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EDUCATION

Out in Schools wins award

Jeremy Hainsworth

OUT IN SCHOOLS HAS BEEN NAMED one of Canada's top 10 organizations that inspire people to take action, think in new ways and make the world a better place.

The designation comes from Tides Canada, a philanthropic organization that helps match donors with "some of the most innovative charitable initiatives in Canada and on the planet."

Out in Schools screens queer films in high schools to facilitate discussions with youth on bullying, homophobia and stereotypes, and to give youth a safe space to explore those issues. Tides calls the program a unique outreach initiative.

"They use creativity and the powerful medium of film and video to engage youth and educators on issues related to homophobia and violence, promoting safer and diverse learning environments," the website says.

"For 2011, our Tides Top 10 features a diverse range of initiatives from coast to coast to coast across Canada. Each is working on specific challenges, yet they are all building innovative solutions to complex social and environmental issues facing Canadians today," it adds.

Vice-president Sarah Goodman says Out in Schools was recognized for "tackling a very important issue" and "taking an innovative approach and bringing students and educators together."

YOUTH



Burnaby Mountain student Ashli Kassar (right, with fellow conference participant Allegra Wright), helped launch her school's GSA a month before the contentious debate on the district's anti-homophobia policy began.

NATHANIEL CHRISTOPHER

Dare to Stand Out draws more than 200

Only half of Langley Secondary students gay-positive

Nathaniel Christopher

MORE THAN 200 STUDENTS AND teachers from across Greater Vancouver and the Fraser Valley attended the Vancouver School Board's second leadership conference for queer youth and their allies at Eric Hamber Secondary School on Dec 9.

"There are 11 conferences in seven cities across the country, and what we're doing is working with youth across Canada to network with them, educate them about LGBTQ issues, engage them in dialogue and create a safer and inclusive community in schools," says Jer's Vision executive director Jeremy Dias. "We've had the highest number of different schools registered this year and the highest number of students we've ever had at a [Vancouver area] conference this year, so it's pretty exciting."

"We hosted the conference last year and it was a wonderful experience," says Tamanawis Secondary student Michaela Milne. "We are extremely lucky to have a much larger GSA this year, and it's going to be a great experience for everyone to learn different things, to make some connections and friends. We have a lot of people who are recently out, so I think it'll be a good experience for everyone."

Tamanawis student Mitchal (who wanted only his first name to be used) is pleased with the progress of the school's gay-straight alliance (GSA).

"We've been doing Pride speaks at our school for the last week or so," he says. "It's really interesting because we really get to take charge and explain to the kids who are closed-minded about what homosexuality is and get the point across that homophobia is not a good thing."

Though Langley Secondary has had a GSA off and on for 10 years, there are very few out students, says student Cassidy Northway. "There was one kid who was out last year, but he had

to be pulled out of classes because of the bullying," she says.

A recent survey at the school revealed that only about half the students had a positive view of queer issues. "A lot of the other 50 percent fell into the neutral category, especially the younger grades, so we are trying to target the younger grades to get them educated, as some of them don't understand the words they use," says Langley Secondary student Samantha Scott, adding that some students still use the word gay as a pejorative.

At West Vancouver's Rockridge Secondary, support for the new GSA is strong, says teacher Leonie Plunkett. "It was a long time coming; we were just waiting for the kids to initiate it," she says. "The GSA is very prominent in the school. Every classroom has a rainbow sticker on the door, and one of our students made an LGBT-themed art project that was shown on the school's announcement screens."

The conference consisted of a full day of programming, including 18 workshops. The morning session featured a talk by Vancouver storyteller Ivan Coyote. "I want everything to be so much different for you than it was for us. I want you to be able to be unapologetically out and safe in your schools," she said.

Coyote also reminded adults of the responsibility they have to queer youth, telling them that if things are to get better, adults must make them better.

"I am sick of moving people to tears with stories of casualties from the warfare we let our children wage on each other," Coyote said. "I'm sick of young dead boys becoming icons of public compassion. I'm sick of Rick Mercer rants we share on Facebook with each other; meanwhile, we continue to allow our principals and school administrators to cater to the conservative and the religious right, and pretend our kids don't all pay the price for their apathy and cowardice."



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