

# Gay-Straight Alliance clubs nurturing tolerance in Durham

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In a classroom in Jordan High School, a large drawing of a purple eggplant is plastered across the door. The sign advises readers: "You can hate eggplant, but you can't hate people. Hate-Free Zone."

Members of the Jordan Gay-Straight Alliance, or GSA, created the sign in line with the club's dedication to providing lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students with a supportive and fun social space.

Outside of making the Hate-Free Zone signs for classrooms, the Jordan GSA hosts weekly meetings and frequent movie nights. The group also makes the yearly trip across town to the N.C. Pride Parade and Festival on Duke University's campus.

But the club's primary activity is discussion, both of topics related to the LGBT community and how heterosexual allies can help. To its members, the Jordan GSA's work reflects the values of their community.

"Durham does get a bad reputation for crime and you might extrapolate that to determine there is more hate," said Phoebe Wooldridge, a senior and co-president of the GSA. "But it's a very tolerant area."

In 2012, national news blog The Daily Beast named Durham the most tolerant city in America, ahead of places like San Francisco, Miami and Chicago. The rating was based in part on the number of same-sex couples per 1,000 households, which they found to be 8.3.

Jordan GSA members cite this study as a point of pride for their hometown, but caution that LGBT people in the area still face significant issues.

"It's not to say there isn't work to be done," said senior and co-president Hannah Rice.

Someone who knows that all too well



**Jordan High School's GSA club discusses how to encourage a healthy environment, led by co-president Hannah Rice. (Staff photo by Cammie Bellamy)**

is Holly Jordan, an English teacher and adviser for the Hillside High School GSA. When Jordan and another teacher started the Hillside GSA three years ago, some school officials resisted.

"We had administrators who might not have been excited about it," Jordan said, "not just personally but because they were worried what the Hillside community would think."

But Jordan said after the club was established and some changes in administration happened, the GSA found acceptance at the school.

Jeremy Crouthamel, a fellow English teacher and Hillside GSA adviser, agreed.

"I think it kind of patterns the change in society," he said of the club's acceptance at Hillside.

Changes have not just happened inside the school. Hillside alumni cheered on the GSA's marching students from the sidelines at a recent N.C. Pride Parade, Jordan said.

Aside from participation in pride events, the Hillside GSA meets every other week to discuss LGBT issues and is planning a service project with a local food bank.

They also hosted anti-bullying training for school faculty. In the training, GSA members demonstrate

to teachers the best ways to make classrooms safe and inclusive. Crouthamel said Hillside teachers have responded well to the training.

"As a teacher, we are legally responsible for making our room a safe space," he said.

Senior member Shanyra Fagon said bullying of gay students is still an issue at the school, noting that a friend was once beaten for his sexuality.

But she is optimistic that her school community is becoming more open to LGBT people.

"Nowadays, people have a lot more support because of how the world is changing," Fagon said, citing President Obama's recent outspokenness in support of same-sex marriage as an example of cultural shift.

Today, the Hillside GSA has between 15 and 20 regular members, an increase from its early membership.

"This year we're seeing a much wider diversity just in terms of who is at GSA," Jordan said. "At first, because it was such a new club it was kind of a statement to join. You couldn't just slide into GSA unnoticed, and I don't know that you can now."

At that, Fagon smiled.

"I love being noticed," she said.

## Durham most tolerant US city

The Daily Beast's ranking of America's most tolerant cities can be found at <http://www.the-dailybeast.com/galleries/2012/01/16/the-u-s-s-most-tolerant-cities-photos.html>