

'Growing Up Queer'

Hidden lifestyles

County teens make video that explores their sexuality and nontraditional lifestyles

Editor's note: The names of the youths in this story have been changed to protect their identities and ensure their safety.

By Jenn Smith
Berkshire Eagle Staff

PITTSFIELD — There are teenagers in Berkshire County looking to be seen beyond the labels they've been given: gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender.

This month, a handful of these youths put their bravest and most honest faces forward to make an educational DVD about "growing up queer in a rural community."

The 22-minute video made its debut on March 13 during the annual True Colors conference at the University of Connecticut. Now the group hopes the short film can be used locally to help educate other teens as well as parents, teachers and community members.

"I've never had a problem but it depends on who you are," said John, who is a senior at Taconic High School and is openly gay. "In a small community like this, a lot of kids are hidden."

According to several national surveys, about 10 percent of the population is non-heterosexual.

John worked on the DVD project produced by the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, Allied (GLBTQA) Youth Group. The group has been operating for the past year in space donated by Berkshire County Kids' Place on Wendell Avenue, and with support from the Berkshire Stonewall Community Coalition.

Formed last year, the group brings together anywhere from three to 30 youths at its monthly meetings, which are organized and facilitated by licensed independent clinical social workers Sara and Kelly Shuff-Heck of Affirmative Counseling.

"I come here to be around people like me. They're committed to doing something," said Cree, 17, of Pittsfield, who is gay.

The group is usually focused on social activities, like hiking, film nights and hanging out after school. But a core group of members said there is still a lack of support for people like them.

"We decided we really needed to do some-



Caroline Bonnavier / Berkshire Eagle Staff

Kelly Shuff-Heck, right, and Sara Shuff-Heck listen during the GLBTQ meeting at Kids Place. The pair oversee meetings with teens who are either gay or exploring nontraditional lifestyles.

If you go ...

If you go...The next meeting of the GLBTQA Youth Group will be Thursday, April, 30, for a hike at Canoe Meadows. To learn more or to register, visit www.affirmativecounseling.net to find a link to the group or call (413) 358-3038. Meetings are free and open to any GLBTQ teens and straight allies between the ages of 13 and 18.

For more local resources:

www.berkshirstonewall.org

For information on state legislation for GLBTQ students: www.mass.gov/cgfy

thing about it," said David, 16, of Pittsfield. He identifies as pansexual, meaning he is attracted to people based more on emotions and aesthetics than gender.

So the group documented teen-to-teen interviews about being GLBTQ in the Berkshires. Questions included: "How do you deal with

homophobia?" "Where would you prefer to live?" "Do you date? If so, what is your ideal date?" and, "Is it easier to be gay, bisexual or transgender?"

Answers varied, but most interviewees said they rely on friends for support in dealing with homophobia; would prefer to live in a major city where lifestyles are more diverse; do not date easily but would plan something simple like an autumn hike or dinner and a movie for a first date.

Students all said it's easier to identify as "bisexual." But Pittsfield High School teacher Randy Northrup, who also appears on the DVD, noted otherwise. "I don't think any of them are actually easy to be," he said.

Northrup, who serves as an advisor for the school's gay-straight alliance, is also gay and struggled with his identity as a teen in the Berkshires.

"It's more important to try to get to know people and who they are," he said.