

The Boston Globe

SATURDAY, JULY 11, 1992

Saving the lives of despairing young gays

DAVID LaFONTEINE

Young people in today's complex, high-pressured world are increasingly at risk for suicide, depression, and a host of problems. The Department of Health and Human Services, in its 1989 "Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide," estimates that 500,000 young men and women try to kill themselves each year.

These cries for help from our youth are of concern to all who care about young people. But if we are to take action to stem the epidemic of youth suicide, we must understand the reasons why a young man or woman would be so despairing as to believe life was not worth living.

Among youth, gay men and lesbians are disproportionately at risk for suicide. The 1989 report estimates that 30 percent of youth suicides are by gays, with gay youth two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than their straight peers. Suicide ranks as the leading cause of death for young gay men and lesbians.

Gay youth suicide is like a hidden holocaust today in America, and in the history of humankind, yet there are no monuments, no memorials, and, as yet, little public recognition of what we have lost and why. A society which cares about the lives and futures of our young people has a moral obligation to end the silence and denial surrounding the problem of gay youth suicide.

Massachusetts kindled some real hope for young gays when Gov. Weld swore in 21 members of the newly created Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth on June 11. Weld and Lt. Gov. Paul Cellucci, in conjunction with gay rights groups, created this commission to find solutions to the epidemic of gay youth suicide and to address a wide variety of problems facing young gays. The commission is the first of its kind in the United States, and is inspiring plans for similar commissions in states such as New York, California and Illinois.



SETH TOBOCMAN ILLUSTRATION © INX

Forceful action in terms of public policy, and sensitive discussion of issues relating to lesbian and gay youth needs to happen in the place where we can reach the largest number of kids: our schools. Young people are required to attend public school, therefore it is reasonable and compassionate to insist that all kids, gay and straight, are assured a safe and supportive learning atmosphere.

The silence of adults while gay teen-agers are subjected to abuse and harassment in schools supported by public money is unconscionable

and needs to stop. The jokes about "faggots" and "queers" need to be met with as much disapprobation as racist or anti-Semitic language. We should either exempt young gays from attending school, and provide an alternative environment, or make the necessary changes so they can be free of abuse, humiliation and rejection.

In Massachusetts, only one public high school, Cambridge Rindge and Latin, has a support program for gay youths.

Three private high schools -

Concord Academy, Milton Academy, and Phillips Academy - have similar programs.

These programs are life-savers for countless young people struggling with isolation and low self-esteem. They need to be replicated quickly in all cities and towns in the state. One out of 10 young people is gay or lesbian: all classroom teachers have gay students. The admirable steps schools are taking in working to abolish racism and anti-Semitism through curriculum and classroom discussion need to expand to include gays and lesbians and their human rights, too.

At almost any high school or college graduation, one can hear rhetoric from adults about how the young represent our future and must be nurtured and cherished. Usually absent from the speeches is adults' awareness of the harm done to young men and women because of the prejudice which adults continue to pass on.

In "Romeo and Juliet," Shakespeare wrote about a legacy of hatred passed on from elders to youth. He brought to life youth struggling to free themselves from that hatred, and in stark and haunting tragedy he portrayed their ultimate deaths because of the hostilities surrounding them.

This love story could be applied to young gays and lesbians. They, too, at a tender and potentially beautiful time of life, are fighting to love and to survive in an atmosphere filled with a prejudice which exerts the dearest price from the young.

The families of Romeo and Juliet, and the community around them, only relinquished the ancient prejudice after the deaths of their children. But do any more young gay and lesbian people need to die before we, as a society, similarly let go of our own bigotry?

The loss of even one young life to suicide is too high a price to pay. We have already lost too many young people to this age-old hatred which was not of their making.

David LaFontaine is chairman of the Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth.