

CHASING



Increased national awareness of LGBTQ students means increased support in Baltimore schools—but also added controversy. *By Hannah Monicken*

here to tell you, if you'll excuse the cliché, that the kids are all right.

"So, I didn't have a 'Ring of Keys' moment," admits Gilman School sophomore Ben Levinson, referring to the song from the popular Broadway musical "Fun Home" wherein the preteen main character sees a butch lesbian for the first time and identifies her own desires. Levinson's been out of the closet at school since his freshman year. "I think I realized I wasn't straight in 7th grade, maybe," he says. "It was kind of a gradual thing."

Levinson is one of the leaders of his school's Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA). Gilman, an all-boys private school, has boasted a GSA for about 15 years, according to Johnnie Forman, the school's director of community and diversity, who adds that Gilman is finalizing new policies regarding transgender and gender non-conforming students.

"We promote a safe space and open environment," Forman says, "all the way up from the lower school to the upper."

Because Gilman is boys-only, Levinson imagines that outsiders might assume the worst. Actually, he says, he's had a great experience, noting that the administration is open to ideas and requests, and it's rare for anyone to be overtly homophobic.

"I'd say Gilman has grown and is growing in leaps and bounds," Levinson says. "It's a great place to be."

As for public schools, the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), along with individual school districts, has taken on bullying in recent years, which includes those bullied for being, or perceived as being, LGBTQ. In general, bullying is down across the state, according to reports of incidents collected by the department each school year—although Baltimore County Public Schools (BCPS) was one of the few systems to report an increase in incidents

I AM ONE OF THE LUCKY ONES WHOSE coming out story is, essentially, a non-story. The response by family and friends to my, "Well, I'm dating a woman now," was more or less a collective shrug. As it was, I didn't actually come out as queer until after college. (I'm 28 now.) And since I am a cisgender white woman (identifying as the gender of my birth), I had it easier than many.

If I had been a bit less oblivious to what the future held, my college experimentation undoubtedly would have involved more than a few innocuous ear piercings and the occasional toke. But if I had been less clueless 10 years ago while in high school, would I have come out? It's hard to say, but my first instinct is no—at least not widely.

There was just one fully out-of-the-closet person in my North Dakota high

school, and he paid for it. Someone scrawled a gay slur on his car; students whispered behind his back. Watching him walk across the stage with his male date during senior prom, a parent behind me scoffed, "What will they allow next: everyone to be naked?!"

Since then, I have learned of a handful of our class of 350 who have subsequently come out. From what Facebook tells me—and what I gather from the hometown grapevine—their experiences range from happily coupled to the tragic suicide of a classmate who joined the Army before the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell.

We say, "It gets better" for LGBTQ—lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer—youth, and it does. It has. Here in Baltimore the next generation is taking up the cause, and at younger ages. And I'm

RAINBOWS

from the 2013-2014 to 2014-2015 academic years.

But according to BCPS spokesperson D. Mychael Dickerson, the county student council is addressing the issue. “We have let that be student-led, while we’re providing support,” he says. “We’ve found it’s much more effective when taken on by the students.”

Private schools have much more leverage to enact their own approaches. From those with whom I’ve spoken—students and faculty associated with Gilman, Bryn Mawr School, Friends School and Garrison Forest School—I’ve gotten the distinct impression of established educational institutions doing their best to keep up with changing times.

“I would say that, in general, the [Friends School] community, both formally and informally, is incredibly open and welcoming,” says Priyanka Rupani, the school’s new director of diversity.

Though she’s been with Friends only a year, Rupani says she is striving to make the intersectionality of identities—whether that’s race, sexuality, religion, gender or something else—and the difficulties that come with traversing these elements, a focus for the school.

Zipi Diamond, who graduated last spring from Bryn Mawr and now attends Macalester College in St. Paul, Minn., praised Bryn Mawr’s willingness to discuss sexuality and gender identity issues.

“I think we did a good job of providing a safe environment to ask questions,” she says. “Sometimes, as we’d start talking about things, people would stop and be like, ‘I’m sorry, but I don’t know what this means.’ What we tried to do is make sure that nobody would get mad at someone for asking a question. When you ask a question, there’s a difference between being hateful and just not knowing.”

Diamond was co-president of her school’s GSA—in Bryn Mawr’s case, the

Gender-Sexuality Alliance—and also worked with the Baltimore chapter of the national Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network. She was called—and called herself—the school’s “Alpha Gay,” a title she enjoyed.

It’s not all rainbows and pride parades, however. In July, Free State Justice, an LGBTQ advocacy group, filed suit against Talbot County, on Maryland’s Eastern Shore, on behalf of a 14-year-old transgender student, claiming the school system was violating Title IX, which states: “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.”

In 2015, MSDE issued guidelines for school systems in accommodating transgender and gender nonconforming students—guidelines that public school districts are encouraged, but not required, to enact. Further, this past May, the U.S. Department of Education issued a directive to public schools to allow students to use bathrooms and locker rooms consistent with their gender identity. (Several states—not Maryland—promptly sued the federal government over this mandate; in August, a

federal judge in Texas, one of those states, ruled that, until the suit is settled, public schools remain free to dictate policy on bathroom use.)

Baltimore County Public Schools is following the MSDE guidelines, and Baltimore City Public Schools’ Title IX training for principals includes allowing transgender students to use bathrooms and locker rooms coinciding with their identity.

For Zar Glover, a senior at all-girls Garrison Forest who identifies as non-binary and prefers the pronouns they/them, the separation between policy and practice can feel particularly defined. Though the school itself has been responsive and supportive—teachers are more than willing to use preferred pronouns, and the school has a new policy for accepting transgender and gender nonconforming students—Glover nonetheless has assumed responsibility for educating peers, a task they described as both important and emotionally exhausting.

As both a person of color and someone who does not identify as male or female, those intersecting identities can make it hard to navigate the halls of a predominantly white girls’ school. “As a whole, I think it’s difficult to get people to understand identities that aren’t inside of this little bubble,” Glover says. “But once there’s that click and you get to be able to have conversations openly about identity—what normal is, what binary is—it’s really nice.”

Glover, who is a leader in both Spectrum (the school’s GSA) and the Black Student Association, sees hope in younger students. When this year’s sophomores came in as freshmen, Glover remembers thinking it seemed like nearly every other one was openly queer—a departure from the two or three in the junior and senior classes.

While there’s still LGBTQ rights progress to be made, it’s nice to know the next generation is working on it. □

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