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Rockville Open House offers safe haven to gay and questioning teens

Teens find friends and support at program at Jewish Community Center of Greater Washington

by Alison Bryant, Staff Writer

For Ilana Kapit, 16, top priority is letting other gay or teens questioning their sexual orientation know that everything will be OK.

There's nothing wrong with having attractions not everyone else has, she says. And at the end of her sophomore year at Walter Johnson High School in Bethesda, she decided to share her thoughts at Rockville Open House.

"I had pretty much figured out who I was and I was getting to the point where I'd hacked off all my hair and was totally comfortable in this gay image," Kapit said. "I'm huge on getting it out there that things will get better and everything will be OK."

Rockville Open House offers lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex (someone born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't fit the typical definitions of male or female), or questioning teens an opportunity to share thoughts and hang out in a safe, welcoming space.

"I don't check identities at the door," said Sarah Meytin, an openly queer rabbi who runs the program. "Anyone who wants to come and be in the space with us is welcome."

Teens from across the county gather the first Thursday of every month at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Washington, at 6125 Montrose Road in Rockville. On



Tess Colwell/The Gazette Ilana Kapit, 16, of Rockville is involved with Rockville Open House at the Greater Washington Jewish Community Center, which offers lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex (someone born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't fit the typical definitions of male or female), or questioning teens an opportunity to share thoughts and hang out in a safe, welcoming space.



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average, about five students show up and steer conversation themselves.

If she is needed, Meytin will offer an adult voice to provide guidance or pose questions for the teens.

"All they want to do is chat with each other," Meytin said. "I haven't structured it as a formal support group. Rather, I wanted to give the kids a safe space to hang out and not hide who they are."

Parts of the Jewish community are very accepting of and welcoming to lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transsexuals, Meytin said. But they need to make the message clear.

"Even the [synagogues] that want to be welcoming sometimes don't realize that if they're not overtly welcoming, then the subtle message is, 'We don't see you,' or, 'We're not ready for you,'" Meytin said. "Even if they don't do anything overtly negative, if they're not proactive, the message is, 'This isn't a space for you to be out and comfortable in.'"

At its conception in April 2010, Rockville Open House was made available to Jewish teens. But Kapit said she found that aspect limiting.

"I'm only Jewish by blood," she said. "I'm not religious at all. If you want more people to come, you should open it up."

And Meytin did. The group attracts all kinds, including straight allies and people who do not identify as Jewish.

Teens from more than 10 high schools attend, and the group boasts 143 friends on its Facebook page. About a third of those are teens in the 13-to-18-year-old range that Meytin is targeting for the open house, Meytin said.

Some teens who attend are out at their schools, and others are not. Others have changed their identities since attending.

"I feel like they come from a really wide variety of different schools, and therefore experiences," Meytin said.

And for Kapit, who is the president of the Gay Straight Alliance at her school and developed a Montgomery County Public Schools Gay Straight Alliance, attending the open house is a way to work through problems.

"It's just really nice to be like, 'Gee, I'm really not alone,'" Kapit said.

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