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Safe place

Rockville Open House provides hangout for Jewish gay teens

by Adam Kredo

Staff Writer

After cropping off most of her hair about two weeks ago, Ilana Kapit received some nasty feedback from her fellow 10th-graders at the Walter Johnson High School in Bethesda.

"I got a lot of, 'You look exactly like your brother' and 'You look very gay,' " recalled the 15-year-old Rockville resident.

And while the openly gay Kapit says she finds it easy to "brush off" the flurry of cruel comments, she is well aware that many like her are unable to do so.

"A lot of people get a lot of" guff from their classmates, Kapit said, explaining that schools are not always a safe haven for gay teens.

According to various reports, in fact, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender teens are at a greatly increased risk to commit suicide -- in some cases, they're nearly two times as likely to kill themselves as their heterosexual peers, according to a 2005 youth risk behavior survey conducted by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Knowing that it's tough to work out one's sexuality in the all-too-public hallways of America's high schools, Rabbi Sarah Meytin decided that it was time to open the doors to a safe space for LGBT Jewish teens.

It's called the Rockville Open House, and it beckons 13- to 18-year-olds to gather once monthly at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Washington in Rockville for an evening of frank discussion and all-around "hanging out," according to Meytin.

"Schools still aren't entirely safe," said Meytin, a preschool teacher at Temple Emanuel in Kensington. "There's an expectation that everyone's going to be straight, [and LGBT teens] have to face a lot of questions or stares or uncomfortable comments."

But at the open house -- which recently held its inaugural meeting at the JCCGW (which was offered to the group free of charge) -- teens can take down the metaphorical walls they've built to shield their sexuality from classmates.

"We basically just talked, which was fabulous because I could tell some of these girls didn't talk much about" being gay, said Kapit, who explained that while she is comfortable discussing her own sexuality, she realizes that many have yet to reach that point.

"I love to see these people who have to live so much of their lives in hiding talk about it," Kapit said, recalling that as some of the six participants began to open up, she could detect a "visible relief of tension."

"They just need to take off the masks they're wearing all day," Kapit added. "Even if it's just for three hours, it's so great."

And while several similar environments exist -- among them the Rainbow Youth Alliance, which holds support sessions for LGBT teens at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockville, and the D.C.-based Sexual Minority Youth Assistance League, which runs a youth recreational night every Friday -- Rockville Open House is the first specifically Jewish sanctuary.

Part of the impetus, Meytin says, is to help solve a problem devoted Jews of all backgrounds have long puzzled over -- the rising rates of intermarriage.

"As a rabbi, I want to see Jews married to Jews," said Meytin, who explained that as an openly gay Jew who is married with kids and active in the Jewish community, she can "serve as a role model" to gay Jewish teens who may be struggling to squeeze religion into their lives. "It's just as important for LGBT Jews to be looking to build Jewish families."



Flotilla raid An Israeli student brandishes her identity card in a demonstration outside Jerusalem's Hebrew University in support of the Israeli Navy raid on ships bound for Gaza. For coverage, see page 19: "Has flotilla dash exposed policy dash?" and "Israel once again lightning rod." Opinion articles appear on pages 15 and 16. Photo by Kobi Gideon / Flash 90 / JTA

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Meytin noted that while she had the goal of creating a safe refuge for quite a while, she didn't take action until hearing from Justin Lerner, the director of the Washington DC Jewish Community Center's Gay and Lesbian Outreach and Education program.

Lerner had received pleas from several parents in need.

"I've had a couple of parents of teens who are Jewish who have wanted to know where they can send" their kids to meet and chat with other gay teens, Lerner recalled. He had no response.

Until Meytin opened shop at the JCCGW, there was simply no place for the area's teens to gather, particularly in the suburbs, Lerner explained.

"Something like this is important to provide a space so parents can feel comfortable that they can provide their child a resource," he said.

Adult-supervised and run out of Jewish facility, Rockville Open House assures parents that their kids are in a protected environment, Lerner said, making it less likely that teens would turn to the Internet or other potentially nefarious outlets to meet new people.

Meytin is not the first to offer such a refuge for Jewish teens. Nathan Weiner, director of the N'tivot Teen Program at Temple Rodef Shalom in Falls Church, says he had tried around 2006 to establish a safe space along with another educator at Temple Beth Ami in Rockville.

The group, Weiner said, met only twice before fading into obscurity due to a lack of "dedicated funding" and widespread community involvement.

Despite its failure, the group's mere existence marked a milestone, Wiener believes.

"A kid looks at a poster [for the group], and says, 'Wow, this exists!' But maybe they're 14 or 15 [years old] and not comfortable asking their parents for a ride" to such a gathering, he explained. Nevertheless, "just the presence of the group makes it a success."

Meytin agrees with that sentiment, and says that while her group's first meeting attracted only half a dozen participants, the teens seemed psyched about the possibilities.


Plus, Meytin has waged a bit of a PR blitz, sending word to Gay Student Alliances at area schools, including Jewish ones, as well as requesting that the Washington Board of Rabbis forward a blurb about the group to its members, asking them to publicize Rockville Open House in their shuls. A Facebook page has garnered 130 fans.

"There's a lot of different needs and desires in the community," Meytin said, explaining that while the space doesn't offer explicitly Jewish content at the moment, she plans to introduce some. In the fall, for example, Meytin said she may try to arrange for guest speakers, possibly members of Hamsa, the University of Maryland's first LGBT student group.

For the time being, Meytin added, she's content to let the kids take the steering wheel. It's beneficial for them, she explained, to feel at home addressing some of the touchy subjects on their minds, such as whether it's OK to hold hands with a partner while in school.

Kapit, for her part, said it's freeing to hang out in a place where "I can just be like, 'Oh, my God, she's so attractive,' and not get weird looks."

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I am very proud of Ilana!
She is very special in general but particularly to me. She is brave for herself and for others and I like that she is so outspoken,b
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