



GSA's Pave the Way for the "New Gay Teen"

Buffalo Grove, IL - Openly gay Buffalo Grove High School seniors, Ryan Kuperman, 17, and Jen Wohlner, 17, were elected Homecoming King and Queen by their peers, nearly 600 senior class students, during their school's Homecoming Dance celebration; October 7, 2005. Approximately 85 other "straight" students were in the running as well. In what can be seen as an amazing commendation for both Kuperman and Wohlner as young gay individuals, and the LGBT community at large; times, they are a changing. But who wore the tiara?

Buffalo Grove High School psychologist Jennifer Zacharski has seen a large increase in LGBT awareness on campus over the last five years. She accounts this partially to the presence of the student run Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), which she has been faculty sponsor of since its initiation.

"Students have become more tolerant," says Zacharski, "and there are more students openly out. Yet we still hear the insults and things being referred to as 'gay.' Mainly, students aren't aware of the effects this negative language can have. We strive to educate them on that."

All six high schools in township district 214 currently have GSA groups in effect. However Buffalo Grove was one of the first to implement this student organization with a mission of "uniting people with a common goal of forming a safe, open-minded, and educated environment [and] promoting equality and acceptance regardless of personality, lifestyle and sexual orientation." All district 214 schools are also involved in the Chicago chapter of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (glsenchicago.org) and take part in their annual Day of Silence event, a protest against the "silencing" of LGBT discrimination world wide.

Started by a group of 5 high school students in 2001, the Buffalo Grove GSA has since executed school wide surveys to establish the current climate toward LGBT people, specifically in their school. They offer group talk sessions regarding issues that affect gay youth and have attended LGBT affirmative productions, offered by About Face Theater, at others schools.

Both Kuperman and Wohlner have been members of their school's GSA since their sophomore and freshman years respectively. Both came out around the same time, in their sophomore year. Kuperman says he was aware of the organization's activities since before his freshman enrollment in 2002.

Aside from the GSA, both students are actively involved on the Buffalo Grove campus. Kuperman plays clarinet for the school's bands and symphony orchestra as well as being a member of the Varsity Cheerleading squad. He looks forward to applying to USC for next fall to pursue a career in musical performance. Wohlner takes part in the improv comedy club as well as the math, speech and acting teams. She is also a member of the National Honor Society and is a National Merit Commended Scholar. Though she's uncertain where she'll be next fall, she's applying to 7 universities and plans to study fine/visual arts and English.

Per their election to Homecoming court, Kuperman sees it as both an honor and a positive advance in the perception of LGBT people en masse. He is proud of his school that not only came together in support of someone openly gay, but who is also, "not the stereotypical high school athlete." Wohlner echoes his sentiments, and adds that what she calls "the new gay teen" is actively aiding in the fostering of positive change in "America's current headlining culture war, not by protesting or anything radical, but by simply fitting in."

"We're very proud of Ryan and Jen and of the student body," says Zarcharski, "who were being progressive and supportive of them. [Ryan and Jen] are great kids and the students agree."

Friends of Kuperman and Wohlner's stated that they all voted for the two (except one, who forgot her student ID, but said she would have had she remembered). For all their involvement and outgoing free spirits Kuperman and Wohlner were the "natural" choice. Sexuality didn't play a part in their decisions.

Yet it may have taken a small role in the actions of the elected students during their Homecoming dance. Wohlner says it was her, in fact, who wore the tiara, but only for half the time. She surrendered it to Kuperman for the later parts of the evening,

stating he wanted to wear it as well.

Written by: Jason P. Freeman

Photo: Buffalo Grove High School Homecoming King Ryan Kuperman, wearing the black shirt, and friends enjoy a day in Chicago's Lakeview.