

Conference spotlights safety for sexual minorities

Gays + Lesbians

Consensus after the event

that drew law officers, school officials, social workers is that more could be done to protect gays and lesbians.

By Ken McLaughlin
Mercury News

Santa Cruz County may be among the most liberal places on Earth, but law enforcement agencies, school districts and social service agencies still have a way to go to make gays, lesbians and other



Zach Davenport, gay and 17, said it's time to address slurs at his school again.

sexual minorities feel welcome and safe.

That was the consensus of more than 100 top cops, school superintendents, social workers, school counselors and others gathered at

a Santa Cruz hotel for what was billed as a first-of-its-kind conference.

"It's the first time that all the agencies in the county have gotten together to discuss issues" that affect the community of gays, bisexuals, transgendered people and hermaphrodites, said conference coordinator Patricia Smith. "It's really a groundbreaking event."

"We're committed to providing public safety to everybody, not just a select group of people," said county Sheriff Mark Tracy, who helped organize the conference.

But Tracy conceded that his de-

partment can do more to educate officers that they need to take harassment of gays as seriously as they take domestic violence against women. And, Tracy said, it is still extremely difficult for a gay male officer to come out of the closet, whereas lesbian officers have found it easier to win acceptance in what has traditionally been viewed as a "male" job.

"As a leader, I set the tone, but we have a long way to go," said Tracy, adding that gay jokes among cops are still not unusual.

See **SAFETY**, Page 5B

SAFETY | Agencies discuss issues facing gay youths

Continued from Page 1B

"It's a difficult issue to deal with."

Conference participants heard from a panel of youths ranging in age from 16 to 24. They expressed feelings of frustration, anger and sadness, some saying that they often felt their cries for help from teachers, police, doctors and school administrators were ignored.

Zach Davenport, a gay 17-year-old, was routinely taunted with slurs during his first two and a half years at Watsonville High School. After being thrown on the ground and kicked in the stomach, the stress and depression transformed him from an A student to a C+ student contemplating suicide.

At first, he put up with the abuse, preferring to deny his homosexuality. But Zach and his mother, Lori, pressured Pajaro Valley Unified School District officials to ensure his safety and warn parents and students that such harassment wouldn't be tolerated.

Zach was given a cellular phone to call for help. And Watsonville High Principal Jose Banda earlier this year required attendance at a school-wide assembly aimed at educating students about the problems gay students face.

Zach said Friday that the harassment stopped at first, but he's starting to hear slurs again.

"I think we need to do another assembly," said Zach, a senior who plans to become a civil-rights attorney.

"It's a banal and unacceptable evil," Santa Cruz Mayor Tim Fitzmaurice said of gay harassment.

"We're committed to providing public safety to everybody, not just a select group of people."

— SANTA CRUZ COUNTY SHERIFF
MARK TRACY, WHO HELPED ORGANIZE
THE CONFERENCE

Fitzmaurice, who is straight, told the story about how his high school's water polo team once went to his house drunk, ready to beat him up simply because "they considered me questionable."

Fitzmaurice contributed \$2,500 on behalf of the city to help pay for Friday's conference, sponsored by the 12-year-old Diversity Center and held at the West Coast Santa Cruz Hotel, formerly the Dream Inn.

Contact Ken McLaughlin at
kmclaughlin@sjmercury.com or
(831) 423-3115.