



Buffalo / Niagara

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www.PFLAG-buffalo-niagara.org

We meet because we have learned that someone very close to us is Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, or Transgendered.

We try to help one another deal with this information in a positive manner.

Although we do not agree at all times, we try to be understanding.

We offer help to those who seek it, but do not force ourselves on others.

We strive to maintain anonymity while sharing on a level that is comfortable for all of us.

We encourage all to attend meetings for their own benefit as well as that of the group.

It is our hope that when each of us reaches a point of understanding and acceptance, we realize that this is when others need us the most.

Buffalo Monthly Meeting

Sunday, November 21, 2010
2:30–5:30 PM

The November meeting will be a self-help sharing meeting. As always, newcomers will be offered the alternative of meeting privately with a PFLAG parent.

Kenilworth United Church of Christ
45 Dalton Drive
Tonawanda, NY 14223

The church is located two blocks west of Niagara Falls Boulevard at the corner of Decatur Rd and Dalton Dr. Decatur runs off of Niagara Falls Boulevard about 0.8 miles south of Sheridan Drive and about 0.8 miles north of Kenmore Ave.

Our meetings are in the library, which is near the parking lot entrance. The facility is handicap accessible.

Save the Date

Sunday December 19, 2010
PFLAG Buffalo/Niagara Holiday Party

New Parents Meetings

These meetings are scheduled as needed. Please call the helpline.

Held at a location convenient to those involved.

This self-help one-on-one meeting deals with the concerns of parents and family members who have recently learned that a loved one is Lesbian or Gay.

Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, Buffalo/Niagara, is a non-profit, all volunteer, community-based organization not affiliated with any ethnic, religious, economic, or political group. Membership is open to all. PFLAG membership lists are kept confidential and mailings are sent in plain envelopes.

Queer Journeys Programs

Queer Journeys is a cable access program sponsored by PFLAG Buffalo/Niagara and coordinated by Camille Cox and Babs Conant. The programs are based on documentaries on GLBT issues. This program only airs in Buffalo, on Mondays at 6:30 pm and Tuesdays at 1:00 am on Time Warner Channel 20.

The schedule for the next two months is:

Nov 1: How Can I be Sure God Loves Me?
 Nov 8: Reading between the Labels
 Nov 15: Your Mom's a Lesbian, Here's your Lunch...
 Nov 22: Straight from the Heart
 Nov 29: Our Faces

Dec 6: Silent Pictures
 Dec 13: Camp Lavender Hill
 Dec 20: Trevor / I Know Who I Am, - Do You?
 Dec 27: Maybe we're Talking About a Different God

A description of the storylines can be found at:
www.PFLAG-buffalo-niagara.org/video_project.shtml

Can You Help With The Newsletter

It is time consuming to find interesting things to share with our members. We want to have a content filled newsletter but that's hard to do within the time available. You can help. When you're reading the news and you see something that would be interesting to our members, just send an email with the information to pflag@bfn.org and if you're reading on-line most sites have a button that easily allows you to share the article with us.

Lifetime Members

Frank Carnevale & James Pilc
 Mary Hewitt
 Clarice Lechner-Hyman

Sponsoring Members

John & Diane Covert
 Sheila Dickinson
 Russel Hurlburt & John Percy
 Paula Welch Jack
 Ronda Marvel
 Bob Patterson
 James & Mary Ellen Walsh

Supporting Members

Anonymous (2)
 Jane & Tony Benfante
 Babs Conant & Camille Cox
 Shawn Cribari
 Loretta & Richard Gucwa
 Donald Kreger & Ron Ehmke
 Jeffrey McConnell & Fred Dansereau
 Mark Meyer
 Roger Seifert & Dennis Stuart
 Linda Stefaniak
 P. J. Tomczyk

Top Ten Ways to Make Schools Safer

As PFLAG National mourns the tragic deaths of Caleb Nolt, Felix Sacco, Raymond Chase, Harrison Chase Brown, Asher Brown, Tyler Clementi, Seth Walsh, Cody J. Parker, Billy Lucas, Justin Aaberg, along with the countless number of other young people who have suffered from relentless anti-LGBT bullying, harassment, and discrimination – we find ourselves searching for more ways to end this trend. Sadly we know all too well that before taking their lives, these young people endured years of anti-LGBT bullying, harassment and discrimination that went unchecked by school officials.

In response to these recent tragedies, and in honor of National Safe Schools Day, we urge you to take action at your school to prevent youth suicide by stopping anti-LGBT bullying today!

We call on you to work in coalition with students, teachers, and other school officials to put an end to anti-LGBT bullying, harassment, and discrimination. Below are 10 simple actions you can take to help build safer schools for all students:

Top 10 Ways To Make Schools Safer:

1. **Claim Your Rights.** It's critical that school community members know their federal civil rights, especially when they live in states and school districts that lack explicit LGBT anti-bullying protections. Be sure to check out PFLAG's Claim Your Rights Resource Center (www.pflag.org/claimyourrights), to learn about ways you can report unchecked bullying, harassment and discrimination.
2. **Call Congress.** Call your Congress Members and ask them to co-sponsor the federal Student Non-Discrimination Act and the Safe Schools Improvement Act.
3. **Plan a PFLAG Meeting.** Organize a PFLAG meeting to discuss what your members can do to prevent bullying and suicide at your school. If you need some ideas on what to include in your program, please contact our Safe Schools Coordinator (mmorgan@pflag.org) for ideas.
4. **Organize a Candlelight Vigil.** Work with your chapter members along with other community organizations to honor students like Asher Brown, Tyler Clementi, Seth Walsh, Billy Lucas, Justin Aaberg, and other young people who have died because of unchecked anti-LGBT bullying.
5. **Plan School-Wide Activities.** There are simple and important ways to educate the school community about why respect for everyone must be the rule, and not the exception, to address bullying in your school communities. Please contact our Safe Schools Coordinator for specific ideas.
6. **Train and Educate Everyone.** Ask for school faculty to be trained to respond to bullying in the most effective, helpful way. To learn more about PFLAG's

Cultivating Respect Training Program please check out community.pflag.org/Page.aspx?pid=1030

7. **Set the Policy.** Work with school officials to strengthen your school's policies on bullying, harassment, and discrimination. Please review PFLAG's model policy at community.pflag.org/Page.aspx?pid=1033
8. **Make a video.** Similar to Dan Savage's "It Gets Better Campaign" (www.itgetsbetterproject.com), consider making a video to tell the world what you're doing to make your school safer. Upload your video to YouTube and send the link to our Safe Schools Coordinator so that we can publicize it!
9. **Write an Op-Ed.** Consider writing an Op-Ed to your local newspaper to educate your community about the impact of anti-LGBT bullying, and the remedies to help build safer schools for all students. For ideas on what to include in your op-ed, please visit our advocacy and issues webpage at community.pflag.org/Page.aspx?pid=1274
10. **Know the Resources.** Make sure school community members know that they can call **1-800-4U-TREVOR**, a suicide prevention hotline, and be sure to share other community resources for young people who are looking for additional help, support and information.

Make it Better Project

The Make It Better Project (www.makeitbetterproject.org) gives students the tools they need to make their schools better today. Through their website and YouTube channel, students and adults can work together to make schools safer for LGBT youth right now. Columnist Dan Savage launched "It Gets Better," a video message in response to recent youth suicides to tell LGBT youth that life gets better after high school. The Make It Better Project takes this one step further, giving students the tools they need to make their lives better now. The Make it Better Project encourages students and adults to not wait until high school is over for their lives to get better; rather, the project encourages school community members to take action today to make schools safer now.

We Must All Protect Youth from Suicide

by Judy Shepard, President, Matthew Shepard Foundation Board of Directors

Our family, and the staff and board at the Matthew Shepard Foundation, are all deeply saddened by the devastating report of at least the fourth gay or gay-perceived teen to commit suicide in this country in the last month.

Reports say that Tyler Clementi, 18, leapt to his death from the George Washington Bridge near his New Jersey college campus after a roommate allegedly broadcast him in a same-sex encounter behind closed doors in his dorm room, and apparently invited others, via

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Counseling for Change

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Buffalo Gay Men's Chorus

Sounds of the Season

Friday Dec. 10 (8 pm) - Riviera Theater

67 Webster St, North Tonawanda, NY

Saturday Dec. 11 (8 pm) - Slee Hall

SUNY at Buffalo, Amherst Campus

Sunday Dec. 12 (4 pm) - Holy Trinity Lutheran Church

1080 Main St, Buffalo, NY

Tickets & info: 883-1277

www.buffalokaymenschorus.org

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Twitter, to view it online. Regardless of his roommate's alleged tweet, Tyler had apparently made no statement about his own sexual orientation. I'm sure we will all learn more about this terrible tragedy as legal proceedings unfold, but the contempt and disregard behind such an invasion of privacy seems clear. In the meantime, we send our thoughts and prayers to Tyler's family as they mourn their loss.

In the last month there has been a shocking series of teen suicides linked to bullying, taunting, and general disrespect regarding sexual orientation, in every corner of America. Just a few days ago, Seth Walsh, a 13-year-old in Tehachapi, Calif., passed away after 10 days on life support after he hanged himself. Police say he had been mercilessly taunted by fellow students over his perceived sexual orientation.

Billy Lucas, 15, hanged himself a few weeks ago at his Indiana home after years of reported harassment by students who judged him to be gay. Asher Brown, a 13-year-old in Harris, TX, who had recently come out, took his life with a gun after, his parents say, their efforts to alert school officials to ongoing bullying were not acted upon.

Many Americans also learned this week about Tyler Wilson, an 11-year-old boy in Ohio who decided to join a cheerleading squad that had been all-female. As a gymnast, he was interested in the athletic elements of cheering. He was taunted with homophobic remarks and had his arm broken by two schoolmates who apparently assumed him to be gay. He told "Good Morning America" that since returning to school, he's been threatened with having his other arm broken, too.

Our young people deserve better than to go to schools where they are treated this way. We have to make schools a safe place for our youth to prepare for their futures, not be confronted with threats, intimidation or routine disrespect.

Quite simply, we are calling one more time for all Americans to stand up and speak out against taunting, invasion of privacy, violence and discrimination against these youth by their peers, and asking everyone in a position of authority in their schools and communities to step forward and provide safe spaces and support services for LGBT youth or those who are simply targeted for discrimination because others assume they are gay. There can never be enough love and acceptance for these young people as they seek to live openly as their true selves and find their role in society.

Suicide is a complicated problem and it is too easy to casually blame it on a single factor in a young person's life, but it is clear that mistreatment by others has a tremendously negative effect on a young person's sense of self worth and colors how he or she sees the world around them. Parents, educators and peers in the community need to be vigilant to the warning signs of suicide and other self-destructive behaviors in the young people in their lives, and help them find resources to be healthy and productive. We urge any LGBT youth contemplating suicide to immediately reach out to The Trevor Project, day or night, at (866) 4-U-TREVOR [866-488-7386].

NJ student's suicide resonates on campus, beyond

By Geoff Mulvihill and Samantha Henry, The Associated Press

"Things will get easier; people's minds will change," Ellen DeGeneres pleads in an Internet video, staring into the camera, her voice breaking. "And you should be alive to see it."

Just as the murder of Matthew Shepard galvanized the gay community around hate-crime legislation more than a decade ago, the suicide of a Rutgers University

student whose sex life was splashed on the Internet has activists rallying around their latest cause: telling tormented gay teens they just need to hang on for a while, that they'll live through it.

Bullying and harassment of young gays and lesbians, and the suicides they have caused, have long been a major topic in gay publications and among activists. But celebrities and others have seized on Tyler Clementi's shocking suicide to call attention to the issue.

Prosecutors say Clementi's roommate and another student used a webcam to broadcast on the Internet live images of the 18-year-old Rutgers University freshman having an intimate encounter with another man. Clementi jumped off the George Washington Bridge three days later.

"To this poor kid, it's better to be dead than to have people know he's gay," said Jean-Marie Navetta, a spokeswoman for Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. "Therein lies the real tragedy here."

Clementi's death was part of a string of suicides last month involving youngsters who were believed to have been victims of anti-gay bullying. Fifteen-year-old Billy Lucas hanged himself in a barn in Greensburg, Ind. Asher Brown, 13, shot himself in the head in Houston. And 13-year-old Seth Walsh of Tehachapi, Calif., hanged himself from a tree in his backyard.

The outpouring of emotion over Clementi's death recalls the reaction to the killing of Shepard, a gay, 21-year-old student at the University of Wyoming. He was found beaten and tied to a lonely fence post in 1998. Two men were convicted in the slaying. Several states passed hate-crime laws in the aftermath of the crime.

DeGeneres, one of the first Hollywood celebrities to come out of the closet, posted a video in response to Clementi's suicide. "My heart is breaking for their families, their friends and for our society that continues to let this happen," the talk show host says in the video. "These kids needed us. We have an obligation to change this. There are messages everywhere that validate this kind of bullying and taunting and we have to make it stop. We can't let intolerance and ignorance take another kid's life."

Former New Jersey Gov. Jim McGreevey, who left office six years ago after declaring himself "a gay American," called for more understanding for young gay people. "Even here in New Jersey, where we are blessed with a progressive culture, every child travels this journey by himself or herself," he said. "It can be very painful and very lonely."

Last month, before Clementi's suicide became known, syndicated sex columnist Dan Savage launched the It Gets Better Project, a series of online videos delivered by adult gays and lesbians designed to tell young people that they can survive harassment and have happy lives. The suicide has generated more attention for the project, as well as for a campaign started recently by

Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays to persuade gay young people to report harassment.

Two New Jersey lawmakers said they would introduce legislation to strengthen the state's anti-bullying law, and another legislator called for stiffer penalties for invasion of privacy.

"We understand that our family's personal tragedy presents important legal issues for the country as well as for us," Clementi's family said in a statement. "Our hope is that our family's personal tragedy will serve as a call for compassion, empathy and human dignity."

Clementi's roommate, Dharun Ravi of Plainsboro, N.J., and another student, Molly Wei of Princeton, N.J., both 18, are charged with invasion of privacy, with the most serious charges carrying up to five years in prison. Prosecutors said they are also looking into the possibility of filing bias charges. A lawyer for Ravi and one believed to be representing Wei have not returned messages. But friends of both have said that they didn't have a problem with gay people.

On the Rutgers campus, where students have expressed guilt that they didn't know or couldn't help the quiet Clementi, students set up tables with flowers and sheets of paper on which people could leave messages and condolences for Clementi's family.

"To recognize this individual is not only to honor a life that was so needlessly lost, but to silently (or vocally) speak out against the flagrantly intolerant and ignorant mindset that facilitated this tragic event," one message read.

The Rutgers football team held a moment of silence for Clementi before its game October 2nd against Tulane. The university held a vigil on October 3rd. And the Rutgers Glee club marched down to the memorial and sang the "Rutgers Prayer" a capella in tribute. It is traditionally sung when an important member of the Rutgers community dies or a tragedy happens at the university. "Everyone is pretty devastated, and frankly, it's embarrassing that something like this would happen here at Rutgers," club member Jonathan Ramteke said.

Obama shocked, saddened by youth suicides

The Associated Press

President Barack Obama said he was "shocked and saddened" by the recent suicides of several young people who were bullied and taunted for being gay.

"As a parent of two daughters, it breaks my heart. It's something that just shouldn't happen in this country," Obama said in a video posted late Thursday October 21st on YouTube and the White House website. It's time, he said, for Americans to dispel the myth that bullying is "just a normal rite of passage."

"I don't know what it's like to be picked on for being gay. But I do know what it's like to grow up feeling that sometimes you don't belong," Obama said. "It's tough."

The victims of bullying can sometimes feel that they are responsible for the taunting because they're different or don't fit in with everybody else.

"But what I want to say is this: You are not alone. You didn't do anything wrong. You didn't do anything to deserve being bullied," Obama said. He encouraged young people who are depressed or down on themselves to reach out to people they trust — parents, teachers, or "folks that you know care about you just the way you are."

"Don't feel like you're in this by yourself," he advised. Over time, Obama said, "you're going to see that your differences are a source of pride and a source of strength."

Anti-gay bullying has been in the spotlight recently after the suicides of several teenagers. The victims included Asher Brown, 13, of Houston, who shot himself with his father's handgun, and Tyler Clementi, 18, the Rutgers University freshman who jumped off the George Washington Bridge in New York after his roommate secretly recorded him with another male student, then broadcast the video online.

In a videotaped message posted earlier in the week, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said she was saddened by the suicides. "These most recent deaths are a reminder that all Americans have to work harder to overcome bigotry and hatred," Clinton said.

Offering support, hope for gay teens who face bullying

By Lornet Turnbull, Seattle Times

"That's so gay." It's a common refrain among teens and young people, part of the school-hall vernacular for anything not cool or hip. But for many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students - some of them still struggling with their sexuality - comments such as these can be hurtful, no less stinging than more overt slurs.

In recent weeks, several high-profile suicides among gay teens have brought increased attention to anti-gay bullying in its many forms:

- Tyler Clementi, a freshman at Rutgers University in New Jersey, jumped off the George Washington Bridge after his sexual encounter with another man was broadcast online.
- Billy Lucas, a 15-year-old from Greensburg, Ind., hanged himself after being harassed at school.
- Asher Brown, a 13-year-old from the Houston suburbs, shot himself after coming out.
- And 13-year-old Seth Walsh from Tehachapi, Calif., died a week after he hanged himself in his parents' back yard following a barrage of taunting and bullying.

Those deaths have prompted the launch of at least two online video projects - including the It Gets Better project by Seattle's Dan Savage, a sex columnist and the editorial director of the Stranger weekly newspaper - intended to give hope to gay teens who face harassment.

"The challenge for the LGBT community is that we are coming out earlier, and that brings with it a host of challenges," said Josh Friedes, executive director of Equal Rights Washington. "These kids are coming to accept themselves at the same time they are maturing sexually. And we all remember what it was like to be in eighth grade," Friedes said.

Experts say many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender teens are vulnerable to the teasing, taunts and aggression of others even as gays witness unprecedented gains nationwide. There are now six states where same-sex couples can legally marry. Anti-discrimination laws exist in some form in 33 states. In 15 states, there are laws addressing harassment or bullying of students based on sexual orientation.

Yet, in its annual survey released last month, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found that the number of students being harassed at school has remained largely unchanged over a decade.

In its 2009 survey, nearly nine of 10 LGBT students said that they had experienced some form of harassment at school in the past year, and nearly two-thirds said they had felt unsafe because of their sexual orientation.

In Washington state, an anti-bullying law passed in 2002 has not brought a decline in anti-gay bullying, according to a state report.

Patchwork approach

One of the most prominent incidents in Washington state occurred this year at Mount Si High School in Snoqualmie, east of Seattle, when a student was beaten and seriously injured after standing up for a friend who was being taunted for seeming to be gay. The incident raised questions about the climate for gay students at the school.

Those who train teachers and administrators about this issue report a patchwork approach to policies in schools and districts across the state. The legislature's attempt last session to put some teeth in the law came up short because there was no money.

"Things have definitely changed - in some cases for the better, in some for the worse," said Daniel Howard, a senior at Bremerton High School and past president of his school's Gay-Straight Alliance. Howard, 17, who is openly gay, said that while LGBT students at Bremerton tend to feel safer, on rare occasions incidents do occur. A few weeks ago, he said, a group of students began taunting him just before the start of class. "They told me I was gonna go to hell because of my choices," he recalls. Howard reported the incident to the teacher, who in turn reported it to the office, and the students were warned. His school's Gay-Straight Alliance adviser, Patty Krisher, said many of the incidents at Bremerton are verbal, not physical, attacks.

Like such organizations elsewhere, she said, the club works to organize school-wide activities to help educate students, teachers and administrators. "What we are doing is trying to change some of the subtle things kids

say, like 'That's so gay,'" she said. "But I think overall, because people are more aware, they are keeping their prejudices to themselves."

Often, gay students in rural parts of the country find there's less support - in the form of organizations, youth centers, churches, even openly gay teachers and other adults - than in more liberal urban centers. In recent years, widespread use of the Internet has given those intent on bullying a powerful tool. And for many young people struggling with homosexuality, religion can play a significant role. "You may go to a house of worship where you heard the minister urging congregants to vote against a domestic-partnership law or gone to a church or synagogue where he urged support," Friedes said. "That type of experience has an unbelievably profound effect on youth."

Support through the Web

Savage's It Gets Better project allows lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people from across the country to post videos in which they talk directly to students, with the adults explaining how their own lives have improved in the years since high school. There have been 650 video uploads and more than 1 million channel views of the project, according to its Web site.

Savage's partner, who is identified only as Terry, says in a video the two made together that he was regularly pummeled at his high school in Spokane, Wash. He added that "things got better the day I left high school," describing it as something akin to a light suddenly coming on. No longer did Terry have to endure "the bullies . . . the people who harassed me . . . the school administrators who would do nothing about it every day. Life instantly got better."

The national Gay-Straight Alliance Network has launched its own video project, called Make It Better, which allows students and adults to upload video messages describing what they are doing now to prevent suicide and make things better for lesbian and gay youths in schools.

"There's no doubt young people are coming out at younger ages; they have more access to resources for support, there's more visibility and awareness - there's no question the big arc is bending toward more safety and acceptance," said Carolyn Laub, executive director of the network. "But that's not to say we are there yet. The fact that so many teens think their only option is to take their own lives is a painful reminder that we still have a long way to go."

Facebook works to remove anti-gay hate speech

The Associated Press

Facebook is working with a gay-advocacy group to reduce the amount of hate speech and bullying on the online social hub. Anti-gay bullying has been in the spotlight recently after the suicides of several gay

teenagers, including Rutgers freshman Tyler Clementi, garnered national attention. According to police, the 19-year-old jumped off the George Washington Bridge after his roommate secretly recorded him with another male student and distributed video online.

The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation said it reached out to Facebook last week after Internet bullies flooded a page set up to honor teens who recently killed themselves in response to anti-gay hate.

The page, set up by a Facebook user, asks supporters to wear purple next Wednesday in memory of the teenagers. Purple represents "spirit" in the rainbow flag that's the symbol of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community. On Friday afternoon, most of the comments on the page were from supporters.

Facebook said that its policies prohibit hateful content and that it has systems in place to take down such posts as soon as possible. But the company also said it wants its users to be able to express unpopular opinions and as such must strike a careful balance between removing harmful content and letting people speak freely.

"Facebook has taken an important first step in making social media a place where anti-gay violence is not allowed," said Jarrett Barrios, the president of GLAAD.

Transgender ruling will affect Maine schools

by Amy Sinclair, NECN

A recent ruling by the Maine Human Rights Commission is forcing schools across the state to look at how they handle transgender students. The commission said a middle school in Orono discriminated against a transgender student by not allowing the child to use the girls' bathroom.

It's lunchtime at a Portland, Maine high school. It's possible among these students is a child who was born with a biological sex but identifies as a different gender.

"We have youngsters who are transgender at the elementary school we have them in middle schools and high schools, we don't make a big deal and they are successful in the Portland school systems" said James Morse, Portland Schools Superintendent.

One of the main issues facing transgender students is choosing a bathroom. Morse said, "They are allowed to use a bathroom in every school...it is dealt with respectfully and uniquely to those buildings needs."

At its most recent meeting, the Maine Human Rights Commission ruled that a middle school student in Orono was discriminated against because the child, who is biologically a boy, was not allowed to use the girls bathroom.

"This student identifies as a girl, dresses as a girl, perceived by her classmates as a girl" said Sarah Holmes from the Center for Sexuality and Gender Diversity.

Sarah Holmes is familiar with the student involved in this case. She says people are recognizing they are transgender at an earlier age in part because there is more awareness and parents are more supportive.

While Maine does have an anti-discrimination law, there is no state policy to guide schools on how to accommodate transgender students.

Sarah Holmes said, "It's no more complicated than providing safe and appropriate bathroom access to students as they identify."

Some are worried accommodating transgender students might make others uncomfortable....but students we spoke with said that's not a concern for them.

Portland's superintendent says it's a matter of society catching up with the needs of these students....and guidelines from the state for schools to follow would be a good place to start.

Facebook campaign could see Ireland appoint first gay president

by Henry McDonald, The Guardian (UK)

Two recent opinion polls have put David Norris ahead of all other possible candidates. Ireland may elect its first openly gay president, thanks to the social networking site Facebook. The current frontrunner to succeed Mary McAleese as head of state in the Irish Republic admits that it was a Facebook campaign that prompted him to step forward for the presidency.

Two recent opinion polls have put the independent senator David Norris ahead of all other possible candidates. His election next autumn would mark an astonishing change in a country once regarded as one of the most conservative Catholic nations in Europe.

Inside a cramped office in the Irish parliament, and surrounded by 200 boxes of correspondence he is about to hand over to the Irish national archives, Senator Norris tells the Guardian he put his name forward only after hearing of a Facebook group with nearly 1,000 members calling for him to stand.

"I've started very early in response to the Facebook campaign," Norris laughs. "One of the Irish Sunday newspapers rang me up and said, 'Do you know that nearly 1,000 people have signed on Facebook calling for you to stand for the presidency?' It was Facebook which started all this, absolutely.

"I think it is very important to use modern technology. It helped get President Obama to win the election."

Although, like the British monarchy's, the Irish president's power is more symbolic than real, elections to the post have previously been used to protest against the Republic's political establishment. Norris is non-aligned, and is hoping to tap into the widespread discontent over the profligacy of the Celtic tiger years and the way the state's main party, Fianna Fáil, handled the economy.

Norris denies his sexuality will be an issue even in more conservative rural parts of Ireland.

"It's a non-issue," he says. "It's a non-issue with the people of Ireland. Some may have some concerns, and I hope I am able to address them. I have just had a major radio interview in Dublin and the interviewer asked me about it, and people came on the programme to say 'Will you get out of that? What does it matter! We want someone with vision ... someone who is independent.'

"The only person who said they would not vote [for] me live on air was a gay man. He rang in to say it was great that a gay man was standing for the presidency but that I was far too leftwing for him. I respect that man because he has parked what he sees as an irrelevant issue and instead goes on to analyse what I stand for."

However, the bearded, gregarious former academic and James Joyce expert accepts that if he were elected it would be a global story. And he would use this fame, especially in the United States, to "sell Ireland".

"Anybody else elected as president of Ireland I don't think is going to get the same kind of sensational news coverage. And I think that's splendid, because if I went to Washington as president every single news channel will be there hungry for a story. I have been around long enough to deal with that story with dignity and then move on to talk about Ireland, to sell our country."

A practising Anglican, Norris rejects the notion that his campaign will come under fire from Catholic traditionalists. He claims to count the current Catholic archbishop of Dublin, Dr Diarmud Martin, as a friend.

On certain key ethical questions, Norris will find himself at odds with the Catholic bishops, however. He says it is a "disgrace" that Ireland has no clear legislation on stem cell research, for example. But the senator says he would be "very surprised" if the hierarchy attacked him during the campaign.

"The [Catholic] church has become wiser, and there have been so many difficulties for the church over the scandals," he said, referring to the revelations of child

abuse in Catholic institutions. "So I don't think the church is likely to intervene and condemn me as an individual. Those days are gone."

One of the last acts of Mary McAleese's two terms as president will be the expected visit of a British queen to Ireland for the first time since the Republic's foundation. Norris says he is strongly in favour of a royal visit as it would further strengthen Anglo-Irish relations.

Asked if he was worried about tabloid intrusion or muckraking over his sexuality during the campaign, Norris responds cheerfully: "I have lived a decent, respectable life, and there has been no scandal."

Then he returns to his voluminous correspondence, some of which is from people facing grave financial problems; some of those are even contemplating taking their own lives.

Norris points to the stacks of boxes filling up his office and says: "There are some desperate people out there looking for help and advice. I pass their details on to organisations who can help and advise them. Sometimes I feel more like a counsellor than a senator."

PFLAG BUFFALO/NIAGARA
2010-2011

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