

KNOW THE FLAGS

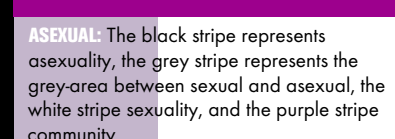
Brief description of a few LGBTQ+ banners and the meanings behind their colors



INCLUSIVE: The black stripe represents those without a gender identity. The complimenting white stripes are to be inclusive to those who are non-binary and intersex.



ASEXUAL: The black stripe represents asexuality, the grey stripe represents the grey-area between sexual and asexual, the white stripe sexuality, and the purple stripe community.



BISEXUAL: Pink represents attraction to people of the same gender; blue represents an attraction to those of an opposite or different gender; and purple represents having an attraction to two or more genders.



NONBINARY: The yellow stripe represents people whose gender exists outside of the binary, the white stripe, people with many or all genders, the purple, people with genders considered a mix of male and female, and the black for people who identify as not having a gender.



RAINBOW IN A DARK ROOM

LGBTQ+ students find their identities in a difficult environment

Proud. That's how **Mak Reagan**, 12, felt in August when they finally settled into their identity after years of uncertainty. "In seventh grade, I knew I liked women, but I didn't know how to classify it and I didn't know much," Reagan said. "I went through phases where I thought I was bi or I thought I was a lesbian, or I thought maybe I was just making it all up and I was straight."

For many LGBTQ+ members, a world where sexuality is normalized is best case scenario. However, for members of the community living in the South, many believe their sexuality is something that's treated as taboo and requires them to live their lives discreetly.

"I know people who have just randomly been called the f-slur in the hallway," Reagan said. "Part of me feels like people won't like me as much because I'm attracted to all genders... I'm also polyamorous... which doesn't help either."

In similar experiences to Reagan, **Lillie Peterson**, 12, has struggled as well when coming to terms with her sexuality.

"In third grade, I'd already told my sister [that I liked women as well]... I would cry [all the time] because I just felt so wrong," Peterson said. "[My sister] had one of her... friends that was out as bisexual talk to me about it and [she told] me that this was a normal thing, [and] that really helped me."

Along with what Peterson has experienced herself, she's also noticed the struggles of her fellow LGBTQ+ friends and classmates when it comes to being accepted for who they are.

"I know a lot of my friends don't feel comfortable being out just because of the environment we're in," Peterson said. "Being in the South and living with their parents' beliefs and things like that. I would just love for everybody to feel comfortable about themselves and feel good [about their sexualities]."

A prominent member of Wando's Spectrum Club, **Alex**, 11, wants to bring more awareness and fair representation to the LGBTQ+ community throughout South Carolina.

"There's still so many countries in the world where being gay is

illegal. There's still things [even in our state that are illegal]," Alex said.

If not for the federal law passed in 2015, same-sex marriage would be illegal in 38 out of the 50 states, majority of which lean right politically. Considering this, most LGBTQ+ members find it unsafe for them to be open about their sexualities in the south.

"We're in a red state. So politicians down here vote against transgender healthcare and [LGBTQ+] rights laws," Alex said. "There's always been a conservative thought process down here. It's just a lot of an amalgamation of different values that kind of often group together to hurt the [LGBTQ+] community."

Although same-sex marriage has been illegal in the South Carolina Constitution since 2006, the Supreme Court case Obergefell v. Hodges in 2015 overruled all state bans on same-sex marriages and the state must recognize such unions as legal.

Like many other LGBTQ+ members throughout the world, Alex promotes and encourages others around them to advocate for increased equal rights among the community.

"Equal rights [are needed for the community]," Alex said. "Being respected as human beings, especially trans women. There's so much violence towards them, especially last year there were just too many hate crimes to even count."

As students in the LGBTQ+ community continue to navigate through the hardships the modern-day social and political climate puts on them, Reagan reminds their fellow members to continue being proud of who they are.

"It's important to be yourself," Reagan said. "There's only one you, and even if you think people are gonna judge you, you'll find somebody who won't judge you and they will support you. Those are the people who matter, not the other ones."

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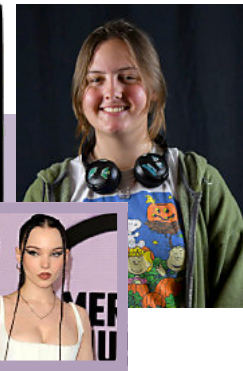
Editors' note: Some names have been changed to protect students' identities upon their request.

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STRENGTH IN NUMBERS: Active member in the LGBTQ+ community, **Carson Walker**, 12, reflects on his identity-centered experiences. "I think it's really sad that people are scared to be their true selves and be really proud of their sexual identities. It shows that while we are living in a world that is very accepting right now there is still a lot needed to be done," Walker said. One of the characteristics Walker values most about this special community is the comradery and never-ending support. "I think it's nice to have people you can share your stories and the things you deal with with," Walker said. "It's okay to be afraid and if you don't feel comfortable then it's okay to take as much time as you need to be completely proud."

MEDIA REPRESENTATION

Seniors share their favorite forms of LGBTQ+ representation across media



Speaking out on representation, **Anna-Claire Hughes**, 12, tells why Dove Cameron is an important part of LGBTQ+ representation. "She is very open about her sexuality. Her music and her outspokenness is important because it makes me not feel as isolated. It made me feel more of who I was, and now I am able to see myself in famous people," Hughes said.



Sharing his favorite video game character, **Hayden Blevins**, 12, expresses why Ellie from "The Last of Us" represents the LGBTQ+ community well. "She is open about it and it's not necessarily her entire character. I think it's really nice to have other people to represent those in the community. She shows that your sexuality doesn't necessarily reflect your personality," Blevins said.