

Acceptance – the dominating theme at South Tahoe schools

By Kathryn Reed

“There is no alternative for being yourself.”

That is the message on the back of South Tahoe High School Ally T-shirts.

Ally isn't an acronym. It means friend or supporter. It is, though, the name of the gay straight alliance at the high school.



Adam Northam
presents
Rachel's
Challenge at
STMS on Nov.
9.
Photo/Kathryn
Reed

Bridey Heidel has been the adviser for all six years it has been active at STHS. Tuesday night was the first time she and students spoke to the Lake Tahoe Unified School District board of education about the club.

“We are not a tolerance group. We are an acceptance group,” Heidel said.

It was a fitting presentation considering across the parking lot Adam Northam was giving a presentation to approximately 60 people, with a third of them youngsters, about Rachel's Challenge. He had been at South Tahoe Middle School all-day; first for two student assemblies and then working with nearly 80 students on a leadership piece of the program.

Rachel Scott was the first person kill April 20, 1999, at Columbine High School in Colorado.

The message in her story is students have the power to generate a chain reaction of kindness, which will ideally silence bullying.

In some ways, that is exactly what Heidel has done with Ally. One way she knows she is getting the acceptance message out is no longer are the group's bulletin boards torn down.

It's not just gay teens in the group. It's for anyone who believes in equality and standing up for the rights of all.

Last year Heidel took a group of students to a gay prom at UNR that was geared toward high school and college students.

"It was great to watch kids dance without looking over their shoulder," Heidel said.

She hopes one day a club like Ally is not needed because the acceptance will be that universal.

It's programs like Rachel's Challenge that STMS Principal Beth Delacour says need to keep coming into the schools to deliver the message that bullying isn't acceptable, small gestures like a smile can go a long way, and pre-judging isn't the answer.

After the 9:30 assembly the morning of Nov. 9 many students were in tears. The message was powerful at times – certainly the images of Columbine are gripping. For many of these students it was likely the first time they had seen them. Some

were not born when this tragedy happened.

The message to dare to dream, choose positive influences and utter kind words are all worthy.

Lost, though, in some of Rachel's Challenge, is the message. This is because the delivery gets bogged down in some farfetched coincidences and stories that don't ring true.

As a man devoted to God, Rachel's father, Darrell, first started the nonprofit Columbine Redemption. From there, Rachel's Challenge took off. It's a mega-business.

At least for eighth-grader Samantha Buscher, it was a mega-message that she heard.

"It was really inspirational to me, just knowing this girl gave her life to help change the world," Buscher said.