

self-identify as heterosexual. In this situation, their sexual identity is heterosexual, but their sexual orientation is non-heterosexual. They can change the label and the behaviors, but they cannot alter the attractions (Schneider & Owens, 2000).

Since sexuality is a component of human development, this section outlines a variety of development models to help frame the participants' experiences. Early models of human development (Gilligan, 1982; Lacombe, 1998) follow a linear, hierarchical pattern, where individuals are expected to master one level before moving on to the next. The models of Freud, Piaget, Kohlberg and Erikson are all linear in design, based on studies conducted exclusively with males (Gilligan, 1982). Following an Eriksonian model, a person progresses through eight stages of psychosocial development, each with its own crisis to negotiate and a series of tasks to master. Adolescence is Stage Five, and the crisis is identity formation and autonomy. As people develop, they master a series of developmental tasks, including sexuality, intimacy, achievement, and the formation of new attachments. Once these tasks are successfully completed, the individual transcends to the next stage. This model emphasizes individuation in isolation, disconnected from the influence of any cultural, biological or social context.

However, human development is not an isolated endeavor, especially for non-heterosexuals whose challenge with adolescence is often compounded by homophobia and heterosexism<sup>10</sup>. Cass (1979) constructed the seminal model of homosexual identity development. The six stages outline a specific pattern of development unique to the non-heterosexual. The stages are linear in design, with the sixth stage denoting the pinnacle of healthy identity formation. Stage one is 'identity confusion,' the feeling of difference without any particular label for that difference. The second stage is 'identity comparison,'

the recognition of internal feelings and comparing them to peers and others in one's world. The third stage is 'identity tolerance,' the labeling of one's feelings and investigating the short and long-term implications of that label. The fourth stage is 'identity acceptance,' the attainment of comfort with that label. The fifth stage is 'identity pride,' the positive association with others in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community. The sixth and final stage is 'identity synthesis,' the ability to integrate sexual identity into overall identity and completely accept one's sexual orientation.

According to Cass (1979), individuals in the earliest stages of sexual awareness detect a difference between their feelings and those of their peers or their surrounding environment. As they investigate further, they attempt to understand the underlying reasons for the discontinuities. Over time, the sexual feelings are labeled, and the individual proceeds through stages of comfort, acceptance and pride, arriving ideally at the integration of sexual orientation and personal identity.

Additionally, Collins (2000) reviewed other models of development and synthesized them into five basic stages: 1) growing awareness of same-sex desire/feeling of difference, 2) partially successful reconciliation of internal LGBT identity with society's expectation of heterosexuality, 3) stigma evasion/manage discrepancies between self and others, 4) incorporation of LGBT cultural norms into individual norms, and 5) public disclosure or 'coming out.' Once again, there is a cognizance of difference between one's attractions and the socially accepted heterosexual expectations. There is a process by which a non-heterosexual individual comprehends, defines and accepts his or her sexual identity. Non-heterosexuals generally learn to negotiate their way through relationships with others by avoiding topics related to sexuality, lying about their sexuality or by disclosing their

sexuality. Most non-heterosexual youth pass through these stages to some degree, even if they progress into adulthood before successfully integrating their public and private identities. This model of development is useful in comprehending non-heterosexual development, but it would not be applicable to heterosexual youth, as it is not necessary for them to integrate a public and private identity.

According to Schneider and Owens (2000), however, the journey of sexuality development is not a linear one, but rather a spiral. LGBT youth often undulate between the pressure to ‘pass’ as heterosexual and the desire to explore the feelings that revolve around their sexual orientation. Schneider and Owens (2000) created a generic model of ‘becoming’ in order to more fully comprehend the tangent that lesbians, gays and bisexuals follow as they wrestle with their specific sexuality identity. It begins with a self-recognition, an awareness of ‘difference.’ Somewhere in mid-childhood or early adolescence, the individual realizes that he or she somehow does not fit in or conform to the norms of his or her peers. This is normally a gradual process, an awakening that may be embraced from its inception or may begin a spiraling of denial, confusion and frustration as the individual decides how to best handle this discovery.

Initially, during the confusion, many youth prefer to live ‘double lives,’ where they ‘pass’ for heterosexual in their public lives and explore their lesbian, gay or bisexual orientation in their private lives. They may opt to suppress these ‘other’ feelings altogether. ‘Passing’ allows them to avoid society’s heterosexism<sup>11</sup> as well as the possible rejection by family and friends. This masquerade utilizes vast amounts of energy. The adolescents have to consciously monitor everything they do, from what they wear to what they say to what they do and with whom they do it. The chasm between the public self and the private self widens,

creating psychological tension, anxiety, and depression (Schneider & Owens, 2000; Uribe, 1994).

Over time, many young people try to alleviate the tension and negativity, and begin to explore their feelings, engage in same-sex erotic behavior, date, seek support groups, and participate in the LGBT subculture. Eventually, they cultivate a positive perspective of their sexuality and accept themselves for who they are internally. The final stage in this process is integration, where the individual ‘comes out’ or publicly discloses his or her sexual identity, and develops a sense of pride as s/he identifies with others in the LGBT community.

Adding to the research conducted by Schneider and Owens (2000), Cramer and Gibson (1999) also acknowledged the spiraling, or continuous flux, of non-heterosexual sexual identity development, and asserted that the use of linear models does little to expand the understanding of this process. In my study, the application of linear models is limited, because they emphasize the individual, lack context and are generated from a binary perspective. They assume that homosexual identity replaces a previous heterosexual identity, instead of viewing the change as more transitory. Linear models of sexuality development tend to be hierarchical, therefore homosexual supplants heterosexual as the apex of healthy development and relegates any other non-heterosexual identity to an inferior position (Cramer & Gibson, 1999). Sexual identity development is not hierarchical in nature. It is more of a continuum, with each person finding his/her place of belonging along that continuum (Cramer & Gibson, 1999).

Cramer and Gibson (1999) also examined other models, including an issues/milestone experience model and a social constructionist model. The issues/milestone model addressed community and cultural contexts, but was not inclusive, for everyone will not go through

each of the experiences, and for those who do, they will experience them in no particular order. The social constructionist model also addressed the importance of historical, social and cultural context, but neglected biological factors. Cramer and Gibson (1999) proposed that the best model of identity development was the interactional model, as it integrated the biological, cognitive, socio-political and historical contexts of LGBT experience.

Embedded in this interactional model (Eliason, 1996) are four cycles of development. The term 'cycle' replaces 'stage', implying a more fluid and less stratified structure. 'Pre-identity' is the initial cycle, a time of growing self-awareness. 'Emerging identity' is the second cycle, where the feeling of 'difference' transforms into a more concrete understanding of sexual orientation. The third cycle is 'experiences and recognition of oppression,' the exploration of sexual behaviors and the struggle with societal and internal homophobia. The final cycle, 're-evaluation/evolution of identity,' integrates sexual identity into the general identity formation of a healthy adolescent or young adult (Cramer & Gibson, 1999). This model is a useful reference for my research, as it reflects the complexity of the participants and the various factors impacting their experiences.

### **Lesbian and Bisexual Identity Development**

Thus far, all of the models in this section generalize across the spectrum of non-heterosexuals. The studies were broad in their application, and did not focus specifically on lesbians or bisexuals. Limited research exists in this area, which is one reason why I chose to focus on them in my own research. Cramer and Gibson (1999) cited a paper that Cramer presented on lesbian identity development at a conference in 1996. She designed a Lesbian Identities Paradigm, adaptable to gays, bisexuals and transgenders, but which centered on the experiences of lesbians.



Cramer's paradigm model recognizes that events do not occur in a linear manner, and considers the biological, social, political and cultural contexts in which identity matures. This model is a matrix, which consists of 'horizontal stressors' and 'vertical stressors.' The 'horizontal stressors' include internal experiences such as life cycle transitions, passing and disclosure, which form the columns across the top. The 'vertical stressors' create the rows along the left side of the table, and include external factors such as family rejection/acceptance, community rejection/acceptance and homophobia. The intersection of these stressors indicates where the female is located in her identity development. The paradigm model is similar to Eliason's (1996) interactional model, because it acknowledges the interplay of multiple influences in an individual's life.

Another model that centers on lesbian development was designed by Whitman, Cormier and Boyd (2000). They utilized Cass' (1979) six stages of homosexual development in their study of lesbian identity management. They contended that the same strategies of identity management were employed in each stage of development, yet *how* they were employed varied depending on the level. The strategies included both passive and active ways that the women decided to conceal or disclose their sexual orientation. General patterns of behavior emerged from the study. Stigma evasion strategies were used most often in earlier stages of development, when the women possessed the greatest discomfort with revealing their sexual orientation. Disclosure, or 'coming out,' was viewed as a function of identity development and occurred more often in the later stages. The women kept information about their lesbianism in their control as much as possible as a way to preserve, enhance and maintain self-esteem (Whitman, Cormier & Boyd, 2000). Even women in stage six consciously chose to conceal their identity occasionally, especially when confronted with issues of safety. This

model of development closely reflected my personal experience, thus it informed my understanding of the women's 'coming out' experiences more than any other development model.

Another study that guided my research was conducted by Prezbindowski and Prezbindowski (2001), who also applied Cass' (1979) model to the development of lesbian and bisexual females. They did not construct a model per se, but they did note particular patterns and values common to many of these adolescents. Lesbian and bisexual females search for identity relative to sexual orientation. They try to establish their identities, form and maintain friendships and find a place for intimacy in their lives. These goals are not much different from other adolescent females, yet the lesbian and bisexual females face the greater challenge of maintaining self-esteem while they negotiate with the difference in their sexual orientation. In the early stages, they experience denial, guilt, and shame. There is often a need to act out. When these young women make the decision to disclose, or 'come out,' they often lose friends and significant portions of their support systems. Those who successfully overcome the 'crisis' reach self-acceptance and sexual comfort, which then leads to the integration of sexual identity with overall identity (Prezbindowski, & Prezbindowski, 2001).

The paucity of research on non-heterosexual females is not unique to models of lesbian development. Collins (2000) delved into a collection of work on non-heterosexuals and determined that little was known about bisexuals in isolation from gays and lesbians<sup>12</sup>. She suggested that perhaps bisexuals receive minimal attention, because so many people viewed bisexuality as a place of transition or denial, and expected bisexuals to 'choose' between homosexuality and heterosexuality. Collins (2000) uncovered an unpublished 1997

dissertation by Bradford that contained a four-stage model of bisexual development. In stage one, the bisexual questions reality, doubting what is it he or she feels. In stage two, s/he search for the meaning behind the internal thoughts and/or feelings and invents an identity. Stage three is the maintenance of the private identity, where he or she is not yet ready to disclose to others. In stage four, the bisexual individual comfortably integrates her/his private and public identities, and discloses to others.

Collins (2000) conducted a study paralleling biracial and bisexual identity development. Numerous similarities emerged between these two entities, which Collins then translated into four phases of identity development. Like the term 'cycle,' the use of the word 'phase' implies a dynamic construction. As in many of the other models, phase one is a time of questioning and confusion. Phase two is a period of refusal and suppression. Phase three is the infusion and exploration of the feelings and all that is connected to them, and phase four is the resolution, acceptance, and defining of the self. In healthy bisexual development, self-definition is the key, for bisexuality is a personal construction that evolves over time with an individual's personal experiences (Collins, 2000). Both Bradford's (1997) and Collin's (2000) studies uncovered aspects of identity development unique to bisexuals, which further deepened my understanding of the processes utilized by the participants as they constructed their sexual identities.

### **The Activism of Queer Theory**

At the intersection of sexual identity and school environments, several strong themes emerge from the literature (Bowlby, 1980; D'Augelli, Pilkington & Hershberger, 2002; Erkut, Marx & Fields, 2001; Evans, 2000; Flowers & Buston, 2001; Kosciw, 2004; Lugg, 2003; Quinlivan, & Town, 1999) pertaining to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender

(LGBT) youth. These themes include: 1) the general concern of the students' safety at school and in the community, 2) the effects of 'being different' on their psychological, sociological and emotional well-being, 3) the effects of isolation and rejection on their academic performance and overall attitude toward school, and 4) the effects of self-advocacy and school community advocacy in counteracting all of the negatives experiences. In this section, I contextualize these themes in queer theory as it pertains to educational policies and curriculum.

According to Steinberg (2000), queer theory challenges aspects of society that silence non-heterosexuals. She contends, "There can never be enough words written, explained, or articulated when one's life and style of life are questioned or silenced by violence and ignorance" (Steinberg, 2000, p. vii). Steinberg (2000) argues that the marginalization of non-heterosexual orientations is created by the patriarchy's normalization of heterosexuality. U.S. society is entrenched in this binary structure and the margins it creates; it is difficult to imagine that it can be eradicated. However, Butler's (1990) and Sedgwick's (1990; 1993) discourses on sexuality have rallied forces against the 'violence and ignorance,' forging a new frontier of activism for non-heterosexuals and setting the stage for the discipline of queer theory (Morris, 2000). 'Queer' can be used as a noun that refers to gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgenders, intersexed<sup>13</sup>, transsexuals<sup>14</sup>, and persons questioning their sexual identity. 'Queer' is also a name chosen by many who wish to alter society's binary structures and no longer relate to the assimilationist<sup>15</sup> practices of many lesbian and gay organizations (Pinar, 1998). However, it is not limited to these descriptions. 'Queer' is a multidimensional word that has a variety of meanings for different people (Lugg, 2003). It can be used as a noun, an adjective, and a verb. According to Talburt (2000), the word 'queer' means

‘across.’ It is believed that the term is derived from the word ‘Quer,’ which is German for ‘transverse,’ and ‘torquere,’ which is Latin for ‘to twist’ (Talburt, 2000). It is movement across the transverse<sup>16</sup> that twists our understanding of the familiar.

The word ‘queer’ is the key component of this theoretical framework, because it implies movement and change, while it questions policies and accepted norms of behavior (Talburt, 2000). ‘Queer’ is action in motion that is continuous, recurring and eddying. It is spiraling and ever-evolving, drawing from past events and redefining itself in contemporary contexts. ‘Queer’ is a ‘troublant,’ a stirring that obstructs the current and disrupts the flow. It is a change agent that turns ‘being’ into ‘performing’ and ‘enacting’ (Talburt, 2000). The term ‘queer’ subverts the ‘neat and tidy’ arrangements of dichotomous sex and gender differences (Luhmann, 1998; Morris, 2000), and refuses stable identities. It is used to undermine rigid categories of identity and grapple with the ambiguity of what it means to be a person (Morris, 2000).

Steinberg (2000) proposes that ‘queer’ is a part of one’s identity, ideology and politics. It is a part of all of people, not just those who live outside the boundaries of heterosexuality. Morris (1998) maintains that queer is strangeness and a radical attitude that interrupts and transcends the binary. Pinar (1998) contends that non-heterosexuals view the world differently than those who meld into the dominant culture. Queer is a deconstruction of dominance and a process of risking oneself, because it challenges people to defy the reproduction of sameness and develop their individual potentials. For Pinar, ‘queer thinking’ allows our voices to be heard so that those who still suffer victimization because of their sexual orientation can be represented, supported and liberated. Or, as Talburt (2000)

explains, to 'queer' a subject is to free it from its patriarchal-defined boundaries and create for it a 'space of the possible.'

Since the term 'queer' refers to action or movement that disrupts or challenges accepted beliefs or practices, 'queer theory' implies activism that attempts to question and alter societal practices that reinforce inequities and discrimination (Morris, 2000). Queer theory has its roots in the AIDS crisis of the 1980s as a resistance to the violent and discursive practices against the marginalized sexualities. Queer theory challenged government agencies that put forth little effort into researching treatments and cures for the virus (Morris, 2000). Queer theory later moved beyond this crusade and became the foundation of an activism that continues to dispute the status quo of sexual identity and disrupt mainstream American culture.

Although queer theory's origin may be 'in the closet,' Elder (1999) claims that there are many types of closets, many forms of containment. It is queer theory's mission to permeate all closets and question the erected walls that define, restrict and contain possibility. Morris (2000) declares that to linger in the closet is to remain a victim. The closet is a finite space that can confine an individual and restrict the exploration of the breadth of one's potential. To penetrate or eradicate the boundaries that limit the expression of sexual identity provides an individual with opportunity and choice. Queer theory must also enter and investigate the 'heterosexual closet,' for they, too, are constrained by the dominant culture's imposition of limitations (Davis & Sumara, 2000).

Queer theory challenges the heterosexist notions of 'normalcy,' where heterosexual is normal and homosexual is defiance (Gibson, 1999; Luhmann, 1998; Sumara, 2001). Heterosexism, the discrimination against those who are non-heterosexual, is based on

heteronormativity, the assumption that everyone is heterosexual. Queer theory is a critical analysis of heterosexism and heteronormativity, and the ideals and structures that privilege heterosexuals over others. Queer theory helps to explain how the category 'heterosexual' exists in relation to other categories, while alleging that any named category cannot adequately represent the complexity of human experience (Sumara, 2001).

Queer theory is utilized by Tierney and Dilley (1998), Sumara (2001) and Breen (1998) to question the influence of male-dominated cultural narratives, and how they limit who people are, what they think and what they envision to be possible. Talburt (2000) applies queer theory to epistemology, questioning what people know and how they know it. Queer theory also investigates 'what' information exists that may be unavailable to the public and 'why' it would be unavailable, and 'who' makes that decision. Queer theory alters perspectives and interrogates practices, policies and beliefs in order to catalyze change that promotes equity.

Queer theory is recognized by Tierney and Dilley (1998) as the discourse of the outcast. It interrogates commonsense thinking of development, education and identity. It challenges the "Western arrogance" (p. 111) that believes Western systems of knowledge are the most accurate and best representations of the world. Queer theory breaks apart the dominant voice, shattering it into multiple tones and harmonies. It questions linear thinking and monocultural social assumptions (Leck, 2000). Queer theory resists the canonical conversations grounded in heteronormativity (King, 1999).

Queer theory helps develop empathy and understanding for those who have been victimized. It attempts to overturn normalization practices and explode constricting definitions. Its intention is to break the silence of oppression and dismantle the fear and hatred of homophobia. Queer theory centers its focus on opposing the heteronormative

policing of sex and gender roles, and tearing down the sex equals gender paradigm (Morris 2000). It moves beyond the destruction of the paradigm to reconstruct fluid spaces that welcome difference and the multiplicity of sexual identities (Elder, 1999; Gibson, 1999; Miller, 1998). Queer theory locates opportunities for change and transformation (Breen, 1998; Morris, 1998; King, 1999). From the ashes of marginalization rises the queer phoenix, celebrating the beauty of the self.

### **Queer Theory and School Curriculum**

Queer theory can illuminate possibilities for change in any aspect of society. Contextualizing queer theory within the modern school structure creates 'queer pedagogy,' a reconstruction of education that has the potential to build welcoming school communities. Luhman (1998) identified queer pedagogy as a desire for knowledge that disrupts the heteronormative construct of schools. It is a reconceptualization of curriculum, an atypical theory that strategically produces difference out of what is familiar or same (Miller, 1998). Queer pedagogy explores topics in the curriculum from alternative perspectives that differ from more commonly practiced approaches. Queer pedagogy constructs non-traditional academic exercises to examine identity, gender, and issues of power and privilege (Tierney & Dilley, 1998). It questions how knowledge is produced, and what that knowledge does to and for the students. Queer pedagogy engages students in conversations where they are encouraged to debate the facts, opinions, and positions embedded in the curricula. There is room for students to problematize the process of learning, creating projects and experiments that expose possibilities residing beyond the realm of the 'right' answer (Britzman, 2000; Leck, 2000; Pinar, 2000). Through queer pedagogy, thinking as boundaried space becomes more permeable, thus more willing to receive learning from a different perspective (Elder,



1999). Therefore, queer theory has the ability to penetrate the multitude of boundaries that impede students' equal access to educational success (Leck, 2000). Therefore, when boundaries are permeated, more students, regardless of sexual orientation, gain access to academic success.

According to Sumara (2001), queer pedagogy models openness and acceptance, teaching children to respect and appreciate differences as well as similarities between each other. It modifies the manner in which language is used to describe and interrupt our experiences. Queer pedagogy demonstrates how diversity and difference can enhance our lives. Education within the queer pedagogy matrix requires that schools provide students with accurate information about the fluidity and complexity of human sexuality, including the ideas of choice, possibility and the freedom to explore (Quinlivan, & Town 1999; Uribe, 1994). Within this matrix, teachers encourage students to be self-reflexive in order to synthesize new information with prior knowledge and re-invent themselves. Self-work catalyzes creativity, and, according to Morris (2000), creativity makes life worth living. Students experience greater academic success when they have opportunities to delve into issues pertinent to their lives (Leck, 2000).

In order to incorporate more student-related topics into the curriculum and embed queer pedagogy into the school environment, it must be supported from the top down. Superintendents, administrators, teachers and parents need to commit to developing a community that promotes and celebrates diversity. According to LeCompte (2000), this kind of community building requires schools to provide educational outreach on identity development and the multiplicities of sexuality to all members of its community. Along with educational workshops, research (Prezbindowski & Prezbindowski, 2001; Schneider &

Owens, 2000) shows that most effective way to address school silence is for schools to adopt a zero tolerance policy for any form of verbal or physical aggression, complete with discussions about why aggression is not acceptable and the consequences for committing such inappropriate acts.

While teaching tolerance is important, it is inadequate to the task of creating welcoming schools, as ‘tolerance’<sup>17</sup> implies having to endure their presence even though it is distasteful. This attitude still relegates individuals in that group to substandard or second-class status (Steinberg, 2000). Promoting tolerance may single out non-heterosexuals as a ‘population in need,’ which may actually ‘ghettoize’ them, reinscribing stereotypes and reinforcing discrimination (de Castell & Bryson, 1998). As long as non-heterosexuals are tolerated, they can never be equal (Talbert, 2000).

According to the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (Kosciw, 2004), one fundamental step toward equality and acceptance is the establishment of legal policies. In her research, Lugg (2000) found thirteen states that offer legal protection specifically based on sexual orientation. There are also some individual school districts scattered throughout the country that offer policies of protection for their students and staff (Kosciw, 2004). However, at this time, there are no federal laws that recognize ‘sexual orientation ‘as a protected class’<sup>18</sup>.

Although change may begin with legal policies, it must also be integrated into a school’s daily routine in order for long-term transformation to occur. Several educational researchers acknowledge queer pedagogy as the most effective framework for this transformation. Quinlivan and Town (1999) credited queer pedagogy as the venue for dissolving boundaries, dismantling heteronormativity and deconstructing schooling experiences. They claimed that

queer pedagogy erases binary discourses that minoritize LGBT youth. It is an activist approach to creating change, for it promotes agency and resistance for students who need to sustain themselves in a hostile environment.

In her classroom, Doll (1998) helps to liberate those who are marginalized by ‘queering her gaze’ on the academic world. She proclaims that in order to teach the non-normal, a person must be the non-normal. Doll informs students that what is ‘normal’ is often accepted as what is ‘natural,’ thus she needs to “work against nature” (p. 287), turn language upside down, and demonstrate how ‘others’ view the world differently. She employs four basic strategies to critique, twist and re-invent knowledge in her classes. She uses shock to confront that which is presented as commonsense information, ideas that are so familiar that they are accepted as given, as truth. She wraps literary writings in jokes and games, shrouding them in mystery so that one is forced to approach from an alternate angle. She encourages students to peer through a different lens and counter the expected position. Pinar (2000) supported this pedagogical style, for he professed it is the duty – and pleasure - of queer teachers and scholars “to think ‘queerly,’ blessed by those who have gone before, aroused by those around us now, and in fidelity to those who are yet to come” (p. xvi). Educators who uncover multiple aspects of their academic content create a safer, more welcoming classroom that invites students to expand the way in which they make meaning of the world within and around them. This broader understanding encourages movement toward the acceptance of self and others.

A series of recommendations for weaving queer pedagogy and LGBT issues into the fabric of the schools were developed by Prezbindowski and Prezbindowski (2001). This study facilitated my ability to more clearly visualize how queer pedagogy could alter a

classroom. These recommendations included infusing the curriculum with LGBT materials where it was appropriate. For example, when talking about families, the textbooks could include those that were headed by gay or lesbian parents; when discussing World War II and Nazi concentration camps, curricula could include the persecution of homosexuals and the origin of the pink triangle; and whenever possible, educators could highlight the contributions of LGBT persons to science, history, and culture. Teachers could invite positive adult LGBT role models to speak to classes, and administrators could foster an atmosphere that welcomed same-sex couples to dances and other school functions. Affirmative representations of LGBT subculture might diminish, or even eliminate, heterosexist behaviors in the classroom. This inclusion might also enhance the self-esteem of LGBT youth and the children of LGBT parents (Breen, 1998; Kosciw, 2004; Luhmann, 1998).

In addition to curriculum and instruction modifications, Prezbindowski & Prezbindowski (2001) suggested ways that educators could individually express support for non-heterosexual students. They could communicate that their classroom is a safe space by hanging a rainbow or a pink triangle sticker in their rooms or on their doors. They could respectfully listen to students in crisis, and inform them of school or community resources that may provide assistance. Teachers can institute rules that disallow insults and hateful speech in their classrooms. They could challenge homophobic behavior every time it occurs, and use the occasion as an opportunity to educate.

Students who feel marginalized or alienated seek agency and advocacy wherever they can find it (Quinlivan & Town, 1999). Educators can help facilitate this process by sponsoring or endorsing school-based organizations that create safe spaces for LGBT youth and their

heterosexual friends, such as Gay Straight Alliances and Project 10<sup>19</sup> (Kosciw, 2004; Quinlivan, & Town 1999; Sims, 2003; Uribe, 1994; Uribe & Harbeck, 1992). In these safe places, students can critique negative representations, and forge positive queer identities through the interwoven strands of politics, visibility and education (Rodriguez, 1998; Talburt, 2000).

Queer pedagogy is designed to disrupt, deconstruct, and reinvent school policies and practices that denigrate non-heterosexual individuals (Quinlivan & Town, 1999). While the initial decentering of curricula and instructional procedures benefits non-heterosexuals, the underlying philosophy of queer pedagogy extends beyond this cause. If altering pedagogy expands the boundaries of sexuality, it will expand the boundaries of all other categories. Broadening the definitions of sexuality adds more lenses through which people can observe and interpret the world, thereby loosening the boundaries around other constrained categories. Greater permeability through the boundaries will increase accessibility to educational resources and success. Inflated circles of acceptance will envelop a larger number of students with diverse interests and ways of being in the world. Building welcoming communities for non-heterosexual students establishes welcoming environments for all students (Quinlivan & Town, 1999; Schneider & Owens, 2000).

### **An Awareness of ‘Difference’**

Exploring the issues of safety for LGBT youth has grown increasingly important in the last ten to fifteen years (Schneider & Owens, 2000; Tharinger & Wells, 2000), as more adolescents are coming out and self-identifying as a ‘sexual minority’ at an earlier age. The term sexual minority is used in this case to denote all students who feel that their sexuality is ‘different’ or non-heterosexual, although they may not necessarily identify as lesbian, gay,

bisexual, transgender or queer. They may even choose to use the ‘Q’ in LGBTQ to mean ‘questioning.’ Some students do not yet have the words to express their sexual identity, yet may still be aware that they feel ‘different’ (Evans, 2000; LeCompte, 2000; Russell, Seif & Truong, 2001). As more adolescents self-identify as a sexual minority, they represent a larger percentage of our middle schools and high schools (D’Augelli, Pilkington & Hershberger, 2002; Morrison & L’Heareux, 2001; Schneider & Owens, 2000; Uribe, 1994).

Non-heterosexual students are members of a minority group not protected by national, and in many cases, state and local laws and policies (Kosciw, 2004; Russell, Seif & Truong, 2001; Tharinger & Wells, 2000). LeCompte (2000) profiles a principal in a Midwest high school, who throughout his career, has worked to protect and promote the equality of several minority groups, including African Americans and women. His goal has been to provide a safe place for all of his staff and students, yet he finds protecting the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth to be his greatest challenge yet. Unlike other minority groups, there are no policies to back his decisions, thus he experiences greater resistance from conservative members of the school community.

Some states have put forth policy changes in order to protect LGBT students. In 1999, the state of California enacted legislation that “protects students in California public schools from harassment and discrimination on the basis of actual or perceived orientation” (Keuhl cited in Russell, Seif & Truong, 2001, p. 111). The Massachusetts Governor Commission’s Report, *Making Schools Safe for Lesbian and Gay Youth*, (1993), demonstrates another state effort to influence change through legal protection. The Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network and other gay activist organizations are currently lobbying nationwide for legal

protection in the public schools on the basis of sexual orientation (Kosciw, 2004). Even in states with legislative protection, however, acts of violence against homosexuals continue.

Quinlivan and Town (1999) assert this issue of safety is directly related to public schools being structured as heteronormative and heterosexist institutions. Heterosexism, the discrimination against non-heterosexuals, often results in violence directed at individuals suspected of being gay or lesbian ((D'Augelli, Pilkington & Hershberger, 2002; Herek, 1993; Kosciw, 2004). Heteronormativity and heterosexism also construct and police rigid boundaries for gender roles, therefore marginalizing heterosexuals who do not fit within these boundaries. In many cases, the consequences of normalizing heterosexuality are victimization, harassment and abuse, not just for sexual minority students, but for all who do not follow the constraints of heteronormativity (Evans, 2000; LeCompte, 2000; Quinlivan & Town, 1999; Schneider & Owens, 2000; Tharinger & Wells, 2000; Uribe, 1994).

Victimization, harassment and abuse are well documented in the literature (D'Augelli, Pilkington & Hershberger, 2002; Evans, 2000; Flowers & Buston, 2001; Herek, Cogan & Gillis, 2002; Kosciw, 2004; LeCompte, 2000; Tharinger & Wells, 2000; Uribe, 1994). Since 1995, four major national and several statewide surveys have been conducted specifically examining the effect of sexual orientation on students' school experiences. Russell, Seif, and Truong (2001) implemented the 1995 National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, the first national survey to incorporate questions regarding "same-sex romantic attractions" (p. 112). In their analysis of this survey, Russell et al. (2001) focus more on the role sexual identity plays in relationships with family, peers, and teachers, plus overall attitude toward and performance in school, which are topics that are addressed in later sections of this chapter. This survey provides some insight into the relationship between sexual attraction

and school experiences, however, since students in the survey were questioned about their attractions and not asked to identify their sexuality, the insights may or may not reflect the experiences of students who identify as lesbian, bisexual, or non-heterosexual.

The 1999, 2001, and 2003 National Student Climate Surveys (NSCS), however, speak directly to the large percentage of students who experience some form of harassment or abuse due to their sexual orientation. The Gay Lesbian Straight Network (Kosciw, 2004) has distributed three surveys bi-annually since 1999. The surveys are distributed throughout the United States through LGBT school and community support groups and LGBT youth centers. They are also available on LGBT Internet websites. Although the population surveyed is limited to students who have access to LGBT support groups or the Internet, in 2003, 887 youth from 48 states and the District of Columbia returned completed surveys. Given the large number of students and the broad geography, the survey is a fair indication of what is occurring in the nation's schools.

The survey results in 1999, 2001, and 2003 confirm the widespread existence of victimization, and although the general situation has improved over time, i.e. more support groups in the schools, more 'safe zones'<sup>20</sup> for students, the latest results from the 2003 NSCS indicate that four out of five, or 80%, of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students experience some form of verbal, sexual or physical harassment at school (Kosciw, 2004). This percentage is just slightly lower than the 2001 NSCS, which found more than eight out of ten LGBT students report verbal, sexual or physical harassment at school (Kosciw, 2004). This means that more than three-fourths of the non-heterosexuals surveyed have encountered some form of harassment because they appeared or behaved in a manner not consistent with the accepted norms. In a 2002 study on adolescents, D'Augelli,



Pilkington and Hershberger concluded that the more open students are about their sexuality or the more atypical they appear to be, the more abuse they experience (see also Flowers & Buston, 2001).

The 2001 NSCS found that over 90% of the students report hearing homophobic remarks such as ‘faggot’, ‘butch’ or ‘dyke’<sup>21</sup> and 75% of these students report that faculty or staff rarely or never intervened when such remarks were made. In the 2003 NSCS, this number increased to 82%, which may suggest less acceptance of difference over time. Additionally, the 2001 National Student Climate Survey reports that 65% of LGBT students have experienced sexual harassment with 20% being victims of physical assault. In fact, 20% of the students who are harassed claim that homophobic remarks are from teachers, administrators, and other adults in the school community. Finally, areas where there are greatest dangers for LGBT students tend to be those places where most teachers are not supervising: locker rooms, cafeterias, hallways, and out on the campus grounds (Kosciw, 2004).

In a study of 450 gay, lesbian and bisexual adults (Herek, Cogan & Gillis, 2002), approximately one-third of those sampled experienced some form of hate crime in their lifetime simply because of their sexual orientation. These crimes most often occurred in public places, with usually more than one person as the aggressor. The majority of the perpetrators were males, and 66% of all perpetrators were between the ages of 13 and 25. Since the study surveyed adults across a broad age range, these results may be historically contextualized, and may not reflect the experiences of current non-heterosexual high school students.

The 2001 and 2003 National School Climate Surveys provide evidence that some schools have evolved into safer places for LGBT students. Despite the changes that have occurred, it is apparent that heteronormativity and heterosexism have far reaching effects that need to be challenged. Flowers & Buston (2001) contend this challenge begins in the home, for it is this space that affects all other spaces that touch a person's life. LeCompte's (2000) principal recognized that "the fight to preserve the safety and protect the rights of GLBTQ people in American schools is just beginning" (p. 428). If the survey results are an accurate indication of the animosity non-heterosexual students experience in their high schools, then educators who envision welcoming schools for students have a monumental task ahead.

### **Devaluation Affects Social and Psychological Functioning**

Regardless of background or circumstances, adolescence is a confusing and challenging time for most people. It is a time when one explores the broad expanses of sexual identity, a common journey taken by virtually all middle school and high school students. Tharinger and Wells (2000) propose that "grappling with the developmental process of being lesbian or gay in adolescence is a significant and added stressor" and qualifies as "one of the most significant developmental turning points in adolescence" (p. 159).

Just how early do students experience the developmental process of being lesbian or gay? Schneider and Owens (2000) report that the mean age of same-sex romantic attractions occurs between ten and thirteen years old, with a range of ten to eighteen years. Therefore, students are self-identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ) as early as middle school, although greater numbers "come out," or become consciously aware of their sexuality, in high school. There are also a number of students who do not necessarily

identify as LGBTQ, but often spend years just feeling “different” (Flowers & Buston, 2001, p. 55).

This ‘difference,’ categorized or not, burdens students with a “unique set of stressful and potentially harmful experiences unlike any faced by heterosexuals” (Owens, 1998, p. 353). The additional stresses stem from family and peer rejection, social isolation, religious condemnation, and school and community discrimination and/or brutality (Flowers & Buston, 2001; Schneider & Owens, 2000; Tharinger & Wells, 2000; Uribe, 1994). These external conflicts are further exacerbated by an individual’s internalized homophobia, that fear of going against the heterosexual norms of American society. The devaluation of the sexual aspect of a person’s identity can have both short-term and long-term negative effects on his or her social and psychological functioning (D’Augelli, Pilkington & Hershberger, 2002; Flowers & Buston, 2001; Schneider & Owens, 2000; Thurlow, 2001).

The psychological, social, and emotional effects of being disregarded and unsupported for identifying as non-heterosexual are immense. D’Augelli and Hershberger (1993) ascertain gay and lesbian youth are more likely to display symptoms of depression, and two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than are their heterosexual peers. Morrison and L’Heureux (2001) assert the main reason these individuals kill themselves is due to their lack of integration into the dominant culture. While heterosexual and non-heterosexual adolescents share general suicide risk factors, non-heterosexuals experience additional factors that place them at an even higher risk, including coming out at an early age, not disclosing their sexual orientation, and reports of current family abuse.

In studies conducted on teenage suicide, Gibson (1989), D’Augelli, Pilkington and Hershberger (1993; 2002) estimated that up to thirty percent of all teenage suicides are linked

to conflicts over homosexuality. The National School Climate Survey (Kosciw, 2004) supports these findings. According to the 2001 NSCS, forty percent of gay and bisexual students have attempted suicide as compared to about ten percent of their heterosexual peers (D'Augelli, Pilkington & Hershberger, 2002; Russell, Seif & Truong, 2001; Savin-Williams, 1994; Tharinger & Wells, 2000; Uribe, 1994).

Since “adolescents are more at risk for developmental failure than their heterosexual counterparts” (p. 158), Tharinger and Wells (2000) advocate for more understanding and support of LGBTQ students. They also contend when family members, peers, and institutions negate an individual’s sense of psychological and physical safety and security, he or she is more prone to developmental difficulties. D’Augelli, Pilkington and Hershberger (2002) observe that the more open students are about their sexual orientation, the more verbal abuse they receive, and the more symptoms of trauma they display. Additionally, the study reveals that symptoms of trauma, such as depression, anxiety, sexual abuse and sleep disturbances, are significantly higher in lesbian and bisexual females than in their male counterparts. However, both male and female non-heterosexual students may be at a higher risk for alcohol and substance abuse and may engage more readily in dangerous sexual behaviors. Although this study utilizes a small sample of students, it is consistent with findings from other similar research (Quinlivan & Town, 1999; Rotheram-Borus, Rosario, Meyer-Bahlburg, Koopman, Dopkins & Davies, 1994 ; Savin-Williams, 1994; Tharinger & Wells, 2000).

In order to illustrate the impact of rejection of family and friends on the non-heterosexual student, Tharinger and Wells (2000) utilizes Bowlby’s (1969; 1980) theory of attachment. This theory illustrates the importance of the emotional bonds between caregivers and their

children. Strong connections with family and school are essential for a student's positive growth and development. Bowlby (1969; 1980) emphasized that when students' affectional bonds with significant others are unwillingly weakened or broken, many forms of personal disturbance and emotional distress occur, such as depression, anxiety, anger, and emotional detachment.

For LGBTQ youth, a myriad of connections are disrupted when they disclose their sexuality, whether to themselves or others. Brooks (1992) asserts these youth are surrounded by a world that negates their existence, rewards their invisibility and punishes healthy disclosure. In one particular study, Hershberger & D'Augelli (1995) determined that more than two-thirds of the students interviewed found 'coming out,' or disclosure of their sexuality, 'somewhat' or 'extremely' disturbing. Hershberger, D'Augelli and Pilkington (1997) also observed a relationship between increased rates of suicide and the loss of friends after disclosure of sexuality. One of their later studies (2002) suggested that rejection and loss is traumatic and takes its toll on even the most well adjusted LGBTQ youth.

In order to minimize these disruptions and rejections, many students, who are aware of their sexuality difference, choose to 'pass,' playing the role of the heterosexual within clear gender boundaries. They end up leading 'double-lives,' and then must deal with the social pressure to deny their true thoughts and feelings (Flowers & Buston, 2001; Russell, Seif & Truong, 2001 Tharinger & Wells, 2000). Pope (1995) found that, despite the added pressure, many students consciously wear the mask of heterosexuality, because they prefer to comply with societal norms rather than face the fear of being rejected and ostracized by the people they love and depend upon the most. As Uribe (1994) notes, "[T]he emotional costs of leading a double life or carrying a 'terrible secret' that no one must ever know are

incalculable” (p. 169). Without appropriate healthcare and support from family, school and community, LGBTQ youth are in danger of serious psychological, social and physical difficulties (Ramfedi, 1987a).

### **Impeding the Learning Process**

Primary and secondary schools have a significant impact on the development of our nation’s children. It is the obligation of our schools to provide all students “with a safe environment where children can learn to become fully realized participants in our democratic society” (Schneider & Owens 2000, p. 363). The ideological tenets of educational institutions are heterosexist and homophobic, however, and this becomes problematic for any students who do not fit into strictly defined gender roles, especially students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. The conflict that ensues not only disturbs their psychological and emotional development, it impedes the learning process (Schneider & Owens, 2000; Tharinger & Wells, 2000; Uribe, 1994).

Students who face openly hostile or explicitly negative classrooms find it difficult to focus on academics. In an interview with Tharinger and Wells (2000), one lesbian student states that she cannot concentrate in class, because “When I did ‘come out,’ it was even more stressful ‘cause I didn’t know that was going to happen to me . . . I got gum in my hair and cokes thrown at me” (p. 161). They interviewed a male student who echoed the young woman’s experience, “I was spit on, pushed and ridiculed. My school life was hell. I decided to leave school because I couldn’t handle it” (p. 162). This student has chosen to leave school rather than continue to expose himself to cruel behavior.

Many LGBT kids leave school as a result of hostile experiences in their schools. If they are not leaving school all together, they often skip classes when they do not feel safe. In the

2001 National School Climate Survey (Kosciw & Cullen, 2003), approximately 33% of the LGBT students surveyed skipped one or more classes a month because they felt unsafe. This contrasts with other national data that reports general skipping of classes at a rate between 5% and 6% (Kosciw, 2004). The 2003 NCSC reports that in regions of the country where there are no policies protecting them, LGBT students are 40% more likely to skip school simply because they are too afraid to go (Kosciw, 2004).

The 2003 NSCS indicates a significant relationship exists between in-school victimization, grade point averages (GPAs) and LGBT student aspirations to attend college. Students who experience significant verbal harassment are twice as likely to report they do not intend to go to college, and their GPAs are significantly lower than their peers (a 2.9 GPA as compared to the average of a 3.3 GPA). The study also suggests that many LGBT students have a more negative attitude toward school and a greater disconnect with their teachers, thus these students often do not see themselves as academically successful.

Learning and academic achievement are affected by “motivated factors intrinsic to the individual, such as self-confidence” (Evans, 2000, p. 82). Students who are dealing with family, peer and community rejection often lack the self-confidence needed to succeed. The potential to learn is also adversely affected when students struggle to gain parental acceptance (Evans, 2000). Additionally, the students question who they are, why they are the way they are and to whom they should or should not ‘come out’ (Schneider & Owens, 2000). As Evans (2000) contends, “whether or not to come out supersedes paying attention to course content and interferes with learning” (p. 84). Indeed, students focus their energy on understanding their sexuality, leaving less room for academic achievement.

Much of the research cited in this dissertation explains the effects of various factors on non-heterosexual youth's learning and development. The Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (Kosciw & Cullen, 2003), Russell, Seif, and Truong (2001), and Tharinger and Wells (2000) recognize the need for more research into the specific experiences of bisexual and transgender students. The scant research that has been done sheds a dim light onto the worlds of bisexual females. According to Russell et al. (2001), female adolescents who are romantically attracted to other females experience more depression, less school success, and weaker relationships with their teachers. This study also suggested that bisexual females experience even less academic success and more depression and alienation than their lesbian counterparts.

The pilot study for this dissertation, conducted in 2001, both expands and differs from much of the previous research, particularly in the area of school success. The bisexual high school females in the study developed close relationships with their teachers and excelled academically. At that time, however, these females attended a private Quaker school that functioned outside the constraints of public school policy. As a Quaker institution, the school adheres to the religious beliefs that acknowledge the acceptance of diversity and the worthiness of all human beings. These beliefs provide the foundation of a safe environment for all of its students, as it protects youth from harassment. This safe and welcoming atmosphere reinforces results from the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network 2001 National Student Climate Survey, which notes that LGBT students attending independent schools feel safer and have a more positive attitude toward school than their peers in public school. These two females also contended that it was easier to be a bisexual than a lesbian,



which contradicts the Add Health Study's findings, but is consistent with the data from the National School Climate Survey.

In some ways, the pilot study supports Russell, Seif & Truong's (2001) interpretation of the Add Health Study. Prior to enrolling in the private school, one of the females spent two years in a public high school. While in the public school, she experienced less connection with her female peers, displayed more apathy about achieving academically, and developed little rapport with her teachers. She started to attend Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) meetings, but stopped after being called a 'dyke' by a group of male classmates. Her feelings of comfort and safety increased dramatically once she began attending the independent school. Perhaps positive school support, as witnessed at this private school, can negate the adverse effects of intolerance, rejection, and isolation.

### **Affects of Advocacy and Agency**

Western society's political constructs of sexuality have pathologized same-sex attraction for centuries. It is important to move beyond the negativity and the victimization, and acknowledge what students do to succeed and how they get/find the support they need despite the odds. There are many forms of both agency and resistance LGBTQ youth employ to maintain and sustain themselves within what is largely a hostile learning environment, and there are ways that the school community can strengthen the agency, or support, that is available to the students (Morrison & L'Heureux, 2001; Quinlivan & Town, 1999; Savin-Williams, 2001).

Educators and school administrators should foster a supportive learning environment that could potentially benefit all children regardless of their sexual orientation or grade level (Schneider & Owens, 2000). Supportive school environments protect the well-being and

rights of all students so that fears and tensions are minimized, and learning can occur. In an atmosphere such as this, students accept themselves and each other, and receive support from significant adults in their lives as they spiral through the developmental processes of adolescence. Consequently, more gays and lesbians will experience higher self-esteem and will then be more likely to have a greater capacity for love both in sexual relationships and in friendships (Schneider & Owens, 2000).

The principal in LeCompte's (2000) study attempts to create such an environment in his Midwestern high school. He follows the same basic steps for his LGBTQ students as he has done for other discriminated minority groups. He brings in experts, notifies parents and community members, and organizes small group discussions to deal with topics related to non-heterosexuality. He also brings in representatives from the Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network, and the Council for Unity. He emphasizes the importance of ensuring the safety and protecting the rights of all of his students and staff. He has no policies to support him, but he stands firm in the face of community resistance. He and a group of his teachers place 'Safe Zone' stickers on their doors (a triangle with the words 'Safe Zone' printed below), signifying that this is a place where students can turn for support (Evans, 2000; LeCompte, 2000). In addition to consistently enforcing a standard of behavior that protects students from harassment, the principal provides educational opportunities for students, faculty and community members. He demonstrates support for all of his students and endeavors to maintain a school that welcomes all members of its community.

The Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network also promotes the safe zone stickers, for they have found that students who have the support of teachers and administrators have

higher grade point averages, are more likely to have academic aspirations beyond high school, and demonstrate a more positive attitude toward school. In schools that have supportive faculty and staff, the average grade point average of LGBT students was 3.1 as opposed to their unsupported counterparts, who had a 2.8 GPA (Kosciw, 2004).

Thus, students who experience success have more positive and meaningful relationships with teachers. The findings of the Add Health Study (Russell, Seif & Truong, 2001) underscore the important role teachers and other non-family adults play in the lives of sexual minorities, especially those reporting bisexual attraction. Student performance and attitude toward school is consistently higher among students who feel safe and supported in their school community. In fact, the 2003 National Student Climate Survey (Kosciw, 2004) found that LGBT students who reported having supportive teachers were more likely to continue on to college.

For LGBT youth, meaningful relationships with peers provide a wider support base, creating more opportunities for students to experience success. In schools where there are established Gay Straight Alliances and other similar peer support groups, the number of LGBT students reporting feelings of being unsafe decreased from 68% to 60% (Kosciw, 2004). Students surrounded by support and acceptance have a “safe space” where they can freely explore topics of interest, engage in learning, and participate more fully in classroom activities. In fact, Evans stated, “great potential exists for *all* (original italics) students in such classes” (2000, p. 86).

Griffin, Lee, Waugh and Beyer (2003) acknowledged that “burgeoning research literature documents the hostile school climate LGBT students face” (p. 5), but fewer studies focus on school-based efforts to become safer places for these youth. Therefore, they analyzed the

role of the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) in twenty-two Massachusetts high schools and determined that each GSA fit into one of four basic categories. The ‘counseling and support’ group focused on the individual’s psychological needs, and often existed in schools whose climate was too hostile for open identity. The ‘safe space’ club was more visible, but tended to serve only as a venue for social, and sometimes activist, events. GSAs in more welcoming schools utilized their increasing visibility as a vehicle to educate the school community about LGBT issues. The organization that effected the most long-term school change was the GSA that participated in broader school efforts to educate the community about respecting and embracing diversity. In these schools, the GSA sponsored educational programming in conjunction with other components of the school. The GSA in these cases was only one aspect of systemic change in policy and practice. Each one of these types of GSAs provided agency to LGBT students. However, the more involved and visible the organization was in the school, the more safety and support it provided to all of its faculty, staff and students.

School-based efforts to create safer and more welcoming environments have been examined by the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (Kosciw & Cullen, 2003), Griffin, Lee, Waugh and Beyer (2003), and Doppler (2000). Based on their research findings, they proposed the following recommendations: 1) establish policies that include ‘sexual orientation’ and ‘gender identity’ as protected classes; 2) provide training for teachers and staff so that they can support their LGBT students, 3) incorporate more images of LGBT people in the curriculum; 4) create Gay Straight Alliances and/or other peer support groups. These measures will increase students’ sense of belonging, decrease victimization, and expand the boundaries of sexual, gender and personal identity. When schools promote better educational outcomes for LGBT students, all students benefit (Quinlivan & Town, 1999).

## **The Next Step in Construction**

In this chapter, I have outlined the theoretical framework and the general themes from research literature regarding gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth. In this study, queer theory is the lens through which the students' school experiences will be examined. Safety from violence and abuse are key issues, because when students do not feel safe, it affects them psychologically, socially and academically. Suicide, depression, and anxiety often result from family, school and peer alienation and rejection. However, research shows that support from family, teachers, and the school community can negate all of the adversarial factors LGBT students contend with, so that they can develop into healthy, happy young adults.

The next chapter provides an overview of the methodology. Narrative inquiry is the qualitative method I have chosen to structure my research. I explain what narrative inquiry is, who has used it, and how it can be utilized in research. I continue with a discussion on narrative analysis and its various applications. Woven into this section are the specific steps I took to complete this study.

### **CHAPTER 3: CONSTRUCTION METHODS**

In the spring of 2003, I stood at a crossroads. I was immersed in a qualitative study for a doctoral class at the university. I interviewed a student, transcribed that interview, and analyzed his story using three different types of computer software. Throughout the entire process, I questioned whether or not I was capable of expanding on this procedure in order to create a quality dissertation. I seriously pondered the option of leaving the doctoral program and completing a second master's degree in school administration. I even went so far as to speak with the department head, who then arranged to have his secretary register me for the necessary courses. It certainly would have been an easier road than the one I was walking at the time.

I had already been registered for a doctoral class in curriculum studies when the department head's secretary instructed me to drop that course and take another, 'more appropriate,' course for school administration. Instinctively, I refused to drop the course, stating that I would start the administrative courses in the fall after I attended the Narrative Inquiry class. I decided to complete this particular course after Dr. Shirley Steinberg told me I 'wrote pretty' when she heard me present my pilot study at the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association that April (Eaton, 2003). Taking the inquiry course was the best decision I could have made. It moved me from the crossroads of insecurity and indecision to a new path and a clear vision.

Through the Narrative Inquiry class, I realized the main reason I questioned my ability to earn my doctorate emanated from my inability to visualize my dissertation. I was unable to see how it was going to be organized, how it was going to flow, or how I was going to write such a lengthy document. Even though I had done a pilot case study to inform my topic and

refine my research questions, I had little faith in my ability to write a coherent, interesting and academically acceptable dissertation. Narrative inquiry changed all of that for me.

After three years in graduate school, the qualitative process of narrative inquiry and analysis allowed me to construct a vision of my proposal, research, and final dissertation. Narrative inquiry gave me permission to think, analyze and write in a style that was comfortable for me. I found my niche in the genre of narrative. I have always been a storyteller, and I have always been mesmerized by storytellers. Now, with great excitement, I discovered a way to enjoy my research and the process of writing it that is not only acceptable to my doctoral committee, but also is a natural style of writing for me.

In order to conduct my research on non-heterosexual females and the construction of safe schools, I chose narrative inquiry as my methodology, as it provided me the opportunity to hear the voices of the students and to investigate school environments through their daily interactions with administrators, faculty and peers. I had four basic questions I wanted to answer: 1) How do non-heterosexual females experience high school? 2) Is school a safe and supportive environment? 3) How did coming out affect these students academically and socially within the context of school? 4) How do non-heterosexual females envision a safe school environment, and what role, if any, do they take in creating and maintaining that kind of environment?

The local school system did not permit me to access the students directly within their schools, therefore I met, observed and interviewed students through a community support group, the Gay Straight Alliance Network. I attended this group's October and January meetings, initially to observe and to recruit interview volunteers, but, over time, I evolved into more of a participant. In early November, a network volunteer added me to the group's

email list, which enabled me to send out additional information about my research to everyone on the list. Eight females responded directly to my email, five of them stating that they remembered me speaking at their October meeting. By the time I sent out consent forms and explained the need for parental permission and a preference for face-to-face interviews, I had confirmed interviews with three high school students.

While I was scheduling interviews with these students, I contacted an acquaintance of my daughter, a young woman living in the Midwest, who had expressed interest in participating in my research. Although the young woman was neither currently in high school nor a member of the local community, I reasoned that her narrative could add texture to the local students' experiences and provide a broader perspective on the issues facing non-heterosexuals in U.S. schools.

I added more texture to the students' stories by recruiting two adult females for in-depth interviewing. In my original proposal, I stated that I would interview a teacher and a principal in an effort to embroider a backdrop around the students. Instead of a principal, however, I interviewed one of the adult network volunteers, primarily because of her mentoring relationship with the three students. I asked several of my teacher colleagues to participate in the research, and after three negative responses, I was finally able to secure an interview with a longtime middle school colleague. Although she was not in a high school environment, she and her school community were also challenged with issues of safe schools, and took similar steps as the high schools to resolve problems with harassment and hostility. The two adults, both non-heterosexual themselves, offered a variation in perception based on position and age, which further contextualized the data I collected from the students' interviews.



I had one formal in-depth interview with each of the five women that ranged from seventy to ninety minutes in length. I followed up each interview with a minimum of two emails that requested clarification of interview data and/or included follow-up questions. Two of the students and one of the adults communicated with me in four emails each, either to share intimate information they were uncomfortable disclosing in person or to answer additional questions I posed to them. The young woman I interviewed exclusively by email conveyed her story in four emails, including her answers to my follow-up questions. The data from these formal interviews supplied the foundation materials for my analysis, while supplementary informal interactions aided in the framing and finishing touches of my interpretations and conclusions.

Most of my informal conversations<sup>22</sup> with the three high school students and the adult volunteer occurred during the two network meetings and the November “Speak Out,” which was a youth-organized protest against a local county’s student protection policy. Additionally, in mid-December, I had further interaction with the adult volunteer and a group of youth leaders when I participated in a one-day Youth Leadership Summit sponsored by the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network. These informal exchanges afforded me the opportunity to strengthen my rapport with these women, enriching my understanding of their lives and informing my analysis of their narratives.

In the remainder of this chapter, I expand on the methodology of narrative inquiry and the process of narrative analysis. Interwoven with the explanations is my own story of how I gained access to the Gay Straight Alliance Network and the sequence of events that guided me to my participants and the evolution of our research journey. I present the blueprints of this rainbow construction project in hopes that educators and students across the United

States, and around the world, can design safer, and, consequently, more successful school environments.

### **Narrative: Students' Storied Lives on Storied Landscapes**

Narrative inquiry does not have a clear definition, yet it is often summed up in one word: 'storytelling' (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Gee, 1999; Riessman, 1993). Choosing narrative inquiry as methodology is a very personal decision for me. I can sit with a group of people and tell stories all night long – my story, their story, even a story of events long ago. Oral accounts of events in my past spring to life as I recreate their flow, their sequence, their structure and the social context in which they occurred. I am fascinated by the experiences of others, as well as how they choose to retell the story, what metaphors and descriptive terms they use, and what they may emphasize or exclude from the recounting of the memory. We “lead storied lives on storied landscapes” (Connelly and Clandinin, 2000, p. 8). Storytelling is what informants do with us and what we do with the research (Riessman, 1993). Connelly and Clandinin (2000) chose to show narrative inquiry rather than define it by describing what inquirers do. They stressed the importance of “maintaining wakefulness” (p. xv) as a way to understand “experience as lived and told stories” (p. xv) and to successfully capture the personal and human dimensions that cannot be quantified. Experience is an inquiry, which sends one on an expedition that leads to more experience, which in turn leads to more experience and so on. Each experience becomes its own phenomenon worthy of retelling and worthy of study. Experience itself becomes the object of investigation (Riessman, 1993). Narrative inquiry is a natural choice for the methodology that structures my research on non-heterosexual students.

## **The Community Support Groups**

According to Kevin Jennings (Kosciw, 2004), the executive director of the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network, there is limited research on the welfare and safety of U.S. gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth. The quantitative data that is available suggests this population is at risk of underachieving and dropping out of school because their sexual orientation can place them in unsafe and, in some cases, violent situations. In a Massachusetts Behavior Risk Survey (cited in Kosciw, 2004), it was reported that 16% of their state's LGBT students skipped school once a month because they felt unsafe, whereas the number of students in general who skipped classes once monthly hovered around 5% (Kosciw, 2004). Using narrative inquiry, I journeyed beyond the statistics and listened to the voices behind the numbers. I wanted to know what these students experienced, where they felt safe, and how we as educators could extend those safety zones into schools across the nation. I approached this research from the belief that safe and accepting school environments benefit non-heterosexual students directly, because it gives them added support to succeed in school (Luhmann, 1998; Quinlivan & Town, 1999; Schneider & Owens, 2000). Extending that belief outwards, *all* students benefit in an open, welcoming atmosphere. It then follows that as students experience comfort and academic success, the families and neighborhoods will benefit as well. In other words, the construction of safe and welcoming schools contributes to the establishment of safe and welcoming communities.

Data were collected from my observations and interviews, from late October 2004 to early January 2005. Once I gained access to a community support group, I observed two meetings of the Triangle Gay Straight Alliance Network<sup>23</sup>, and I played the role of participant-observer at both a local "Speak Out"<sup>24</sup> and a LGBT Youth Leadership Summit<sup>25</sup>. I recorded extensive

field notes at each of the network's meetings, shared some of my own experiences at the "Speak Out," and attended several sessions offered at the Youth Summit. These events were entertaining and enlightening, because the youth brought to these gatherings such a wide variety of talents, personalities and experiences. As much as I enjoyed the events, however, the quest to gain access into the group proved to be more challenging than I had anticipated.

In the latter part of October, I received permission by the Institutional Review Board to move forward with my study. While the university reviewed my proposal, I began my endeavor to gain access to local LGBT youth support groups. I retrieved a file of notes I had collected over the summer, and located the phone numbers and email addresses for three local support groups: the North Carolina Lambda Youth Network, A Safer Place for Youth Network, and the Triangle Gay Straight Alliance Network.

I was already familiar with the North Carolina Lambda Youth Network<sup>26</sup>, as I observed one of their meetings two years ago in preparation for my pilot study. I emailed the organization's headquarters and received no response. I called their contact number, but the phone just rang. Next, I emailed A Safer Place for Youth Network (ASPYN)<sup>27</sup>. It took more than a week before I received a reply from one of their volunteers. She requested a copy of my interview questions. Later, when we spoke in person at an LBGT event, she apologized for the delay, and asked for a copy of my proposal for members of ASPYN's board to preview. I emailed her my proposal, but did not receive a reply.

My initial attempts to contact the Triangle Gay Straight Alliance Network were as unsuccessful as my earlier efforts with the other networks. I logged each phone call I made and each email I wrote over the next three days. I grew discouraged and confused. I did not expect such difficulty in gaining access to the gateway of my research. The turning point

occurred the next day, when a volunteer at Safe Schools NC left me a voicemail. This non-profit group is the parent organization of the Triangle Gay Straight Alliance Network, and several volunteers oversee both operations. I returned the volunteer's telephone call, explained my research focus, and emailed her my guiding interview questions. She invited me to speak during the business segment of the network's October meeting. This provided me the opportunity to introduce my research to the youth in attendance, and recruit female volunteers for in-depth interviews.

The Triangle Network meets on a monthly basis, gathering together members of the local schools' Gay Straight Alliances. These meetings serve a variety of purposes, from social events to leadership training, from service projects to political activism. The student attendance at these meetings varies, depending on such issues as transportation and the need to study for exams. The network's governing board is comprised of officers from the area's Gay Straight Alliances as well as the three primary adult volunteers.

Before I formally attended one of their meetings in later October, I informally observed the group's participation in the 20<sup>th</sup> Annual North Carolina Gay Pride Parade at the end of September. Some members confidently marched down the street carrying a giant rainbow flag, while others operated a booth at the concurrent festival, handing out flyers that advertised the organization's mission and principles.

Upon entering the first meeting, located in the fellowship hall of a non-denominational church, I consciously remained on the perimeter of the gathering, careful to minimize the effect of my presence. I briefly exchanged greetings with several of the volunteers, introduced myself to the young adult facilitator and quietly joined two of the adults sitting near the outside wall of the room. Undisturbed by my entrance, the students sat in a circle of

chairs, participating in an icebreaker activity. I observed the events of the first hour and recorded extensive field notes, including ‘thick’ descriptions of the setting and the variety of behaviors that occurred during the meeting (Adler & Adler, 1994; Bogdan & Bilken, 1998; Creswell, 1997; Geertz, 1973; Glesne, 1999). Before the business portion of the meeting began, the adult facilitator informed the students of my presence. I was invited to join the circle, and at the appropriate moment, I introduced myself, outlined my research, and distributed my email address to potential interviewees.

Later that evening, I transferred the field notes to my electronic journal. This transference allowed me the time to re-examine my observations and write reflexive comments (Hatch, 2002; Janesick, 2004). I repeated this note-taking process at the second meeting, the youth summit, and the “Speak Out.”

The “Speak Out,” organized by several youth members of the Triangle Network and their adult sponsors, protested the local school system’s student protection policy. It was the opinion of the LGBT organization that the policy did not adequately protect students based on sexual orientation and gender expression, therefore they wanted school officials to reword the policy so that it protected *all* students. Numerous students took turns standing in front of the room, recalling moments in their own lives when they did not feel safe at school, poignantly explaining why they believed revising the policy was imperative. Several adults, including myself, also ambled to the front of the room and shared stories, always ending the vignette with words of support for the youth in their efforts to change the protection policy.

The youth summit provided students an opportunity to learn how to develop/maintain Gay Straight Alliances and educate the school community about LGBT issues. Located at one of the area’s universities, this one-day conference brought together youth leaders, high school

and college students, and several supportive adults from the Triangle Gay Straight Alliance Network, local chapters of the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network, and GLSEN National<sup>28</sup>. Although adults oversaw the summit, most of the sessions were conducted by youth for youth. I observed how the youths' energy fueled their enthusiasm to provide support for one another. Their conversations bubbled with excitement as they scoffed down muffins and coffee, wrapped their arms around one another or gathered in small circles on the carpeted floor. They appeared ready to learn how to be catalysts of change in their schools.

### **The Interviews**

In the middle of the summit, I spent nearly two hours absorbed in the observation of the clusters of students that gathered in the central meeting room. Each one of these students, these future catalysts, had a story to share, an experience to recall, and as I surveyed the room, I imagined each one's life story. Life stories are more than oral histories. They can be found in literary works, autobiographies, informal conversations and diaries (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998). Wherever they may be found, stories are an opportunity for researchers to explore the inner world of another so that they may examine how individuals construct their inner reality and how they choose to reveal that construction to the outer world. We reveal ourselves to others by the stories that we tell. People's narratives are people's identity (Lieblich et al, 1998).

Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber (1998) view narrative as a way to represent identities and/or lifestyles that are part of a specific subculture in society. It is appropriate to employ "real-world" (p. 5) methods to investigate real-life problems. Narrative is one way to communicate the experiences of people whose voices are often ignored. It is a way to

centralize those who live in the margins, whose personal narratives are ignored or drowned out by the ‘grand narrative’ of the dominant society (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998; Riessman, 1993). Therefore, many narratives focus on minority groups that experience discrimination.

I used the “insider/outsider” approach (Best, 2003; Parameswaran, 2001; Sherif, 2001) to the research: as a lesbian, I possessed an insider perspective to the non-heterosexual subculture, although as an older woman and an educator, I occupied an outsider space in their realm of youth and student. I reasoned that my position as insider would enable me to more easily recruit volunteers, and the volunteers would more likely feel safe to openly discuss their experiences with me. I understood what it felt like to be verbally harassed or ostracized from groups because of sexual orientation. I had an insight into their pain and their determination to create a more accepting community. Even though I was not one of their teachers or adult mentors, I was able to quickly establish a comfortable rapport with each student I interviewed.

During the data collection process and the analysis, however, I was cognizant of my bias and my sensitivity to their challenges. Their recollections of events in their high schools called forth similar memories of my own, and I remained conscious of the two images. I tried to separate my experiences from their own, yet I knew that my emotional connection would impact the lens through which I interpreted the students, and the other adults’, stories. I connected with their pain when they talked of physical assaults, and I experienced awe and pride when I witnessed their protests against inequitable school policies. I realized my insider status had of the advantage of commonality and the disadvantage of support toward the non-heterosexual youth. However, in the broader scope of this research, the advantage



outweighed the disadvantage, especially since I vigilantly kept myself aware of my lens and the inferences it drew from the narratives of the women.

I originally planned to interview at least three young women currently enrolled in high school. I also considered older females who had graduated within the past five years, the corresponding time period for which there is data from the National Student Climate Surveys. The purpose for interviewing high school students was to listen to and observe the stories of non-heterosexual females in order to better understand their experiences in high school, how they came out to the school community and determine whether they have safe, supportive environments in which to explore their sexual identities. Additionally, the students' daily experiences would shed light on their school's current problems of harassment and/or violence and the policies they employed to minimize these issues. I wanted to inquire as to the roles the students have, or would like to have, in reducing the violence and creating a supportive environment for LGBT students. In addition to the high school students, I expected to interview one or two non-heterosexual female teachers. I anticipated that their stories would provide multiple perspectives in which to contextualize the voices of the students.

After talking to the GSA network, I advertised my volunteer request on the network's list serve. I received eight emails within the week from young women, ages 14 to 20, interested in participating in the project. Three women lived more than two hours away and were unable to meet in person, so I attached my interview questions and consent forms to emails for them to return as soon as they were able. One of the women responded a few days later, and corresponded with me several times as I continued to inquire about her experiences. A college-aged female appeared eager to volunteer and later reconsidered, although she gave no

reason for withdrawing. A high school freshman quickly contacted me, excited about the opportunity to meet and converse, however, her parents refused to sign the permission form, and she had to reluctantly withdraw from the research.

The remaining three email contacts eventually became the high school students I interviewed in person. Two were currently serving as presidents of their school's Gay Straight Alliance, while the third was in the process of establishing an Alliance in her school. Once we connected via email, we selected a time and place for the first in-depth interview. I anticipated having at least one more face-to-face interview with each student, however, most of the follow-up conversations occurred electronically. Between academics and extra-curricular activities, the students' time was extremely limited, and electronic mail proved to be a more feasible form of communication. I also had the opportunity to informally interview them at the network meetings and the "Speak Out."

The first student I interviewed invited me to attend the "Speak Out," which occurred in mid-November, approximately ten days after our formal interview. I agreed to be there, and when I arrived, my intention was to fade into a corner and scan the tobacco-warehouse-turned-auditorium, scrutinizing the participating youth and the supportive parents, teachers and other adults present. The plan changed when one of the adult volunteers encouraged me to stand up and share my story with the group. I outlined my research endeavor and once again asked for interview volunteers. I also recounted the harassment I experienced in that county when members of my faculty learned of my non-heterosexuality, a disconcerting situation that influenced my decision to resign from my tenured teaching position. Once I returned to my seat near the rear entrance, I distributed my business card to five female students and one teacher who were interested in being interviewed.

My initial interview parameters were confined to non-heterosexual women only, but I chose to expand the boundaries that night, after speaking to three heterosexual female allies<sup>29</sup>. These students requested that their stories be heard, as they, too, supported the creation and maintenance of safe schools. I could not deny the importance of allies in the challenging pursuit for equality, so I agreed to interview them as well. Interestingly enough, not one of the women with whom I interacted that evening responded to my invitation.

These young women were not the only females who chose to decline involvement in the research. The teacher from the “Speak Out” and two other female colleagues who I had contacted also chose not to participate. I then communicated with a third colleague from a local middle school, and she agreed to be interviewed. In my original research design, I planned on interviewing a principal, but as I developed camaraderie with members of the Triangle GSA Network, once again, I altered my path. The dynamic energy of the director and her volunteers captured my attention, and I realized I was more interested in exploring the positive actions students utilized to overcome adversity than to focus on the adversity itself. It was in that enlightened moment that I requested an interview with one of the network’s volunteers. She accepted without hesitation. Thus, after all of my recruitment efforts from late October through mid-December, I was able to successfully schedule and conduct a total of five formal, in-depth interviews.

In order to enrich the narratives extracted from the interviews, I compiled brochures on organizations and support groups for non-heterosexual youth as well as the latest research from academic journals and news stories from non-heterosexual publications and websites. Related articles from the local newspapers rounded out the data. I triangulated these texts

with observations and transcriptions of the interviews I conducted with the six females (Hatch, 2002; Wolcott, 2001).

### **Narrative Truths**

The stories people often choose to remember and retell are those that emerge from the boundary between the ideal and real. The tension between what is ‘supposed to be’ and what is personal reality creates agency for composing narrative (Riessman, 1993). At any given time, people are in flux, a process of personal change, and will narrate the change in terms of that process. This process is personal and internal. However, at the same time, it is also woven tightly within the social and cultural matrix of the larger society.

An individual’s knowledge is embedded in a cultural framework, thus each story retold has a social context as well as a personal one. Context makes a difference. The sociocultural tapestry surrounds personal experience and influences inflection, emphasis, intonation, and the choice of vocabulary. Narratives are temporal; there is a continuity of past, present and future (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). The wider context of society and culture serves as the backdrop for the relationship of events in real time, and as a connection between the inner world of the participant and the outer events that impact memory and perception (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998).

Narratives can be divided into two basic types: descriptive and explanatory (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). Descriptive narratives are “narrative truths,” stories that describe events as accurately as possible given individual perspective and selective memory (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998, p. 8). These tend to be linear in nature, following a timeline or a sequence of occurrences. Explanatory narratives relay events with connections between

themes. These tend to spiral back and forth, capturing fragments of lived experience over a period of time.

Each woman shared her narrative truth, creating snapshots of pertinent events and describing how they impacted her worldview and her vision of a safe, supportive school environment. My interview guides reiterated the central questions of my research: 1) How do non-heterosexual females experience high school? 2) Is school a safe and supportive environment? 3) How did coming out affect these students academically and socially within the context of school? and 4) How do non-heterosexual females envision a safe school and what roles, if any, do they take in creating and maintaining that kind of environment?

I audio taped all of the interviews and transcribed them verbatim (Bogdan & Bilken, 1997; Creswell, 1997; Kvale, 1996). By personally transcribing the interviews, I was able to replay sections of the tape, paying close attention to changes in pitch, fluency, tone and inflection. I visualized the gestures and facial expressions as I listened to the conversations, noting pauses and variations in emotion. Although I invested nearly sixty hours into this process, it was a worthwhile endeavor as it enriched my analysis of the women's narratives.

Following the requirements established by the Institutional Review Board, each interviewee signed a consent form that outlined the research procedures and assured participant confidentiality. The consent form also stated that all tapes and transcripts would be destroyed no more than five years after the completion of my dissertation. Each woman was interviewed once in person for a duration of seventy-five to ninety minutes. Once I transcribed an interview, I emailed the participant her transcript and several follow-up questions. We communicated electronically over a period of time, rounding out the interviews with additional stories and reflections. Participants were guaranteed anonymity

and were aware that they could terminate the interviews at any point they deemed necessary. All transcriptions were given to the interviewees for feedback. A few interviewees clarified some portions of their transcripts where I misunderstood a fact or a point they were attempting to make.

### **Structural Analysis**

Understanding snapshots of a person's life is not an exact science. Interpretations of events can always be otherwise (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). No matter how carefully a researcher dissects and examines someone's words, there is always room for yet another possible explanation. There are, however, several popular approaches that researchers have used to analyze and construct meaning from narratives: structural, poetic and discourse analysis (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000; Gee, 1999; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998; Riessman, 1993).

Structural analysis examines narrative as a literary or fictional text. Many narratives have a plot, theme, characters, metaphors, and other structures found in literature (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000; Riessman, 1993; Gee, 1999). As in literature, one can scrutinize relationships between reader, author, text and life (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). The researcher maintains self-awareness and self-discipline in the "on-going examination of text against interpretation" (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998, p. 11). Lieblich et al (1998) emphasize listening to the voices in the text: the narrator, the theoretical framework, and the reflexive monitoring or self-awareness. They have developed a model of structural analysis based on a matrix of four cells: holistic-categorical, holistic-form, categorical-content, and categorical-form. Each cell involves a way to dissect phrases or stories and how to focus on making meaning from that selection.

The holistic-categorical model of structural analysis looks at the whole story and focuses on content or the ‘what is being said.’ The holistic-form again looks at the whole story, but concentrates on the plot, structure, use of vocabulary and metaphors, or the ‘how it is being said.’ Categorical-content explores specific pieces of the text and groups them into categories. Categorical-form extracts discrete units of the narrative and categorizes the metaphors, expressions, and/or the presence of other literary structures. I applied these models as I analyzed the interview transcripts and attempted to deepen my understanding of the narratives, especially the significance of the word chosen, the metaphors used, the structure of the stories retold, and changes in voice inflection as each story unfolded.

From November, 2004, to January, 2005, I played the tapes as I read and re-read the transcripts. At times, I would follow my general household routine while listening to these women’s voices emanating from the living room stereo. On long trips on the highway, I allowed their words to surround me within the confines of my Mazda. I intentionally listened to the voices in different environments to note the particular vocabulary, emotions or themes entrenched in the text so that I could gain a deeper insight into these storied lives.

Each woman had favorite words or expressions that they used often throughout their narrations. I was intrigued by the choice of words and the repetition of their use. For example, all three of the high school students recounted feeling isolated in their elementary and middle school years. They stressed being an “outcast” and “not fitting in,” with each word or phrase showing up in the analysis at least three times in each interview.

Sometimes it was not the words that impacted me, but the emphasis on certain words or the vague presence of an undercurrent idea wanting to emerge, but still in its infancy and not yet ready to be released. The plots of the students’ stories evolved along similar lines, while

the adults' storylines unfolded different from the youth and from one another. Each interview had numerous common themes, yet the manner in which each challenge was approached and resolved varied with each individual. Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber's (1998) four-celled matrix of analysis assisted me in the process of coding the transcripts and developing the themes that would later evolve into my research findings and conclusions.

### **Discourse Analysis**

Discourse analysis is another way to analyze and interpret the language within the narrative. Gee (1999) views life as a patchwork of thoughts, words, actions, events and interactions in discourses. Individuals produce, reproduce, sustain, and transform a given "form of life" (p. 12) or discourse. Using discourse analysis, Gee (1999) has constructed six areas of reality and four tools of inquiry to understand the use of narratives in his research. The areas of reality include 1) meaning and value aspects of the material world, 2) activities, 3) identities and relationships, 4) politics, 5) connections, and 6) semiotics (the use of symbols and forms of knowledge). The four tools of inquiry used in the analysis are 1) situated identity, 2) social language, 3) discourse and 4) conversation. Situated identity speaks to the positionality and identity of the narrator. Social language explores different styles of language and their location in various settings. Discourse focuses on the integration of the language and the non-language (gestures and actions) involved in the narration. Conversation investigates the long-running themes that stretch over time.

Each one of the areas of reality becomes the foundation on which the tools of inquiry dissect the stories. The interplay of the areas of reality and the tools of inquiry create situation networks. All the elements in a situation network are connected threads and images built within a cultural model. In this model, there are shared experiences, histories and



background. Social languages, situated meanings, and cultural models allow people to enact and recognize different discourses at work (Gee, 1999).

Discourse analysis studies how language gives meaning to aspects of the situation network and how that situation network gives meaning to that language simultaneously. A researcher using this form of analysis can then ask questions such as, 1) “What are the connections and how do they construct coherence?” 2) “What systems of knowledge and ways of knowing are relevant?” 3) “What social languages are relevant?” and 4) “What are the situated meanings, cultural models and main activities at play?” (Gee, 1999, p. 92). All of the answers to the researcher’s questions are gathered and then analyzed for “convergence,” a process that looks at trustworthiness, agreement, support and consistency.

As I examined the data, I applied the above questions that Gee (1999) developed in his discourse analysis. By asking these questions, I remained cognizant of the social contexts of each narration. The older women, being in their 30s and 40s, developed their sexual identities in an entirely different political and social climate than the younger women, ages 14 to 19. Among the younger women, social context varied based on geographical location, family environment and socioeconomic status. My knowledge of discourse analysis provided additional guidance as I struggled to make meaning of the subtext beneath the vocalized text.

### **Poetic Analysis**

Gee (1999) also employs poetic analysis as another approach to the interpretation of narrative. In this approach, segments of transcripts or narration are organized into ‘stanzas’, clumps of tone units that deal with a single topic or perspective. Each stanza, or poetic unit, is examined for a variety of structures and characteristics that punctuate speech patterns, i.e.

changes in pitch, pauses, emphasis, tone and inflection (Riessman, 1993). Each unit is also inspected for organization of words and phrases, coherency, connections, and continuity.

Stories often have a distinct beginning and end, with a middle consisting of linked categories (Riessman, 1993). These categories can be extracted and organized into charts, concept maps/webs or codes. Themes emerge from the concepts and codes. Interpretation of these themes gives birth to understandings both of what was said and what may have been implied. The meanings that materialize from the final analysis enlighten the researcher about the participant(s) or event(s) under study. In many cases, the knowledge that is acquired during the research process will assist those whose voices have been ignored or misunderstood.

In an effort to uncover narratives that may have been misinterpreted, stifled or ignored, I read through all of the transcripts and extracted poignant, emotional, and inspirational excerpts, and then compiled them into one word document, separating them out by participant. I focused on one quote at a time and redesigned the sentences into poetic stanzas. I read the words aloud, as if I was reciting poetry. I boldfaced, and occasionally italicized, a word phrase on each line of the stanza to make visible any possible meaning veiled below the surface. I experimented with the length of the lines, the form of the stanza, the boldfacing of the words. I closed my eyes and imagined I was reciting slam poetry on the front stage of a smoky jazz club, and spoke the words in cadence, dissecting thoughts and experiences. At times, I just read aloud the boldfaced or italicized words to search for deeper emotions or understanding. This was a time-consuming process, but one of the most enjoyable steps in the analysis process.

The following two examples illustrate this technique. The first excerpt is from a bisexual high school senior and the second is from one of the adult volunteers of the GSA network. The first quote is a portion of her response when I inquired to the benefits of belonging to the Gay Straight Alliance. She states,

. . . And, it's opened up the door. I'm willing to talk to people who will criticize, who will point and laugh, but I know that there are people who won't.

Using the computer, I restructure the lines into stanzas so that it looks like this:

And, it's **opened up** the door.  
I'm **willing** to talk to people who will  
**criticize**,  
who will  
**point** and **laugh**,  
*but*  
I **know**  
there **are** people  
who *won't*.

In the second example, this volunteer expresses her admiration for the youth and her desire to facilitate their growth as leaders. She explains,

You just got to give them, give them a community, let them hook up with one another, and they can, I mean they can, they are inspired and empowered to do anything they want. And they're making an incredible difference in schools.

Again, altering the spacing of lines and emphasizing certain words, I produce another poem:

You've just got to **give** them,  
give them a **community**,  
let them **hook up** with one another,  
and they **can**,  
I mean, **they can**,  
they are **inspired** and **empowered**  
to **do anything** they want.  
And they're **making** an  
incredible *difference* in schools.

Embedded in the poems are beauty, pain and courage. Words of wisdom and optimism flow from lives that were both highly complicated and incredibly fascinating. Scars and vulnerability peer through the print as clearly as the seeds of possibility and empowerment. The poetic units spotlight specific moments in time, exposing thoughts and experiences to analysis and interpretation.

My hand-written analysis of data was enhanced by the application of computer software. I utilized the coding and webbing features of Atlas-ti software to examine each electronic document I had created. Transcripts, news articles and entries from my electronic journal were downloaded into the Atlas software. Words or phrases were highlighted and assigned a code. Codes were organized into families based on similarities. Themes germinated from the code families, and they were organized into concept maps, which, for me, illustrated how each theme informed another. All of the codes, quotations and concept maps were printed out to facilitate closure scrutiny. I enlarged the concept maps on 14" x 21" chart paper, and revised the thematic relationships as my research progressed.

### **Limitations**

As I prepared to conduct the research, I carefully planned each step of the process. However, during the first weeks of implementation, it became apparent that there were factors outside my realm of control that altered the plans and limited the data collection. One issue that emerged was the age of the students. In an effort to protect research participants, the Institutional Review Board required parental consent for all youth under the age of eighteen, therefore the only students who could participate in the research either had to disclose their sexual orientation to their parents or they had to be at least eighteen. This narrowed the pool of students from which I could select interviewees. Because of the

consent restriction, at least three young women declined participation in the research, specifically because they were not 'out' to their parents. The consent forms not only limited the young women I could interview, it restricted the stories I heard to those who had parental support and to those who were older. There were numerous voices to which I did not have access, and a collection of stories which could not be heard in this study.

Even the students who were able to share their stories encountered limitations. Each participant juggled a daily schedule laden with activities, thus formal face-to-face interviews were confined to one per participant. Outside of interviews, meetings and events, all conversations were conducted through emails. From a positive perspective, email enabled the participants and me to exchange information with minimal disruptions to already overbooked schedules. I attached transcripts and sections of chapters to emails for review, and participants answered questions or expanded on stories they shared in their formal interviews, revealing details they were less comfortable disclosing in person. From a negative perspective, electronic conversations were void of facial expressions, non-linguistic gestures, vocal inflections and intonations. They lacked the animation and subtle cues offered by body movements and tone of voice.

Since I only interviewed Carrie via email, the lack of non-verbal cues limited my understanding of her narratives. With each of the other participants, I could visualize their gestures or tone of voice as I read their emails, because I met with each one face-to-face, and had developed a sense of each one's personality. I could only surmise how Carrie would gesture or what tone of voice she intended as she typed her thoughts and memories in the email. When she did not respond to a question, I interpreted her silence as a desire to avoid

the question, but I had no way of predicting what she was thinking, since I could not observe her non-verbal communication.

Additionally, Carrie's emails were brief as compared to the interview transcripts, and some of the brevity could be attributed to my inability to establish a rapport with her in the same manner in which I was able to establish a rapport with the other interviewees. If we had met in person, Carrie might have divulged more details in her stories. However, despite the confines of email, corresponding electronically with Carrie did allow me to hear some of her narrative, providing a set of experiences from another geographical location that could be compared and contrasted with the local narratives.

The narratives of these six females were their stories as I heard, taped, transcribed, and analyzed them. Although the women reflected my race and, to a large extent, my socioeconomic level, I did not use their narratives to recount my own story. There were places where my experiences paralleled some of theirs, such as the awareness of feeling different from classmates, but there were numerous portions of their narratives that differed from my own memories. As I examined and interpreted each story, I was cognizant of my bias toward the women, especially the students. As an educator, I recognized my professional inclination to protect the students from the harassment of others, and as a lesbian, I acknowledged my compassion for the youth as they struggled with their identity development and self-acceptance. Throughout the research, I endeavored to convey the stories of these six women as accurately as possible, anticipating that their experiences would offer insights to improve schools for non-heterosexual students, and, in turn, for all students.

## **Let the Classroom Construction Begin**

As I listened to the stories, to the lived experiences of these females, their experiences provided a window into their inner worlds (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 1993). I had an opportunity to retell and interpret their understanding of personal events in the context of a traditionally intolerant social atmosphere. I intended to make audible these voices so that educators, students, and families can reconstruct school communities, and hopefully make them more welcoming environments for all of their members. In the next few chapters, we immerse ourselves in the data, surrounded by the voices of six unconventional, yet passionate, women. Chapter four introduces the reader to these women, who have become the crew of our rainbow construction.

## CHAPTER 4: MEET THE CREW

An architect's dream remains a dream without a competent crew to construct the edifice. I had the fortune of working with members of a crew that transcended competence. I discovered a group that transformed my blueprint into a structure more impressive than I could have imagined before October. I expected to observe hurt and pain, and they showed me resilience and determination. I envisioned them confronting walls of resistance, and they showed me the ladders they built to surmount any obstacles placed in their path.

Initially, I will introduce each one of the students. There are four in total, three who currently attend local high schools, and a slightly older female that lives out-of-state and communicated with me solely through email. Following the students, I will present the adult volunteer and the middle school teacher.

### Lee

On a dismal, rainy November afternoon, I scrambled out of my car and ran into the bookstore before I was soaked to the skin (I was never very good at carrying umbrellas). I shook myself dry and scanned the store, looking for my first interviewee. Due to the weather, traffic had inched its way down the highway, causing me to be ten minutes late for the interview. I was nervous that she may not have waited and left before I had even arrived.

I first met Lee at a Triangle Network meeting, a tall figure dressed in black, reminiscent of *The Addams Family's* Morticia. The way in which her white, creamy skin contrasted her dark clothing, her black eye make-up and long, raven hair gave me the impression that something deep and mysterious swirled beneath the placid surface of this fourteen-year-old high school freshman.



I meandered down the aisles, half gazing at books as I searched for Lee, but to no avail. I strolled over to the café, and set my school bag down on a corner table. I rummaged through magazines for another twenty minutes, and as soon as I was preparing to leave, Lee leaped through the entrance door, mother and younger sister in tow. Hair sodden and eye make-up streaming down her face, she apologized profusely, claiming that her mother had forgotten, and that she had to walk to the bookstore in the rain. Her mother handed me the consent form, we spoke momentarily, and then she left, escorting her youngest daughter out the door in front of her. Lee and I purchased some coffee and settled into the corner for our conversation.

Lee slid into a chair and peeled off her saturated black trench coat. Attempting to dry her clothing, she grasped some paper napkins and blotted her black top and black jeans. She wiped down her three-inch heeled, calf-high, black boots, inhaled deeply, and reclined against the back of her seat. As we talked, Lee appeared shy and nervous. She avoided looking me in the eye the entire two hours we spent together that evening. She studied the patterns in the floor tiles intensely as she divulged inner feelings and significant moments in her brief life. On at least three occasions, she stopped mid-sentence, wrapped one leg around the other, and whispered that she was nervous. I did my best to ease her discomfort, chatting about music and books, general subjects that were less intimidating.

I suspected that her nervousness did not stem from her lack of desire to be interviewed. After I spoke at the network meeting, she told one of the adult volunteers that she wanted to participate in the research. She hesitated to contact me, however, because she thought I would not be interested in what she had to say. The volunteer encouraged her to email me, assuring her that what she had to share was important. I heard from Lee the next day, and

reinforced what the volunteer had already explained. Perhaps Lee was initially shy and self-conscious because this was a new experience for her. Eventually, she relaxed enough to laugh and joke with me.

The older of two girls, Lee had always been more mature than her peers. At the age of six, her father started reading adult books to her and her sister, fueling Lee's interest to continue the trend on her own. Since she read at a much higher level than her classmates, she excelled in school, to the point of losing interest in classroom activities. "I mostly fell asleep in class. It was okay, I was a good student and I did my work," Lee murmured when I inquired about her earliest memories of elementary school. She added, "It was just boring in school."

From the beginning, Lee was an extremely quiet student, and she preferred to surround herself with quiet friends. She considered herself a loner, and gravitated toward others who were rejected by the majority of the class. "[In first grade] I was friends with two loners . . . We didn't have any other friends." She spent the remainder of her elementary years in this triangular friendship, until, on the brink of entering middle school, she and her family followed her father's work to Germany.

Lee has always had the benefits of an upper-middle class life. She described her childhood as "basic" and "normal." As a young child, Lee and her stay-at-home mother would place pins on a map to represent the myriad of cities her father visited as a financial manager for a large corporation. During summer and holiday vacations, Lee and her family often accompanied her father on his trips, exposing her to multiple continents and cultures around the globe. Relocating to Germany was the only time the family lived outside of the United States.

Lee's entire middle school career was spent in a small city in southern Germany. Her first year was difficult socially, as she struggled to learn the language and the morays of the area. She was teased repeatedly for being an American, and not being able to speak German. She recalled, "Oh, everyone would call me names the first year I was there . . . They didn't understand why I couldn't speak German . . . and they teased me." She befriended one girl in her class, because "nobody else would be her friend." Adjusting to the new environment, especially as a pubescent adolescent, proved to be quite the challenge. "I drove my parents crazy, especially my mother", Lee commented,

I just locked myself in my room all the time and didn't want to talk to anyone.  
I was always alone, I was the loner type, so, I would yell at [my mom] or yell  
at my sister.

Since she did spend an enormous amount of time isolated in her room, books and computer chat rooms were her favorite methods of escape. Lee's reading preference focused around manga, a genre of books based on the popular Japanese anime. The time she expended in computer chat rooms revolved around discussions related to these stories, which she often engaged in with people much older than herself. Over the years, the majority of her interactions have been with adults, and the manner in which she presented herself indicated an understanding of the world beyond her years.

Eventually, as she acclimated to her surroundings, Lee's circle of friends expanded. She initially attempted to cultivate friendships with some of the girls, but quickly changed her mind when she discovered that they were "preppy," a characteristic she detested. Lee connected more easily with the boys, as she was one of the few girls not afraid to run around outside and get dirty. Inside the classroom, Lee entertained her friends by drawing characters on her notes based on the books she read at home.

Lee returned to the United States less than a year ago, at the end of the previous school year. She busied herself over the summer “unpacking, getting used to the area, getting un-jetlagged, getting used to speaking English again.” In August, she entered a high school for the first time, unobtrusively observing the culture of the student body. Her preliminary impressions of high school were not very positive. “[It’s] boring. Very boring. People get teased too much. I can’t stand a lot of people there, ‘cause they’re so immature,” Lee reflected as she sipped her latte. Now that she has completed a semester, she responded with a brighter outlook. She “kind of got used to it,” concentrating on her academics and her involvement in ROTC.

One of the benefits of returning to the United States was that Lee isolated herself less than when she was in Germany. In an effort to reach out to like-minded peers, she browsed the Internet, searching for an LGBT community center. While there were no community centers for LGBT youth, she did connect with A Safer Place for Youth Network (ASPYN). Cultivating friendships within this support group subsequently directed her to the Triangle Gay Straight Alliance Network. Lee attended every meeting of each organization as much as her schedule allowed. Being immersed in a non-heterosexual environment helped Lee to feel more comfortable with herself, and her confidence blossomed. The adult volunteers encouraged her to participate in a number of political events, nurturing her potential as a leader.

Slowly the seeds of leadership proceeded to germinate. Over the past few months, Lee has been in the midst of establishing a Gay Straight Alliance in her school, an arduous task for a freshman, but not an impossible one. Nearly two months ago, Lee stood before her school district’s Board of Education to explain why their student protection policy needed

revision. Ten days later, she led the “Speak Out,” a public protest against this same student protection policy. This past weekend, at the latest Triangle Network meeting, Lee no longer concealed herself in the shadows of her raven-esque persona. Dressed in a rainbow-striped turtleneck and Jordache jeans, hair pinned up above her neck, she stood in the middle of the circle and read the words of a student activist from another era. Lee has begun the transformation from an isolated loner to an empowered young leader.

### **Kay**

One sunny afternoon in mid-November, I jogged briskly up the sidewalk to a coffee shop, running late again for an interview. Luckily, Kay had not yet arrived, and I had time to claim a table situated in the bay window of one of my favorite dessert spots. As soon as I placed my notebook and tape recorder on the table, Kay swaggered into the room, smiling as brightly as the sunshine outside. Kay’s petite frame, short blonde hair and bouncing energy gave her the appearance of someone younger than her sixteen years. She sported an ensemble of a black taffeta skirt, a white scoop neck top, a black military-styled waistcoat, black fishnet stockings and ankle-high black military boots. The coat was covered with political buttons along the collar, on both the left and right sides of the silver zipper.

I first noticed Kay at the October alliance network meeting. Wearing baggy, olive pants and a black jacket laden with silver chains, Kay eagerly participated in the group discussions, entertaining her peers with her quip sense of humor. Sitting in the circle among other alliance officers, her presence commanded attention, and other youth respectfully awaited her input when making a decision. Kay never walked wherever she went. She strutted, she flounced, she sailed, and eyes watched as she maneuvered around the room.

Holding the paper coffee cup close to her mouth, Kay spoke candidly, directing me to ask more specific questions as opposed to more open-ended ones. She responded most often with jokes, her wit apparently an innate component of her vibrant personality. The conversation floated comfortably between us as she unfolded her life before me. Kay communicated her experiences humorously and nonchalantly, defying any hint of emotion to emerge from the depths beneath the militant surface.

The only child of a two-parent middle class home, Kay described her childhood as “a good solid one, and my family is a good solid one.” She considered her mom one of the “cheeriest people on the face of the planet,” and her dad to be “very creative.” Her father was presently self-employed in the healthcare industry, while her mother worked for one of the local universities. With a smile expanding across her face, Kay boasted that her parents were “very, very smart” and “very, very nice people.”

Reflecting on her elementary years, Kay characterized herself as an “offbeat” child, visiting art museums when most of her peers were playing ball or video games. She added,

While everyone else was comparing their size two and a half jeans, I was off to the side in my baggy jeans covered with patches . . . that was kind of interesting . . . I didn’t exactly have a good time. I didn’t fit in, is all, especially in elementary school.

On several occasions, Kay mentioned the terms “offbeat” and “didn’t fit in.” As a result, she often chose to retreat to her room where she contently drew and read. She “wasn’t the most liked person,” and spoke of being close to only two friends while in elementary school. She portrayed most of her classmates as “all happy, super-golfing preps of the world . . . I thought it was just boring.”

Although Kay was not popular with her peers, she adored her teachers. She recalled fondly her fourth and fifth grade teachers and the many weekends she cared for the class guinea pig at home. Academically, she performed successfully, especially in English and reading. I queried if she ever had a crush on one of her teachers, and she replied, “No, they’re teachers. They’re old.” She delivered that line with such impeccable timing that we both broke into laughter.

Kay predicted that her parents would describe her as “artsy,” “shy,” “friendly” and “quiet,” while her classmates would label her “weird.” Beyond these adjectives, she pictured herself a “tomboy,” because she “used to be the kid dressed in baggy clothes with messed up hair in the trees . . . Still am.” These days, however, the soft, blonde hair is no longer “messed up.” It cascades neatly alongside her face and above her neck, slightly angled down toward the jaw line.

The general theme of “not fitting in” continued into middle school. “Middle school sucked,” exclaimed Kay,

[In] sixth grade, my grades went to hell in a hand basket. It was not pretty. That’s the age when I started getting really depressed. I was bored and lonely, and really didn’t care about school. I kind of felt like an outcast.

In seventh grade, her social life improved as she discovered her niche with a particular group of girls. Her grades did not improve, however, until eighth grade, when she “went off and buried [her]self and studied.” She consciously chose to isolate herself, focused on academics, and “went back to being an A student.”

As Kay entered high school, life continued to create more roadblocks for her to overcome. She did have the opportunity to bond with a group of “artsy” friends who embraced her for who she was. However, when she negotiated the hallways alone, she often encountered

hostility. She recounted the times she was called names, pushed and threatened, especially in her freshman year. Fortunately, in her sophomore year, she shared with a friend her decision to start a Gay Straight Alliance. This friend suggested she talk to one of the teachers he believed would sponsor the club. The teacher agreed, and the GSA was born. Kay still experienced some harassment, but now she could depend on teacher and administrator support if problems erupted.

By the middle of her sophomore year, Kay began to attend the Triangle GSA Network. She relied on their guidance to assist her in leading her own school's alliance. Members of the network suggested discussion topics and types of movies to view. Student leaders brainstormed educational activities and distributed surveys. The network, still in its infancy, matured with the students as they gained experience running their own clubs.

This year, Kay's confidence has continued to flourish. Two months ago, she coordinated efforts with other Triangle area youth to present a student panel at a small, local university. At this event, youth shared their experiences at school, at home, and in the community, relaying the challenges LGBT youth have as they endeavor to be their non-heterosexual selves in a heterosexist society. Last month, Kay's GSA was featured in an article printed in the local newspaper (Hagen, 2004). In an effort to educate the public about Gay Straight Alliances, Kay and one of her officers expounded on the benefits of having a school club where students could seek support when they were surrounded by rejection and filled with confusion. Throughout the article, Kay emphasized, "The Gay Straight Alliance does not promote homosexuality, but helps gay teens adjust to who they are." The article received some backlash from conservative members of the community, but Kay remained courageously steadfast in the aftermath of the criticism.



At this last network meeting, Kay's political messages have moved beyond the buttons and have become a part of her – literally. She has shaved the back of her head, bleached it bright blonde and has sprayed a blue “W” in the middle of a red circle with a red line cutting right through the middle of the “W.” It is her latest statement against the president, one aspect of the protest she is organizing for Inauguration Day. Her presence is more subtle at this meeting, as she allows her hair to speak multitudes. Her bounce is lighter and her swagger less exaggerated, but her strength and determination have not diminished.

### **Reyna**

The initial replies to my recruitment of participants included a note from a young woman who offered to converse with me if I could possibly wait a few more weeks, when she would turn eighteen, and would not need her parents' permission to be interviewed. She admitted that her parents did not know about her sexual orientation, and she would prefer to leave it that way. I granted her request, and arranged to contact her after her birthday. Several weeks later, I once again strolled to the dessert shop, punctual this time, and settled into one of the booths along the far wall of the shop. A moment later, Reyna and three of her friends entered the shop, talking and laughing boisterously, the sound of their presence echoing around the room. She acknowledged me, motioned farewell to her friends, and proceeded toward the booth. Dressed in a white spaghetti-strapped tank top and black jeans, she placed herself directly across the table from me. Her green eyes sparkled behind her charcoal-rimmed glasses as she smiled broadly. Her round face flushed with excitement, and her demeanor generated enthusiasm.

My first impression of Reyna paralleled the energetic character that sat across from me drinking chai tea that December afternoon. Strident. That was the word that surfaced to my

conscious mind as I studied Reyna. At the October network meeting, she had assisted the adult facilitator, delegating tasks and leading discussions. She was vocal during the business portion of the meeting, suggesting service projects and places to celebrate the upcoming holiday. Her voice was strong and assertive, filled with confidence and conviction.

Reyna exhaled heavily, leaned forward, and rested her elbows on the table. She began to recite all the places she had lived before coming to this city. Born in a neighboring state, she moved with her working class family to two other states before settling in a small rural town northeast of our current location. Despite the fact that she attended numerous schools, she quickly adjusted to the new environments and continuously achieved outstanding grades. Like the previous participants, Reyna perceived herself to be the ‘outcast’ at school. She shrugged her shoulders and sighed,

I was also a real big, like, social outcast – all the time. Even though there really wasn’t a reason for it. I guess I just sort of kept to myself more, and people don’t like that. I was always known as ‘the red-headed girl with the gap in her teeth.’

Like Lee, the friendships Reyna did cultivate were with other outcast students. They were generally the reclusive types that no one else in the class liked. She claimed that this was a pattern for her through tenth grade, until she transferred to the specialized high school.

Outside of school, most of Reyna’s time was spent playing with her two younger brothers and their friends. It was not unusual to spot her running in a field somewhere in the neighborhood playing tackle football with a group of boys. If the weather discouraged outdoor sports, Reyna would most likely be in a neighbor’s living room with a swarm of boys playing video games.

Reyna did not define herself as Christian, but she grew up in a very religious family and “was forced to go to church” until the tenth grade. Religion deeply influenced Reyna’s early years. “When I was in elementary school,” Reyna reflected, “I believed everything that the church told me – absolutely everything they told me.” However, by the time she was in the sixth grade, she began to question her congregation’s policies. When the minister began to preach that premarital sex and teenage pregnancy were the girl’s fault, she realized that “my opinions just weren’t fitting with theirs.” Her parents transferred to a different church shortly thereafter, but those early memories of church remained seared in Reyna’s mind.

Social challenges continued for Reyna as she entered middle school. While her relationships with teachers were as strong as her academic accomplishments, her classmates were a source of provocation. The harassment that once revolved around the general “red-headed girl with the gap in her teeth” shifted to another level, and focused on her sexuality. When her classmates noticed Reyna’s short hair and baggy clothes, many teased her for “being gay” and wanting “to be a boy.” She ignored the comments to the best of her ability, but by the beginning of high school, she tired of the abuse. She softened her appearance and altered her wardrobe, which successfully subdued the murmurings around her.

Reyna depicted the well-rounded student. In her first two years of high school, she participated in numerous extra-curricula activities. Her interests spanned from Latin Club to Drama Club to Varsity soccer. Her academic achievements earned her a membership in the National Honor Society. Time away from school and homework was most often spent with her two closest friends. Resources were limited in the small tobacco-farming community, and Reyna made the most of what it had to offer.

An opportunity to expand her educational possibilities presented itself one afternoon in Reyna's English class, during the spring semester of her sophomore year. The guidance counselor distributed brochures of academic enrichment programs, one of which advertised Reyna's current school. The following month, Reyna and her parents attended the school's open house, initiated the application process, "and basically, it went from there." Reyna set down her chai, swung her arms wide and laughed,

It was all just like a big blur. It went real quick. I turned in the application, and I was like, "I hope I get in, because I don't want to stay at home."

Alone in a new school and in a new city, Reyna retreated to her room each evening after classes. Facing four to six hours of homework daily, it was tempting to bury oneself in papers and decline invitations to socialize. Reyna's assigned mentor tolerated that behavior for a period of time, and then pulled her out from under the mountains of books, persuading her to get involved in clubs and activities. Reyna recalled, "[I]t was sort of forced on me . . . you *have* to be social [here], basically to survive." She shadowed her mentor, accompanying him to a variety of events and meeting. This eventually led to her immersion in the diversity club, their school's version of a Gay Straight Alliance.

Unlike her earlier experiences, classmates confided in Reyna, seeking her out for comfort and guidance. Still lacking confidence and social experience, Reyna was puzzled by "the thought that [she] would be a good person to contact . . . People would email [her] and ask questions." Reluctant at first to accept this new responsibility, Reyna adjusted more easily to the task of assisting others once she realized that the club valued her opinions and ideas.

As a part of her association with the diversity club, Reyna was also invited to collaborate with other alliances at the network meetings. Shy and reserved in this new setting, Reyna

spoke tentatively at the first few meetings. Despite her quiet exterior, the adult volunteers recognized Reyna's leadership potential and decided to nurture it into full bloom. They gave her notebooks of resources from the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN), and invited her to facilitate projects and activities. This year, she was elected president of the network, and acknowledged the network's contribution to her growth and her world perspective. Regarding her social growth, Reyna elaborated,

I think that's a lot of the reason why I have sort of come from not being so social to being really social and not only that, but I know more . . . Everyone has an opinion, and that's just a fact, you know? If someone doesn't like it, I mean, they don't have to, but just sort of that whole confidence thing. I didn't have the self-confidence at the beginning of last year, but I do now.

This year, not only was Reyna chosen to lead the network of alliances, she was elected president of her own school's diversity club. She poured over training guides and GLSEN resources in order to enlighten her group about "Days of Action"<sup>30</sup> that could be observed throughout the year. She organized educational events and collaborated with other clubs to sponsor "movie nights" and discussion circles – any type of activity that opened the conversation about LGBT issues. The school administration had traditionally been supportive of any concerted effort to promote equality and multiculturalism, and whenever they hesitated, Reyna was the first one there, ready to protest their actions.

I reclined in the booth, coffee cup empty, absorbing Reyna's stories. She recounted multiple events in her life, arms swaying through the air to emphasize the excitement or fury, depending on the experience she was recalling. I eyed the tape recorder, noted the spool still revolving, and smiled. I was grateful that all of this would be captured on tape, because I could not imagine anyone dictating those words at Reyna's rate of speed.

At the “Speak Out,” Reyna was the second student to speak. As she moved toward the podium, her stride was swift and decisive. She emphatically promoted the need for student leadership in the movement for justice and equality. She shared with the audience an encounter she had with the administrators at her school, and encouraged everyone to take a stand for what they valued. Her speech was brief but powerful, inspiring both adults and students to join forces against discrimination.

At the last network meeting, no one specific student dominated the leadership role. However, Reyna’s voice wafted above the crowd on several occasions. In one poignant speech about student activism, Reyna deliberated on her evolution as an activist parallel to the evolution of the network. In the past fifteen months, both have effloresced. The network has successfully supported the creation of Gay Straight Alliances in the region’s high schools, and Reyna has been a central force in motivating students to promote tolerance and education.

I think the big thing is ignorance – people not knowing . . . If they don’t know, and they have this opinion - no one’s telling them otherwise, so why are they going to change their opinion, you know?

Reyna stressed the importance of education in her interview last month, and she reiterated its significance in her speech. In her final paragraph, Reyna predicted that the next few years would witness the establishment of Gay Straight Alliances in every high school in the central part of the state, and, she concluded, she intended to be at the forefront of that movement. Considering her infinite stores of energy, it would not surprise me if that statement was accurate.

## **Carrie**

This particular exchange differed from the previous interviews, as it was exclusively an email communication. Actually, there was a brief telephone conversation to initiate contact, but all of the questions and answers transpired electronically. I had no knowledge of Carrie's physical features, however the power behind her words evoked the vision of an independent young woman dedicated to being herself regardless of the intolerance she confronted.

Raised in a Midwestern middle-class home, Carrie spent countless hours of her childhood playing in the backyard with her best friend, who was a boy. Most days found them dressed up as pirates or as Robin Hood, swinging through the trees or building tree houses. These moments outside of school brought Carrie many positive memories. Inside school, however, she combated difficulties on a regular basis. She was "always a tomboy," complete with short hair, patched jeans and plaid shirts. She was often "mistaken for a guy" and, over the years, endured ridicule from both classmates and teachers alike.

In middle school, the taunting intensified as Carrie accepted her sexual orientation and openly lived a lesbian lifestyle. She started dating a female classmate in the eighth grade, which provoked even more controversy. Carrie unabashedly dated her girlfriend throughout her high school years, despite "being hackled" relentlessly by her peers. She surmised that her classmates did not understand nor did they exhibit any desire to do so. Not to be discouraged by the rising tide of hostility, Carrie and her friends persisted in being true to themselves, reassuring each other that they were "trying to make [life] easier" for those who came after them by doing so.

Carrie disappointedly admitted that it was the school administration that demonstrated the most intolerance. She was summoned to the principal's office on multiple occasions, most

often for “public displays of affection.” Carrie contested the disciplinary actions repeatedly, until the “uphill battle” grew too steep. In her junior year, Carrie made the decision to “drop out” of school. After she earned her General Equivalency Diploma (GED), Carrie attained an “amazing” position as a lighting technician in a neighborhood theatre.

Now 19, Carrie lived in her own apartment just minutes from her “exceptionally loving” parents and her younger brother. Carrie regretted that her brother was “feeling the intolerant wrath of his peers” for her sexuality. While she admitted to having a “poor attitude towards school,” she believed it would be “unfair to place her problems” on her sexual orientation. She contended that her perception of school had not been “affected one way or the other by being out.” I endeavored to probe deeper into this statement, as I suspected that her low grades and lack of involvement in school might have been connected to the harassment she experienced. I emailed her in the early part of December and did not receive a reply until early February. She insisted that her low performance in school reflected her inability to learn in a structured environment such as school, but, again, her sexual orientation “played no part in her decision to leave school.” Admittedly, this was not the statement I expected to hear, but it was her story, and it would not be fair to present it any other way.

### **Alicia**

One unseasonably warm day in December, I purchased my coffee from yet another of my favorite cafés, ventured to the outdoor patio, and took residence at one of the green picnic tables splattered with sunshine. I was early, so I opened my notebook and re-read my interview guide, modifying the questions I had asked the students in preparation for my appointment with Alicia. She was to be the first adult I interviewed for this project, and I was taking advantage of this time to make the mental shift.



From the outset, Alicia had been an invaluable resource. She played an instrumental role in my ability to meet LGBT youth in the community. At the first network meeting I attended, she co-facilitated the leadership training activities, and guided students through the general process of conducting a student panel, an educational opportunity that she often used to open dialogues between non-heterosexual students and members of the school community. During the business portion of the meeting, Alicia presided over the conversation, but distanced herself enough to create space for others to share the responsibility of leadership.

Arriving punctually, Alicia nodded her head in my direction and crossed the patio, black bag clutched in one hand, coffee cup held high in the other. Dressed in black pinstripe pants, black scoop necked top, black boots, and a long black coat, Alicia bounced lightly across the grass, and seated herself on the opposite side of the picnic table. The large silver pendant around her neck glittered in the late afternoon sun, and the air vibrated with her radiating energy. She smiled broadly and commenced to share with me a conversation she had earlier that day with a student who successfully convinced his principal to permit the formation of a Gay Straight Alliance at his high school. This level of bubbling energy continued throughout the hours we spent together.

I asked Alicia to paint me a verbal picture of her childhood, and she laughed, professing that she had “such a hard time” with her memory in general. Yet after a moment’s hesitation, she launched into a description of her childhood that appeared to be quite comprehensive. Alicia was the product of a close-knit, middle class Midwestern family. In her earliest memories, “a lot revolved being around family, having a pretty extensive extended family.” Alicia enjoyed being “a very social kid” with neighborhood friends, spending most of her free time roller-skating, skate boarding and doing “a lot of running around.”

However, when Alicia was ten, her parents divorced, and life took a turn for the worse.

She recalled,

I think my parents' divorce had a pretty big impact on me as a child. I was kind of a daddy's little girl, and I was just used to - my dad kind of spoiled me, kind of gave me whatever I wanted. It's hard to go from that to not even having him around and having things a little bit harder.

Having little money, Alicia, her mother and her younger sister left behind the comforts of affluence and moved to a working class community. As a woman approaching her mid-thirties, Alicia came of age in a time when divorce was not common, and her mother feared her daughters would be treated as inferior because of this situation. As a result, Alicia's mother repeatedly urged her and her younger sister "to be better than, because people are going to expect the worst." Alicia applied this philosophy to academic achievement, and continuously excelled throughout her school career.

A natural "extrovert," Alicia surrounded herself with friends constantly. Through her early adolescence, she was a member of a cohesive group of five friends, to whom she is still close today. Alicia confessed that, as a young person, she was "such a conformist," and consciously made choices that would keep her in the "in-crowd" or, at least, the "second level of the 'in'." The need to be like others led Alicia down some rocky roads. Through high school, she had her moments of rebellion and was "a pain in the ass kind of teenager, as most teenagers are." Yet, like most teenagers, Alicia successfully rebounded from the poor decisions, and adjusted her focus on the future.

Years before, when Alicia's mother found herself without a husband and a job, she astutely accepted a position at a local, yet highly acclaimed, university. By committing to employment at that university, Alicia's mother ensured her daughters a tuition-free college

education. Alicia flourished in college, especially once she entered the higher-level classes required for her major in sociology and political science. I asked her if she was an activist in college, and she shook her head negatively, “If I wasn’t working, I was in school,

so there wasn’t any time to devote to other things. I was becoming an activist in my own mind, you know. At that point, I was learning about so many things that had never been taught to me before.

She loved being in school and embracing new ideas - new lenses through which she could view the world around her. The soil of her future activism and leadership was tilled during these years as an undergraduate student.

The first few years following graduation led Alicia to teaching positions in Russia and Eastern Europe. She absorbed a great deal of world knowledge from these experiences, but realized that her advancement in the International School was limited without a teaching certification. She researched university programs back in the United States, and eventually journeyed to the New England states to pursue her graduate degree. The first program did not “feel right,” so with the assistance of a university counselor, Alicia investigated another program and decided, “This is where I need to be.” Instead of following the path of teaching certification, however, she gravitated toward the university’s more “activist oriented” Intercultural program, a concept which greatly appealed to her.

It was in graduate school where Alicia acquired her expertise in facilitating community education sessions, diversity trainings and student panels. She conducted group conversations at community colleges, public schools and community centers. In those early assemblies, diversity was most often presented as a general topic of “difference.” That focus did not narrow until Alicia relocated to this state where she fulfilled her internship requirement working with an LGBT youth organization.

During her one-year internship, Alicia developed a youth leadership program, advised one of the first Gay Straight Alliances in the area, and built a collaborative network with other regional LGBT organizations. She presented LGBT challenges at state conferences and joined efforts with other volunteers to convince the Department of Education that LGBT issues needed to be addressed in our schools. Even as she earned her degree and proceeded to work for other non-profit agencies, the fate of non-heterosexual youth remained a primary interest for Alicia, and she maintained an active role in leadership training and community education.

As cars rolled by with their music blaring and trucks roared by with their engines grinding, Alicia expounded emphatically on her admiration for the students. Oblivious to the noise whirling around us, she described how arduous the task became when “you’re basically a volunteer and you’re butting heads” with resistant politicians and other conservative community members. She shifted her weight, leaned across the table and asserted, “[Y]ou get burned out.

You just want to quit, you know. All I have to do is spend two minutes with [the students] and they re-energize me, and I am ready to jump right back in.

She regarded the youth as her “role models.” The students’ unwavering fortitude inspired Alicia to devote a large portion of her time to cultivating safe school communities, a vision that has transformed into a life’s passion.

Alicia was present at every LGBT event that I attended, often leading at least one activity or training session. At these meetings, she and I often discussed the latest political news affecting student policies or the most recent information from resources such as the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network. Her extensive knowledge on LGBT topics generated

many interesting conversations, but what stood out to me was her desire to stay in the shadows as the students developed their leadership potentials. She planned to guide the students and orchestrate the necessary organizational strategies from behind the scenes. Here she was doing some formidable work, and, yet, no ego was involved in her actions. She did not even perceive herself to be any sort of heroine. “I think that I’ve been able to facilitate something that has helped them . . . I wouldn’t say that I personally have much of an impact other than creating that space for them.” It was refreshing to note that other long-term volunteers I met in this network had similar perspectives to Alicia’s. They each had their own reasons for participating in the network, yet they shared a vision of creating safer spaces for these youth.

At the last network meeting, Alicia stepped into the background and let a younger volunteer facilitate the majority of the meeting. Alicia’s presence comforted those who had grown used to her direction, yet she seemed pleased to allow someone else oversee some of the activities she had supervised for so long. Alicia suspected that this alteration in responsibility meant that it was time to contemplate her role in the future of the organization. She predicted that her efforts would be more effectively focused on expanding the network across the state, collaborating with other school systems, interconnecting alliance networks, and amplifying the voice of non-heterosexual youth statewide. As she outlined the plan she had formulated, I got the impression that she was committed to this group, or at least to the youth, and would continue this work for a long time to come.

### **Jaime**

This particular interview did not take place in a coffee shop, but rather in the comfort of Jaime’s home. I arrived in the early evening, greeted by two friendly dogs and the warmth of

a rustic Southern home. We maneuvered our way around the rambunctious dogs and into the dining area. There we chatted casually over cheese and crackers, eventually turned on the tape recorder and commenced the interview. As Jaime disclosed stories of her life, the dogs occasionally added their voices, demanding us to pay them some attention, too.

Jaime has been an eighth grade educator for the past twenty years in the same school system and in the same school. Now in her early forties, she has lived a generally conservative life, adhering to many of the time-tested traditions of her school culture. She was tall and athletic, dressed modestly in blue jeans, a checkered shirt with a white turtleneck underneath, and running shoes. Her short, dark hair was speckled with a hint of white, and her skin was slightly bronzed from years of outdoor coaching. She spoke in relaxed, matter-of-fact tones, smiling occasionally as she remembered certain events or people from her past.

The oldest of three children, Jaime grew up in the security of a middle class, “close-knit” family. Because she was the eldest, Jaime claimed that her “parents were strictest” on her, but there was also “a lot of love in that house.” She described her father as the “gadget-guy,” always building or modifying electronic devices. She portrayed her mother as the “the caregiver,” someone who compassionately administered to others in their times of need. Both of her siblings had married and raised families of their own. Single with no children, Jamie considered herself the “coolest aunt on the planet.”

Although born in another state, Jaime spent the majority of her early years in one of the first planned communities in this area. As it turned out, Jaime was the only girl in this neighborhood at the time, so she “hung out” with the boys, playing all kinds of sports, climbing trees, and riding bikes. I asked her how her friends would have described her, and she stated that there were an abundance of children in the community, so she was “just one of

the group.” Additionally, she identified herself as a “tomboy,” claiming that she and her friends were “very active” and “mischievous,” but “not troublemakers.”

In school, she was the “overachiever” and the “bookworm,” attaining A/B honor roll status throughout her school career. Her large circle of friends consisted of other high-achieving students. Jaime “looked up to her teachers,” and, as with other important adults in her life, she “wanted to please” them. Starting in junior high school, she participated in three sports a year, and by the age of fourteen, she managed to work part time, play sports and maintain outstanding grades in her classes.

Athletics were an important outlet for her, especially when her parents divorced during her eighth grade year. Sports “kept me out of trouble,” Jaime admitted. Her coaches became an essential source of support, and “gave [her] refuge when things got bad at home.” Occasionally, she would “sit in their office and cry,” taking the time to compose herself in order to finish up her school day. Although her parents were no longer together, they provided an amiable atmosphere for the children, easing the transition to a single-parent home. “Life was routine,” Jaime contended, “days went by, and there was no drama.” In her opinion, Jaime “had things pretty even” through most of her adolescence.

From the time she was in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, Jaime knew that she “was going to be a teacher,” and set her goals on earning her way into one of the state’s teaching colleges. In her senior year, Jaime was offered a volleyball scholarship to a small, Christian college that had a highly reputed School of Education. Her years at college were generally positive: countless practices with a tightly bonded team, education classes and weekends at home working. She formed a close relationship with her first coach, the one who recruited her for the school, but

experienced difficulties with the second coach two years later, primarily because he “was a womanizer”, but also because he lacked the expertise needed to direct a championship team.

After graduation, Jaime acquired a teaching position in her home city, at the school to which she has remained rooted ever since. I had never been one to stay in a school more than four years, so I expressed my amazement that she had been in one place for so long. Jaime reclined in her chair, crossed her arms and legs and stared at the ceiling, ruminating on my comment for a few moments. “It’s a community,” she explained,

When I said at the beginning that it was a traditional school, by far the majority of the kids are still from parents who went to that school. And the teachers at that school, many of them, went to that school. So, there’s a sense of taking care of each other. There’s a sense of that. The faculty is very tight.

This was a community to which Jaime was deeply invested. As a coach and as a teacher, she had “great relationships with her students.” She fostered a caring and secure environment, a “sanctuary” that did not tolerate any “name-calling” or “put downs.” Parents wrote notes of appreciation for her professionalism, her consistency, and for “protecting [their] kid.” Over the years, students, parents and colleagues alike found her to be a rock of dependability, a woman whose actions were congruous with her beliefs.

While Jaime participated in LGBT fundraising events over the past two decades, she did not formally involve herself in any LGBT youth organizations. However, she advocated for her all of students, in general, and on a few occasions, provided extra support for students who struggled with accepting their non-heterosexuality. She listened attentively and compassionately whenever a student came to her with “a sensitive issue.” Students trusted her, because they knew that “it was not going to go anywhere.” Jaime elaborated that it was



not just her that the students could depend on. “The students really feel like they can trust the staff, and they do come to us, and not just me.”

Jaime acknowledged that the harassment at her school has grown “more sophisticated” and “more subtle.” Aware of this development, the administrators and counselors have emphasized the need to “act on” any display of intimidation or violence, and not to “sweep it under the rug.” Therefore, in her classroom, Jaime has approached the topics of harassment, tolerance and difference on a global level.

We talked about everything. We talked about handicaps . . . I’ve talked about obesity. I talked about my friends who have been foster children. I talked about people I know who are multi-racial, and we’ve talked about gay stuff. But I made it global, because that’s really what it’s about. There’s a lot of biases and a lot of prejudice, and a lot of ignorance about many things . . . racism, male-female bias, the military, you know, anything. We talk about everything. We do every year.

Jaime professed that the key to minimizing problems in the school was “communication.” Anytime issues were ignored, trouble ensued. She maintained that her school was a safe school, because the teachers modeled tolerance. They “do have a sense of what’s really right and wrong. And, [harassment] has never been okay.”

The evening grew late as we concluded our conversation. Jaime placed her left ankle on her right knee, set her hands on her thighs and exhaled, adding her final comments regarding her vision of a safe school community, and using examples in her school to illustrate her points. Her loyalty to her school was admirable, and her dedication to her students was exemplar. Jaime represented the type of educator students required in their classrooms: a teacher who listened and a teacher who cared.

### **Now for the Blisters and Bruises**

In this chapter, I introduced the women whose lives framed this research. Each one of these women enriched the narrative with their individual experiences and personalities. Three of the women were presently enrolled in high school, and reflected for us some of the current issues occurring in their schools and the impact those issues have had on their lives. The other young woman, now out of school, electronically shared her story. Although she was faceless and distant, her words beckoned to be heard. The adults rounded out the interviews, providing additional perspectives to the events that influenced the students' lives.

As we move deeper into the building process, a variety of obstacles emerge from the unfolding events. No matter how meticulous a crewmember is, few are able to complete a construction project without obtaining some blisters and bruises. The next chapter examines the negative consequences of accepting one's non-heterosexual orientation and making the decision to 'follow the rainbow.'

## **CHAPTER 5: VANDALISM, MISHAPS AND DELAYS**

As I begin this chapter, I return to my research questions, reminding myself to let the data drive the results of the project. The first question focuses on how the females experience high school, which directly ties in with the third question regarding how the young women's coming out affected them academically and socially within the context of school. The second and fourth questions move the research in a more constructive direction by inquiring whether the students believe that they attend at safe school, and what role, if any, do they have in creating and/or maintaining a positive, welcoming school environment.

This chapter will concentrate on the first set of questions stated above, emphasizing the negative experiences each woman encountered as she learned to accept her non-heterosexuality. Also included in this narrative will be stories shared by the adults who have supported various students as they struggled with issues related to understanding their sexual orientation. Following the same order I used in the previous chapter, we will listen to the voices of the women as they courageously disclose details of some of the most vulnerable moments of their lives.

### **The Nervous Loner**

Lee's shy and nervous demeanor had been an intricate part of her personality throughout her life. Lee perceived herself to be the "loner type." She withdrew from most of her classmates in school, and from others in general, and relied on computer websites or the pages of books for entertainment and social interactions. The few friends she did have were as shy and reclusive as she, and were ostracized from the mainstream peer group as much as Lee.

In middle school, as Lee approached puberty, she descended into a depression. She would come directly home from school and lock herself in her room “all the time and didn’t want to talk to anyone. [She] was always alone.” She attributed a portion of her depression to the relocation to Germany. Unable to speak the language and not having any friends, Lee felt isolated. “That’s where my whole depression started,” she recollected,

But my sexual orientation plays a key part in it, I’d have to say. After I found out I was a lesbian, I felt like I couldn’t be myself, that I would have to pretend to be into guys just to fit in, because I hardly fit in as it was – I didn’t want to ostracize myself anymore than I was already.

She often felt awkward around other girls, but as she grew more conscious of her sexual orientation, she became “real nervous” and tried “to avoid them.” In order to ignore her attraction for some of her female classmates, Lee opted to spend more of her time with the boys. Some of her male companions interpreted this as her “flirting with them,” and they responded in kind. As the peer pressure to have a boyfriend mounted, Lee reluctantly conceded, and dated some of the boys at her school. “I guess it was just that hormone thing – all the girls, they all want a boyfriend, so I was like ‘okay, I guess I need one, too’.” By eighth grade, Lee realized that having a boyfriend “sucked,” and was not something she wished to continue.

One of Lee’s obstacles in coping with her sexuality was her age. She was twelve when she first “started noticing stuff.” Initially, she “tried to pass it off as bisexual,” so she “could just forget about that part” - “that part” being her attraction to other females. Attempting to adjust to her new understanding of herself, Lee nonchalantly informed her mother that she was “bisexual” as they drove to the market one afternoon. Her mother slowly turned her head, face expressionless, and “was like, ‘Well, okay,’ . . . and she also said, ‘I think you’re a

little too young to be knowing that.” In a manner typical to early adolescence, Lee immediately dismissed her mother’s comment with a concise “whatever.”

Lee claimed that she “got used to it,” but in reality, she “hit a very big denial stage,” and spent the better part of two years trying “to ignore” her feelings. She allowed herself to ponder her interest in women from time to time, but as feelings of discomfort arose, she would disregard her romantic attractions and return to self-denial. Ironically, Lee voraciously read a multitude of romance stories about gay men, yet she continued to harbor the feeling that “being a lesbian was bad.”

Lee “internalized” her feelings, “trying not to isolate” herself, though she asserted that her actions only “isolated [her] even more.” She admitted, “[B]eing different caused my minor depression to increase until it gradually completely took over my life.”

Being gay really makes you question your identity; at least, that’s what happened to me. I kept asking myself why I was like that, and questioned myself whether I was really ‘gay’ or whether it was just a stage...or whether I imagined it.

She fabricated “excuses” to justify “being gay,” declaring that she was only attracted to women because she “was just lonely.” She temporarily convinced herself that she was attracted to “pretty” men: males who “cross-dressed”, wore make-up and “looked like women.” This perpetual cycle of reasoning consumed Lee to the point that she developed insomnia. She would log onto computer chat rooms in the middle of the night, desperately trying to keep the avalanche of thoughts at bay. During the day, she would be so absorbed in her circular thinking pattern that classmates assumed “she was stuck up” and “didn’t want to be near her.”

The denial continued until Lee returned to the United States last May. As she heard people making “gay jokes,” Lee remarked that “it really started bugging” her again. She “did research,” “read books,” and, once again, “tried to get used to it.” She accepted the fact that she “just wasn’t into boys,” and that she was a lesbian rather than bisexual. I asked her what her biggest roadblock to acceptance was, and she replied,

I just can’t get pass the fact that if I really am ‘out’ about it, then people will be really angry with me. I just don’t want people telling me everyday that I’m going to hell and that kind of thing.

Although she professed to “not feeling very comfortable” with her sexuality, she proceeded to venture forward, convincing herself that “in time,” she would be “pretty comfortable with it.” It is with this attitude of determination that she entered her freshmen year in high school.

Lee’s school was a sizable suburban public high school in one of the largest school systems in the Southeast. The school was well integrated, with the number of Caucasians approximately equal to the number of African Americans, plus a small percentage of Hispanics and Asians. This high-performing, traditional curriculum school was located in the northwest section of the county, and enrolled students from all socioeconomic levels.

As one of nearly eighteen hundred students, it was not surprising that Lee would be “shy” as she embarked on her high school career. She cultivated a few friendships, but, in general, she “kept to herself” and remained “low-key.” She described the majority of her classmates as “immature.” More than once, she witnessed people “being bullied” by students who “beat people up for no reason.” She admitted to being “nervous” around other students, and avoided doing anything “to make them want to beat [her] up.”

She often overheard her peers joke about other students “being gay,” and while the comments were not targeted at her directly, she felt “singled out.” She elaborated on that

statement with two specific examples. On one occasion, a young man in her ROTC class wrote, “I Love Joe” on his arm and ran around the classroom demanding to know who had written on his arm. In her English class, a student wrote, “I Love Boys” on the paper belonging to another student sitting beside him. The student who wrote the statement jumped out of his seat, pointed to the other student’s paper and announced to the class what the young man had presumably written. The class erupted with laughter and taunts. Lee lamented that the innocent student was called a “fruitcake” for weeks following that incident. “It’s just stupid,” Lee sighs, “It happens. It’s always there.”

Comparing her experience here with the one in Germany, Lee contended that the students in this school were “harsh.” I queried what she meant by that. She responded, “Cause I know they’re not playing.”

They really think that [being gay] is something disgusting. They really think that it’s abnormal. And it really, really bothers me. There’s nothing I can do about it, but tune it out.

Initially, the incessant verbal harassment hurt Lee intensely. For one week Lee was “so depressed about it” that she was unable to “concentrate on anything.” She soon realized that the only way she was going to succeed was to “tune it out” so that she could “concentrate on her work.”

I inquired if she had any fears at school. Lee confessed that she feared being ‘out’ at school, “cause if my teachers were against that, they might give me bad grades, and I really want to get into a good college.” Also, being a member of the ROTC class, Lee worried not only about her classmates’ reactions, but whether her instructors “would kick [her] out or not.” She had also been planning to start a Gay Straight Alliance at her school and had some trepidation about that. She surmised that if she started the club, she would then “have to be

president,” which would “make her the main person.” Lee continued, “[I]f you join a group like that, you’re going to get teased, no matter what. I guess if you just ignore it, it will stop.” She predicted that the benefits of the club would allay her fears. She “wouldn’t feel so alone.” She also reasoned that if she was “feeling this bad, there’s probably other people that do” as well. Believing that idea made it easier for Lee to pursue the establishment of the alliance.

Knowing that she had been earning As and Bs in her classes, I asked her to talk about her relationships with her teachers. She originally stated that she did not think very highly of her teachers. She then paused, and in a softer tone, answered, “I like my teachers, but they just teach . . . I really don’t want to talk to them about anything non-academic.” She had similar feelings about her guidance counselors. She lacked sufficient trust in her counselors to confide in them about a problem. Her general attitude toward the administrators pulsed with negativity, primarily because she interpreted their silence about LGBT issues to mean that they “want to ignore it.”

It was apparent that Lee experienced adversities in school as she internally struggled with her sexual identity. While her academic performance remained strong through the years, her emotional turmoil provided obstacles that intermittently interfered with her class work. Choosing not to develop personal connections with the adults at school, Lee elected to seek support for her challenges elsewhere.

### **The Offbeat Outsider**

From her early years in elementary school through her early years in high school, Kay remembered getting “teased a lot” for being “offbeat.” Her classmates “didn’t like” her, because she was “weird” and “not a very social person.” Kay recalled, “I didn’t fit in . . . I



wasn't big with the whole hanging out with groups." One way that Kay coped with the stress and anxiety of being different was to "isolate" herself. She found solace in reading "way too much," and then she "drew" and "read some more." She ascribed some of her difference to her "creative" father and his preference for "art museums" over "playing ball" or "video games." She also believed she "wasn't a big hit" with her female classmates due to her choices of "baggy clothes" and "climbing trees" when most of the other girls conversed about the latest trends in fashion.

Middle school brought more difficulties as her pattern of earning As and Bs came to a swift halt. Kay's grades plummeted as she "started to get really depressed."

I was bored, and lonely, and really didn't care about school. I felt like an outcast. Like, I really didn't click with anybody . . . I was just depressed and unhappy with everything . . . I felt like an outsider.

In sixth and seventh grade, Kay was academically unsuccessful as she explored her own identity and attempted to connect with a group to which she could belong. From the age of ten, Kay had an awareness of her attraction to females. She had been "sitting in gym class", watching the other students running around, and commenting to herself, "Hey, that girl's kind of cute!" When she looked at some of the boys, nothing registered, yet when she once again turned her attention to the girls, she noted, "Hey, that girl's kind of cute!" That event essentially prompted the investigation into her sexual orientation. Initially, Kay tried to "piece things together," but she "wasn't even familiar with being gay or bi," so she took some time to "figure things out."

In the summer of her thirteenth year, Kay was sleeping over at a friend's house when she began to read "some girl's, like, journal or blog or something." The text in which Kay was so engrossed clarified "how [the author] figured out she was bi, and I'm like, 'Hey, that

sounds kind of familiar.’ Then I figured I was.” Shortly thereafter, Kay took the risk and confided in one of her closest friends. Kay recalled that a few months earlier, a young man told her friend that he was gay. Her friend accepted his sexuality without any problem. Kay reasoned that her friend would be equally accepting of her as well. Kay then disclosed to her friend that she was bisexual. The friend grinned and responded, ““Oh cool, so am I.” Kay sighed with relief.

Shortly after this incident, Kay disclosed her sexual orientation to her mother. One summer night, before she went to her friend’s house for a “sleepover,” Kay wrote a letter and left it for her mother to read. Kay’s mother picked her up the next morning, and affirmed, “I read your letter. I’m okay with it. It’ll be fine. I love you anyways.” Her mother then insisted that Kay tell her father, but she refused. Ultimately, it was the mother who communicated with the father. Although the father adjusted more slowly to the news, Kay attested that both parents were “really supportive.”

It was another two years before Kay professed to her small circle of friends that she was “gay.” “They took it well,” she concluded. I probed further and inquired about the change of identity. She explained, “I was, like, 13, and I really didn’t know what gay was.”

I didn’t know how people would react to gay, but at the time, I was, like, still pretty young, so, “oh, okay, [bisexual] sounds about right.” And that, and it’s like, you’re in middle school, early high school, you’re still under pressure to be the ‘straight girl’.

In her freshman year in high school, Kay finally realized that she did not “like guys.” She had been dating a young man for three months when it dawned on her that she loved him “as a friend,” but she was not attracted to him. After she acknowledged these platonic feelings for her boyfriend, Kay stated, “That’s when I told people I’m gay.” As she accepted her

sexual identity, Kay altered her physical appearance. In addition to her usual baggy clothes, Kay donned a pair of black military boots and shaved her head. This new, more radical look certainly caught the attention of her high school peers.

Kay attended a high school whose enrollment and racial diversity were comparable to Lee's, except that it was located in an adjacent school system. Unlike Lee's traditional high school, Kay's school had a pre-engineering focus. Located in an affluent section of the county, this school vaunted high test scores, great extracurricular programs, and three state-champion sports teams. Although the school had a reputation of being relatively liberal and accepting of difference, Kay did experience harassment on a regular basis.

In her first two years of high school, Kay avoided walking alone in the hallways, especially the less traveled ones, because she was often the target of both verbal and physical provocation. As an almost daily occurrence, "guys would scream 'dyke' down the hall."

Finally, I'm like, 'Yeah, guys, I *am* a lesbian.' So, I'd get knocked into, I had to change how I would go from one class to another, because . . . people used to knock into me all the time. They'd be like, "What the fuck is it – it's a girl – it's a boy. What is it? What are you?" "I'm a dyke!" I just kind of like chuckled, that's how I get out of situations. Otherwise, it's, like, five foot girl taking on six foot muscled guy.

In the stairwells, places even more intimidating than the halls, Kay nervously "hopped up the stairs" to escape harm. Kay sourly admitted that in her sophomore year, she would ask herself daily, "Okay, am I going to have a bruised face tomorrow?" The manner in which other students behaved when adults were not around made Kay "feel pretty unsafe" and "disconnected" to the school. I explored this harassment a bit further, and queried whether Kay informed her teachers, parents or administrators about her negative experiences. She

had notified her father and one of her teachers, but she convinced them to leave it alone as Kay was too “shy” at that time to confront the issue directly.

Internally, Kay continued to feel “confused and frustrated.” Even though she had numerous bisexual friends, she was the only lesbian she knew in the school, and that “made [her] feel still kind of like on the edge of things.”

I was very much alone. I had, I still didn’t know any other gay people. So, there was no one. And so I was like, “What am I doing here?”

Kay’s mild depression grew more severe. This depression and the hostility of her classmates exacerbated her already diagnosed obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and attention deficit disorder (ADD). The combination of all of these factors had a devastating impact on her grades. She flatly stated, “I didn’t do too well in school.” Because of her ADD, Kay “couldn’t focus.” She was highly distracted by movements in and around the classroom. Compounding that dilemma “was the OCD.” She stressed “about stuff too much,” escalating to the point where she would yell, “No, fuck it, I’m just not doing it.” She asserted it was her disorders that “held [her] back in school, not the fact that [she] was gay.”

Even though Kay had difficulties concentrating on her schoolwork, she expressed positive feelings toward most of her teachers. She enjoyed her “cool” teachers, especially the ones who taught history, psychology and Honors English. “Some teachers are good, some teachers are bad,” explained Kay. The teachers who appeared to be least tolerant, in Kay’s opinion, were the “coaches.” As she walked down the hall one day, wearing her “Hate-Free Zone” shirt, Kay overheard one coach whisper to another, “Oh, no jokes right now, there’s gay kids near by.”

Aside from her own personal tribulations, Kay relayed a story about one of her gay male friends and an incident that occurred in one of their English classes during the previous school year. According to Kay, “He’s as gay as it gets.”

So, people are not a big fan of him. He’s just way too ADHD, touchy-feely, off-the-wall, loose in the head. So, like, he’d get picked on. They’d make gay comments, and the teacher would laugh along with them. I felt like if she wasn’t the teacher, and didn’t have that teacher power of writing me up, I’d hit her.

Fortunately, Kay opted for a more mature retaliation. She wrote a series of papers regarding “how gay people should have rights.” Then she read a book “with gay characters” and penned an essay about it. “It didn’t make her too happy,” Kay confessed.

After she chartered her school’s Gay Straight Alliance in the middle of her sophomore year, Kay’s attitude toward the school, its administrators and the student body improved. Kay discovered that some of the people were “not hostile so much as they’re curious,” because they had not been “exposed to it.” In her observation, the majority of the administrators and teachers advocated, or at least tolerated, non-heterosexual students. As she accepted her sexuality, she learned how to utilize her resources and contend with the hostility.

### **The Social Outcast**

Reyna transferred to numerous schools throughout her childhood as her family relocated to four different states and at least seven different towns in the first twelve years of her life. Reyna took her family’s transience in stride, quickly adjusted to her new environment, and concentrated on her academics. She described herself as a “social outcast,” never quite fitting in with her more extroverted classmates. Reyna was often teased, she noted, because “the people who weren’t too social were picked on a lot.” Shy and reclusive, Reyna

surrounded herself with a “group of friends” that were “basically all of the social outcasts from around the school.”

Her perception of being an “outcast” and “different” persisted throughout her middle school and early high school years. As she grew and evolved as a girl, an adolescent, and then a young woman, Reyna’s position as outsider remained constant while the reasons for being ostracized varied. In middle school, gender expression and sexual orientation became the pervasive reasons for the verbal harassment Reyna endured. Her short blonde hair, checkered shirts and baggy cargo pants caused Reyna to be mistaken for a male by both students and teachers. Classmates frequently accused her of “wanting to be a boy” and “being gay.” They yelled at her across the classroom, in the hallways and in the cafeteria. At one point in seventh grade, a girl walked up behind Reyna, tapped her vigorously on the shoulder, and as Reyna turned, she demanded, “Have you got breasts or you got chest?” The classmate then abruptly turned around and stalked away. “That, that was kind of weird, but that’s, yeah, that’s the kind of stuff I got basically everyday,” Reyna recalled.

Adults could be equally insensitive toward Reyna. One particular incident dominated Reyna’s memories of negative teacher experiences. In her eighth grade band class, Reyna sat next to her boyfriend, shoulders touching in a subtle display of affection. The class had a substitute teacher that day, and they were instructed to take a quiz. The substitute addressed Reyna’s boyfriend, “You need to move away from that boy, ‘cause it looks like you’re cheating on the quiz.”

Then [my boyfriend] got real mad, he’s like, “she’s not a boy, she’s a girl, and I think you should apologize.” And the teacher absolutely refused to apologize for it. He’s like, “If she wants an apology, she can ask for one.” And I was just – I laughed, and I wasn’t going to make him apologize.

Reyna chose to “laugh it off,” because she was not “an assertive kind of person,” and lacked the valiance to challenge the authority of a teacher, substitute or not.

In middle school, Reyna’s peers perceived her silence as a confirmation of their accusations. “Well, you’re not saying anything because you know it’s true,” they taunted. Reyna “got sick of hearing of it,” and consciously altered her looks as she entered high school. She “grew her hair out” and “didn’t wear her brothers’ clothes.” Reyna attributed the decrease in “teasing” to her softened appearance and the fact that she “really didn’t respond” to the teasing. Periodically, though, Reyna would have to negotiate the hallways alone, and it was here where she was most vulnerable to attack. She “got pushed into lockers a lot,” and “people would come by and make fag comments.” The administrators supervising this small, rural high school neglected to notice the hostile behavior. Reyna predicted that they “ignored it” so that they could “honestly say, ‘No one does that here. We’ve never had any complaints.’” Even when they were aware of the vexation, the administrators said nothing, for if they did, they feared “it would cause problems.” Despite all of the harassment she encountered, Reyna claimed that she “never felt unsafe” in her school.

During the time that she struggled to shield herself from external rejection, Reyna battled her own internalized homophobia. Initially, while in elementary school, Reyna considered her attraction to females “fine” and “natural.” In sixth grade, Reyna would “fade away” in thought as she stared at the “pretty” female classmate who sat at the desk adjacent to hers. “I could sit there and do that for, like, hours,” she confessed. At that point in time, she “didn’t know what ‘gay’ was” and thought it “was perfectly okay to like girls.”

However, when she moved to this state in seventh grade and learned what the term ‘gay’ meant, her opinions changed. She recalled one afternoon in the school cafeteria, sitting with

her friends and observing two girls holding hands at another table. One of her friends started “making fun of them.” Members of the group denigrated the girls, proclaiming their affection for one another to be “wrong.” Since her friends disapproved, Reyna “assumed that it was wrong” as well. Through the remainder of middle school, she “was one of the biggest homophobes you’d ever meet.” Whenever she “had a crush on a girl,” she “just ignored it.” She convinced herself, “That’s wrong, I can’t do that.”

This internal reprimand, however, did not preclude Reyna’s attraction to other females. In the fall of her thirteenth year, Reyna’s best friend introduced her to an older female student. This young woman was “100% totally open about who she was.” She emanated an “I’m gay and if you don’t like that, you can kiss my ass’ kind of attitude.” Reyna was mesmerized by this young woman who appeared so confident, not caring in the least what other people thought. Reyna developed the “biggest crush” on this self-assured woman, and spent the evening walking around at the football game holding her hand. Reyna confided in her friend about the crush, and her friend nonchalantly replied, “Yeah, we figured for forever that you were gay, and you just didn’t want to admit it.”

Reyna assured herself that this was merely an isolated event, but as time passed, she developed crushes on “the girl in her English class,” and then “the girl at the gas station,” followed by a myriad of crushes on girls “in high school.” Finally, she acknowledged her feelings:

I’ve got to get over it, I can’t, you know, sit around and not, you know, act as if I’m not gay or whatever, because I mean, it’s obvious that I am. It took, it took a little while after that, but that’s when it really started to change. That’s when I sort of gave up acting like I wasn’t.



I inquired if she went through a stage of defining herself as a “bisexual,” as was the case with two of the other female students. She nodded her head affirmatively, and stated that she still identified as bisexual. She added, “I actually just broke up with a boyfriend of mine, and before him, I was with a girl.”

Since Reyna was the only one of the six I interviewed who self-identified as bisexual, I probed further into specific experiences related to her bisexuality. I explained to her that, several years ago, I had conducted a pilot study (Eaton, 2001) with bisexual female students who contended it was easier to be bisexual than it was to be a lesbian in high school. I asked what her experience had been. She responded that she agreed with that statement, because “people are pretty accepting, I guess, well, not accepting, but they’re not as hard on bisexual people, I guess, as they are on lesbians.” She reflected for a moment, and then continued,

But then again, like, I know from my being bisexual, I get a lot of crap from the straight people around where I live, but I also get crap from the gay community, because they’re like, “Oh, you just want the best of both worlds. You can’t be straight and you can’t be lesbian at the same time. You have got to pick one. It’s not possible to be both.”

Reyna agreed that in some ways it was easier to be bisexual, because you can “still date a guy and people won’t give you crap about it.” The advantage to being a lesbian, she reasoned, was there at least was one “select group of people” that was “okay with you.”

I quoted her some findings from research I had read that proclaimed bisexuals had higher rates of depression, lower grades, and less meaningful connections with their teachers than lesbian students. Again, I asked for her insight. She thought the ideas were “ridiculous.” She stated that the “number of bisexual females at her school was overwhelming,” and nearly all of them were outstanding students. She was “best friends” with her math teacher, and perceived all the relationships she had with her teachers to be positive. She presumed that it

was “discrimination issues” and “the way they’re treated” that affected the bisexual students’ academic performance, not their sexual orientation per se. She related to that, because for a brief period of time in her own high school experience, Reyna “was way down” because she “got picked on all the time.” She shut down and “stopped worrying about homework.” She then realized how “silly” it was to allow others to sabotage her grades, and resumed her prior pattern of achievement. She concluded, “It’s just the same as everyone else: there are certain people who just excel academically, and certain people that just don’t.”

I inquired if she disclosed her bisexuality to the people she dated. She replied that she was comfortable with her sexual orientation and usually shared that information with whomever she became romantically involved. Sometimes the males she told “got weird,” about it, claiming that two women together were “hot.” More often than not, they were “pretty cool” with it. On one occasion, in the school she currently attended, Reyna had a disturbing experience with an ex-boyfriend. He feared Reyna would tell his new, heterosexual girlfriend that he was bisexual, so he “personally attacked” her. He spread rumors around campus, proclaiming “she’s done this with people, she’s done that with people. He let everyone know I was bi.” She “didn’t care,” because most of the people with whom she was close already knew. As long as her parents did not know, she was fine. “I didn’t care that he was telling people. It was the fact that he was telling people in hopes of hurting me.” She murmured, “It happens. It happens a lot.”

Reyna spent the last two years of high school at a specialized, academically challenging school where she lived on campus. With a student population hovering around 1500, this school boasted a relatively diverse population. On average, the school's population was 12% African American, 65% Caucasian, 3% Hispanic, 18% Asian American, and 1% Native

American. The diverse population was reflected in the wide variety of extra-curricula clubs and events that it hosted. She stressed that the school was “safe physically,” but “psychologically and emotionally, it might not be.” She declared, “Everything is kind of underground at our school.” Reyna elaborated with a story: As she and several other members of the alliance network prepared to leave the school to attend a holiday event last month, another student queried where they were going. Reyna informed him of their holiday plans, and as he walked away, he muttered, almost inaudibly, “Fucking faggots.” She did not know who the student was, and she did not follow up with a complaint, “We don’t want problems caused,” Reyna professed, “because, I mean, you have to live there.” There were “no fights” at the school, and there were rarely any major commotions on campus, but Reyna indicated that the discomfort came from “little tiny things . . . they’re really not nice.”

As president of the school’s diversity club, Reyna generally enjoyed a cooperative relationship with the administration. There was one specific situation this past fall where Reyna’s plans for her club to sponsor Transgender Day of Remembrance conflicted with the school’s Open House weekend for prospective students. Reyna gestured with great animation as she chronicled her administration’s resistance to the event. She recounted at length all of the details, fervently asserting her position that the diversity club had a right to display its posters. Not swaying from her opinion, but willing to compromise, Reyna negotiated with several administrators. She finally succeeded in orchestrating the plans for this observation.

Reyna proposed areas in which her school could improve, but, overall, she attested that it “was pretty good about” promoting diversity and tolerance. Throughout her school experience, Reyna successfully developed favorable relationships with most of her teachers

and a few of the administrators. She transcended the hostility she confronted in her rural school system, and found the confidence to transform the negativity at her current school into productive, educational opportunities.

### **The Persistent Tomboy**

Gliding through the trees, dressed in Robin Hood's green tights and saving damsels in distress, Carrie depicted the stereotypical "tomboy." Often mistaken for a boy, Carrie openly acknowledged her sexuality relatively early in life. "I think everyone already knew," she suggested as she reflected on her "coming out" story. In middle school, Carrie's awareness of her sexual orientation drifted to the surface in physical education class. She was uncomfortable changing in front of her female classmates, but did not comprehend why she was so hesitant. Some time passed before she consciously understood her behavior. "In middle school through high school gym," Carrie divulged,

I refused to change in public. I was always in a bathroom stall. At the time, I didn't know why, I wasn't being shy, but by the time high school rolled around, I realized I was refusing to let myself look at my schoolmates "that way."

Despite the awkwardness of disrobing around her peers, Carrie continued to explore her feelings. While in eighth grade, Carrie met her high school sweetheart. "Ironically enough, we met in sewing class," she remarked. I imagined she chuckled as she wrote that line, a crooked grin spreading across her tanned face. The two young ladies realized their attraction to one another at "one particular sleepover." It was "just her and I, when we both realized, 'hey, I'm flirting with a girl.'" From that moment of recognition through the next few years of high school, these two remained an inseparable couple.

I did not attain the specific statistics of her school, but Carrie's correspondences conveyed a ubiquitous atmosphere of intolerance. As she entered high school, Carrie was characterized as "the 'dyke'." She was "out with [her] girlfriend of the time," and a "day didn't go by without [her] being hackled with some kind of name." For this lone lesbian couple in the midst of a Midwestern conservative school community, verbal harassment was a daily occurrence.

At times, the verbal hostility manifested itself in written form. In her freshman year, one of Carrie's classmates wrote a poem about her in English class. This student explicated "how homosexuality was wrong and how the Holocaust was brilliant." He beseeched his teacher to read the poem aloud in class. The teacher denied his request "and failed him for it."

Unfortunately, Carrie painfully discovered that not every teacher shared her English teacher's compassion and enlightenment. On one occasion, Carrie was "called to the principal's [office] for excessive PDA," or public displays of affection. Apparently, "[they] were written up by a teacher for 'kissing and fondling' in the cafeteria." Carrie vehemently defended her innocence, as the alleged event was reported on a day when her girlfriend "remained home sick from school" and the displays of affection "never could've taken place." Carrie was "appalled that someone in power would make up lies" about her. Dejectedly, she added, "I thought the teachers were the only ones on my side."

Compared to other members of the school community, the teachers were her biggest advocates. Carrie asserted that the administration was "by far [their] biggest enemy after other students." In one particular example, an assistant principal

approached Carrie at some point in her freshman year and proclaimed that she “was not allowed to kiss her [girlfriend] before she got on her bus.” Once again, Carrie erected a wall of resistance and argued with the administrator. She was “shocked” at his request, because “straight kids could practically have sex on lockers, but a peck goodbye was making everyone uncomfortable.” This perpetual inconsistent enforcement of policies embittered Carrie toward school. The negative attitude coupled with poor grades subsequently resulted in her leaving school in her junior year.

Carrie experienced high school as an “uphill battle.” Determined to live according to her understanding of her identity, Carrie encountered hostility on a regular basis. Intolerant classmates and administrators exemplified a “system” that “rejected” Carrie. She withstood the wave of “wrath” for numerous years in an effort to “make it easier for others,” but the turbulent waters refused to recede. She reacted to the contentiousness by removing herself from the unwelcoming environment.

### **The Conformist Turned Activist**

Alicia’s early memories revolved around her sprawling extended family. She has maintained a close relationship with these members of her family for more than three decades, even though she did have moments when she was not always comfortable in their presence. In her pre-adolescent years, her earliest sense of ‘difference’ emerged when she unconsciously recoiled from the jokes her father’s relatives often told at family gatherings. She said they had a “tendency to tell not so politically correct jokes” that usually portrayed “black people, or Hispanic people, or gay and lesbian people” in a negative manner. “I don’t even think I was dealing with any sexuality issues at that point,” Alicia mused,

I didn't like the fact that they were making fun of people. They were putting people down, and that was making me feel bad and it made me feel uncomfortable.

This feeling of 'difference' grew incrementally over the years, and in seventh grade, it echoed closer to the surface as Alicia's close friends decided to try out for the cheerleading squad, something she herself had no interest in doing. "I guess that was my first feeling of maybe I'm a little bit different than the rest of them," Alicia recalled. The decision not to cheerlead caused a shift in Alicia's set of friends, so she was not as "popular" as she once was, but she relegated a large portion of her energy to "fitting in," and at least remaining at the "second level of popular." She "needed to fit in," to conform "with everybody else." It was a "very big thing" for her.

Her first conscious crush on a girl occurred in middle school. She followed the girl wherever she went, but "could not figure out" why she "liked her so much." She convinced herself that she just "wanted to be like her," because this girl "was getting all the guys." A moment later in the conversation, Alicia admitted that she "never was that interested" in boys, but she felt "so much pressure" to date them, to go along with what the other girls were doing, to adhere to what was "in" and "acceptable."

Later, in ninth grade, Alicia developed her "first major, heavy duty crush on a girl." She claimed that she "absolutely knew" these were romantic feelings, because she internally understood that "this was not normal."

I followed her around. Like, it lasted until, she was a year ahead of me, and, like, it lasted until she went off to college. Yeah, because I was in eleventh grade. I mean, it just – ninth, tenth, eleventh grade, I just followed her around. It's crazy.

She attempted to conceal her feelings from herself as well as others. She recognized “on some level” that she “should not be feeling this way.” Alicia remembered feeling petrified, because she “knew it was just more than wanting to emulate her,” and “fantasized about kissing her.” “And God-forbid,” she thought, “if anybody ever found out that I was feeling that way.” The closer her attractions toward females bubbled to the surface, the more she dated guys “to show everyone else” that she “wasn’t having these other feelings.” She “experimented with drugs and alcohol” and engaged in “dangerous sexual behaviors” in an effort to distance herself from her attraction to women.

I asked her if it was her home or religious background that influenced her aversion to homosexuality. She replied that she had no religious background, and aside from her father’s relatives and their “politically incorrect” jokes, her family expressed no dissent for homosexuality, or diversity in general. She explained that her mother had several close gay and lesbian friends, people Alicia had known most of her life, and therefore pressure from her immediate family was not an issue. She stated that “it was just society.” Growing up in the 1980s proved challenging for anyone with a non-heterosexual orientation. AIDS was the controversial topic of the times, and Alicia’s peers perceived that “it was a homosexual disease and it was killing people, and they deserve to die.” Alicia feared AIDS, and even worried that her mother might “catch it” from some of her gay male friends. Feeling the pressure from her circle of friends, Alicia allowed herself to accept that being gay or lesbian “was just not normal.”

In her undergraduate years at a highly regarded Midwestern university, Alicia slowly began to shed her conformist identity, replacing it with the embryonic layers of activism and social justice. Not yet ready to publicly battle injustice, she “was becoming an activist in her



own mind.” During these years, she entered her “first relationship with a woman.” It ended on a devastating note in the fall semester of her senior year. “It was really bad,” Alicia sighed. The recollection of this memory was one of the few times I witnessed that perpetual smile recede from her face.

And it was a bad experience, and so I took a semester off, and I went to live with my dad in Florida for a little while, and then I came back and finished up school, so I was about a semester behind.

Alicia did graduate and relocated to Russia and Eastern Europe to teach English for a period of time. The denial she experienced in high school resurfaced, and her internalized homophobia forced her to ignore her lesbian orientation throughout most of her twenties. Alicia “was really struggling” with her identity. She remembered “having crushes and never really telling anybody about it, never really exploring it.” She was aware of her non-heterosexuality, but “never did anything about it.” It was not until she enrolled in graduate school that she resolved to “come out” and “be herself.”

Alicia moved to New England to attend graduate school, and determined that this “was the year” that she was “going to come out,” although she “just didn’t know how [she] was going to do it.” However, the “how” became clearer as opportunities unfolded. It turned out that one of her professors sponsored a LGBT group at her house each month, and when the upcoming meeting was announced in class, Alicia decided to attend. Shortly thereafter, she participated in a “really big diversity training” with the entire student body. At one point in the evening, all of the students were directed “to get into the group to which you most identify.” Alicia rallied up the courage to stroll across the room and join the other students she knew from the LGBT group. This was “her big moment.”

We were supposed to be putting together a presentation of our needs as a group for the school community. And I was, I was just so upset, because this was, this was my 'coming out'. So everybody just start proceeding to tell their 'coming out' stories. We're all crying. We're sitting in this room, everybody's crying, we're all just bonding like you would not believe, and we didn't do it, we didn't have our presentation done.

Each group was required to present their needs to the rest of the audience, so when the time came for her group to proffer, Alicia accompanied her cohorts to the front of the room and "looked down" the entire time. She "'came out' in a big way to the entire school community." The initial reactions of friends and classmates were overwhelming for Alicia. She "was not ready to deal with all the questions that came up afterwards." However, she managed to negotiate her way through the tumult by sheltering herself in the midst of the school's LGBT organization. Alicia "stayed with that group the rest of the year," and her "life changed completely" as she accepted her sexual identity.

As a part of her coursework, Alicia facilitated community trainings on issues such as "diversity," "stereotypes," and "homophobia." A counselor she met during these trainings asked her to advise a Gay Straight Alliance at a local high school. She attended the meetings and "just listened as they were pulling their stuff together." They discussed "how they were getting harassed a lot" and the fact they "formed a support club" to provide "a place where they could all come together." Alicia professed that while these New England students "dealt with harassment," their experiences were "more positive than the stories" she has heard since she moved to the South.

When she relocated to this state nearly eight years ago to fulfill her internship requirement, community organizations for LGBT youth were in their infancy and Gay Straight Alliance clubs were almost non-existent. In an effort to connect with non-

heterosexual high school students, Alicia met with a newly formed Gay Straight Alliance at a local charter school. “For some reason,” Alicia reflected, “a big chunk of their student population identified as LGBT.” They were “looking for ways to make schools safer,” because “they all had bad experiences in their individual schools” prior to enrolling in the charter school.

Alicia successfully expedited trainings with these students and other student groups from the region’s private high schools. The public schools at that time, however, “would not let [her] in.” Even representatives from the Department of Public Instruction declined from collaborating with Alicia on programs to enlighten the education community on LGBT issues. “We’re not going to talk about these issues,” the representatives claimed, “[because] this was too controversial.” In the late nineties, Alicia asserted, “there was a lot of fear out there.”

Fortunately for non-heterosexual students, persistence prevailed and times changed. In the past five years, Alicia and a core group of volunteers were invited to present LGBT issues at state conferences, conduct trainings at the Character Education conference and participate on state-level Safe Schools committees. “They’ve been real allies of ours,” Alicia added,

When I used to go and do trainings, people used to say that this was not an issue that they were dealing with in their school, that there’s no gay people at their school. I never hear that anymore. What I hear is, “This is a huge issue in my school, and I need to know what to do about it.” There’s been a big evolution there . . . they’re dealing with it, because of the [Gay Straight Alliances]. So they can’t say that it’s not an issue anymore.

Alicia acknowledged that the state's education system made "a huge step" in how they approached LGBT issues. However, for some of our students, change did not transpire quickly enough.

In one specific example, a local high school student requested Alicia's assistance after this student experienced consistent verbal and physical harassment from her classmates. Alicia met with several of the school's teachers and administrators to brainstorm both short term and long term solutions to the hostility. By the end of the meeting, Alicia was content with the plan of action they had forged that afternoon. In the student's eyes, the plan was "too slow and too incremental." She responded to the adults plan with exasperation, "That's not good enough. I'm in school, and I have to go back to that school tomorrow." The depth of emotion in the student's voice "woke them up." Alicia stored that memory as a reminder that "it's not good enough,"

and we have to push harder and we have to push for it faster, because we still have students in schools, we do have students in schools that are committing suicide, and we have students in schools that are dropping out and not doing well because of their sexual identity. And, you know, until we don't have that, we have to push, and we have to push hard and fast.

Alicia contended that she knew students who were not performing well in school. She heard the students share their "suicidal thoughts" and stories about "being in different psychiatric wards at different times." Many of these same students, Alicia continued, were able to muster "incredible courage" when confronting "hostile administrators" and accomplish "some incredible work" in their schools.

Alicia expected that she would "always work with youth in some fashion," because this was her "life's passion," and it encouraged her to grow both as an activist and as a person. This was a "frustrating" journey for her at times, but it was also "kind of exciting." Standing

up to politicians and other powerful members of the community taught her to build “a thick skin,” because she “was always being talked bad about.” She no longer worried about “fitting in.” She was willing to battle “the big boys” so that students could stretch the boundaries of conformity and establish their own niche of acceptable difference.

### **The Token Teacher**

Jaime had what she called a “charmed life.” She knew little “drama” in her childhood and adolescence, and life as an adult advanced smoothly. She did not progress through stages of awareness, nor did she spiral between the acceptance and denial of her sexuality. At age 13, Jaime developed a crush on an eighth grade student teacher, and it was at that point she recognized her attraction to females. The student teacher was a track star at the local university, and, at times, invited Jaime to the meets. Jaime enjoyed being the recipient of this “attention outside of school” and “wanted to please [the student teacher] tremendously.” Whenever the student teacher was near, Jaime claimed that her stomach would do “flip-flops.” She “never thought twice about the fact that it was a woman.” Jaime was able to label her orientation the following year, when a friend taught her the definitions of ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian.’

I inquired as to what transpired in Jaime’s life that enabled her to avoid the “turmoil” that many non-heterosexual people encountered in their lives. She shook her head and shrugged her shoulders, not entirely certain how she managed to circumvent the “negative experiences.” However, Jaime did credit her parents “for not pressuring her to be a particular way.” They consistently supported her for who she was – “tomboy,” “athletic,” “mischievous” – and did not constrain her to a boundaried definition of female or feminine. Her teachers also accepted her as she was. When the student teacher she so admired left the

school, one of Jaime's other teachers approached her, gently placed a hand on her shoulder and told her it "was going to be alright." Jaime's ears never heard jeers or ridicule in the hallways or cafeteria, and her body never bruised from an elbow in her side or a push into the cold metal of a locker. She felt "very fortunate to have had such support and positive experiences" throughout her childhood and adolescence.

As a senior in high school, Jaime entered into her first long-term relationship, one that would continue through all four of her college years. Dating this woman was a complex undertaking, because she "lived a distance away," and Jaime had to contrive "elaborate schemes and many excuses" so as to "maximize her time with the girlfriend." Jaime recalled, "Every second was precious." The situation also caused Jaime much guilt, because it was the "only time" in her life that she was "even slightly dishonest with her mother."

Jaime attended a private, Christian college in the eastern portion of the state. She liked the college because it had, in her opinion, "one of the best small education schools in the state." Jaime provided additional background, "It was interesting,"

there was a huge homosexual population at this school, because all these gay boys, and it was mostly the guys, . . . would come to this little college, because they could get their parents off their backs, because they were going to a Christian school – and so it looked good to their mommies. But there's also a huge lesbian population, because we had great athletics there. I didn't know all this coming in. I was just excited that I had a scholarship, and my parents didn't have to pay for me to go to school.

Life on campus was generally placid, with athletics and academics saturating the weekdays and part-time jobs permeating the weekends.

One single negative experience remained separated from the rest of Jaime's positive memories. Jaime had earned her way into college on a volleyball scholarship. She and her teammates bonded closely to their first coach, the woman who recruited Jaime for the school.

In her junior year, Jaime's team was assigned a different coach, a man "who didn't know anything about volleyball." Jaime narrowed her eyes and sneered in my direction as she described the new coach as "a womanizer" and "a slime."

During one afternoon practice, Jaime fell ill and the coach gave her permission to leave early. Forty-five minutes later, members of Jaime's team pounded on her dorm room door "in a rage." The coach had taken advantage of Jaime's premature departure, "sat the team down and said, 'I'm hearing rumors that she, that your teammate's gay, and I want to know how you feel about it, and should I take her scholarship away.'"

So that's the only time I remember ever feeling discriminated against. But the team said, "You kick her off the team, we're all leaving." I mean, they supported me one hundred percent. And so that was the end of that conversation.

Jaime asserted that her intentions at the school were to "play ball" and "get an education." It was not her aspiration to "stir stuff up."

Jaime's college graduation led her to a teaching position in the same school district in which she grew up. She loved her job, but referred to herself as the "token" teacher, because she "was the only gay person in that school for almost ten years." Although she postulated that her principal was unaware, she was "pretty sure" that some of the faculty "knew." She suspected that "there was not much concern," as her "peers" elected her "Teacher of the Year" in the seventh year of her career.

Jaime explained that she felt obligated to work her "ass off" at school in order to "prove" that non-heterosexuals were neither "slime," nor "child molesters," nor "pornography queens." She wanted to be perceived as "normal." This pressure did not originate with her

colleagues, but rather within Jaime herself. “I felt like I had to work harder,” Jaime revealed, “Not that they think I should work harder, but that I think I should.”

I queried whether non-heterosexual students ever specifically reached out to her as they maneuvered their way through the understanding and acceptance of their sexual orientation. Initially, she answered the question more globally by claiming that she “treated everyone the same,” and “a lot of kids” came to her “about a lot of things – a lot of straight kids.” After a moment, she conceded, “I’ve only had a couple of kids that have ‘come out’ to me.”

Jaime proceeded to share the stories of two females who had disclosed their lesbian orientation to her. Ten years ago, one of the students returned to the middle school after starting high school in order to seek Jaime’s support. “The girl was a statistic,” Jaime declared, “She was a total loner. She didn’t have any friends . . . [and] she had no support at home.” The young woman came from a “super religious” family who threatened to “kick her out of the house” and promised that she “would burn in hell forever” if she “didn’t change her ways.”

The young woman’s emotional state grew “progressively worse.” She became increasingly depressed and withdrawn, lost nearly forty pounds, and ended up in the psychiatric ward of one the region’s university hospitals. Shortly after returning to school, she was admitted to another hospital where she remained for several weeks under “suicide watch.” Her academics suffered from her long absences from school, and she struggled to pass her courses. Jaime remembered that the student “graduated on time,” but was required to attend “summer school” in order to do so.

When the young woman was in school, she directed the counselors to call Jaime, not her parents. Jaime knew the high school counselors and communicated with them “every other



day to get information, or to see if [she] could help.” The counselors notified Jaime whenever the student “had been asking” for her. I observed Jaime as her voice trailed off into silence, and I imagined scenes flashing through her mind as she recalled these difficult moments. I mentioned that she and the student must have grown pretty close. Her eyes jounced as her mind shifted back to the present. She corrected me, “Well, no, we weren’t really that close.”

But, she chose me, and I wasn’t going to let her down, but we weren’t really that close. I didn’t know her that well – not as a student. I think she sought me out because she figured I was gay, and like I said, I was the token for a long time at that school. I was it.

The young woman “got her act together,” but “doesn’t speak to her family anymore.” She relocated out of state for a period of time, but recently returned to the area in order to pursue “her second master’s degree.”

The other young woman ‘came out’ in the more recent past, in the spring of 2000. According to Jaime, she “had the support of friends” so she was not a “suicide risk.” She lacked the support of her family, however, and this rejection “was huge.” The student descended into depression and, like the first student, lost an exorbitant amount of weight. She conversed with Jaime about experimenting with drugs, and Jaime encouraged the young woman to seek professional counseling. “I couldn’t give her what she needed. I’m not a professional therapist.” Jaime has continued to call her “now and then” to “check on her.” A frown of sadness and resignation darkened Jaime’s face as she uttered, “She is still struggling.”

I commented to Jaime that many non-heterosexual youth claimed that the majority of the harassment they received from their peers occurred when teachers were not around. Thus, I

asked her if she witnessed any harassment related to sexuality in the classrooms or halls. She relayed a story about a “couple of boys that were ‘flaming’<sup>31</sup>.” They were often “teased by the jock boys.” The teachers would “protect and shield” the students receiving the abuse, and the “teasers got in trouble.” Jaime also described a situation, which manifested in a classroom she was supervising a few days prior to the interview. A student bellowed, “Oh, that’s so gay!” as he judged another student’s artwork. Jaime immediately reprimanded him for his insult. She did not focus on the “gay part,” but on the fact that he was using the phrase as a “put down” and exhibiting behavior that was unacceptable in her presence. Jaime emphasized the fact that harassment of any kind “has never been tolerated.”

In her observation, teachers “never made fun of” a student’s sexual orientation. “As conservative as our school is,” Jaime contended, “They do have a sense of what’s really right and wrong.” She added that in her experience, it was “the coaches, the male coaches” in particular, that were “most sympathetic” to students who were tormented because of their perceived sexual orientation.

Although the teachers were dedicated to eliminating harassment whenever and wherever they observed it materializing, Jaime admitted that there were “a tremendous number of students,” and situations could occur several times before any adult was aware of the problem. The students were “getting more savvy every year” and the intimidation was “getting more sophisticated and more subtle.” Jaime expressed concern that teachers and administrators “don’t hear about [it] as quickly or see [it] as quickly” as they would like to. “And it’s not that we’re not looking,” Jaime concluded, “it’s just that they are getting really good, and so we just have to be more diligent.”

Jaime's school was the most populated middle school in the district, and its students mirrored the county's diversity of race, ethnicity and socioeconomic levels. She and her colleagues were challenged daily by the potential for hostility and victimization. Jaime stressed "communication" as the key to eradicating negative behaviors and maintaining a safe, welcoming school environment. Even if teachers were "uncomfortable" with issues of sexuality, she believed they would do "what's right" for the students. In Jaime's opinion, it was possible to "teach an old dog new tricks," but in order to enlighten the more conservative educators, it would require "a lot of patience" and "a lot of communicating."

### **Beyond the Roadblocks**

In this chapter, the women recounted the journey on which they embarked as they traversed from the awareness to the acceptance of their sexual identity. Each woman voiced the obstacles they encountered, and the emotional and physical pain they endured within the context of school. This chapter concentrated on the negative perspective, acknowledging the array of horrors that many non-heterosexuals continue to experience in their schools.

It is important to depict the negative first, as it becomes the fertilized soil where the seeds of courage and strength germinate, root and emerge. The seeds blossom into a bouquet of actions that propel the students forward. The next chapter will examine the women's support systems and the roles they have accepted in order to create and/or maintain safe school communities.

## **CHAPTER 6: SETTING THE SUPPORT BEAMS**

In construction, the outline of every structure is framed with support beams designed to withstand high winds, heavy rains, intense explosions and a variety of other natural and man-made disasters. The beams are the backbone of a building, the skeleton against which all other materials are fastened. For the women in this study, the support beams in their lives have made it possible for them to progress in their schooling, in their careers and in their growth as adolescents or adults. Despite the difficulties they have confronted, these women have cultivated support systems in several arenas, systems on which they can depend when the energy wanes and the rejections magnify.

As I listen to the voices on the tapes and re-read the coded transcripts, common themes egress. Since some of these supports are common spaces for four out of the six women, I organized the data by themes as opposed to order of interview. The primary supports for these women are their family and friends, their teachers and school administrators, and the in-school and community alliance organizations. These stanchions are intricately connected to the remaining research questions, which address whether each woman considered her school a safe environment and what, if any, role does she have in establishing or promoting what she envisions as a safe and welcoming educational atmosphere.

### **Support from Family and Friends**

Nearly every student I interviewed attested to the support they felt from their parents. That is probably not a surprise considering that each female younger than eighteen had to have parental permission in order to communicate with me. Reyna requested I postpone our interview for the sole purpose of waiting for her eighteenth birthday, at which time her signature alone was sufficient, and she could avoid divulging unwelcomed information to her

parents. Each one of the women connected with at least one friend who bastioned them through the travails of rejection and hostility. With the guidance and affirmation of nurturing bonds encircling them, the women were motivated to transfigure negative events into positive opportunities.

Lee initially hesitated revealing her sexual identity to her mother, because she feared her mother would be disappointed with the idea of having “no grandchildren.” Her mother, however, received the disclosure amenably and desired to understand, not chastise, her daughter. Once back in the United States, Lee’s mother joined an organization for Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, or PFLAG, and read the latest books and articles in order to obtain assistance in raising a healthy lesbian daughter. The mother further demonstrated support by driving Lee to meetings and activities sponsored by the LGBT youth organizations to which she belonged. Lee’s father was informed of her sexual orientation by way of her mother. Lee explained that he “just ignored it,” because he “ignores everything.” It appeared, however, that both of her parents approved of Lee’s decision earlier this fall to seek professional therapy for her depression. “Of course, my parents wouldn’t have given me a choice if I hadn’t made one,” explicated Lee.

Lee now has the assistance of a professional therapist as well as the informal guidance of her “best friend,” Fin, in California. Fin is a transgender who is scheduled to undergo female to male surgery this spring, and then plans to marry his fiancé in the summer. Lee talked excitedly about flying across country to attend their wedding. Two years ago, Lee and Fin met on the Internet, and developed a close relationship by communicating daily via computer. On numerous occasions, Fin noticed Lee on line and would convince her to talk

about the issues that prompted her insomnia. “Talk child, right now or no wedding cake for you” Lee mimicked, revealing one of the few smiles that escaped during the interview.

The support embedded in Lee and Fin’s friendship traveled in both directions. Lee bolstered her own self-confidence by reassuring Fin of his worthiness each time he confronted hostility and rejection. When Fin’s mother threatened “to disown” him, Lee talked to him,

[I] told him that it doesn’t matter anyway, and that [we] love you anyway, and he’s got friends, he doesn’t have to feel like he’s not loved just because his mom says he’s going to hell and that kind of thing, so, basically the “you’re not alone” speech-type thing.

Lee found solace in Fin’s friendship, as he was the one of the few people in her life that she trusted. His compassion sheltered her through many difficult and lonely times.

I inquired if she had any friends like Fin in her high school. She referred to one young man, Denny, who attended many of her classes. On those days when depression clouded Lee’s persona, Denny sensed her withdrawal and remained close, entertaining her with jokes or reassuring her with kindness. Lee described Denny as a “good guy,” and the “only one” at school to whom she would disclose her sexuality. Although Lee permitted few people into her circle of trust, their encouragement was bountiful enough to impel Lee into a more constructive direction.

Like Lee, Kay and Carrie also benefited from the support of their parents. Carrie acknowledged her “parents and family” for being “exceptionally accepting and loving,” and providing her respite from the daily “hackles” she endured at school. Kay received comfort from a mother who was “really supportive” and a dad who was “fine” with her lesbianism. When Kay’s father learned about her victimization at school, he insisted on contacting the principal and rectifying the problem. Kay persuaded her father to abandon that idea, as she

was “overly shy” and feared greater retaliation from her peers if the principal got involved. As in Lee’s case, Kay’s parents recognized her depression and recently arranged for her to receive professional counseling. While in therapy over the summer, Kay began taking Prozac. “I’m a happy person now,” Kay grinned.

Unlike Lee, both Carrie and Kay surrounded themselves with a “tight-knit” group of friends. Carrie attributed the “strong bonds” of her friendships to the common goal of pushing “the system as far as it could go” as a “reaction to its rejection.” This cluster of friends buffered one another from the thorns of antagonism residing in their traditional Midwestern school, knowing that their efforts would blaze a trail that others could later follow.

Kay’s friends were also a buffer, a trusted group of peers she could “talk to” when she needed encouragement. Kay attested that her friends were “kind of different” and “off in the artsy section of the world,” but they were also “cool” with her sexuality. Kay’s “best friend” was the young bisexual female to whom she first ‘came out,’ someone on whom she counted through the waxes and wanes of adolescence. Kay also had two athletic male friends who protected her from classmates’ insults or threats. In math class one day, Kay’s friend, Henry, overheard a classmate “messing with” Kay. Henry “got pissed off” and “almost knocked the shit out of him.” Kay chuckled, “He’s been very nice and respectful ever since.” It was one of these male friends who also directed Kay to a potential faculty sponsor when she revealed to him her desire to establish a Gay Straight Alliance at their school. As president of that alliance, Kay had an even broader foundation upon which to stand, strengthening her resistance to the animosity that occurred periodically.

While Reyna did not share the other women's fortune of parental support, she did have friends who sustained her through most of her secondary years. Through middle school and the first two years of high school, Reyna's closest friend, Mandy, provided the succor in times of distress. Mandy suspected Reyna's attraction to women in the seventh grade, and introduced her to a ninth grade lesbian, who later became Reyna's first major crush. Mandy befriended a gay male named Jack, and she, in turn, introduced him to Reyna. The three friends spent all of their free time together and "end up being really close." Reyna enjoyed Jack's companionship, because she knew that he understood "what it was like to go through the teasing." When Reyna was "having a down time," Jack "seemed to be having an up time," so it "helped a lot of times just to talk."

In the past two years that Reyna has attended the specialized high school, she has found no shortage of advocates and friends. She contended, "The number of bisexual girls at [this school] is overwhelming," thus she is neither isolated nor an outcast. Last year, her senior mentor, who identified as bisexual, invited her to join the school's diversity club, opening up even more avenues for camaraderie and support. Reyna evolved into the person everyone "would contact" to request information and advice. Like Lee, Reyna fortified her own self-confidence by listening to others who "struggled with their sexuality." Guiding classmates through their challenges "built up" Reyna's confidence "as far as being social." Establishing an expansive base of allies at this school paved the way for Reyna's transformation into an activist and a leader.

Both adults in this study developed leadership skills as they matured and accepted roles of increased responsibility, which included educating and mentoring youth. Although Alicia was in her later twenties when she finally 'came out,' she was able to take that risk because



of the friendships she cultivated in graduate school. Alicia “bonded” with members of the school’s LGBT organization, and they became her “best friends” and “support network.” With this underpinning of support, Alicia was able to realize her potential as an activist, dismantling prejudice and forging safe spaces for non-heterosexual youth.

Jaime provided safe spaces for two of her non-heterosexual students as they grappled with accepting their sexual identity. Jaime noted that, unlike the first student, the second student was “not a suicide risk,” because she “felt more supported by friends.” Jaime proceeded to acknowledge the safe spaces of her own youth, sculpted, in part, by a “close-knit” group of friends who embraced her as she was. “No parent, teacher or friend ever told me I could not feel the way I felt,” proclaimed Jaime. Even in college, when she encountered her volleyball coach’s homophobia, Jaime’s friends rallied behind her, threatening to quit the team if the coach terminated her scholarship. As a professional educator, Jaime relied on friends at school to support her by not disclosing any information related to her sexual orientation, an action that might endanger her future employment with the school system.

Each woman interviewed benefited in some way from the advocacy of family and friends. In some cases, parents arranged for professional counseling and medication, which proffered additional assistance. In situations where family members were not accepting, a cadre of friends fashioned a matrix of support strong enough to foster the progression of identity integration. The intimate relationships of family and friends contributed to the women’s abilities to hurdle the obstacles produced by discrimination and intolerance.

### **Support from Faculty and Administrators**

Like parents, teachers and administrators are adults on whom most students depend to have their best interests in mind when making decisions that affect their health and welfare.

Several of the narratives illustrate the influence of teachers, while some demonstrate how the attitude modeled by the school's leadership impacts the general atmosphere of the educational community. As in the previous section, the women who received support from their educators were better able to confront and surmount barriers of malevolence.

At the time of the interview, when I questioned Lee about supportive educators in her high school, she could not identify one adult to whom she communicated "non-academic" issues. At the last meeting I attended, Lee expounded on the positives of her principal, characterizing her as being "very supportive" of Lee's proposal to establish a Gay Straight Alliance at the school. I asked her what occurred in the interim, and she explained that she finally approached the principal, and to Lee's surprise, she was amenable to the alliance. Other than the principal, Lee made no mention of faculty she considered safe enough to entrust her ideas of promoting tolerance and diversity among the student body.

Like Lee, Kay also had fortune of a supportive principal, although in her case, she had not one, but two, principals in two years who "preached tolerance." When Kay initiated the club last year, the principal responded with a "take it forward" attitude. This year, Kay applauded on the first day of school when the new principal introduced himself to the student body with the phrase, "I preach tolerance." This new principal enforced a strict "zero-tolerance" policy against harassment. During the fall there were times when I traveled the hallways of this school and observed the administrators supervise strategic intersections during class changes, radios in hand, prepared to impede provocation at a moment's notice. Kay strode down the hallways with a lighter step, knowing that her principal's policy would protect her from the torment that was once her daily companion. Kay exuded pride at the fact that the principal

“knew her by name” and reasoned that if she “had a problem” or was “getting messed with,” she would “bypass teachers and go to the principal.”

In the midst of last year’s harassment, Kay shielded herself with dreams of organizing a Gay Straight Alliance at her school. One of her friends suggested a teacher that might be interested in sponsoring the group. Kay replied, “Great, I’ve got someone supporting me here. I can do this now.” Kay successfully found an advisor who then recruited another colleague to assist with the group. Kay regarded her advisors as “good people,” and appreciated all of their efforts to support the group, which included the connection they established between the school’s alliance and the alliance network. Kay initially worried that being president of the group meant that she would be “really, really out,” thus making her a more vulnerable target for aggression. She overcame the fear by reasoning, “Well, at the time, I’d already been, like, knocked into.”

I wasn’t too afraid. It’s like, what are they going to do? Knock into me again? Beat me up? They’re not going to beat me up at school. If they do, I will scream, and a teacher will come. Problem solved.

Kay proceeded with the organizing of the alliance, knowing that a veneer of adult protection mollified the negativity emanating from members of the student body.

Earlier this school year, the alliance distributed “Hate-Free Zone” posters to a vast number of teachers, who then posted them clearly in their rooms, once again reinforcing the principle’s “zero-tolerance” policy. Since most of the faculty knew Kay as the president of the organization, the majority was aware of Kay’s sexual orientation. Other than the coaches she overheard joking about the alliance’s t-shirts, Kay did not experience any animosity from the staff. On the contrary, she admitted that this year was “more fun,” primarily because she had “good classes with good teachers.”

From a teacher perspective, being “good” was an essential component in building “trust” in a classroom. Jaime commenced with anti-bullying and anti-harassment conversations “at the beginning of the year,” drawing from “global examples” of difference, such as size, race, physical abilities, and, eventually, sexual orientation. Jaime contended that it was important to “talk about everything,” because “there’s a lot of biases and a lot of prejudices, and a lot of ignorance about many things.” Over the course of each year, she and the students would engage in “great discussions” as a class. Outside of class, students also knew that they could confide in Jaime regarding “something personal or sensitive” and trust that it was “not going anywhere.”

When the two young lesbian students leaned on Jaime during their tribulations, Jaime “listened.” She “told them they could call [her] anytime,”

anytime they came to talk to me, I gave them the time they needed, even when it was not convenient. But you just can’t walk away from that and say, “Oh, call me later” or “Let’s talk about this later”. I mean, they’re in a crisis situation. You can’t walk away from a crisis, so I put the other stuff away.

Jaime sensed that the young woman “chose” her, and she “was not going to let them down.” Even though she did not feel “qualified” to assist these students, she committed to “giving it everything” she had. She was determined to do her “very best” to support these students.

After twenty years in the classroom, Jaime continued to model for her students the values of “dependability,” “reliability,” “compassion” and “caring.” She attributed her “great relationships with the kids” to the consistency by which she lived these values. Jaime believed that her “professional attitude” was also the reason why she “never had any problems” with parents. They perceived that she “protected” their children, often writing “Thank You” letters for her nurturance. Jaime’s “sanctuary” of a classroom mirrored the

school's general anti-harassment policy authorized by the administrators and counselors. "Harassment has never been tolerated here," asserted Jaime, "The kids really feel like they can trust the staff, because if we see anything at all, we act on it." She believed students were more cooperative and more successful when they had "a space to talk" and teachers who were "fair." Jaime endeavored to be a "student advocate," the kind of teacher "the kids know they can count on," the kind of teacher she had the fortune of knowing in her own childhood.

Carrie, Reyna and Alicia all had positive rapports with several 'Jaime-type' teachers during their years in secondary school. Carrie referred to a number of her teachers as "amazing." Reyna claimed that she had "great relationships" with her teachers, most of who were aware of her sexual orientation. Alicia admired the majority of her teachers and admitted that she had "more memories" of her teachers than she did her school friends. Not all of the women experienced positive interactions with administrators, but those who did expressed more self-confidence and more involvement in school. According to several of these narratives, when the women received teacher and administrative support, they were better able to ascertain the courage needed to not only endure the hostility encountered in their schools, but to progress in spite of it.

### **Support from Alliances**

The next few themes are integrally related, however, I contend that each is significant enough to warrant its own section. The alliances are a key component of the students' high school experiences, often representing the turning point in each young woman's relationship with herself and with members of her school community. Within the safety of the school and community alliances, these students have developed self-esteem and leadership skills, and

have been given the guidance to actualize their potential. In the later sections, we will more closely examine how their interactions with the alliances and their personal visions of a safe school result in the activism that creates opportunities for enlightenment, change and the manifestation of safer school communities.

Several months ago, Kay and her vice president were interviewed by the local newspaper (Hagen, 2004) regarding the purpose of the Gay Straight Alliance in their high school. Kay bravely explained that she “felt very alone” in her freshman year, and she was “constantly harassed,” “knocked into” and “cursed at” by peers. Last year, as a sophomore, she “worked to start a Gay Straight Alliance. The two students described the alliance as a club of 30 active members that “aims to provide a zone of comfort for students who may be questioning their sexuality or want to support gay and lesbian friends and family members.” In the conversation, Kay asserted that the club was for any teens, gay or straight, who wanted to promote tolerance and reduce prejudice.” Both Kay and her vice-president emphasized that the alliance did not “promote homosexuality,” but helped “students feel accepted.” Kay stressed that the organization’s primary role was to “promote the message that everyone should be treated with respect and dignity.”

The article pointed out that not everyone in the school welcomed the group. Most students like the “the idea of the hate-free zone shirt” until they noticed it was sponsored by the Gay Straight Alliance. One student who disagreed with the club’s message arrived at school one morning wearing a “gay-free zone shirt.” The principal addressed the inappropriate action, telling the student that his shirt “would not be tolerated.” The principal later commented to the reporter,

I'm proud anytime we can promote tolerance and respect ideas, cultures and philosophies, and I know that the GSA here is seeking to do that in a positive way.

The principal did receive a “minimal” number of phone calls from parents attempting to “stop the group from meeting” and Kay hoped that those who have called “realize how it has helped her.” She then added, “Would they want their kid to be afraid of going to school?” Kay concluded the newspaper interview by stating, “Since the club has formed, I’ve been much more comfortable here.” Currently a junior, Kay continued to deal with harassment, ignorance and animosity, however she now had a “whole group of friends” who she could rely on “to help” her.

It was in her sophomore year that Kay felt “so miserable” that she manifested her dream of beginning a Gay Straight Alliance in her school. In order to officially establish an extra-curricula organization, Kay was required “to fill out some forms” and provide her principal with a “mission statement,” which she obtained from the website of the Gay Straight Alliance Network<sup>32</sup>. With the support of her faculty advisors and the permission of her principal, Kay organized the club by first appointing some of her friends as officers, and then advertising the first meeting on “flyers” which were distributed throughout the school. Kay recalled that starting the alliance “kind of sucked at first,” because she “had no idea what [she] was doing.” However, she proceeded to move forward, thinking, “Alright, support group, good stuff.”

Kay wore the role of president more comfortably once she connected with the area’s alliance network and gleaned ideas from other, more experienced, alliance officers. The adult volunteers proffered additional resources and leadership trainings where Kay could hone her skills initially as a club officer, and later as a spokesperson educating her school

community about the purpose and goals of the alliance. In the first year, Kay focused on educating the members of club by hosting “movie days” and facilitating discussions on LGBT-related issues, such as “civil unions vs. marriages” and the “state laws on adoption, marriage, or recognition of any gay relationship.” Late April, the club promoted a “Day of Silence<sup>33</sup>” by distributing over fifty “rainbow pins” and cards that said, “We are doing this to show the silence that gay people go through, for those who can’t be too out.” Smiling, Kay recollected, “It was fun stuff. It got a lot of people’s attention. A lot of people wanted to do it.”

Another activity sponsored by the alliance was the school-wide dissemination of a survey written by volunteers of the alliance network. The goal was to collect data regarding the school community’s general attitude toward LGBT persons and issues. The survey contained ten questions, such as,

How many times do you hear the word ‘gay’? Where do you hear it the most?  
Do your teachers stop someone if they say that? Do you know anyone gay?

Kay claimed that her alliance received over 500 completed surveys, more than any other school in the network. Although she could not recall specific answers to the survey questions, her general perception was that the school’s attitude “lean[ed] toward negative.”

This year, Kay and her club, now 35 members strong, began a “Hate-Free Zone” campaign. Kay clarified, “It’s like, you know, this is a ‘Hate-Free Zone.’ It’s run by the [school’s] Gay Straight Alliance.”

And so, most people are, like, “What are these ‘Hate-Free Zone’ posters? Where are they coming from?” And we show them that there are, like, 30 people in the club, wearing shirts – we’ve got attention. And on the back, it says, “Gay Straight Alliance”. So, and I’ve had a few people come up to me, and say, “So, you run it?” “Yeah.” So, they’ll ask, “Do you have to be gay and



do you have to have to be anti-Christian?” “No, you just have to believe that gay people deserve rights and that they’re not second-class crap.” We got a few members that way, or at least people that wear the shirts.

“Hate-Free Zone” posters adorned the hallways as well as the walls of many classrooms, and more posters, T-shirts, and stickers were displayed in a glass case in the main foyer, visible to anyone who entered the school.

To build on this general theme, Kay wanted to devise more “get people to notice us” activities. She hoped to educate the school about “hate crimes” by drawing “police chalk outlines” using “red tape, and in the center, have writing that tells how a gay person was killed and why.” Kay believed that there was “more curiosity” than there was hostility, and if students were more “exposed” to it, they would realize that “gay people aren’t that bad and scary - they’re okay.” With Kay’s determined leadership, this year’s Gay Straight Alliance nurtured over thirty new freshmen members while expanding its educational campaigns for the school at large. The creation and maintenance of this organization contributed to Kay’s increased interest in school as well as a decrease in her depression. “This year is actually more fun,” proclaimed Kay.

Like Kay, Reyna also blossomed in the safety of a diversity organization, one that enabled her to transform over time from a “shy outcast” into a confident leader. Reyna rarely socialized at her new high school until her “senior brother” convinced her to attend one of the diversity club’s meetings. This meeting initiated a significant change in Reyna, and she “made a lot of friends as soon as [she] got there.” Reyna quickly became interested in learning “more about the attitudes that people had toward homosexuality around the rest of the country or around the rest of the state, even.” Reyna acknowledged that this club had “a

big influence” on her, because for the first time in her life, she realized that she “could be whatever [she] wanted to be and no one really cared.”

Previously at school, if you said anything, and people didn’t like it, they pointed and laughed. Now, at [this school] they really don’t. So, it’s sort of built up my confidence as far as being social. I’m willing to talk to people who will criticize, who will point and laugh, but I know there are people who won’t.

Shortly after joining the diversity group, Reyna learned that the alliance network had requested to collaborate with her club to host a social event where members of high school alliances could gather together, get to know each other and exchange ideas. This function marked the beginning of Reyna’s association with the alliance network, the first step in an eighteen-month journey that lead to a plethora of leadership opportunities and a nexus of support.

On the school level, Reyna participated in educational events hosted by the club, such as “AIDS Awareness Week,” “Coming Out Day<sup>34</sup>,” and “Movie Days.” Like Kay, Reyna believed that “ignorance” was the origin of the hostility targeting LGBT students, and if the school community had opportunities to understand other perspectives, much of the harassment would be eliminated. Reyna attested, “I think it is possible to change a person’s mind. I know, I have.”

There was a kid last year who was really homophobic, and didn’t accept homosexuality or non-heterosexuality, and now he’s a member of [the diversity club]. I think the big thing is ignorance – people not knowing.

Reyna also facilitated a “Day of Silence” at her school, and eventually, with much perseverance, received permission to draw the chalk outlines of victims of hate crimes as a way to observe “Transgender Day of Remembrance<sup>35</sup>.” Additionally, Reyna’s group

coordinated activities with other school organizations, such as the peer counselors, in an effort to promote understanding, acceptance and support.

On the network level, Reyna continued to meet monthly with Kay, Lee and other members of the region's high school alliances in order to plan social activities, service projects and community education programs. Now a leader of both her school's club as well as the alliance network, Reyna credited both organizations for "opening up the door" to her "self-confidence." It was here, in the safety of community, that Reyna metamorphosed "from not being so social to being really social" and knowing "more."

Being "social" and knowing "more" were goals Lee set out to achieve as she contemplated her plan to initiate a Gay Straight Alliance at her high school. During the summer, Lee tired of feeling "so alone," and sought a space to feel "normal." She searched the Internet for a community support group, and began attending the gatherings of A Safer Place for Youth Network (ASPYN). Once a month, "random people" would meet at a coffee shop near the city's downtown district, and "stay there for two hours." Lee added,

You're not a member or anything. You just come if you feel like it. We just sit there and drink coffee, and talk about random things.

At one of these meetings, Lee met a young gay man who deeply inspired her. He lived with a grandmother who believed that "he's going to hell" for being homosexual, yet he exuded a bubbling, jovial attitude. He claimed that the key to maintaining a positive perspective was "accepting yourself no matter what." Lee also befriended one particular adult facilitator who, sensing Lee's need for a broader base of support, later connected her to the alliance network.

At the alliance network meetings, Lee quietly observed the action and slowly emerged as a potential leader. As Lee began to take on more responsibility in the network, she confided in one of the adults that she would be willing to establish an alliance at her school. Lee knew this was going to be a big risk for her, but she was determined to create a circle of support in her school that reflected the support she had constructed in the community. Lee's primary interest was to form a group "so that [she] would benefit from it," because she "wouldn't feel so alone at school."

Initially, as she proceeded with her plan, Lee encountered an uncooperative and intimidating Dean of Students, who attempted to impede the process by claiming it was against school policy to form a gay-friendly organization. I asked her if she was going to pursue the alliance despite the obstacles that were emerging. She responded, "Yeah."

'Cause if I feel this bad at my school, there's probably other people that do. At least, I hope there are. And they probably feel just as bad about it, too. So, it would be a good thing to do.

When I first interviewed Lee, she was in the midst of debate with this dean. At the last meeting, I inquired as to the status of the alliance, and she smiled, stating that plans were moving forward thanks to the support of her principal. Apparently, Lee turned to the alliance network for assistance, and one of the adult volunteers helped Lee to navigate around the dean and directly toward the principal. The next step was to choose a date and distribute flyers advertising the club's inaugural meeting. Lee was "nervous," because she "didn't know how to run a club," but the challenge would be easier knowing that the alliance was there to offer whatever guidance she required.

Lee was the youngest student I interviewed, and, thus, had the potential to be involved in the network longer than the other young women. I queried if she intended to remain active in

the school and community alliances. She cocked her head to one side, peering at me as if I spoke in a foreign language. “Of course, yeah,” she replied,

’Cause that’s what brings me closer to everything. So, if I was to stop going, then I’ll feel isolated again, and, you should never isolate yourself.

It was the networking, the sense of community that motivated this “loner” to excavate her way out of a deep depression and build a bridge to accepting herself “no matter what.” Lee yearned for a space where she could feel “normal,” and not only attained that space, but learned how to manufacture her own niche of safety in an unwelcoming school environment.

Carrie, unfortunately, was not as successful as Lee in her attempts to start a Gay Straight Alliance at her high school. The hurdles erected by school leadership proved to be too formidable for Carrie to circumvent. However, one year after Carrie left school, her girlfriend and their circle of friends once again endeavored to organize the club. Initially, the principal refused their request, but the young women persevered in their efforts to establish the group. The morning following the refusal, Carrie’s girlfriend marched into the main office and presented the principal with a stack of papers containing the “all the legalities and [students’] rights.” After some consideration, the administrator reluctantly acquiesced to the formation of the alliance. It appeared that the seeds of Carrie’s determination and courage had finally blossomed into a formal Gay Straight Alliance, and shifted that school community into a slightly more tolerable place.

Gay Straight Alliances, or similar gay-friendly organizations, seemingly influence a school’s atmosphere, often safeguarding non-heterosexual students from the forces of negativity and rejection. This is the primary reason why Alicia persisted in cultivating an ever-expanding network of alliances across the state. She originally began attending Gay

Straight Alliance meetings as a favor to a local high school guidance counselor. He informed her of a group of students that wanted to form an alliance and asked if she “would come to their meeting and kind of help them.” Alicia “started going to their meetings,” but did not think she did “anything to help them.” She conjectured that they wanted an adult model of support who would “just listened” as they pulled “their stuff together.”

When Alicia relocated to this state to complete her internship, she pursued her interest in working with non-heterosexual high school students. As an intern for the Lambda Youth Network, Alicia connected with youth in several of the area’s charter schools and private schools and supported their efforts to formally organize alliances. Alicia’s efforts to reach out to high school youth attracted more young people to the community support group. As alliances rooted themselves in the private schools, public school students began to request alliances in their high schools. In the past seven years, Alicia witnessed the number of schools containing Gay Straight Alliances grow from one to thirteen, and perhaps even more as I write.

After Alicia finished her internship, she wanted to preserve her connection with the youth, and thus, decided to volunteer with the alliance network. From her perspective, Alicia contended that the network helped the students, “because they get a chance to know one another and meet people” across alliances. The network also afforded students the opportunity to feel that “they’re a part of something bigger.” Alicia helped to provide a

space for [the students], and they do the work, and they make the connections, and they call each other and share ideas . . . I had nothing to do with that. I just gave them a place to exchange numbers.

As an adult facilitator of the network, Alicia defined her role as a disseminator of information that armed the students with “the facts they need” to “face” hostility and execute a task. The

students appreciated Alicia's presence in their lives, but it was she that referred to the students as "role models," because they demonstrated "incredible courage" and were "empowered" to overcome adversity and accomplish "some incredible work." According to Alicia, the youth are "making an incredible difference in schools."

The narratives in this section illustrated that the support given by both the school and community organizations was instrumental in channeling the women's energy in a constructive direction. Where depression and isolation had descended to obscure vision, the action of alliances swept in, dispersed the fog, and illuminated hope and possibility. This matrix of support provided the fertile soil in which the seeds of hope and possibility could germinate.

### **Visions of a Safe School**

As I interviewed each high school student, I asked her to envision a safe school and then describe it. I also inquired whether Jaime perceived her school as safe, and if so, what criteria did she use to make that determination. The descriptions contained many similarities, although one student believed it was outside the realm of possibility to manifest a safe environment, at least at her school.

One characteristic of safe schools that emerged in the conversations was the visibility of administrators in the hallways, and their willingness to address harassment, especially LGBT-related harassment, when it occurred. For Kay, a safe school would be one where she did not have "listen to degrading names all day." In this school, "people wouldn't have to feel like they could get hurt just because they're different." She stated that her school was "pretty good," because they "have a principal or a teacher at every intersection on the hall." Although "teachers come stand outside their doors" during class changes, students "could use

some more” supervision in the “not so heavily traveled halls.” In general, Kay claimed that her school was “a very good school,” because “the principal and the vice principals” were “very supportive.” She also attested that if she “had a problem,” she knew she could “go anytime and they’ll tidy things up.”

Following a similar theme, Lee envisioned a school “where everybody concentrated and got along with people;” where “people could be mature instead of like children.” In this school, Lee imagined that the leadership would “do their part and pay more attention” to the victimization of LGBT students, but she doubted the administrators would “change anytime soon,” because “they would get complaints from the other parents.” Lee muttered dejectedly, “So that’s what they want to do, they want to ignore it.”

Although each one of these young women visualized a safe school as I had asked, they both had reservations about the possibility of its manifestation. Even though Kay considered her school “pretty good,” she thought it was limited in controlling student behaviors. Kay contended that teachers could do a better job responding to verbal harassment. “If it’s loud enough,” Kay added, “they’ll be like, ‘Stop it. Stop it now.’” However, if the comments were “like background talk,” the teachers would “just ignore it.” She asserted that outside of the general umbrella of faculty supervision, “You can’t turn it around.”

Lee’s inclinations were more pessimistic. Although she stated that in a safe school, everyone “got along,” she did not believe any student, teacher or administrator would strive to actualize that vision. Lee elaborated, “It’s really hard to get anything like that going,”

plus the bulk of the students, they don’t really want to be cooperative with other people, ‘cause they don’t. I really don’t know why they do what they do, but it’s really not possible. There’s always going to be some kind of problems at schools.



Lee presumed that it was not possible to change a person's view regarding sexuality. She reasoned that a person would "have to be brought up with" the understanding of difference and tolerance, because "you can't really change how you're raised with it." Kay, however, held a more positive outlook about the idea of altering people's opinions about non-heterosexuality. She perceived intolerance as a lack of exposure and a misunderstanding of the "unspoken," and therefore promoted educational activities that dismantled barriers of difference and injustice.

Reyna's vision also centered on education, especially on the need for modifications in the curriculum in order for schools to actualize their potential as safe, welcoming communities. She considered her school safe "physically," but not "psychologically or socially." She attested that schools would be safer "when the world itself decides to give up finding ways to make homosexuality or any kind of non-heterosexual view seem like it's wrong."

Like, schools don't talk about homosexuality. It's not in history books. People just cover it up like it's something that no one needs to know anything about. And when the world stops hiding it, then I think we're going to be more open to it, and schools in general will be safer.

Reyna dedicated the last portion of our interview to specific changes in curriculum she predicted would aid in fostering more tolerance for non-heterosexual students. She contended that as history teachers examined the activism of the Civil Rights era, they needed to include "the activist stuff that happened in the 80s and the 90s with homosexuality." She expounded on the importance of studying "the AIDS epidemic, the problems brought to the homosexual community because of AIDS, and the problems brought to the world because of AIDS." Reyna asserted that "it's not necessarily events, and guns and people dying that

affects people,” but the “little things” that “affect people a lot more.” “In social studies,” Reyna reasoned, “I think social issues need to be studied more than bombs.”

Additionally, Reyna agreed that revealing the sexual orientation of a poet, a scientist or another “renowned” person had a positive impact on students. In her English class, students “gasped” when they discovered that the “amazing” Walt Whitman was homosexual. Reyna declared that it was “good” to “show there are people who defy the stereotype,” and then people “begin to think maybe the stereotype doesn’t fit.”

I asked Reyna what faculty could do to facilitate the process of making schools safer. She pondered momentarily and replied, “I think teachers overall need to stop worrying about the way other teachers would look at them,”

and they need to realize that regardless of their own personal beliefs, regardless of everyone else’s beliefs, there are just things in this world that need to be fixed, and one of them is the way that homosexual and non-heterosexual people in schools are treated.

Reyna stressed that there were “all these gay, lesbian, bi, trans, whatever people” in the “public school setting” that were getting “really, really picked on,” and someone “has to fix it.” According to Reyna, teachers had to start reprimanding kids when they “yell out in class, ‘Oh, that’s so gay!’” Until teachers were “willing to say, ‘That’s wrong to say,’” then “nothing’s going to go anywhere.” It would be at that point when Reyna could envision schools being “a lot safer.”

If schools abided by Reyna’s criteria for creating safe communities, then Jaime’s school was quite close to fitting the description. Jaime “comfortably” labeled her school as a safe environment for its students, primarily because “harassment has never been tolerated.” The teachers formed “a community” and had “a sense of taking care of each other.” Jaime

continued, “The faculty is very tight. A lot of the faculty know the parents of the kids.” Jaime explained that the faculty had “a sense of what’s really right and wrong,” and did not judge the students, regardless of a teacher’s personal beliefs. Even if sexuality made someone “uncomfortable,” “people seem to know what’s right at that school.”

Jaime credited the counselors for their contribution to nurturing the school’s safe atmosphere. They were “really good” about tailoring “support groups” and “outreach groups” to the needs of the students. These programs had the ability “to turn a potential firestorm into something productive,” Jaime acknowledged, “It’s about communication.” Jaime conjectured that her “seasoned faculty” could potentially advance the school from one that was “safe” to one of “acceptance” with “a lot of patience and a lot of communicating.” She could even envision a Gay Straight Alliance forming at her school. The students would “embrace it the first ten minutes it came in the door,” affirmed Jaime, not so much because there was a large population of non-heterosexuals at the school, but because “tolerance is the buzz word these days” and students “are of the mindset and of the generation that it’s the cool thing to do.” The fact that tolerance is “cool” at Jaime’s middle school is a testament to the foundation of assurance already cemented within those school walls. The students “trusted the teachers” to support them, and Jaime contended that it was that kind of atmosphere that kept the school community safe.

There are numerous factors that attribute to the formation of safe schools. Safety begins with a vision, the ability to visualize the reality of such a concept. Safe schools require administrators and faculty that endorse tolerance, eradicate hostility, and include non-heterosexuals in the curriculum. Safety is further strengthened by the educational collaboration of guidance counselors, alliances and other school organizations. Borrowing

Reyna's words, safe schools can become a reality when students and teachers alike decide that it is time "to fix" the treatment of non-heterosexuals in schools.

### **The Empowerment of Activism**

As I observed students interacting at the meetings and summits, I was fascinated by the resiliency and hope emanating from these youth. Many of them spoke candidly of negative experiences with name calling, bullying and other forms of discrimination, yet they were transcend the problems and brainstorm solutions. Within the shelter of one another's acceptance, the atmosphere relaxed while humor wove itself placidly through the crowd, turning the network gatherings into a mixture of leadership training and social event. I recalled these scenes as I later scribed the actions in my research journal. In an instance, I froze with realization: the students were redirecting the negativity of harassment into the positive of activism. They were utilizing the available trainings and resources in order to conduct student panels, protest against school boards, and educate members of their school community. They were transforming into change agents, forging paths wide enough for themselves as well as any other students whose difference traditionally pushed them into the margins. Several of the women I interviewed played an integral role in the activism occurring in this area. In this section, we will explore a few of the trails blazed by these women.

Alicia was the prime activist in this group, for she was the one responsible for igniting the fires of alliances across the school districts in this region. The roots of her activism germinated in her undergraduate years in the Midwest, however it was in her New England graduate school where the rhizomes unfolded in full blossom. As an extension of her university coursework, Alicia was required to facilitate trainings "in the community," which

included community centers, community colleges and a several small colleges. The initial sessions Alicia conducted were “about stereotypes and prejudices, where our stereotypes come from, where our ideas come from, how our ideas play out, and where homophobia comes from.” It was during the one of these sessions that Alicia met the high school guidance counselor that invited her to guide some of his students through the process of organizing a Gay Straight Alliance.

Alicia brought that experience with her as she relocated south to intern with the Lambda Youth Network. Alicia discussed the work she accomplished with high school students in New England, and then proposed a plan to reach out to the youth in this region, something no LGBT community group had elected to do prior to Alicia’s arrival in 1997. Before she attempted to connect with area youth, Alicia first bridged the Lambda Youth Network with the Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), another local LGBT organization. Using the resources and funding generated by this networking, Alicia created the Rainbow Youth Network, “a youth-driven, youth-led program” designed to foster “youth empowerment.” The Rainbow Youth Network expanded rapidly, attracting numerous young people from area high schools who “wanted to make schools safer” and were “looking for some sort of advice” in order “to figure out a way to do it.”

As Alicia developed the leadership trainings for the Rainbow Youth Network, she began receiving requests to nurture the seedling Gay Straight Alliances sprouting in several of the area’s charter schools and private schools. As Alicia met with each group of students, they “would just talk” about “their needs” to make “schools better.” Alicia suggested that the groups conduct trainings that “centered on youth panels,” which would provide opportunities for the students “to talk about their experiences” with administrators, teachers and other

students. Alicia proceeded to facilitate trainings and information sessions for both the alliances and the Rainbow Youth Network for nearly eighteen months, and then “started backing out” as she focused her energy on completing her master’s thesis. Although she dedicated most of her time to research and writing, Alicia “stayed connected” to the youth through some of her “connections with [her] PFLAG people and [her] GLSEN people,” and, periodically, agreed “to facilitate a workshop or a state-wide conference.”

Once the demands of the graduate degree were behind her, Alicia plunged back into her volunteer work with the youth. By this time, alliances had been formed in nearly ten high schools, public and private, across three adjacent counties. Noting the geographical distance between schools, Alicia recognized the importance of networking the alliances so that students could fashion an keystone of support and fuel the establishment of more alliances in the school districts’ other high schools. With the help of several other volunteers, Alicia acquired a space where students could meet monthly to socialize, brainstorm educational activities, organize protests, and extend support. At the first meeting I attended, Alicia prepared a group of students for a student panel they would be presenting the following week at one of the city’s private colleges. When she was not working directly with the alliance network, she was promoting Gay Straight Alliances at diversity conferences or strengthening connections with alliance networks in other areas of the state. Alicia’s goal was expand the network until every high school in this state sponsored a Gay Straight Alliance or some form of diversity club.

Within the haven of this network, Reyna, Lee, and Kay absorbed the guidance and support of others, developed confidence and catalyzed change within their school districts as well as their schools. Reyna, the most vocal of the three, challenged perceived injustices wherever

she encountered them. When a reader of the local newspaper wrote an editorial criticizing the article on the Gay Straight Alliance at Kay's school (Hagen, 2004), Reyna (2004) responded with her own editorial. She referred to his comment that alliances "promote sexual activity" as "riducuous," stating, instead, that it was "something used to better the educational environment."

I assume some people, such as the writer of the above mentioned letter, feel that this cruel treatment of LGBT students in schools is perfectly legitimate considering the rather disturbing interpretation of the purpose of a GSA presented in his letter. However, this is not the case. This treatment is not reasonable or legitimate. The purpose of these clubs in schools is to try to aid society in understanding that regardless of differences in opinions and lifestyles, everyone has the right to pursue happiness as stated in the preamble to the United States Constitution. The purpose of these clubs is to make the environment these students learn in safer for students so that this happiness might actually be achieved.

In the original editorial, the gentleman condemned Alicia's involvement in the alliance network, accusing her of endorsing homosexuality. Reyna concluded her editorial defending Alicia's dedication to the youth, asserting,

More adults should be doing what she does everyday. There is nothing wrong with teaching tolerance, and there is absolutely nothing relating to "Kama Sutra menus" in teaching that tolerance.

Reyna's strident message to the writer attested to her commitment to impacting change in the community and improving conditions for non-heterosexual students.

The letter to the newspaper was not the first time Reyna reproached adults for their position on non-heterosexuality. This past October, Reyna combated with her administration over the observance of "Transgender Day of Remembrance," because it conflicted with an open house planned for prospective students. Ordinarily, whenever the club planned to host

an event, they had little problem attaining permission from the administrator who generally attended their meetings. Initially, the idea was to “chalk body outlines representing all the people who’ve died” and craft “posters of people’s pictures” that described “what happened to them” and “why they were killed.” On the night they received authorization to conduct the activities, Reyna sent out a mass email inviting students to join the club in this observance. The next morning, Reyna received an email from administration requesting a postponement of the event as it was the same day as Open House, and they did not want to “offend prospective students and their families.” The faculty sponsor and a number of the club’s members acquiesced, but Reyna protested,

‘C’mon, you don’t postpone Memorial Day or Veteran’s Day. You wouldn’t postpone anything else.’ And part of the email said this might be offensive to some people. And I was like, ‘You’re telling me that I can’t celebrate this, well, not really celebrate, but that I can’t observe this day – you’re offending me.’

Reyna proceeded to talk with other student leaders, teachers and her faculty sponsor, who by then “changed her mind” and supported Reyna’s efforts to observe the Remembrance Day on its designated date. The sponsor suggested that Reyna “send an email to the administration,” which, as Reyna explained, turned into “this long, drawn out page and three quarters letter basically saying how ridiculous this was.” She illustrated how the postponement of the observance sent the message that “this doesn’t matter” and “people don’t need to know about this.” She then reminded administration that their request to “cut off one sector of the diversity club system” was incongruent with their public proclamation that the school was an “accepting community.” Administration suggested a compromise of “approved” posters without the chalk outlines. The club agreed, however, Reyna spoke out again when only eight out of the twenty or more posters received administrative approval.



She “balled” in front of the administrative liaison to her club, insisting that “it just hurt,” because “it took a lot” for her “just to get the eight posters up.” The administrator considered Reyna’s argument and eventually allowed the club to display the remaining posters at “Club Fair,” a portion of the Open House where each school club has a table of information about their organization. Reyna succeeded in observing Transgender Day of Remembrance, because she was willing “to make a stand.” She credited her experiences with the alliance network as the primary source of her confidence and pursuit of justice. In the latter part of our interview, she emphasized, “You have to say something, and if you don’t, nothing’s going to happen.” Reyna knew that if she had not said something, the school would have silenced the event, reinforcing a “psychologically unsafe” environment for its non-heterosexual students.

Like Reyna, Lee also protested a situation that created a potentially “unsafe” environment for non-heterosexual students. Less vocal in her approach, yet equally determined, Lee stood before the county school board in November to address the injustices embedded in the school district’s student protection policy. The state mandated that each school district “must have an anti-harassment policy to protect all students,” but her district “hasn’t done that.” In their current policy, the county school district “made this long list”

of like race, sex, that kind of thing, but they left out sexual orientation and that kind of thing. And they loop in “including, but not limited to”, but that the loophole for them, and plus they never pay attention anyway when you report something like that.

Members of the network alliance were striving to convince the board to modify the terminology to “All Students” or “All People” so that it could include “teachers and other staff.” Lee stated that she and four of her peers planned to speak at the board meeting for

three minutes each “about how we’d like them to change the policy,” and then they would extend an invitation to the board to attend the “Speak Out” the following week at a local charter school.

In her three minutes, she intended to talk about what she “experienced,” what she “saw happening” and what she “thought should be changed.” For Lee, this pivotal moment of addressing the school board was the seed bursting forth in full fecundity, a new chapter awakening in this young woman’s life. Standing in front of a crowded room complete with news cameras differed vastly from the experience of sitting alone in your bedroom staring at a computer screen in the early hours of the morning. Although this first step of activism revealed a new aspect of her personality, Lee prepared for it with trepidation. She admitted to being “really nervous,” because, in her opinion, she was “not a very good public speaker.”

I can talk in front of people I know, but not in front of people I don’t know.  
It’s a challenge. I’ll be standing up at the podium, and the media will be there. It’ll be really big.

With the adult volunteers sitting nearby for encouragement, Lee and each of her peers completed their three-minute speeches, and, as rehearsed, they invited members of the board to the “Speak Out,” which would occur the following week.

The “Speak Out,” located in a converted tobacco barn only a few blocks from the heart of the city, was designed to be a public forum where anyone could voice their thoughts for or against altering the student protection policy. The students organized this forum to create the opportunity to converse with the people who held the power to make the necessary policy changes. The adult volunteers arranged the place, provided transportation and offered assistance with speeches. When I arrived, the tiny campus was buzzing with youth anxiously awaiting the arrival of the board members, representatives from the school system’s

administration and the media. Lee delayed the beginning of the program, hoping that last minute stragglers would be the audience the students wanted to address.

Fifteen minutes after the original start time, Lee shyly approached the podium and welcomed everyone. She outlined the purpose and procedures for the night's program. All were invited to express their perspectives related to the student protection policy, with the understanding that each opinion would be received with respect. Lee also reiterated the speech she presented to the school board the previous week. Although no board members or Central Office personnel were in attendance, approximately a dozen students followed Lee's example and shared their experiences with injustice in their schools, illustrating the need for a protection policy that included non-heterosexuals. The stories were poignant, for they were not lost in victimization or helplessness; instead, they were bathed in hope and empowerment as students explained how they approached a teacher about her unjust behavior or challenged an administrator about the implications of his decision.

Reyna stood before the group and described the barriers she encountered as she planned her club's Transgender Day of Remembrance, stressing the necessity to "stand up for what you believe is right and work for change." One young woman echoed Reyna's message, explicating, "This is not a moral issue, this is an issue of respect and protection. The system is in place to protect us – not as homosexuals, but as students." A coordinator of A Safer Place for Youth Network applauded the students for seeking solutions to problems they witnessed in their schools and encouraged them "to keep working for change and not to give up." An older gentleman challenged the youth to "be fearless" and commit "one act of resistance everyday." The executive director of the state's Equality organization noted that change was "needed in the student protection policy," because "the job of a GSA should not

be to protect students from harassment - that should be the job of the school and the school system.” Thirty minutes into the event, a lone cameraman from the city’s television news crew appeared, set up and proceeded to tape just as the final speaker began their story. The protest received no television air time or space in the following day’s newspaper, but, for many of the students, it demonstrated the power of their collective voice and the potential change their dedication and persistence could create.

Although Kay was unable to attend the “Speak Out,” she devoted time to participating in other forms of activism with the alliance network. This fall, she divulged her stories to teachers, administrators, professors and students as a member of the student panels that Alicia coordinated. Kay also supervised the holiday service project that donated dozens of stuffed bears to hospitalized children. In her own school, Kay continuously pondered “attention-getting” ideas that would enlighten the students and staff about issues impacting non-heterosexual youth. She involved the student body in the “Day of Silence,” promoted the “Hate-Free Zone” campaign, and organized a protest against President Bush’s second inauguration. She volunteered to be interviewed by the local newspaper and withstood the backlash from less tolerant members of the community. As of this writing, however, Kay had not been able to achieve her goal of observing “Transgender Day of Remembrance” and educating the student body about transgender youth by displaying “chalk outlines” of those “who were killed” because of their gender expression. Given Kay’s creativity, wit and determination, I would imagine she could maneuver a path to success and attain her goal of enlightening others.

Women like Alicia modeled a role for the younger women to emulate. Instead of grieving as victims of attacks and abuse, they recognized problems and evaluated solutions. Each one

of the students experienced situations where hurdles impeded their progress, and each one faced the roadblock and managed to plot a course around it. Change was often difficult, but the women demonstrated the fortitude to pursue social justice, even if advancements were incremental.

### **Sheetrocking the Walls**

This chapter highlighted the people and places where the women I interviewed found the support they needed in order to actualize their potential as human beings and as effective agents of change. The support of family and friends positively impacts the women's self-perceptions, inspiring them to explore ways to cope with issues relating to their sexual orientation. The narratives attested to the fact that adult members of a school community influence student behaviors. Support from teachers and administrators enabled the students to foster a deeper connection to their schools, motivating them to remain in school and achieve academically. School and community support groups provide guidance, trainings, and social opportunities that encourage leadership development and activism for social justice. Each woman has a vision of a safe school community and, in some fashion, contributes to the realization of that vision. As they strive to realize their vision, they become agents of social change, improving conditions for non-heterosexual youth that will ultimately benefit all students.

In the next chapter, we will apply the final touches to the frame and main supports, completing the construction of this rainbow classroom. I will discuss the findings from my research within the framework of Queer Theory and previous research. Included in this concluding chapter will be implications for further research related to LGBT youth and institutions of education.

## **CHAPTER 7: THE FINISHING TOUCHES**

When constructing a building of any type, contractors finish off rooms by painting the sheetrock, framing the walls with moldings, and laying carpet or tile before occupants fill the room with furniture or decorate the walls with pictures. In this chapter, the finishing touches of this construction project are the painting and framing of discussion related to the data uncovered in the research. Returning to my overarching questions, I structure this chapter to explore the answers splattered throughout the interviews, both those that are apparent and those that are more subtle or entangled in the complexities of adolescence. I survey the general school experiences of the students and consider how each one coped with the effects of acknowledging, and eventually accepting, a non-heterosexual orientation.

Although this study is limited to six women, their input is broadly applicable. I regard their recommendations for creating safe schools as valuable contributions to the manifestation of equitable institutions of education. Educational environments can be altered by those who choose to “queer their vision” (Doll, 1998) and observe accepted practices from a different angle, using that new perspective to challenge the status quo. The students’ activist approach to issues of sexuality has enlightened other students and staff, embedding long-term changes into the infrastructures of their schools. As I reflect on the messages emanating from both the text of the narratives and their subtext, I suggest further research that will assist educators in choosing from an array of floor plans that will foster equity and justice in their classrooms, and provide students with an environment conducive to learning and maturing into healthy adults.

## **The Impact of ‘Difference’ and Sexual Orientation**

Each one of the students I interviewed relayed the feeling of being ‘different,’ beginning with her earliest memories in elementary school. Lee described herself as a “loner” who found school “boring” and her classmates “immature.” She claimed that her peers did not like her, therefore the only friends she did have were two other girls who were also disliked by the majority of the class. Kay also had few friends in elementary school, because she did not “fit in” and was “not well liked” by her classmates. She perceived herself as “shy” and “offbeat,” and befriended others who “were kind of different.” Reyna characterized herself as a “social outcast” who made friends with all of the “other social outcasts around the school.”

Some of the ostracizing these young women recalled may have resulted from their non-traditional gender expressions. Carrie wrote about her favorite childhood game of dressing up as a “pirate” or “Robin Hood” and swinging through the trees with her best friend. She admitted that she was “mistaken for a boy” most of her life. Reyna was also accused of wanting “to be a boy” because she dressed in her brothers’ clothes and enjoyed “playing football and video games” with the “neighborhood boys.” Kay disassociated herself from the “size two and a half,” fashion-conscious girls who called her “weird,” because she was a “tomboy” who preferred to wear “baggy clothes” and “climb trees.” Lee did not consider herself a “tomboy,” but she “hated wearing skirts.” She “tried to avoid” girls, especially when she was in Germany, because she thought they were too “preppy.” Most of the friendships Lee did cultivate in Germany were with boys, because she preferred to play outdoors and was the “only girl” at the school who did not mind getting “wet and dirty.”

I pondered how much of this ‘difference’ the young women noted in their interviews related to their sexual orientation. Schneider and Owens (2000) stated that sexual orientation, the sexual, affectional and romantic attraction toward another, developed early in life, and many people who identified as non-heterosexual recalled feeling ‘different’ before they were consciously aware of their orientation. Perhaps the young women’s nonconformity to traditional feminine roles was the larval manifestation of their non-heterosexuality, and, on some unconscious level of understanding, those classmates who reflected society’s construct of heterosexuality were already beginning to relegate them to the margins of acceptability. Butler (1990) asserted that sexual identity was more of a normative idea than it was a biological descriptor, a concept so deeply rooted in our society that no one escapes the impact of its confined space. The dominant culture outlined the accepted, or ‘normal,’ categories of sexual identity, and defined their boundaries using the compulsory binary structure infused into our patriarchal society. In order to understand a particular concept, that concept must be juxtaposed with an ‘other,’ that which it is *not*. Therefore, if heterosexuality was the socially acceptable identity within the classroom, then the young women in this study were ‘othered,’ defining that which is not, as early as kindergarten or first grade.

Did this ‘othering,’ this movement toward the margins, have negative psychological impacts on the students? When the students divulged their stories to me, much of it was uttered without emotion. At least, on the surface, it appeared that they stated the facts nonchalantly. Lee stared at the floor or at book titles, Kay deflected discomfort with humor or sarcasm, and Carrie responded with silence. I suspected these actions were an attempt to veil the depth of emotion elicited by the marginalization with which each one had become so



well acquainted at school. As I progressed with my interviews and analysis, I listened carefully to each woman's comments, focusing on choice of words, tone of voice and non-verbal cues to more accurately decipher the emotional effects of living beyond the boundaries of classroom conformity.

Both Lee and Kay had a history of severe depression and were in therapy. When I first interviewed Lee, she said that the rejection she experienced due to her sexual orientation "enhanced" her depression, but that there were other factors that caused it. In a follow-up email, Lee confessed that the isolation she felt because of her sexual orientation "played a key part" in her depression. Kay was prescribed Prozac this past summer, and attributed her more optimistic outlook, at least in part, to the medication. She contended that prior to the establishment of the alliance, she felt "confused," "frustrated" and "very much alone." I mused over these students' comments, intrigued by the relationship between depression and 'difference.' Where did they initially intertwine? How deeply enmeshed were they, and how did one impact the other? Was there a causal relationship between the two, or did one exacerbate the other, and to what extent? It was my observation that a relationship did exist between depression and the feelings of being an "outcast" and a "loner," but the interplay between the two would require further investigation.

D'Augelli, Pilkington and Hershberger (2002) asserted that the female non-heterosexual students in their study exhibited symptoms of trauma, including depression. I attempted to excavate deeper into the origins of each woman's depression to note its relationship with their sexual orientation. Lee claimed that her decline into depression began in middle school, when she left friends and extended family and moved to Germany. Its intensity increased as she became aware of her sexual orientation. Kay credited genetics with her propensity

toward depression, which also blossomed in middle school, along with poor grades and the awareness of her sexual attraction toward females. My observations on sexual orientation paralleled Reyna's position on bisexuals and depression: it was not the sexual orientation itself that existed in relationship to depression, but rather the isolation and rejection experienced by the non-heterosexual that affected depression. The narratives seemed to indicate that being ostracized by classmates did intensify Lee's and Kay's depression.

Reyna made no claim to having challenges with depression, and only referenced the emotion briefly when she recalled a period of time in high school when her peers' hostility overwhelmed her, and she stopped doing her classwork. Originally shy and introverted, Reyna evolved into the most vocal member of this group, emphasizing her replies with grandiose gestures, her voice filled with inflection and emotion. She appeared to be the most candid student I interviewed, allowing anger, frustration, confusion and joy to flow freely through her stories. My interview and other interactions with Reyna led me to conclude that, in comparison to the other young women, she had achieved a greater degree of what Cass (1979) referred to as 'identity synthesis,' the integration of sexual identity into overall identity.

Perhaps Reyna was able to accomplish identity integration because, unlike Lee and Kay, she did not experience the degree of emotional distress that would impede her progression through the stages of sexual identity development. Perhaps it was merely because Reyna was older than Lee and Kay, and had the benefit of more time to process and accept her orientation. Unlike the other students, Reyna also relocated to different states and a variety of school systems, which challenged her ability to adapt to new environments. As the daughter of a working class family, she encountered economic situations not experienced by

either Kay or Lee, which may have affected Reyna's ability to adapt to internal changes more readily than the other young women. The fact that she self-identified as 'bisexual' and not 'lesbian' may also speak to her level of comfort with her orientation. Reyna's acceptance may be influenced by a combination of the above reasons, and, possibly, other undisclosed factors. Regardless of the reasons, Reyna's integration of identities seemed to buffer her from emotional disturbances, further reinforcing the idea that psychological trauma originated from heterosexism, and not from the sexual orientation itself.

### **The Ability to Cope**

I surmised that being a "social outcast" would be a difficult experience for a kindergartener or first grader to endure, and I was intrigued by the coping mechanisms each young woman devised in response to the early years of their classmates' denigration. Most of the coping skills they used related to isolation. In elementary school, Kay physically placed herself "to the side" of the classroom, away from the cluster of female classmates who were absorbed in conversations about topics Kay found unappealing. At home, she withdrew to her room to "read and draw," and when she did spend time outdoors, she would "frolic around" the backyard by herself. When Kay was not retreating into a physical space that shielded her from negativity, she utilized her sharp wit and sarcastic humor to barricade the pain. While her humor effectively intercepted injurious words and actions, she realized that it also facilitated communication with other students. On one occasion, when another student asked her if she was a "dyke," she replied, "Yes, I am, and what are you - a breeder?" Her sarcasm communicated the answer the student sought, and also conveyed the message that "dyke" was an inappropriate term to reference lesbians. Kay was able to honestly answer the question and address the pejorative in a non-threatening manner.

Similar to Kay, Lee retreated to her bedroom to read or surf the Internet as a response to the rebuff she encountered in school. She referred to her classmates as “immature,” almost as if the very utterance of the word sheltered her from the sting of being disliked by her peers. Additionally, Lee frequently used the term “boring” as a descriptor for school or particular classes she attended. Again, at least some of that might have been a protection from the hurt she tolerated as a child, distancing her from those who prejudged her. In high school, Lee initially applied the same coping mechanisms that adequately navigated her through the previous grades. She “ignored” the teasing, “tuned out” the name-calling, and “kept to herself” in order to avoid getting “beat up.” Slowly, that intimidated personality began to evolve into a quiet leader who was willing to face potential antagonism for organizing her school’s first Gay Straight Alliance. Her recent methods of dealing with the animosity relied less on hiding away from others and more on seeking the support of like-minded persons who motivated her to protest injustices and promote tolerance.

Reyna’s pattern of coping mirrored both Kay’s and Lee’s, starting school introverted and ostracized, then later flowering into a vociferous leader opposing hostility and discrimination. Reyna’s family moved frequently, placing her in seven different school systems by the time she entered seventh grade. Reyna was always the new girl, “the red head with the gap in her teeth,” who chose to focus on her school work and not interact with her classmates. She was gifted with the ability to adjust quickly to new situations while maintaining her academic standing. She felt compassion for other classmates who were marginalized by the mainstream members of class, and befriended them in whatever school she attended.

When Reyna battled with the heterosexism of peers in middle school, she retreated into the refuge created by the camaraderie of two close friends. It was not until her junior year in high school that Reyna found her voice and stood her ground against the inequities she witnessed in school as well as in the community. Silence and withdrawal were replaced with communication and action. Reyna no longer feared vocalizing her opinions before others who might scorn her. Her haven expanded from two small town friends into a network of advocates extended across three counties. Reyna coaxed the courage buried deep within to the surface with the reassurance that she would be strengthened by the presence of a multitude who respected her for the person she was, regardless of sexual orientation.

Each one of these young women managed to uncover their self-confidence, which was once obscured by thick layers of fear, confusion and aggression, and cast into a corner to gather dust while the students centered their energies on completing their days with as little harassment as possible. These three students converted their fears, frustrations and confusions into resiliency and determination. They started school internalizing the discomfort of being ‘othered’ by their differences, but they are now ending their school careers by externally channeling their differences into opportunities for positive change.

Carrie, on the other hand, did not end her school career on the same positive note as Lee, Kay and Reyna. She forged forward in her determination to be herself in school from the time she pretended to be Robin Hood in elementary school to the time she left high school in her junior year. Unlike the other young women, Carrie did not make any major transformation from an introverted outcast to a leader of social change, but she did possess the courage to openly express her sexual and gender identity despite the friction it caused with the socially-accepted norms of her school community. She coped with the hostility by

combating it directly, gathering extra fortitude from the support of her parents and several of her teachers. Although Carrie asserted that the discomfort of being ‘othered’ did not contribute to her quitting school, it would seem that years of pushing against the boundaries of her school’s heteronormativity would impact her decision to leave what might be deemed an unsafe environment.

### **The Ingredients of a Safe School, a Recipe for Success**

Establishing an environment that reduces the hostility of heterosexism requires an array of ingredients that are reflected in the general policies and practices of a school. There needs to exist an overall belief that those who function outside the realm of normed behavior are to be respected for their difference, whether that difference is ethnicity, able-ness, sexuality or some other category of being. Welcoming schools, at the very least, promote “tolerance” and protect all of their students from harm, including protection from the violence that stems from differences in sexual identity.

In the interviews, each woman named what she perceived to be the factors that contributed to creating safe schools, noting which ones already framed their school atmospheres, and which ones they had targeted to modify. Schneider and Owens (2000) and Prezbindowski and Prezbindowski (2001) asserted that most effective way to address harassment is for schools to adopt a zero tolerance policy for any form of verbal or physical aggression, complete with discussions about why aggression is not acceptable and the implementation of consistent consequences for committing the inappropriate acts. Jaime proclaimed that her school was a safe environment, because it practiced a “zero tolerance policy” toward harassment and employed counselors who conducted educational workshops tailored to the needs of the students as well as the staff. Additionally, Jaime believed that the

staff had successfully fostered an atmosphere where most of the student body “embraced” tolerance and trusted that teachers would “do the right thing” to maintain a nurturing and protective environment.

Kay attested to numerous practices in her school that enabled her to feel safer this year than in the past, including more administrative supervision in the hallways, the promotion of “Hate-Free Zones” throughout the school and the principal’s explicit messages of tolerance broadcasted on the public announcement system. Reyna affirmed that her school was “physically” safe, because there were “no fights.” She also claimed that it was not “psychologically” or “socially” safe, because there were students that verbally harassed non-heterosexual students, and it was intimidating to report them to administration since they all lived together on the campus. Although Reyna did experience moments when psychological safety was tenuous, she did have a safe enough environment that she could turn to one of her teachers or administrators for assistance or support. Reyna’s school prided itself on its diversity and its acceptance of difference, thus when her administrators initially declined her request to host Transgender Day of Remembrance, she protested the decision and reminded them of the school’s philosophy. The atmosphere was safe enough for Reyna to respectfully challenge the school’s leadership, trusting that they would consider her position and alter their judgment accordingly. She had no need to fear any negative consequences for defending issues related to non-heterosexuality, unlike Lee, who worried that teachers might “lower her grades” if they attained information regarding her sexual orientation.

Neither Lee nor Carrie regarded their schools as safe, although Lee was willing to remain in school and strive for changes, even if they were incremental. Carrie attempted to make her school more tolerant of non-heterosexuals, but was not convinced that she was very

successful. The “uphill battle” became too steep, and she grew weary of fighting. I received an email from her just this past week, after a silence of nearly three months, and she reiterated that her leaving school was connected to her “poor academic performance” and not from the struggle to be “out” in school. Even if her sexual orientation did not play a role in her decision to leave school, her resolution to be openly lesbian in a conservative school placed Carrie in an unsafe situation, and the administration did little, if anything, to protect her from the daily harangue she received for confidently being herself.

Policies of protection were a valuable, and perhaps a necessary, foundation for the construction of safe schools. The Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (Lamont, 2004) recently released their “State of the States Report,” which ranked each state according to its protection of non-heterosexual youth in schools. Only eight states and the District of Columbia had laws that explicitly protected students in public schools regardless of sexual orientation and gender expression. There were also individual school districts across the nation that protected non-heterosexual students, even though a policy did not exist on the state level. Those statistics implied that 75% of the our country’s 47 million school children attended a school that did not include sexual orientation and gender expression as protected classes. In states or districts where legal protection did not exist, non-heterosexual students were 40% more likely to miss school at least one a month because they do not feel safe (Kosciw, 2004). This was one reason why it was important for Lee and other members of the network alliance to persistently protest their school board and insist that the current student protection policy be modified to either expand protection to “all students” or to specifically include ‘sexual orientation and gender expression’ as a protected category.



Alicia's involvement with the alliance network and the Safe Schools organization was pertinent to the formation of welcoming school environments that encouraged their students to actualize their creative and academic potential. The 2003 National School Climate Survey (Kosciw, 2004) indicated that non-heterosexual students who had Gay Straight Alliances or another similar support group in their schools felt safer and earned higher grade point averages than students who lacked a support group in their schools. Alicia's goal was to aid in establishing Gay Straight Alliances in every high school in the state, organize regional alliance networks, and then connect the regions in order to extend a network of support and communication across the state. It was an ambitious goal, but one that had already demonstrated its power of positive change in the locales where alliances were flourishing. The presence of school alliances provided safety nets for both Kay and Reyna, allowing them to transform their introverted personas into active leaders, and assisting them to develop more meaningful connections with their schools.

### **Queer Theory and Activism**

In chapter two, I refer to the activism rooted in Queer Theory. 'Queer' was defined as a continuous, ever-evolving action that disrupted the flow of heterosexist assumptions. Queer Theory was the change agent that turned 'being' into 'enacting' (Talbert, 2000), and challenged the arrangements of dichotomous sex and gender differences (Luhmann, 1998; Morris, 2000). These high school students who participated in the school and community support groups were living queer theory. They were not afraid to undermine preconceived notions of identity and grapple with the ambiguity of what it means to be a person. They actively strove to educate one another as well as the staff and student body at large. They collaborated on projects with other school and community organizations in an effort to build

bridges of understanding, moving beyond the borders of tolerance and into the territory of acceptance and respect.

Steinberg (2000) asserted that ‘queer’ was a part of all of us, heterosexual and non-heterosexual alike, which supported the fact that approximately one third to one half of all members in this region’s Gay Straight Alliances were heterosexual or questioning (SafeSchoolsNC, 2004). This year, at one of the local high schools, a 16-year-old, self-identified heterosexual organized her school’s first alliance. She and other heterosexual students like her were able to ‘queer’ their perspectives, transcend binary thinking and view the world from a position outside their place in the dominant culture.

Along with other adult volunteers, Alicia guided young people such as Lee, Reyna and Kay to take the risk of accepting themselves and defy the constructs of heteronormativity that attempted to contain them in a boundaried space of conformity. As a graduate student, Alicia found her own voice of justice, and later encouraged young people like Lee, Reyna and Kay to insert their voices into this choir of activism, so that those who still suffer victimization could be represented, supported and liberated.

According to Tierney and Dilley (1998), queer theory was the discourse of the outcast. Reyna, a self-proclaimed “social outcast,” asserted that that there was “no real reason” why she was ostracized by her classmates, but perhaps there was something about her approach or her demeanor that resisted their commonsense thinking of education and identity. In her suggestions for modifying curriculum, Reyna ‘queered’ pedagogical thinking, steering it away from the systems of knowledge that were most often used in schools to represent the world around us. The concept of teaching “social issues and not bombs” in a social studies class would encourage students to debate the facts, opinions, and positions embedded in

canonical curricula, stirring up currents of controversy in many of this states' school systems. To extend the historical tendrils of activism and the affects of social change beyond the Civil Rights movement and into the realm of AIDS and Queer activism would gnaw at the heels of heterosexism and discomfort the powers who determined what knowledge got taught.

By 'queering' pedagogy, thinking and inquiry overflowed their restricted space, catalyzing the learning environment to become more permeable and more willing to receive different perspectives. Reyna catalyzed change in her English class the day she told her classmates that Walt Whitman was a homosexual. She facilitated a shift in thinking for some of her classmates, possibly opening their minds to other pieces of information that dismantled stereotypes and clarified misconceptions. The foundation of Reyna's queer pedagogy was the ability to penetrate the multiple layers of prejudicial beliefs that promoted "psychologically" unsafe classrooms, which impeded students' equal access to educational success.

In her classroom, Jaime 'queered' pedagogy in order to model openness and acceptance, teaching children to respect and appreciate differences as well as similarities between each other. She demonstrated how diversity and difference enhanced their lives. Within the matrix of queer pedagogy, Jaime encouraged students to be self-reflexive and to actualize their potential. Students felt safe within Jaime's classroom "sanctuary," which allowed them to focus on their school work, increasing their chances to experience greater academic success.

Queer theory has the potential to ignite compassion and encourage each person to develop empathy for those who had been victimized. Kay and Reyna sponsored 'Days of Action' in their schools in an effort to educate their school community and foster understanding for

those who had suffered from oppression. The Day of Silence represented the lack of voice non-heterosexuals have had in their schools or in the curriculum. The Transgender Day of Remembrance enlightened the student body about the number of youth who have been killed because their gender expression existed outside the constriction of heteronormative categories. Both young women agreed that “ignorance” was responsible for much of the harassment they experienced; therefore they theorized that their attempts to educate would minimize heterosexism and maximize compassion.

All of the students that I observed at the network meetings and at the youth leadership summit desired the opportunity to traverse past the destructive forces of fear and ignorance, and reconstruct fluid spaces that welcomed difference and the multiplicity of sexual identities. They sought advice and reassurance from various adults in their home and school lives, but essentially were utilizing their own sense of ‘queered’ leadership, courage and determination to locate opportunities for change and transformation. Reyna, Kay, Lee and their peers acquired training and assistance from adults like Alicia and Jaime so that they could rise from the ashes of their fears, confusion and self-hatred, and transform into queer phoenixes, celebrating the beauty of their non-heterosexual selves.

As these students remake themselves into leaders and activists of positive change, my attention returns to Carrie and other students like her who do not have the opportunity to actualize the phoenix transformation. I ponder what narratives Carrie might have been able to share if she did have an activist like Alicia in her life, and how different Carrie’s story might have been if she had the benefit of a community network or classmates like Kay, Lee or Reyna to stand with her against the animosity of her school’s administrators. While there are growing numbers of Kays, Reynas, and Lees, there are many others who are more like

Carrie, struggling with the daily existence of being ‘different’ without the support of student alliances or compassionate adults. In this research, I listen to the narratives of each one of these women and extract what is working to transform certain schools into safe and supportive communities in an effort to implement those actions in more schools across the nation.

### **Reflections on the Construction Project**

When I started this research journey with my pilot study in 2001, I was not sure what I would uncover in the schools. As a student in the 1970s and 80s, the few classmates who were perceived to be non-heterosexual were often verbally, and sometimes physically, assaulted. Gay rights’ activists and protests existed in New York City, which was only seventy miles away, but with the sheltering of our small town, it might as well have been a thousand miles away. In numerous ways, society has grown more understanding, or at least more tolerant, of non-heterosexuality, but the continued occurrence of brutality indicates that there is much more work to be done. As I write this last section, I listen intently as the evening news reports that a male college student has been physically assaulted in a populated section of town by a group of young men, because they considered him a “faggot.”

In my early years as an educator, the topic of homosexuals only seemed to emerge during our science classroom discussions on AIDS, and no matter how I tried to redirect their thinking, the students usually equated homosexuality with pathology. Aside from the general adolescent obsession with the word ‘faggot,’ silence surrounded LGBT issues, and the term ‘non-heterosexual’ was non-existent. It was only when I transferred to an alternative school, a campus of less than 100 students, did I experience the harassment and rejection that so many of the students relayed in their stories.

I eventually resigned from that position and moved to a different school system and a more welcoming atmosphere. As I commenced with my pilot study, I interviewed students who also had the benefit of a welcoming school community. We – the students, the non-heterosexual faculty, and I – had pictures of what could be, but we knew that there were many staff and students who were not in a safe place, and many who believed that a safe place was beyond the realm of reality. It was at that time that I realized visions of possibility needed to be created and would only manifest in a community of effort. That study focused on the ingredients of a safe school and the positive affects it had on all students regardless of sexual orientation.

While this state has its conservative regions that are immersed in heterosexism and homophobia, certain locales have evolved into more tolerant, if not accepting, areas. The State Department of Public Instruction has organized task forces to examine issues surrounding non-heterosexual students, and has invited adults such as Alicia to enlighten audiences at state-wide conferences about the challenges facing non-heterosexual students. There is plenty of room for more growth, but school systems are progressing, and safe schools are emerging, primarily through the efforts of its non-heterosexual youth.

The students that I interviewed both fascinate and inspire me. Like Alicia, I perceive them as “role models,” for they are youth who have ambitions to become change agents, and, when given guidance and support, they collectively oppose the discrimination they witness, and labor to positively alter their school environments. Through efforts like Alicia’s, the students gather in “community,” where they are a “part of something bigger” and are “empowered to do anything they want.”

Lee, Kay, Reyna and other members of the alliance network have risked antagonism in order to educate their schools about sexuality, tolerance and diversity. They have experienced trauma and psychological abuses, but they are not victims. These young women embrace queer activism, and are troubling the stagnant waters of our local systems. Carrie has attempted to accomplish the same task in her Midwestern school, and even though she has not achieved that goal to the same extent, she has planted seeds that will later flower into positive change. These students follow Reyna's advice and "take a stand," and, as Alicia has observed, they are "making an incredible difference in schools."

### **Implications for Future Building**

In the past four years, I have witnessed a blossoming of interest in the arena of sexuality studies and its implications in education. With students recognizing their 'difference' earlier in their lives, sexuality issues have become more pertinent in secondary schools. Models of sexual identity development have been designed for lesbians and bisexuals, but more work remains in exploring different categories of sexual identity to decipher the subtle differences in developmental needs of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth. The interplay of identity development and cultural factors such race, ethnicity, religion and socioeconomic level, also require further investigation as identity models are created. It will be beneficial to incorporate these models into the adolescent development courses that are offered to pre-service educators and other professions who work with youth.

The understanding of transgender and bisexual identity categories is in its infancy, with broad tracks of territory still unexplored. The National School Climate Survey (Kosciw, 2004) suggests that transgender students suffer the greatest victimization of all non-heterosexual youth, and greater efforts are needed to uncover interventions that will greatly

reduce the hostility toward those that appear to stretch gender expression boundaries to their fullest extent. According to the national survey, bisexual students do not seem to experience more incidences of harassment than their gay or lesbian peers, yet they do encounter negative feedback from both heterosexual and non-heterosexual classmates, therefore research that identifies bisexuality as its own category, and not just an ‘act of denial’ or a ‘passing phase,’ may alleviate animosity and enhance support systems for those who self-identify as bisexuals.

Further research can examine effective methods for imbedding non-heterosexual people and topics into the curriculum. Additionally, issues regarding sexual identity and sexual orientation need to be woven into schools’ pedagogical practices to educate students and staff about the complexities of human sexuality. Data from national surveys (Kosciw, 2004) demonstrate that schools that include non-heterosexual matters in their curriculum provide safer environments for the non-heterosexual students. Research efforts can result in the establishment of more inclusive curricula on all grade levels. Further applying Queer Theory to education can challenge, and, ultimately, modify the canonical structure of instructional materials, providing multiple perspectives on topics and multiple voices narrating the knowledge schools disseminate to its students.

In the legal arena, research (Buckel, 2000; Kosciw, 2004; Lamont, 2004; LeCompte, 2000) proposes that long-term positive changes in attitudes and behaviors accompany changes in policies and administrative leaderships that protect and respect all students. Legal protection is the underpinning for constructing schools that promote tolerance and welcome diversity. Additional research that scrutinizes the procedures which each of the eight states underwent to successfully vote in protection policies for non-heterosexual students may



facilitate the implementation of protective legislation in more states, thereby strengthening the foundations of more safe schools across the nation.

Further explorations into the activism of the school alliances and their community networks will illuminate the power of student leadership and its impact on the schools as well as on the participating individuals. Comparing the trends of queer activism from the post-Stonewall era of the 1970s, through the AIDS-related struggles of the 1980s, and to the youth-led movements of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century is another segment of research that branches off the trunk of data from this project. The narrow scope of this paper does not allow the space nor the time to delve into the long-term impacts that such activism may have in our schools, but I consider it a worthwhile endeavor to investigate. From what I have witnessed in my limited time in the field, queer activism has the potential to positively influence education on multiple layers: administrators and faculty model tolerance while building trusting relationships with their students, non-heterosexuality is incorporated into curricula across content areas, and all students participate in 'Days of Action', empathizing with those who have endured victimization for their sexual orientation or gender expression.

Queer activism continuously challenges the knowledge systems that dictate how students make meaning of the world around them. Queer activism tests the boundaries that define gender and sexual identity, opening spaces for all students to safely express their individuality and embrace diversity. Queer activism nurtures and instructs crews of change agents who construct safe schools and create welcoming environments that invite all students to learn, mature and more fully actualize their academic - and human - potential.

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## END NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>“Transgender” is used to describe a wide range of identities and experiences including transsexual individuals, cross-dressers, intersexed individuals, and individuals, regardless of sexual orientation, whose appearance or characteristics are perceived to be gender atypical.

<sup>2</sup> I use the term “moral” to refer to the personal belief systems individuals use to determine whether something is ‘right’ or ‘wrong.’

<sup>3</sup> According to an except taken from the United Nations’ Declaration of Human Rights, “The Declaration recognizes that the ‘inherent dignity of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world’ and is linked to the recognition of fundamental rights towards which every human being aspires, namely the right to life, liberty and security of person; the right to an adequate standard of living; the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution; the right to own property; the right to freedom of opinion and expression; the right to education, freedom of thought, conscience and religion; and the right to freedom from torture and degrading treatment, among others. These are inherent rights to be enjoyed by all human beings of the global village -- men, women and children, as well as by any group of society, disadvantaged or not -- and not “gifts” to be withdrawn, withheld or granted at someone’s whim or will.

<sup>4</sup>Kevin Jennings is the founder and executive director of the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network, located in New York City.

<sup>5</sup>“Heterosexism” and “homophobia” both generate violent and abusive actions toward non-heterosexuals or those perceived as such, yet they vary slightly in meaning. “Heterosexism” the discrimination against those who are not, or perceived as not, heterosexual. “Homophobia” is the fear of or disdain for non-heterosexuals and any behavior based on such a feeling.

<sup>6</sup> The term “assimilationist” refers to people who have allowed the minority LGBT culture to be absorbed into and aligned with mainstream culture, instead of protesting the heterosexual norms and working to change the dominant cultures understanding about sexuality, specifically non-heterosexuality. The term, ‘Queer,’ often used as a pejorative, has been reclaimed by some non-heterosexual activists is an effort to reframe it as a purveyor of positive social change.

<sup>7</sup> The “insider/outsider” approach comes from ethnography, where observations are often noted from an “outsiders’ perspective – the researcher is a stranger to the population being studied, and is of a different racial/ethnic group and culture. Radhika Parameswaran (2001) explores gender and culture in India as both an insider and an outsider, as she was born in India (insider), but later migrated to and was educated in the United States (outsider). Bahira Sherif (2001) negotiates insider/outsider status in Egypt, as she, too, was born in the country of her research (insider), but is American educated and acculturated (outsider). Amy Best (2003) studies proms from an insider/outsider perspective, for she was once a female student

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who attended her high school prom (insider), but she is now older and a suburban white woman interviewing urban black girls about their prom experiences (outsider). Similarly, I am a lesbian who once attended and taught in a high school (insider), but I am now older and no longer teach in a high school setting (outsider). Sharing histories and experiences may provide a vantage point and an insight not available to the researcher who does not have these commonalities.

<sup>8</sup>‘Coming out’ is the process by which non-heterosexuals publicly disclose their sexual orientation.

<sup>9</sup>“Lesbian” women and “gay” males are those who have an affectional and sexual attraction to their own sex. “Bisexual” refers to those who have affectional and sexual attractions to members of both sexes. “Transgender” is used to describe a wide range of identities and experiences, including transsexual individuals, cross-dressers, intersexed individuals, and individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation, whose appearance or characteristics are perceived to gender atypical. “Queer” is a non-heterosexual who chooses not to use one of the other categories or may not want to conform to one of other non-heterosexual labels. In this paper, I will use the words or acronyms used in the research that I cite. For example, LeCompte (2000) uses the acronym LGBTQ in her research, therefore in my discussion of her research, I also use LGBTQ; Schneider and Owens (2000) refer to non-heterosexual youth as sexual minorities thus that is the term I use as I reference their research.

<sup>10</sup>‘Heterosexism’ is the discrimination against those who are or who are perceived to be non-heterosexual.

<sup>9</sup> According to Quinlivan and Town (1999), there is a societal assumption that all individuals are heterosexual. Non-heterosexuality defies that assumption and potentially marginalizes persons who do not conform with the accepted norms.

<sup>12</sup> Transgender issues are also a frontier where scholars are just beginning to blaze new trails. These findings, however, are outside the scope of this paper, and will not be discussed at this point.

<sup>13</sup>“Intersexed” refers to persons who have partial or complete genitalia of both biological sexes and whose sex is ambiguous.

<sup>14</sup>“Transsexuals” are persons who have surgically reconstructed their bodies to fit the gender with whom they most closely identify.

<sup>15</sup>According to Pinar (1998), there are individuals who assert that contemporary lesbian and gay organizations have moved toward assimilating into mainstream culture instead of actively working against the underlying prejudices that perpetuate second-class citizenship for non-heterosexuals. These individuals have embraced the term ‘queer’ as a stand against discrimination and oppression.

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<sup>16</sup>“Transverse” is a line or beam that crosses a set of parallel lines or beams. I use the term to mean boundaries of any kind, often ones that are socially or politically constructed.

<sup>17</sup> Tolerance is important as it moves individuals in the direction of accepting and respecting another person’s differences. However, tolerance does not necessarily lead to acceptance, thus queer theorists strive to move people beyond the plateau of tolerance and closer to the level of acceptance.

<sup>18</sup>Lugg (2000) and Buckel (1999) state that while there are no federal laws to specifically protect the rights of LGBT persons, there have been cases tried using Title IX. One particular case involved a Wisconsin man, James Nabozny, who applied the right to fair and equal treatment guaranteed by Title IX in his suit against the local school district and the state after enduring four years of severe harassment from his classmates due to his sexual orientation.

<sup>19</sup>Before the inception of the Gay Straight Alliances in the late 1990s, Uribe and Harbeck designed Project 10, a movement to establish LGBT support groups in the high schools of the Los Angeles Unified School District.

<sup>20</sup>‘Safe zones’ are designated places within an institution where students can seek the comfort of a safe space where they are accepted unconditionally. Safe zones may include teachers’ classrooms, guidance counselors’ offices or administrators’ offices.

<sup>21</sup>The 1999, 2001 and 2003 National School Climate Surveys provide the answer options of “frequently”, “often”, “rarely” or “never”. In the 2001 NSCS, more than ninety percent of the students reported hearing homophobic remarks such as “faggot”, “butch” or “dyke” frequently or often. The 2003 NSCS shows a decline, with a report of approximately 85% of the students hearing homophobic remarks.

<sup>22</sup> At each meeting, event or summit that I attended, I handwrote notes in a small notebook that I carried in my coat pocket. Later that evening, I used the notes as well as my mental observations to record lengthy, detailed notes in an electronic journal on my desktop computer.

<sup>23</sup> The Triangle Gay Straight Alliance Network (TGSAN) is a program sponsored by Safe Schools NC, a non-profit organization established to support students in their efforts to effect positive change in their schools. TGSAN strives to create and organize Gay Straight Alliances in every school in North Carolina. It is a strong and powerful movement that envisions a world that is free of shame and fear over opinion, sexual orientation, and gender expression. For more information on this organization, visit their website at [www.safeschoolsnc.org](http://www.safeschoolsnc.org) or [www.tgsan.org](http://www.tgsan.org).

<sup>24</sup>A “Speak Out” is a non-violent protest organized members of the general population who disagree with a governing body’s policy or practice. The “Speak Out” I attended targeted a public school system’s policy on student protection. Members of the Triangle GSA Network

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disagreed with the wording of the policy, and were attempting to persuade the school board to revise it.

<sup>25</sup>The Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Youth Summit was a one-day conference sponsored by the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN) in conjunction with the Triangle Gay Straight Alliance Network (TGSAN). This event provided sessions that educated students on how to create and expand their school's Gay Straight Alliances. They also promoted leadership development and team building skills. They also provided packets of resource materials so that student could conduct training sessions at their schools. Most of the breakout sessions were facilitated by youth who had successfully completed GLSEN's youth leadership program. For more information and resources, visit their website at [www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org).

<sup>26</sup>North Carolina Lambda Youth Network (NCLYN) is a youth-led statewide leadership development network for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and allied (LGBTQA) young people, ages 13 to 24. They are dedicated to developing LGBTQA young people as leaders and community organizers while providing a space that affirms their identities. NCLYN recognizes how our struggles as young people, people of color, and people of different abilities, sexualities, genders, and class backgrounds are intimately connected and how a commitment to end homophobia must include a commitment to fighting for social justice and equality for all. For more information, visit their website at [www.nclamdayouth.org](http://www.nclamdayouth.org).

<sup>27</sup>A Safer Place for Youth Network (ASPYN) is coalition of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning and allied (LGBTQ&A) youth ages 13 to 23, and adults working together to make their county a safe, healthy, and life affirming place for LGBTQ&A Youth. ASPYN is a program of Triangle Community Works, a coalition of organizations, individuals, and projects serving the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and allied communities in central North Carolina. For more information, visit their website at [www.tcworks.org/aspyn/home.htm](http://www.tcworks.org/aspyn/home.htm).

<sup>28</sup>GLSEN National is the headquarters of the Gay Lesbian Education Network, which is located in New York City. Adult facilitators from GLSEN National travel around the country orchestrating these summits in conjunction with GLSEN-trained youth leaders and local LGBT organizations.

<sup>29</sup>Heterosexuals who support safe and welcoming schools for non-heterosexuals are often referred to as "allies" or "advocates". Many of the support groups work from a platform of inclusivity, opening their doors to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning and allied or LGBTQQA youth.

<sup>30</sup>The Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network has a Student Organizing Department that designates quarterly "Days of Action", providing tools for Gay Straight Alliances and other LGBTQ-oriented youth organizations to develop campaigns that engage and mobilize other young people, build coalitions with other clubs and organize events. For more information, please visit their website at: <http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/news/record/1733/html>.

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<sup>31</sup>The word “flaming” is a slang term referring to effeminate gay men.

<sup>32</sup>Gay-Straight Alliance Network is a youth-led organization that connects school-based Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) to each other and community resources. Through peer support, leadership development, and training, GSA Network supports young people in starting, strengthening, and sustaining GSAs and builds the capacity of GSAs to: (1) create safe environments in schools for students to support each other and learn about homophobia and other oppressions; (2) educate the school community about homophobia, gender identity; (3) and sexual orientation issues, and fight discrimination, harassment, and violence in schools. For more information, please visit their website at: <http://www.gsanetwork.org>.

<sup>33</sup> The Day of Silence, a project of the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) in collaboration with the United States Student Association, is a student-led day of action where those who support making anti-LGBT bias unacceptable in schools take a day-long vow of silence to recognize and protest the discrimination and harassment (in effect, the silencing) experienced by LGBT students and their allies. For more information, please visit their website at: <http://www.dayofsilence.org>.

<sup>34</sup>“Coming Out Day” is an educational event that provides information about prominent historical figures who were openly homosexual.

<sup>35</sup> Transgender Day of Remembrance is a project of Gender Education & Advocacy encouraging students and student clubs to remember and educate communities about ending violence based on gender identity/expression. For more information, please visit their website at: <http://www.dayofsilence.org/tdr/>.