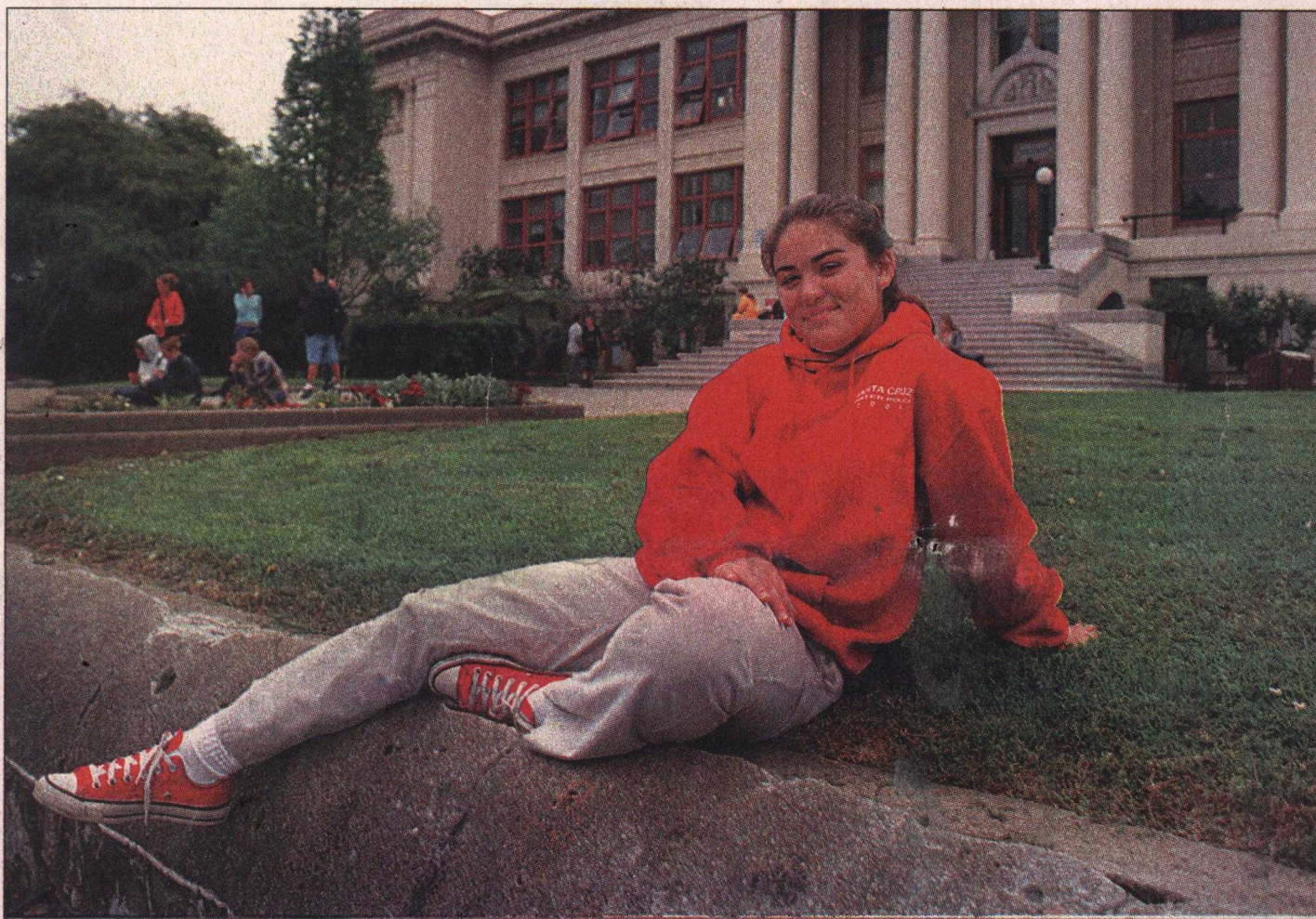


Silence speaks loudly

Student activist gives voice to gay teens' issues



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Nikira Hernandez, a 15-year-old sophomore at Santa Cruz High School, is one of the organizers of today's national Day of Silence observation, held to illustrate the struggle gay teen-agers face daily.

'I do it for all the people who can't be silent because they're scared to be associated with it.'

NIKIRA HERNANDEZ, DAY OF SILENCE ORGANIZER

By HEATHER BOERNER

Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ

Nikira Hernandez spent most of Tuesday juggling the responsibilities that go with organizing a national event in which more than 1,770 schools will participate today. There were last-minute problems, dozens of e-mails to send and phone calls to return.

But Nikira is only a sophomore at Santa Cruz High School, and is doing that in addition to playing three sports and finishing her school work. She is one of nine national organizers for the 7-year-old Day of Silence project, which asks high school students nationwide to take an eight-hour vow of silence to illustrate how gay teens feel daily when their peers harass them.

It's quite a role for the 15-year-old, who up until last year spent most of her time playing soccer, participating in Junior Lifeguards and watching movies. After

coming out as a lesbian last year, Nikira helped organize the school's 2001 Day of Silence. About 200 students participated.

For the past few months, she's spent about six hours a week on the phone and at the computer solving problems and scheduling events. She flown to New York to meet other national teen organizers with the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network, which is sponsoring the event. She's been interviewed by national magazines and appeared on Closet Free Radio, a local radio show.

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She will be one of this year's recipients of the Queer Youth Awards, given annually by the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning Youth Task Force of Santa Cruz County.

Nikira has a broad smile and shrugs her shoulders when she likes something. She has a kind of nervous energy that makes her foot tap, and she winds her hands in the too-long sleeves of her sweatshirt.

She shrugs and grins a lot when talking about the Day of Silence, but then grows suddenly serious.

Pausing, she thinks about what the project means to her.

"I wanted to do something," she said, stopping to think for a moment. "And then I'm no longer a victim."

"I like to feel that I'm having an effect on people, so that if it's in the paper, closeted kids can read it. That's the reason I do all this. I do it for all the people who can't be silent because they're scared to be associated with it."



HERNANDEZ

One of only nine national organizers

some good.

"She's doing something positive and constructive, it makes her feel good, and she's getting a lot of recognition for it," Hamane said. "I think it's pretty neat."

Santa Cruz High was the only local school to participate in last year's event. Today, Watsonville, Soquel, Aptos and Scotts Valley high schools will participate, too. They're even making up T-shirts — another thing Nikira coordinated. Santa's Cruz's gay political group, the Gay, Lesbian, Bisex-

ual, Transgender Alliance, will hold a companion demonstration at the clock tower at 6 p.m.

Nikira is a lifelong Santa Cruz resident and lives with her mother and stepfather. Rolling her eyes, she describes herself as "half-jock, half-intellectual, half-activist and half-gay poster child."

Nikira calls Santa Cruz "a wonderful place to grow up gay," and notes there are some openly gay teachers at her school. Her mother, she said, is supportive of her and drives her to and from meetings of the Rainbow Alliance, the gay-straight club.

Still, she said, she's seen and heard anti-gay epithets spoken by fellow students, and has experienced a kind of silent tension with some girls in her school. Unlike boys, who are often the victim of physical violence because they are gay, she said straight girls often just decide not to hang out with other girls who are gay.

Nikira's experience is proved out in national surveys. According to a national report from the Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network, three-fourths of teen lesbians or bisexual girls report being sexually harassed in school. More than 80 per-

cent of gay students say they've been the subject of anti-gay epithets. One-third report being beaten or physically attacked for their sexual orientation.

It's that discrimination the National Day of Silence aims to address. Students who participate agree to take an eight-hour vow of silence. When people ask why they aren't talking, they hand out cards that say, in part, "My deliberate silence echoes that silence which is caused by harassment, prejudice and discrimination. ... Think about the voices you are not hearing today. What are you going to do to end the silence?"

Last year, Nikira expected maybe 20 kids to participate at her school. To her surprise, 200 students and two teachers stayed silent all day.

At the end of the day, the students finally spoke, giving speeches on the school steps about discrimination.

Then, Nikira said, "We ran around screaming. You know, we're teen-agers."

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