

Diversity Arts Program opens students' eyes



By Patrick Sullivan, Beacon intern

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Feelings of anger, sadness and apathy washed over a diverse group of students and teachers in a Central High School classroom Tuesday morning. The students had been brought together to discuss the disappearance of fellow schoolmate Justin Baker, who recently revealed to his family and friends that he was gay. All that was left of Baker was a backpack with a letter.

"I can't take it anymore," the letter read. "I want to go where I am accepted."

According to several students at the school, Baker is a kind, caring person and was accepted by most of his classmates until he came out. Once several of his friends and classmates knew he was gay, Baker faced verbal and physical ridicule. Three students even admitted to physically bullying Baker the last day he was seen.

One teacher did not accept Baker's sexual orientation and even condoned the bullying.

"The boys were just being boys," the teacher said. "Justin just isn't right. He is not behaving in a Christian manner."

One of Baker's good friends refuted the teacher's claims, urging teachers not to become involved in students' worries.

"Teachers should stay out of students' business just as students should stay out of teachers' business," she said.

Once the debate died down, the students and teachers brainstormed and came up with several constructive ways to help the school accept Justin and other gay students. Ideas included student tolerance training and the formation of a Gay Straight Alliance.

After the students and teachers presented their ideas, the meeting ended and the students and faculty were no longer at odds. The homophobic bullies suddenly befriended those they had once rejected. The students and teachers peacefully coexisted.

As for Justin Baker, he no longer existed. Turns out, he never existed.

The scene in that classroom was not one to lament a runaway student. Rather, the meeting served as an exercise for the Diversity Arts Program, a summer seminar that helps high school students explore social justice and diversity issues in the St. Louis area.

In 2008, the Diversity Awareness Partnership and the Metro Theatre Company teamed up to create the 10-day program, which takes place at Washington University and works with 20 students from 17 high schools.

The seminar incorporates local artists, teachers and community activists who help teach participants how to tackle issues like racism, classism, religious intolerance and sexual orientation through the performing, visual and media arts.

"We wanted to find a way to use art as a tool for social change and engage high school students," said Emily Task, program director for the



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Small groups discuss issues and creative ways to approach them.



Emily Task, left, is founder, and Emily

Diversity Awareness Program and founder of the summer program. "The program helps young people find their path to be activists."

Kohring is an artistic teacher for the Diversity Arts Program.

To be considered for the program, students must go through an application process, explain their background and submit an essay. According to Task, almost 30 students applied.

"We have the application process to ensure the group is diverse," Task said.

To help participants discover ways to become active in the community, the program uses local advocacy agencies. Representatives from the Interfaith Partnership, Jobs with Justice, Planned Parenthood, Organization for Black Struggle and Teen Advocacy for Sexual Health talked with the students about a vast array of local issues.

Although students have not completed the program, many are planning ways to make a difference in their schools and communities.

"I'd like to start a diversity club at my school," said Clarissa Reel, a senior at Riverview Gardens High School. "Many of the students haven't really had a chance to experience different people, so it would definitely be a good eye opener."

The students' ambition does not surprise Emily Kohring, education director and artistic associate for Metro Theatre Company and an artistic teacher for the program. According to Kohrin, several program alumni have gone on to start clubs and organizations.

"Our real goal is that they are moved to do something after they leave," she said. "It's wonderful if they have this new awareness and new knowledge and new vocabulary, but if they don't do anything with it then it's limited."

Although activism is its main goal, the program must first educate students before sending them into their

SOME OF THE STUDENTS



Clarissa Reel,
Riverview Gardens



Ana Alsup,
O'Fallon, Ill.

communities, Kohring said.

The students learn about the problems facing diversity, then find ways to resolve them through skits, writing prompts and other exercises that promote creativity. The deep immersion into the issues leaves students with a new knowledge of diversity.

"I learned words that I didn't even know existed," said Deja Blue, a freshman at Crossroads Collegiate Preparatory High School. "I didn't know about these problems."

To show how much they have learned, students will participate in an open mic night Saturday, July 17 (5 p.m. and 7:30 p.m.) at the Regional Arts Commission, 6128 Delmar. For the event, students will read poetry, perform skits and monologues, sing and showcase media art.

According to Kohring, participants have been preparing pieces for the event throughout the program and many are not finished.

"It's an open mic as opposed to a show because many pieces are not polished and are works in progress," Kohring said. "The goal is not to be glossy and polished, but to share what you've learned through an artistic medium."

Although their work is not quite ready to hit Broadway or the airwaves, students will leave the program with a polished idea of what they can do to help grow diversity and teach others about the issues.

"I plan to go back to my town and get more people to come together with diversity," said Ana Alsup, a junior at O'Fallon Township High School. "We just need to come together."

The students got a warm reception from family and friends who gathered at the Regional Arts Commission Saturday night (photo below). While the topics were serious, the presentations were upbeat, focusing on the possibility of making a difference and improving tense situations in schools.



Antonio Canty,
McClure



Deja Blue,
Crossroads



Heidi Griswald,
Crossroads



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