

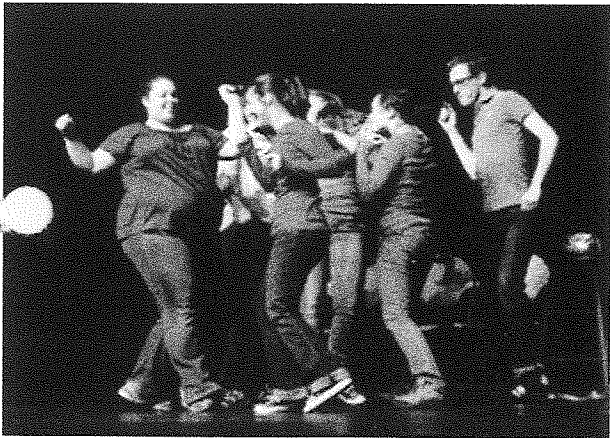
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An allied front: Standing 'out' but not alone

Young people use theater to demonstrate their support for peers regardless of sexual orientation.

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Staff Writer

GORHAM — Alone at center stage, a confident young woman proclaims, "I'm a lesbian, a student, a daughter, a violinist and a brunette."



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Student actors affiliated with Add Verb Productions dance at the start of Monday's performance of the Out & Allied Project at the University of Southern Maine in Gorham. The show is by and about gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youths and their allies.

Photos by Tim Greenway/Staff Photographer



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Hillary Perry, left, and Angelica Phipps perform a piece titled "I'm Not Gay, But Thank You" during the Out & Allied Project at USM's Russell Hall in Gorham.

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She's uncertain of her place in the world, but has found comfort and relief in realizing that she prefers girls over boys. Her acceptance and recognition of her lesbianism doesn't define her, but is one characteristic among many.

"I can finally stop shutting the door on a part of me that explains so much," she says.

The scene spills out in a monologue called "Jeopardy," the opening in a series of short plays presented this week by Add Verb Productions, the University of Southern Maine and the University of New England.

The plays are part of the Out & Allied Project, a collection of theater pieces by and about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youths and their allies.

A group of 16 student actors from USM, UNE and local high schools presented the plays Monday night for about 80 people at Russell Hall at USM in Gorham.

The production will be repeated at 7:30 tonight in the Student Union at UNE's Biddeford campus and at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday at First Parish Church on Congress Street in Portland. The performances coincide with National Ally Week. Admission is free.

Thom Harnett, Maine's assistant attorney general for civil rights education and enforcement, will speak before Wednesday's performance.

The production includes short performance pieces that explain what it means to be an ally to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youths. The theater pieces include poems, monologues and short plays – most written by young people.

Collectively, they examine life, love and acceptance.

Florence Cooley plays the girl in "Jeopardy." She's a theater student at USM, and said most of the people

she knows on campus are accepting and supportive of people who come out. But she is not naive.

"I realize it's an issue all over," said Cooley, who grew up in Yarmouth. "I felt it was important to be involved because this is a powerful message and I wanted to be part of sharing it."

Angelica Phipps, a 15-year-old sophomore at Bonny Eagle High School, got involved because "there's a lot of discrimination that I see every day at my high school. I want to do something positive. People have misguided opinions that are not based in fact."

She recognizes that her decision to perform may be controversial at her school. But, she said, "I really don't care. This is important."

Cathy Plourde, executive director of Add Verb Productions, said her theater company has made its niche by tackling issues that most people are uncomfortable discussing. She recruited students to write about their experiences and compiled them in the series of short plays.

She has collected hundreds of stories from people, and hopes to publish the best in an anthology that would be made available to schools and youth groups across the United States.

She has sharpened her message in recent weeks, since the death of Tyler Clementi, a student at Rutgers who jumped to his death from the George Washington Bridge in New York after he was publicly outed against his will.

She's less interested in presenting plays that explain why people come out, and more interested in finding material that encourages people, no matter their sexual preference, to support those who express their sexual orientation publicly.

When gay and straight people join an alliance, together they help create a safer community for everybody, she said.

"I'm not looking for pieces that replicate oppression. We all know what a jerk looks like. But what we don't know is how people then respond, and that is what I am interested in," Plourde said.

Meghan Brodie, a theater professor at USM who directs the plays, credits the college community for supporting the effort, and saluted the student actors for their courage in tackling the subject.

"They may incur negative feedback for doing this, but I am really proud of them for walking through that door. They know I have their back," she said.

As an artist, she said, it's important to speak out about difficult issues. The Out & Allied Project provides solidarity for people of all sexual persuasions, she said.

"We are so disheartened that it is so timely. This gives us the platform on which to take a stand and respond to what is happening nationally," Brodie said.

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