Outlet offers LGBTQ+ youth a place to be

Longtime local program serves critical support, advocacy role

by Elena Kadvany / Palo Alto Weekly

There’s a rare place in Mountain View where transgender and gender non-conforming teens feel safe to explore, express and be who they are.

That place is Outlet, a longtime local program that provides comprehensive services to LGBTQ+ youth and adolescents, both directly in the form of support groups and individual counseling and indirectly through providing training to local school districts, including Palo Alto Unified.

Local transgender youth and their families describe Outlet as a life-saving, one-of-a-kind resource. It was where Rayden Marcum, a male transgender college student from Palo Alto, first tried out male pronouns. And it was where J., a transgender man who transitioned from female to male while a Gunn High School student, felt he was given "permission to exist," he said. J. requested that the Weekly only use his first initial to protect his privacy. For some students, Outlet was where they met another transgender person for the first time.

In high school, Marcum and J., as well as other current Palo Alto transgender and gender non-conforming students, frequently attended one of several peer-led, drop-in support groups at Outlet. This particular group is for LGBTQ+ youth ages 10 to 18 years old and meets every Monday night at the Community Health Awareness Council in Mountain View, where Outlet is based. It’s entirely driven by the youth themselves, though staff members help to facilitate. The students typically check in with each other about what’s going on that day or week and suggest topics or questions that they want to focus on that night. Topics can range from deeply serious -- how to handle discrimination or harassment at school -- to typical teenage angst: "How do I ask someone out?"

Ross said in the last three or four years, that particular group has seen an increase in the number of transgender and gender non-conforming youth, compared to its history of supporting mostly gay, lesbian and bisexual youth. The group provides critical support and information for students who are questioning or exploring their gender identity.

"The nuanced piece of being trans or gender-diverse is that it’s this internal struggle that’s not super visible, but it’s always there," Ross said. "It’s been shown to have a huge impact on the ability of these kids to really figure out what feels right to them. If you don’t have a place to do that, then you’re keeping it internalized. You’re walking around with anxiety and depression and isolation."

All of Outlet’s support groups are free, confidential and meet year-round. Other groups include De Ambiente, the only Spanish-speaking support group for bilingual and/or newly immigrated LGBTQ+ youth between 10

http://www.paloaltoonline.com/news/2015/11/06/outlet­offers­lgbt­youth­place­to­be
and 25 years old in the Bay Area; another support group for youth ages 10 to 18 who identify anywhere on the gender spectrum or want to explore their gender identity; and a young-adults group geared toward LGBTQ+ young adults who are out of high school, in college or are transitioning into work and gaining more independence.

The groups average about seven to 12 youth per week, according to Outlet Program Director Anthony Ross. Outlet, which employs three full-time staff members including Ross, serves students from up and down the Peninsula, from Palo Alto to San Jose. The organization is now housed under Palo Alto nonprofit Adolescent Counseling Services.

Outlet also runs peer-support groups on the Palo Alto and Gunn high school campuses, as well as at Woodside High School and a pilot group at Sequoia High School. These groups are for youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or who might be questioning their gender identity and are highly confidential. If a student is interested in attending, they must speak with their school's Adolescent Counseling Services (ACS) site director to find out when and where the group meets. Many of these students are "barely out," and come to that group first to get feedback and advice from their peers and Outlet staff on how to talk to their friends and families about their identity, Ross said.

Outlet also provides youth with individual counseling through ACS interns either after school in a Community Counseling Program, or at the students' own schools through the on-campus groups.

These kind of youth support groups are scarce in the area. The only other local option is a weekly drop-in meeting in Palo Alto for LGBTQ+ people and allies between the ages of 13 and 25. The group is hosted by Youth Space, a Family & Children Services LGBTQ+ program based in San Jose.

Outlet first formed in 1997 as an HIV-prevention and education program through the YWCA of Palo Alto. The organization would teach volunteer high school students how to lead HIV-prevention workshops, with the goal that they would then spread that education back at their schools. It turned out that many of those students identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual, Ross said. They asked staff leading the program at the time if they would start a support group for LGBT youth, and they did -- the same Monday night group that continues today.

Outlet also plays a major role in the education of Palo Alto teachers. They have been the school district's primary source of LGBTQ+ training for eight years and provide an annual, two-hour long training to new hires. Outlet also regularly consults with teachers or administrators who have questions or request help in supporting a transgender student's transition, for example. Ross is also a member of the school district's LGBTQ committee and was directly involved in the creation of a new gender-identity policy coming before the Palo Alto school board next week.

Outlet's educational services are broad-reaching. During the 2014-15 fiscal year, the nonprofit provided training and education to 3,395 youth and youth-serving professionals throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, according to Ross. The group also takes requests for workshops on LGBTQ+ issues, from what California laws are in place to protect LGBTQ+ youth to gender education. Ross said they receive requests not only from schools -- from elementary through higher-education institutions -- but also mental health professionals and youth-serving nonprofit organizations that are not LGBTQ+ specific.

Outlet staff will also advocate on behalf of students and families when necessary. Ross said he recently attended a meeting with administrators and a family of a middle-school transgender student to talk about accommodations for the student. The school administrators were talking about getting training scheduled eventually; Ross stepped in to make the point that "something really needs to happen now."

"We often need to advocate and push for, "What are you going to do right now," and, "What's your long-term plan?" he said.

Outlet also leads parent-education programs in both English and Spanish, and regularly refers parents to local mental health professionals for further support. Ross urged any parents with gender-diverse children, whether or not they fall into the organization’s target age group of 10 to 25, to contact Gender Spectrum, an Oakland organization that provides education and training around gender to schools and other institutions, with any questions.

Ross -- whose email signature includes not only typical information like his professional title and phone number, but also his preferred pronouns ("he/him/his") -- signs off every email with a quote from American poet and feminist Adrienne Rich: "When someone with the authority of a teacher describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing."

Through support groups, education, advocacy and beyond, Outlet serves to counter that psychic disequilibrium that so deeply affects local LGBTQ+ youth.

Youth or parents interested in finding out more about Outlet can email outlet@chacmv.org or visit acs-teens.org/what-we-do/outlet/.

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