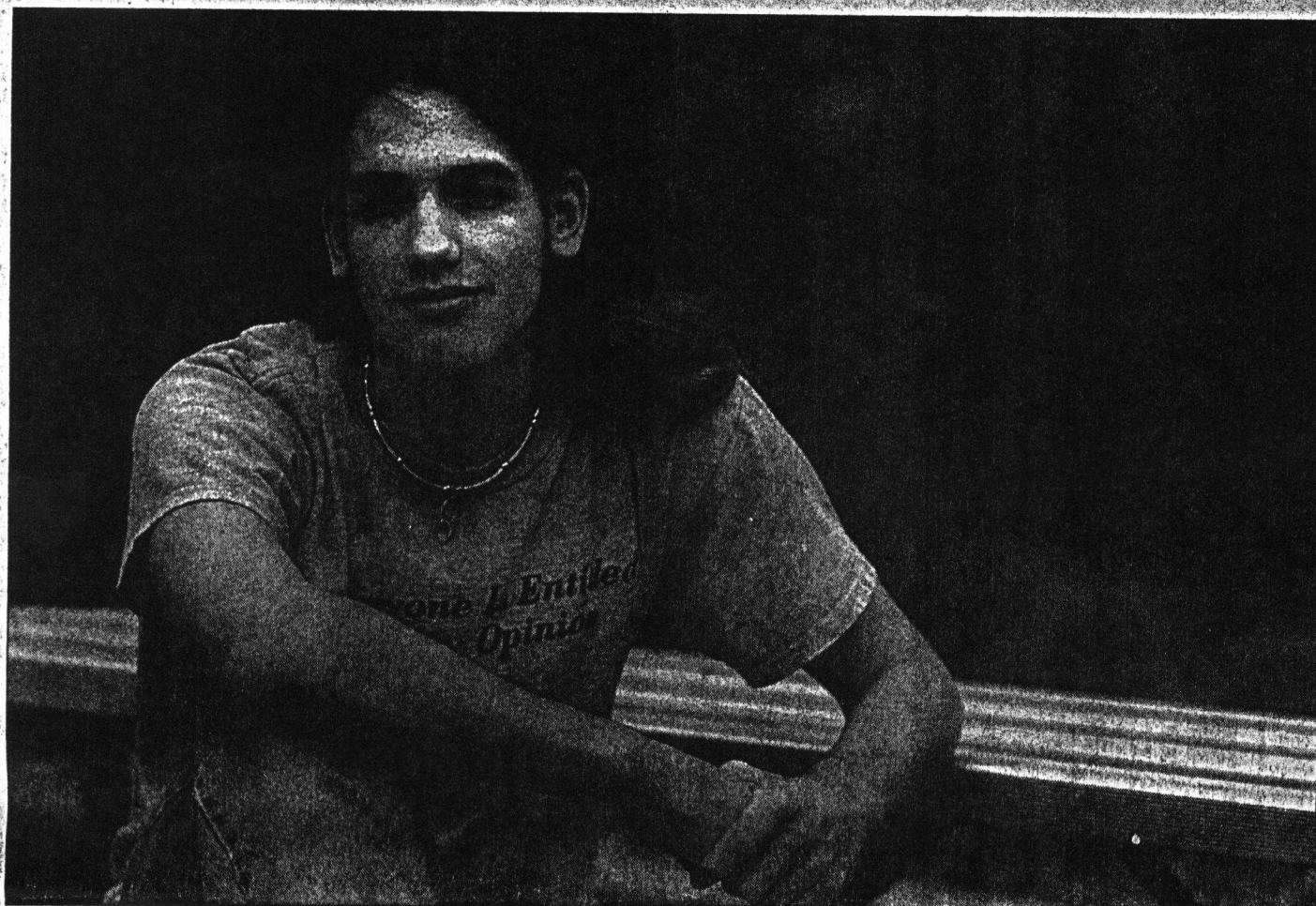


LESBIAN, GAY YOUTH HONORED



'There are some people who are just not accepting and some people who are. It's hard to know who's your ally.'

JONATHAN JACKSON, STUDENT, RENAISSANCE HIGH SCHOOL

Jonathan Jackson says life as a gay teenager in Watsonville isn't easy, but he's survived and grown into a leader.

County teenagers recognized for leadership

By DAVID SCHARFENBERG
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Walking the halls of Watsonville High School with his old boyfriend was an adventure.

"You would not imagine the amount of leers and mumbled 'faggots' we'd hear," said Jonathan Jackson, 18, who now attends Watsonville's Renaissance High School. "There are some people who are just not accepting and some people who are. It's hard to know who's your ally."

WATSONVILLE Life as a gay teenager in Watsonville hasn't been easy for Jackson. Actually, life hasn't been easy for Jackson, period.

A bright kid with an acerbic wit, Jackson says he's had a difficult relationship with both of his parents, faced an abusive stepfather, experimented with drugs, ditched school and attempted suicide twice.

But he's survived. He's also found time for a little advocacy work. Last year, he founded a short-lived gay-straight alliance at Renaissance and helped organize campus participation in the "National Day of Silence." Participants in the 8-year-old event take a vow of silence to protest the harassment and discrimination that "silences" lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people.

Sunday night, Jackson will be recognized for his efforts — one of nine people and two organizations to be honored at the countywide Seventh Annual Queer Youth Leadership Awards.

The event, sponsored by the Santa Cruz County Task Force for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning Youth, recognizes "queer" youth leaders, gay and straight "allies" of queer youth and organizations that have contributed to the lives of queer youth.

The event will follow tonight's "Youth Speak Out," a community forum on homophobia on school campuses sponsored by several queer advo-

Seventh annual Queer Youth Leadership Awards

2004 Queer Youth Leadership Awardees

Alfonzo Collazo — Watsonville High School graduate
Jonathan Jackson — Renaissance High School student
Joshua Moreno — Watsonville High School student
Jerry Samliento — New School student
Vanessa Soma — Scotts Valley High School student
Shanti Zunes-Wolf — Santa Cruz High School student

2004 Ally to Queer Youth Awardees

Craig Warren — Scotts Valley Middle School student
Deborah Jacobson — Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays Santa Cruz chairperson
Ralph Porras — Santa Cruz High School principal

2004 Organizational Alliance to Queer Youth Awardees

Gay and Proud — Watsonville Youth Group
Rainbow Alliance — Santa Cruz High School
Gay-Straight Alliance

cacy groups. The speak out, broadcast live 6-7 p.m. on Community TV of Santa Cruz County, cable Channel 27, will cap this year's local recognition of the National Day of Silence.

Stuart Rosenstein, chairman of the county task force, said he hopes the community will tune into tonight's event and take action.

"We will know the success of the speak out when we find that parents are going to principals (Thursday) and saying, 'What are you doing to stop slurs on your campus?'" he said.

Rosenstein said some schools, like Watsonville

High, are taking action to make their campuses safe for queer youth, as required by the California Student Safety & Violence Prevention Act of 2000. But others have been slow to act, he said.

The Queer Youth Awards, he said, are designed to send a message that "queer youth matter" and honor young people's work to combat homophobia. "It's youth like Jonathan, and his courage, that help make a difference in our community," he said.

Contact David Scharfenberg at
dscharfenberg@santacruzsentinel.com

Events

Youth Speak Out

Today,
Community Television of Santa Cruz County,
816 Pacific Ave., Santa Cruz.
6-7 p.m.
Event is free and open to middle and high school students only.
Televised live on Community Television of Santa Cruz County, cable channel 27.

7th Annual Queer Youth Leadership Awards

April 25.
Harbor High School Little Theater,
300 La Fonda Ave., Santa Cruz.
4-6 p.m.: Variety show and awards ceremony.
6:30-8 p.m.: Buffet, refreshments, social.
Recommended donation: \$20, adults, \$10, students and seniors.