

Gay, lesbian teen-agers in Louisville seek support

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Staff Writer

When he was in high school, Jane Hope's son Gerry was a winning swimmer and student-council president.

"Yet, he thought about suicide a lot," Hope said recently.

"Gay and lesbian children often look really good ... but inside you may not know that they're feeling a lot of pain and a lot of isolation and a lot of loneliness."

Hope said her son knew he was homosexual from the time he was 12 but didn't "come out of the closet" to her until he was 21. "That's a long time to be alone with a secret."

Although some cities, including Indianapolis, have started youth groups or programs for gay and lesbian teen-agers, homosexual youths in Louisville still must struggle with their emerging sexuality largely on their own, say Hope and others concerned about the issue.

Marie Jenkins, who is active with Hope in the Louisville chapter of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, said "it hit me in the pit of my stomach" when her daughter Anne told her five years ago she was a lesbian. But Jenkins said she and her husband, Tom, gradually have learned that gay teen-agers and their families feel alone, anguished and in need of support.

According to a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services report released last year, homosexual youths are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual teen-agers, and up to 30

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SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 25, 1991

The Courier-Journal

Homosexual teens

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percent of the teens who kill themselves each year may be gay.

Homosexual youths also are at higher risk for alcohol and drug abuse — in part because their struggle to come to terms with their sexual orientation, in a society generally not accepting of homosexuality, often leads to low self-esteem. "Many families are unable to reconcile their child's sexual identity with moral and religious values," the report says.

Teen-agers who openly acknowledge their homosexuality, the report says, "may feel some sense of security within themselves but face tremendous external conflicts with family and peers."

Recently at an AIDS conference in Louisville, a panel of homosexual teen-agers from Indianapolis spoke of their struggles and the support they get from the Indianapolis Youth Group, an educational and social organization for homosexuals under 21.

"When you're 15 or 16 and you have feelings that aren't quite 'normal' . . . you feel very isolated," said one panelist, a girl named Love. (Teens on the panel used only their first names because some have not discussed their sexuality with their families.)

She added: "We know that gay youth have a high rate of AIDS. It's because they are out on the street," trying to meet other homosexuals, because "they have nowhere (else) to go."

The youth group "has given me the self-esteem and the confidence" to speak publicly about being a lesbian, said Vanessa, another panelist. Joining it "was the best step toward the future I could ever make," she said, adding that the support she has found made her understand "it's OK to be gay. It's OK. You're not a bad person."

While the group may not motivate everyone to openly acknowledge his or her sexuality, Vanessa said, those who participate "can at least look in the mirror and say, 'I am homosexual, and I am happy.'"

The youth group, funded in part by a \$30,000 grant from the federal Centers for Disease Control, was formed three years ago. So far it has served about 1,000 teen-agers. Its adult coordinator, Chris Gonzalez, said the group sponsors roller-skating parties, dances and parents' nights, and educational seminars on subjects such as prevention of acquired immune deficiency syndrome and self-esteem building.

Last summer, the group also started a national hot line — 1-800-347-TEEN — operated from 7 p.m. to midnight Fridays and Saturdays by group members trained in peer counseling.

"We are receiving an awful lot of calls from kids from the Louisville area who are looking for direction and a place to go," Gonzalez said. "You have kids within your own community who . . . desperately need your help."

In Louisville, a group of concerned adults is at "a very early stage" of discussing whether to set up a similar group, said Jeff Vessels, who has been active in AIDS work.

"The bottom line is that we want to provide a safe environment where young people can be who they are and feel OK about it," Vessels said. "The need is clear, and we're trying to figure out how best to address it."

At the AIDS conference, the Indianapolis teens and members of the parents group spoke of the difficulty of being young and homosexual in a heterosexual world.

Zach, a college student, grew up in a small, conservative town in a staunchly Roman Catholic family. He used to drive 200 miles round-trip to attend youth-group meetings. Zach said his family wondered where he was going. "So I told them I was going to a youth group in Indianapolis. They thought it was a church youth group, and I didn't correct them."

"You tell them you're going to the library or to friends, because it's important to you," Love said. "Eventually, I hope to come out to my parents. The group has helped me to think about it, as an even feasible thing."

Zach said he since has told his mother he is gay and has invited her to parents' night, but so far she hasn't come. "She was having a hard time sitting in a room with one homosexual person, let alone 60," he said. "But I think she's getting closer. . . . I think I've been blessed really with such an understanding mother."

A man in the audience said that when he told his parents he was gay, they threw him out of the house.

Paul, a panelist, said his father wanted to take him to a "hooker house" to celebrate his 21st birthday. Paul said he couldn't talk to his father about his sexual orientation. But he has talked to his mother and his sister. And Paul said that when he told his mother, in a scene that for him was emotionally agonizing, she told him she'd assumed he was gay for several years.

His advice: "If you know your child is gay, tell them you know they're gay. Don't wait for us to tell you."

Carita Warner said she "never dreamed" that her daughter Sarah, who had "one boyfriend after another" through high school, could be a lesbian. When Sarah told her, Warner said, she reacted with disbelief, denial and anger. Warner said she grieved for things she had always dreamed of, "weddings that you had planned . . . grandchildren that you had hoped you would have."

Eventually Warner reached acceptance. "There's a whole lot worse things. Thank goodness she's still happy and productive and living an exciting life."