

Call for queer support, inclusivity

Local LGBTQ+ hate still far from gone

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Copy Editor

Senior Andrew Astorino came out as pansexual in sixth grade and gender fluid in ninth. Over time, they've become more comfortable with presenting themselves in a way that finally fits them. As a result, they gradually became more open about their inclusion within the LGBTQ+ community.

To show their support, Astorino hung a pride flag outside their house to symbolize both their support and, of course, their pride to others like them. Because of how hard it was to first come out, Astorino thought it would help to make their support more visible to their neighborhood.

However, last year during June (Pride Month), a group of young men walked to their house, tore down the flag, and burned it on their lawn. At first, Astorino had no idea how to respond. They were unsure of whether they should intervene or just let it happen. They soon decided to confront the group.

"I confronted them about it, saying 'this isn't right.'" Astorino said. "This is my property." And they said that if I hung it up again, they would kill me and my family."

Astorino's parents were shaken by this, but insisted on continuing to show their support.

"It was a vulnerable time for us." Tina Astorino, Andrew's mom, said. "For me to watch my kids be threatened makes me feel terrible as a parent. My job as a parent is to make my children as safe and happy as possible."

Andrew, however, is still anxious about if it could happen to them again.

Homophobia and transphobia are still more than alive within the country. The most recent reminder in the United States came in the form of a senior citizen's murder. According to NBC News and USA Today, on August 18, 66-year-old store owner Laura Ann Carleton was shot and killed because of her refusal to take down a pride flag in front of her

clothing store in Cedar Glen, California. Despite not being queer, Carleton was adamant in her support for the LGBTQ+ community.

Homophobia and transphobia are still major issues that cause the queer community a great amount of stress. To make it more difficult, this bigotry is also present within the legislature of other certain states.

Discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community isn't an issue solely isolated within specific regions. Mount Prospect, Arlington Heights, and the surrounding towns are generally considered quite accepting of people within the community. However, this is far from saying that discrimination is completely gone.

Astorino has, on many accounts, been verbally attacked at school because of their openness to and connection with the LGBTQ+ community. In recent memory, they've been called slurs, most commonly being called "faggot," as well as being called "not normal" by students in the locker room, lunchroom and classrooms.

Despite this, Astorino has never had to deal with any physical assaults, leading to them remarking how they, thankfully, feel safe at school. Astorino is currently an avid member of the Gay-Straight Alliance, or GSA, at Prospect.

Astorino's close family is in complete support of them. When their sister came out as bisexual during high school, they were inspired to finally come out as well.

"My mom and dad are very supportive of my sister and I," Astorino said. "[My sister] came out as bisexual, and it inspired me to come out after that. It was hard at first, since nobody knew what to call me. But I realized that it takes time for [some things] to change."

English teacher Matt Love proudly hangs a pride flag in his class to show his support to the school and students.

"I want all my students in [my] room to feel safe, secure, and respected, no matter who they are," Love said.

He mentioned how, in the past, students have come into his room and thanked him for being so open with his support, despite them not even taking his class. Additionally, He's only had one student who was against the flag, saying it was against his religion. Love offered to speak with him about it, which he said was a very respectful conversation. It's a conversation that Love was happy to be able to have.

Love is thankful for Illinois' stance on queer rights, as he doubts he could hang a pride flag in more restrictive states like Texas and Florida. He feels that such laws prohibit better understanding of literature, given his role as an English teacher and his tendency to analyze the characters and authors in works.

"It would be really hard for me to follow an at best arbitrary and at worst bigoted, restriction on

events, authors, and characters," Love said. "Everyone wants to see themselves in the stories they read and the shows they watch."

With Florida's introduction of the "Don't Say Gay" bill, the state government prohibits the teaching of topics pertaining to the LGBTQ+ community.

According to CNN, even showing a movie with queer representation is enough to be put under fire, as is the case for the teacher who was put under investigation after showing her class the Disney movie "Strange World," which had a queer character.

"[With those restrictions], students feel isolated," Love said. "They think they're the only ones. When you see [a reflection] of yourself in storytelling, and it's normalized, it's a good thing."

One way to help ensure this feeling of a community in Prospect is the GSA, which strives to create a safe space for queer students, but also to build strong connections with the rest of the school. Astorino said that Erik Hodges, the teacher sponsor of the GSA, has done an incredible job in helping with this goal.

"Our GSA community club was really helpful [when I came out]," Astorino said. "They made it better when I was in my darkest times."

With last year's GSA leader graduating, the club needed a new head, and Astorino happily took the role. They said that they wanted to help shape the club in a way that they see as more inclusive and beneficial to the school.

The main problem that Astorino feels should be fixed is the negative sentiment and infighting within the LGBTQ+ community. They mention that they commonly hear judgment towards bisexual individuals, being called "fake gay."

At this moment, they are currently working on creating this year's new club logo, which Astorino hopes students can connect to, and can create more visibility for any other queer students who are going through similar dark times that Astorino is now out of.

Astorino was very adamant on not being anonymous within this story. They specifically asked to be mentioned by their real name in order to show the importance of acceptance for queer individuals.

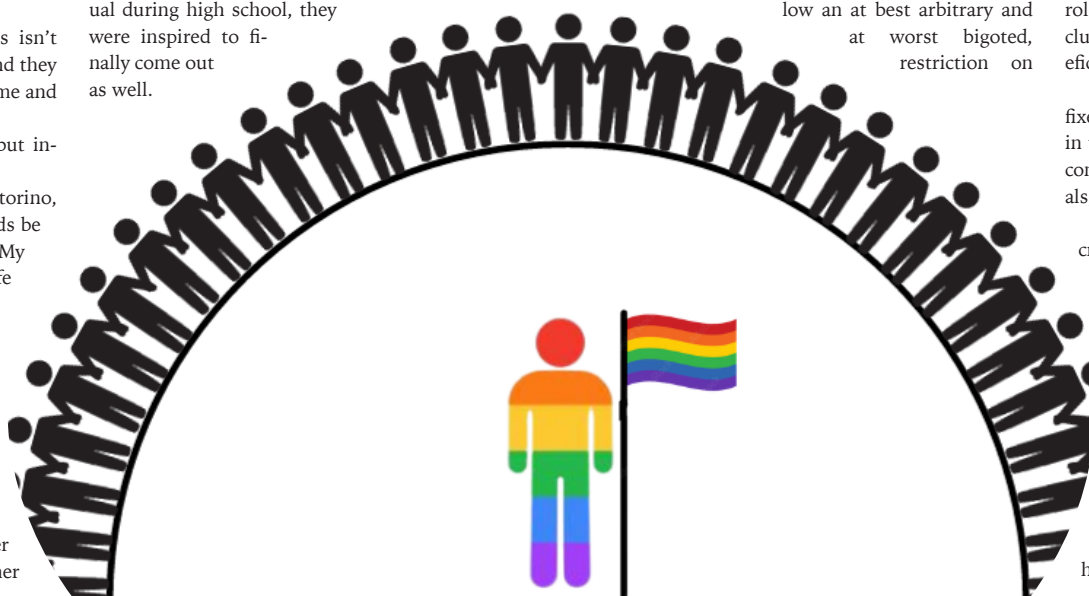
"I don't want to be anonymous [in this story]," Astorino said. "Because then people would have one less person to connect with." ➔



64% of queer students feel supported at Prospect



1 in 10 Prospect students identify as LGBTQ+
*According to a survey of 422 students



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