

Tune In, Come Out

Generations: Spurred by media images and a new climate of acceptance, teenagers are experimenting more openly with gay and bi-sexuality

IT WAS COMING-OUT DAY AT CAMBRIDGE Rindge and Latin, an autumnal rite every bit as gala as graduation day at the elite Massachusetts high school. Triangular pink stickers were plastered everywhere, on Levi's, sweat shirts, high-top sneakers—even, prankishly, on the backs of unsuspecting football stars. For 16-year-old Khadijah Britton, perhaps the one student actually coming out, the stickers signaled acceptance, in spite of her uneasiness. She felt it her responsibility to tell other students that being "straight" wasn't the only possibility. Inevitably, Britton guessed, she would have to endure "weird looks" in the hallways. But later that day she announced before 250 classmates: "I've always known I was bisexual."

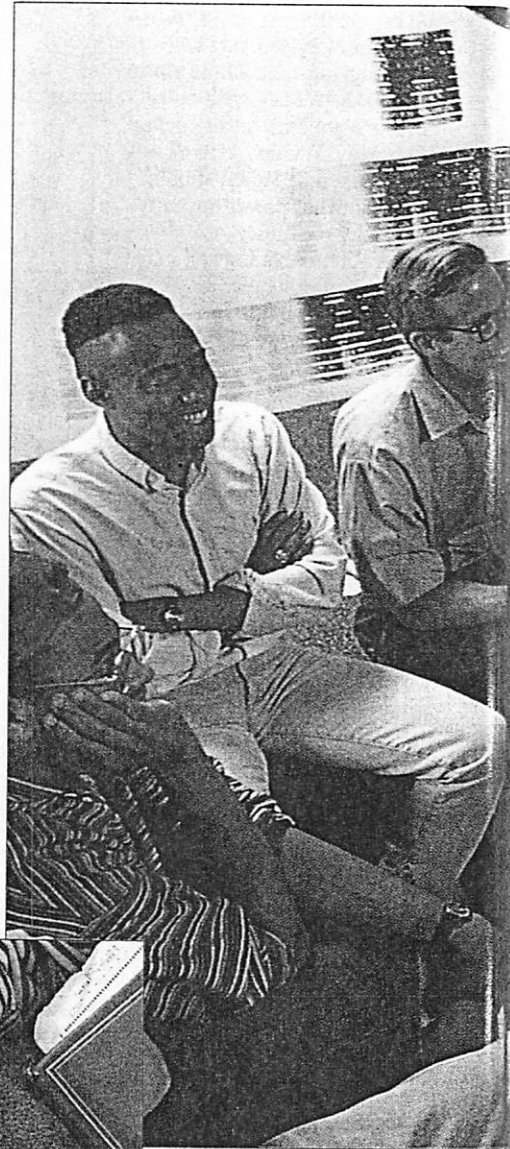
Things have come a distance at Rindge and Latin since it became the first public high school to join Boston's Gay Pride parade two years ago, with a delegation of just a couple of openly gay students. Now the contingent has grown big enough to carry the huge pink and black banner of Project 10 East, the school's formally recognized gay-straight alliance. Boston may be up front, but at high schools around the country, multiculturalism has begun to embrace multisexualism. With or without official blessing, student gay organizations have cropped up in Chicago, Berkeley, Miami, Minneapolis, New York. In Massachusetts alone, more than a hundred public and private schools have such groups, including George Bush's alma mater, Andover.

The schools tend to be up-scale and memberships are small. But more students seem to be coming out, and they're coming out younger. A climate of greater tolerance is making it possible for teens to explore more openly what they've historically sampled in secret. "It's been going on for years and years, and now people have the courage to face it," says Meredith Grossman, a Ft. Lauderdale, Fla., high-school junior who conducted her own confirming survey of schools in her area and wrote an article about it for

the local paper. The major shift, says Kevin Jennings, an openly gay teacher at Concord (Mass.) Academy, has been in the acceptance of gays by straight students. One 1993 survey of students by a task force set up by Massachusetts Gov. William Weld found that 64 percent of all students (78 percent of female students) condemned discrimination against homosexuals. Sixty percent favored gay support groups.

Becoming chic: Some high schoolers are coming out homosexual, some bisexual. Others are admittedly confused. "It's very hard to figure out what you are in the core of your belly," says one Boston teenager who thought she was a lesbian until she found herself enjoying a relationship with a man. Teens' eagerness to experiment has made bisexuality almost "cool" in some schools. "From where I sit, it's definitely becoming more chic," says George Hohagen, 20, a Midwestern market researcher not long out of high school himself. "It's trendy even to ask the question out loud: 'Do you think I am?'" At meetings of Boston Area Gay and Lesbian Youth, support-group leader Troix Bettencourt, 19, a public-health intern, has seen an increase in teenagers who identify themselves as bisexual. They don't want to be penned into one type of behavior, he says. "It [saying you're bisexual] just says you're not yet defined and gives you some freedom." It's also easier. "After all, you've still got the straight

PAULA LERNER—WOODFIN CAMP



'They're open to everything': Cambridge students adopt the pink triangle in support of gay rights. Generation Q acts out in Chicago

part," says 18-year-old Jessica Byers, a recent Rindge and Latin graduate who came out as a lesbian.

Not surprisingly, a backlash has developed among parents. "The schools are just going overboard with this stuff," says Brian Camenker, a member of Newton (Mass.) Citizens for Public Education, formed this year to keep sexual issues out of the curriculum. Camenker, who has a

son, Darlene Dottin. According to Dr. Frances Stott, a professor of child development at Chicago's Erikson Institute, some adolescents may experiment because of a biological predisposition, some because they think it's the thing to do. But they also have a deeper agenda, she says. "Teenagers are at that point in life where so many aspects of their identity are coming together. They're figuring out issues of

Q, an informal rap group for young gays and bisexuals. "The truth is, they're open to everything."

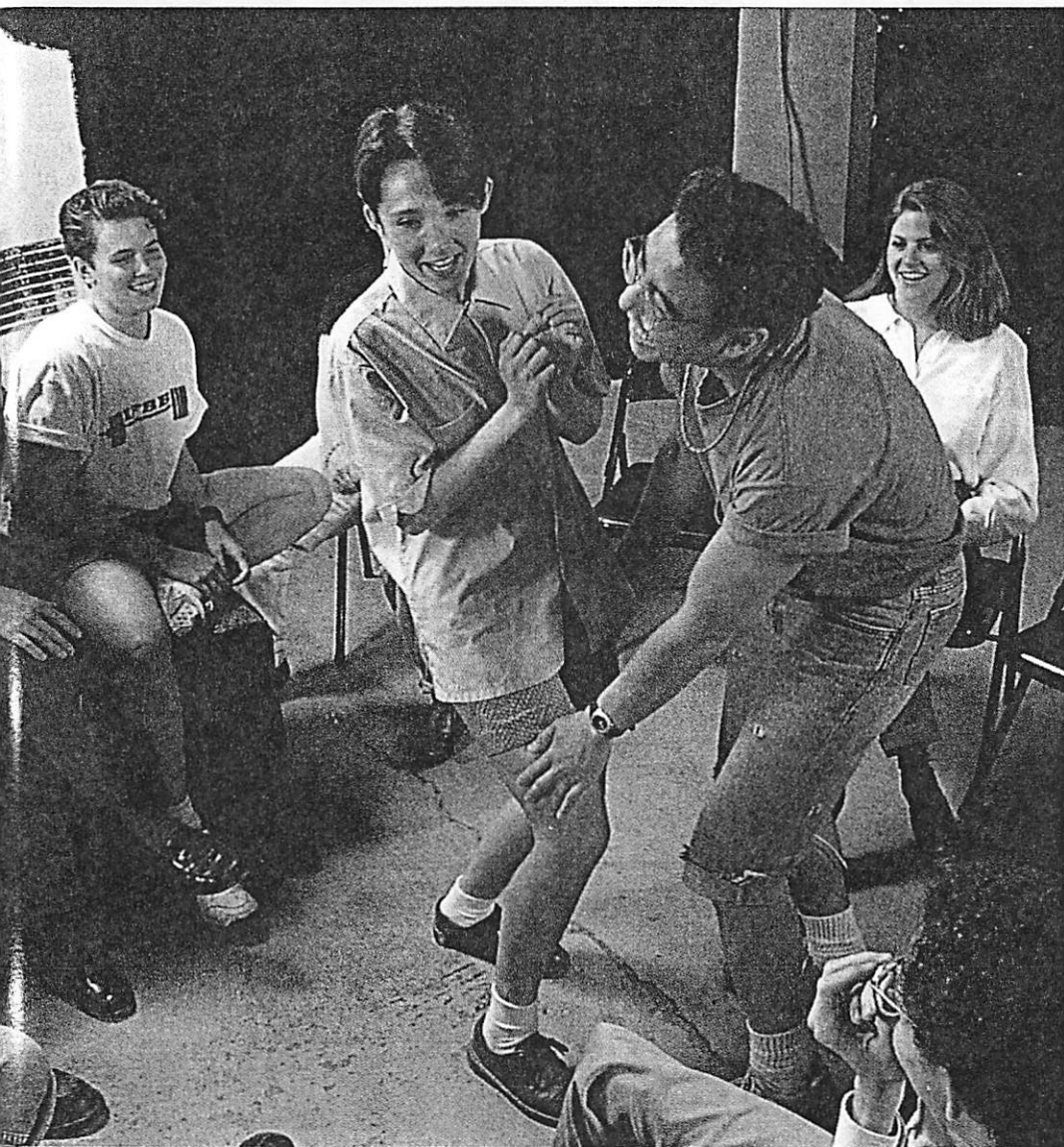
Not that the lid is entirely off. There's still a high cost in stigma for coming out at all. In boys' locker rooms, "faggot" remains a favorite catchall epithet for anyone whose behavior is deemed even slightly out of the ordinary. The same Massachusetts task force that reported greater support for gays also found that 60 percent of students said they'd be "upset or afraid" if people thought they were gay or bisexual. "There's still an enormous amount of pain that these kids have to go through," says Frances Kunreuther, executive director of the Hetrick-Martin Institute in Manhattan, a gay and lesbian youth organization that serves more than 1,500 young people a year. "Young people are getting stronger," she adds. "They're more willing to come to us. But the fact is, gay-bashing is up." (Some say teenagers themselves are the worst bashers.)

Governor's task force: Nationally, schools are growing more tolerant of gay students, but they're scarcely throwing their doors wide open to welcome them. No other state has followed the lead of Massachusetts, where the governor's task force has recommended that schools formulate specific policies to protect gay and lesbian students from harassment. The panel also urged special training for teachers and counselors, stocking school libraries with books and films for students who want to learn more about gay issues, and school-based support groups for gay students and straight students alike. Governor Weld backed the panel's recommendations, but declined to push for legislation, leaving communities to decide what, if any, changes to make.

Clearly, changes are in order. The task force was estab-

lished after Weld saw a little-advertised 1989 Department of Health and Human Services report that said 30 percent of youth suicides occur among gays and lesbians. Sexually nonconforming students may feel bolder about stepping into the open these days, but they're finding it's still a cold world out there.

DAVID GELMAN with DEBRA ROSENBERG in Boston, VICKI QUADE in Chicago, ELIZABETH ROBERTS in Miami and DANZY SENNA in New York



DAVID WALBERG FOR NEWSWEEK

daughter in second grade, fears that all the attention to homosexuality is influencing children. "They have gay assemblies, with speakers extolling the virtues of gayhood," he says. "The kids are sick of it." But some kids seem determined to push it even further. At Newton (Mass.) North high school, students say that one female couple is constantly "making out" in the hallways and the cafeteria. "I think they do it just to shock everybody," says sen-

sexual identity, occupational identity, role identity. They're really asking the question, "Who am I?"

They're also taking cues from the popular culture. Psychologists say the media fascination with sexual athleticism and androgynous pop icons like Elton John, Mick Jagger and Madonna help promote experimentation among teenagers. Kids today are willing to try "just about anything," says Carrie Miller, who operates Chicago's Generation