

# Finding your way when you're young, gay

By SUSAN CAMPBELL  
• The Hartford Courant

One would think there has never been a better time for a kid to be homosexual or bisexual. More than ever before, there are support groups, books like "The Journey Out" or "Young, Gay, and Proud," and pop culture validations like the gay teen in "My So-Called Life," now on rotation on MTV cable.

But in some ways, things couldn't be worse.

"Because the issue of gay rights is now very much in the open, it is a tougher time for people who are gay and lesbian," said David LaFontaine, chairman of the Massachusetts Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth. His 4-year-old agency is the only state organization of its kind in the country.

"Unfortunately," he said, "I think gay people have become a target group for people who no longer target racial minorities. We've become the scapegoat of the '90s."

Massachusetts has led the way in gay and lesbian awareness. After a national report on the high suicide rate among homosexual teens, Republican Gov. William Weld formed the state commission and the next year signed a bill increasing legal protection for homosexuals. LaFontaine said commission research has led to awareness programs in 100 Massachusetts high schools and to the formation of about 50 community-based Gay/Straight Alliances.

"Kids have been able to graduate high school and go on to college without feeling scarred because of prejudice," LaFontaine said. "If those

horror stories we heard at the public hearings are going on in a liberal state like Massachusetts, then the environment must be even more difficult in other states."

In fact, it is. Last month in Utah, the Salt Lake City Board of Education banned all clubs from city high schools in order to keep a fledgling Gay/Straight Alliance from meeting. Hundreds of students protested.

Robin Passariello is founder and executive director of Children From the Shadows, a Connecticut group for and about homosexual and bisexual young people and those known as transgendered — people who cross-dress and people who believe they should be the opposite sex of the one they are. "I'm a lesbian adult, once a terrified and suicidal lesbian teen-ager," she said. "Having gone through that, I could see a need for this."

Young homosexuals who are rejected by their family or friends — or who don't even try to come out — react in various ways, she said. Some become perfect. Others become sexually promiscuous with the opposite sex. (A recent Toronto study said that lesbian girls are at greater risk of pregnancy than heterosexual ones.) Others believe that since everyone is going to hate them anyway, they can be as wild as they want. Some abuse drugs. And some kill themselves.

Homosexual youths account for 30 percent of the 5,000 or so people ages 12 to 24 who commit suicide each year, according to a study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Passariello said the numbers are just the harsh reality of

lives lived in the shadows.

"When you think about adolescence as a whole, kids are trying to find out who they are," Passariello said. "If a boy looks at a girl in study hall, she and her friends talk for the next three weeks about what that look meant. They get support from their friends and ideas from their parents. They know from school and from television how to act. Gay kids are so hidden and so afraid, they don't have the opportunity to talk to anybody about how they should be. They have to kind of figure it out."

"Youth service bureaus are more active now," Passariello said. "But while there are pockets of growing support, there are still a lot of kids — in urban areas or more conservative areas — who are still very isolated."

And there is more support in formal organizations like PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays). Studies show that the earlier an adolescent can find a group where he belongs, the better.

Such groups deal with all aspects of homosexual life, from relationships to coming out. Counselors say coming out takes a lifetime.

LaFontaine said young people being raised in politically and religiously conservative households have an especially rough time.

"We have to have an atmosphere that protects these kids from verbal and physical harm," LaFontaine said. "Teachers need to realize it's their responsibility to interrupt anti-gay language in the classroom, on the playing field, in the hallways. Anti-gay sentiments are expressed, and a lot of harm is done to young people."