

Harvey would be proud

New York school named after gay activist Milk

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Sun Media

NEW YORK — It's a place where the girls dress like guys and some of the guys wear wigs and makeup. Harvey Milk High School is the first school for gays, bisexuals and transgendered in the United States. And with a 90% success rate, it's getting a lot of attention in other countries.

When she was 14 years old, Jennifer Ramirez stopped going to school for a year after being terrorized by boys because she's a lesbian. Her school did nothing to help. The 100 students at Harvey Milk have all had similar experiences and high schools remain probably the worst places on earth to come out of the closet.

In the U.S., 30% of teenagers are kicked out of their homes when they come out, 84% are victims of verbal abuse and 40% have experienced physical abuse.

"They needed a place where they feel safe. Even if you call it segregation, it was necessary," said Orville Bell, an openly gay teacher at Harvey Milk.

The school is located in the East Village on the third storey of a 19th-century building. After entering the

building and going through several levels of security, a visitor will find they've joined a loud and colourful teen population (high heels and wigs on boys isn't out of the ordinary here). You could just as well have stumbled onto the set of *Degrassi*.

More importantly, people seem happy. They're laughing with their teachers and even Alan, the director. It's like the world's been turned upside down. The students can lose their inhibitions here, a place where identity is no longer a problem and conformity isn't strictly enforced.

Still, these students have come a long way. Some have gone through three high schools before arriving here. Others have attempted suicide. Some were rejected by their parents.

"A school told one of my students that he was going to hell because he's gay," said Bell, who keeps a tally of the horror stories.

Every student has to approach Harvey Milk on their own. The school is free since it's part of the public system and students do not



MARIE-JOELLE PARENT/SUN MEDIA PHOTOS

Luis Alcantara, Anna Devane, Matty Agostini and Jennifer Ramirez are all students at Harvey Milk, located on the third floor of this building, inset, in New York.

have to reveal their sexual identity when they apply, and is therefore open to heterosexual students as well. Several have enrolled.

"We don't keep statistics because some change their identities three times a year," said Mark Jabir, the school's assistant director. "Some go from boy to girl and vice-versa."

Mostly financed with public money (\$3.2 million), the school's opening in 2003 attracted a flood of opposition, including members of the infamous Westboro Baptist Church, who demonstrated outside shouting "Die, fags!" at students. Others criticized the apparent apartheid that would be created by isolating the students. A

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New York Post article entitled "Gay High" brought a lot of attention focused on the school.

Today, things have calmed down. Harvey Milk is still in the spotlight, but now it's for their 90% academic success rate.

Students here definitely

aren't hurting for attention and resources. There are usually only 10 people per class. They have psychologists and counsellors available to help them. Since most of them live below the poverty line, they have access to showers, a washer and dryer, clothing and a cook.

"It's a normal school except for the environment. There are no 'gay math' classes," Bell explained. "But in the French classes for example, I will have them read gay authors."

He will include the play *Bent*, which deals with the persecution of homosexuals in Nazi concentration camps, an impossible assignment in a regular high school.

The school has several star supporters including Hilary Clinton, Anne Hathaway, Rosie O'Donnell, Molly Shannon, Mary-Louise Parker and the Hetrick-Martin Institute.

Harvey Milk, played by Sean Penn in the 2008 film *Milk*, was the first openly gay politician elected in the U.S. He was a fervent supporter of civil rights for homosexuals in San Francisco where he was elected



to the municipal council. He was assassinated in 1978 along with the city's mayor by Dan White, who was later sentenced to seven years for the crime. Milk has since become something of a martyr in the gay community.

"It's the students and the young teachers who chose the name of the school," said Thomas Krever, director of the Hetrick-Martin Institute, who founded Harvey Milk High School which operates within its space.

"It made sense, Harvey Milk was a gay activist, a teacher in New York and his very basic message was that young LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people) needed a role model in life and hope."

SIDE STORIES

THE STORY OF... Anna Devane, 18

"I knew that I was a lesbian since my first year. When I came out at my old school, they told me, 'Now that you're a lesbian you're going to want all the girls.' That hurt me. I never wanted to go to school. My mother is a strong believer

and I was raised according to what the Bible says. She still has a hard time saying that I'm a lesbian, but since I've been at Harvey Milk things are better. Now I want to study to be an embalmer."

Matty Agostini, 18

"Growing up, I always knew I was different. I had

my coming out in Florida in a very Christian and football-loving town. I wasn't at all comfortable there. So my mother moved to New York for me. I love this school. I spend more time in this building than at home. For a few hours we can escape from the real world and be ourselves.

I can tell my teachers anything."

Jennifer Ramirez, 17

"When I came out at a school in Queens, some boys thought I was going to steal their girlfriends and they followed me all the way to my house and threatened me. I didn't go to school for a year."

Luis Alcantara, 18

"I came here to not be harassed. The teachers didn't know what to do with me because I was different. I'd lost all my self-respect. My mother is very religious so she didn't accept me in the beginning. But since I've been at school it's opened a door."

PRIDE WEEK EVENTS

- Deathwatch by Jean Genet Saturday at 2 p.m.
- DiverCiudad — a visual arts exhibit of Latin American Queer Artists Saturday at 11 a.m.
- Franco-Fete Saturday and Sunday at 1 p.m.
- We Are Family! Saturday at noon.
- Refugee Pride: Queer Deportations Saturday at 5 p.m.
- The Baby Formula — Meet the Cast Party Saturday at 9:28 p.m.
- Singing OUT!'s "Makin' Waves" Cabaret Cruise Saturday at 11:30 p.m.
- The Vent! Launch Party Sunday at 7 p.m.
- Queer View Sunday at 7 p.m.
- Can't Stop The Spirit! Sunday at 7 p.m.
- Global Human Rights For Queers: What Out Is About Monday at 6:30 p.m.
- This Is Not a Reading Series Presents: Lauren Kirschner — Where we have to go Monday at 7 p.m.
- Queer View Monday at 7 p.m.
- Pride Prom 2009: Superqueeroes! Monday at 8 p.m.
- Colour Me Drag Presents: Colour Me Pride! Monday at 9 p.m.
- Queer Family Pride Party Tuesday at 5 p.m.
- Queer View Tuesday at 7 p.m.
- This Is Not A Reading Series presents She's Shameless/She's Writing. Tuesday at 7:30 p.m.
- Night at the Indies- Celebrate PRIDE! Tuesday at 8 p.m.
- Granny Boots Presents a Patriarchy Smashing Pride Blowout with The Madonna Show -Trans Theatre Under the Stars Wednesday at 9 p.m.
- ARTWHERK! Wednesday at 7 p.m., Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday at 10 a.m.
- Canadian LGBT Immigration Thursday at 6 p.m.
- Queer View Thursday at 7 p.m.
- Guess Who's Coming to Sabbath Thursday at 7:30 p.m.
- Clave Thursday at 8:59 p.m.
- 25th Anniversary AIDS Candlelight Vigil Thursday at 9 p.m.
- Queeraoke Thursday at 10 p.m.
- Seniors' Pride on the Island Friday June 26 at 11 a.m.
- Green Space on Church: Starry Night Friday at 5 p.m.
- Cruisin' Women Friday at 6:30 p.m.
- Clam Slam 2009 Friday at 7 p.m.
- Exquisite Corpse Friday at 8 p.m.
- Drenched: Women's Pride Dance Friday at 9 p.m.
- AX "Saints & Sinners" Friday at 10 p.m.
- Pride & Remembrance Run June 27 at 10 a.m.
- Celebrate Pride at the AGO! June 27 at noon
- The Beach Ball June 27 at noon
- Green Space on Church: Open Air Affair June 27 at 1 p.m.
- Ancient Chinese Sex Relics Exhibition June 28 and June 30 at 10 a.m.
- Church on Church St. June 28 11 a.m.
- Green Space on Church: Tree House Party June 28 1 p.m. For a full schedule off Pride Week Events visit <http://www.pridetoronto.com/festival/events>