

Clubs provide safe place for South Shore's LGBT students

By Shannon Early

In August, a private college in Elmhurst, Ill., announced it would include a question on applications about whether a prospective student identifies with the LGBT community. If applicants answer yes, they might be awarded an Enrichment Scholarship which could cover up to 40 percent of Elmhurst College's tuition. The question is designed to promote acceptance on Elmhurst's campus, as well as to diversify the student body and to enrich students' lives.



Though Elmhurst is seemingly the first to directly inquire about a student's sexual orientation, it is not the first to award scholarships based on the LGBT community, nor is it the first campus to welcome diversity.

Last year, Friends of ALLY, a LGBT club at Lake Tahoe Community College in South Lake Tahoe, awarded \$750 worth of scholarships to students based on essays they submitted related to lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender issues. The scholarships were open to any student who wanted to share his or her coming out story or an experience with a friend or family member who identifies as gay or lesbian.

Chris Sidell, president of Friends of ALLY, said the scholarships this year will be of equal value so a non-LGBT student would receive the same amount as a LGBT student. He said the scholarships help students make a connection with the club who may not normally seek out the club for support.

Lisa Shafer, adviser for Friends of ALLY, said the club, as well as scholarships, should be open to all students, not just

those who identify with the LGBT community. In addition to providing scholarships, Friends of ALLY will begin to offer peer support once a month and strengthen its bond with the ALLY club at South Tahoe High School.

Shafer said the club is welcome to people who “want to be a part of social justice and equality for all.”

Friends of ALLY was founded last year, while STHS’s ALLY club is in its seventh year

STHS recently hosted a guest speaker who spoke about HIV in front of 100 students. Nearly every class at STHS bears a “Safe Zone” poster on classroom doorways and every Thursday is “ALLY Day”, where staff wears ALLY T-shirts to remind students they are in an environment free of harassment.

STHS instructor and adviser Bridey Heidel said the club was not always welcome. A bulletin board covered in ALLY flyers and messages outside of her classroom was torn down and vandalized the first few years. But this year the billboard remains unscathed from hateful words or actions.

“We don’t really work to change anyone’s opinions because I don’t really think you can. I just work to protect the children and I hope that they feel comfortable as they graduate going out into the community,” Heidel told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Both clubs have been successful in recruiting members and fundraising for special events and trips. More than 100 people signed up for Friends of ALLY within three days. And the club hosted a widely successful dance last winter. ALLY participates in Winterfest – the gay ski week – and has gone to the Queer Youth Advocacy in Sacramento to instruct students how to lobby for their cause.

Overall the clubs have received positive feedback for their work from the community and schools.

Shafer said she has met amazing people since becoming adviser of Friends of ALLY and from the looks of the first meeting members want to support an important cause but also have a good time. Shafer believes the students deserve all the credit for the group.

“It’s their lives. It’s their stories,” she said.

The next event hosted by Friends of ALLY will be a Back to School BBQ on campus on Oct. 11 from 11:30am-1pm.

Tahoe Pride may not be affiliated with an institution, but with its nearly 600 friends on Facebook it attempts to connect the LGBT community in Tahoe.

Dawn Harkins, one of three creative members of Tahoe Pride, said the group supports ALLY and Friends of ALLY and hopes to interact with them more in the future. The group hosts mixers and events throughout the year.

Tahoe Pride’s mission statement is: “Tahoe Pride is a safe, welcoming place for LGBTQ people and their friends, a place to build a strong community while forming lasting friendships. We build community by organizing a variety of social, cultural, and outdoor activities where we promote equality and respect toward each other. We are committed to diversity and are open to all: men and women; straight and gay; couples and singles. Tahoe Pride and its friends care strongly about equal rights. We strive to promote tolerance, education, and communication about issues that affect our community through being active and visible in the community in which we live. As we grow we are taking steps to form a board and move forward in our vision of providing programs and services that benefit the LGBTQ community and their friends.”

Their next monthly mixer is Oct. 11 from 6-9pm at Murphy’s Irish Pub. The mixer coincides with National Coming Out Day.

While the LGBT community mostly considers Elmhurst College’s

inclusion of a question about sexual orientation a positive step, Shafer and Heidel agreed all underrepresented groups deserve opportunities to earn scholarships. As evidenced by the work of groups in town, the LGBT community is working toward an atmosphere accepting of all lifestyles.

For more information:

LTCC Friends of ALLY Club Facebook page

STHS ALLY Club Facebook page

Tahoe Pride Facebook page