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Combating gay bashing focus of conference at high school

By HOWARD MOZEL
Special to The Champion

Organizers of 'Beyond Homophobia: Strategies for Change' want to make one thing clear. Next week's conference will focus on human rights and hate crimes, not the gay lifestyle.

The event — a special gathering of Halton high school students that will take place Tuesday at Milton District High School (MDHS) — will seek strategies to combat gay bashing and homophobia, which have been identified as the most observed hate crimes in Halton schools.

"We are responding directly to the students' request to learn how to deal with homophobia in their schools and to their desire to take back concrete strategies to confront this hate crime," said Halton Anti-Homophobia Committee (HAHC) member and Halton Pride Committee chair Marcus Logan. "The planning committee hopes to provide these tools for the students as well as teachers and principals."

Particularly exciting to organizers is the breadth of participation in the conference, which is expected to attract students and educators from Halton's public and Catholic school boards as well as representatives from private schools.

In fact, welcoming remarks will be made on behalf of both school boards by Halton Catholic District School Board Director of Education Lou Piovesan.

He will be joined in addressing the crowd by MDHS principal Ian Jones and North Halton Cultural Awareness Council chair Elizabeth Carmichael.

Organizers excited about conference

"How exciting is it that public, Catholic and private schools will be supporting the conference and it is so important that the director of the Halton Catholic District School Board is one of the people to open the conference," said HAHC member Katherine Joss.

According to HAHC past chair Julie Pehar, Tuesday's event won't be about the pros and cons of coming out and other such issues and care has been taken to focus the agenda to make attendees think — not overtly provoke their religious beliefs.

"No one will be challenged to go beyond their personal comfort level," said Ms Pehar.

Perhaps the day's most interesting session will be the morning panel discussion, which will feature largely gay speakers including Halton students, a deaf lesbian pupil from E.C. Drury High School in Milton, the parents of a 16-year-old gay youth and a young gay Somali Muslim.

"The panel members are incredibly brave in their desire to share their experiences in order to help change perceptions," said Ms Pehar, who explained that the day will also feature a variety of interactive displays and a wealth of information.

Conference a good first step

"This Beyond Homophobia conference is only a small first step in dealing with homophobic issues at Halton schools," said HAHC and high school teacher Robin Coverdale. "Many more steps must be taken to guarantee basic human rights for our homosexual and bisexual students."

According to organizers, homophobia is defined as an "irrational, intense fear or hatred of intimate relationships with persons of the same sex, or the gay or lesbian people who have same-sex relationships."

In an effort to have conference participants engage in "self reflection" about their own attitudes, explained Ms Pehar, each will be encouraged to rank themselves on a scale developed by an American psychologist ranging from "repulsion" to "nurturance." "This will be done in private to challenge ourselves," said Ms Pehar.

The afternoon half of the day will be marked by a solidarity similar to that of the morning when remarks are given by Halton Regional Police Diversity Officer Const. Diane Hendry, Halton District School Board Chair Ethel Gardiner, Halton Catholic District School Board religious and family life consultant Linda Triantafillou and Halton District School Board diversity officer Suzanne Muir.

The conference is being funded by the National Crime Prevention Council from which funding was obtained to hold the event.

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