

# Student-organized Pride celebration at Brandon school draws backlash

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Roughly 100 people participated in a 10-minute Pride march around the building on the last day of school, according to Otter Valley Principal James Avery. Courtesy photo

On the second-to-last day of school, a small group of the roughly 500 students at Otter Valley Union Middle and High School dressed up in rainbow apparel and draped Pride flags around their shoulders for an informal, student-organized celebration of Pride month.

Ten to 15 students gathered in the school lobby just before 8 a.m. on June 10, according to student Finley Manney-Hart, who organized the event. The plan was to exchange Pride flags and Pride-themed clothing before each student headed off to class for the day, Manney-Hart said.

“We weren’t going to jump through the halls or anything,” Manney-Hart said. “It was just a way to show support for one another and celebrate Pride.”

But the day soon devolved into altercations between groups of students, and three LGBTQ kids were suspended, including Manney-Hart, he said. An administrator described the events as a “disturbing conflict” between kids with differing viewpoints, while two LGBTQ students said the day was another example of hostilities they and their friends have faced at school. They questioned administrators’ handling of the situation.

“There is a horrible amount of harassment and discrimination at Otter Valley against LGBTQ people,” Manney-Hart said. “The school has refused to acknowledge it. They actually push incidents under the rug.”

Almost immediately after they began to gather on June 10, Manney-Hart said, the group noticed some other students mocking them and taking photos.

Screenshots obtained by VTDigger showed that confrontations between students spilled over onto social media. One student posted an image on Snapchat that depicted two students in what appears to be a school hallway with Gadsden flags, which read “Don’t Tread on Me,” draped around their shoulders. The photo was captioned “you wear your flags we’ll wear ours.”

Another posted a photo of the students gathered in the lobby with their Pride flags with the caption “What the f— is this gay s—,” followed by a smiley face emoji and a watergun emoji.

James Avery, principal of the school, described the incidents at Otter Valley as “disturbing conflict between students who have significant differences in beliefs.”

Avery said it was hard to say how many students were involved in the conflict. He also declined to say how many students were disciplined but said the school’s actions ranged from “removal

through the remainder of the year” to restorative justice practices. He declined to say whether that would include suspensions but said punishments would not roll over into the next school year.

Manney-Hart said he and two other LGBTQ students were suspended the morning of June 10.

In a Facebook comment on the school’s page the next morning, a parent, Lola Montez, said LGBTQ kids were reprimanded.



Some students draped “Don’t Tread on Me” flags around their shoulders on June 10, the day that some students arrived with Pride flags for a student-organized Pride celebration. Photo courtesy of Finley Manney-Hart

“Yes, and the children that were asked to leave were NOT wearing the Don’t Tread on Me flag, they were wearing the Pride flag,” she wrote. “I know because my child was one of them.”

Jeanne Collins, superintendent of the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union, said slurs and comments came from students of “all opinions.”

“There are ways that you can disagree and there are ways that you cannot disagree,” Collins said. “We expect respect and civility, and if comments or slurs were made that were not respectful or civil, then we look into it, regardless of who the student is.”

Avery said the school investigated complaints brought to its attention — reviewing camera footage and interviewing students — and took action. All reports of physical altercations between students have been addressed, he said.

Some students disputed administrators’ claims. Manney-Hart said he was suspended for getting into a yelling match in the hallway with another student who was using slurs against LGBTQ students. He does not believe that she was suspended.

“If they really were being fair and treating all their students equally, then the other student that was yelling in the hallways back at me and was swearing in the hallways would also be [suspended],” Manney-Hart said.

## **A possible threat**

Manney-Hart also said he had been told that a student had threatened to shoot LGBTQ students. Manney-Hart said he did not hear the threat directly but said two other students witnessed the peer talking about it with friends. Manney-Hart reported the incident to the school and the police.

Avery said the school investigated the reported threat, but ultimately found it not to be credible.

Christopher Brickell, the Brandon police chief, later spoke with Manney-Hart about his concerns.

Brickell said the officer to whom the report was initially made tried to investigate the claim but “was not getting the information he was looking to try to get to investigate it further.” Brickell said the police department spoke with Otter Valley school administrators, who said they were already investigating the matter.

Brandon police generally let administrators address issues within the school unless criminal behavior is involved, Brickell said.

Though administrators did not find the reported shooting threat to be credible, they still took precautions, Avery said. Brickell and another officer visited the school the following day — the final day of classes for the year — and participated in the June 11 Pride walk Avery had announced the day before.

Brickell said police attended the walk to make sure things went smoothly after the altercations of the previous day and because of an expletive-laced message someone left for Avery in the school's general voicemail, which the principal reported to the police.

Brickell said he had a conversation with the individual, in which he told the police chief he regretted leaving the voicemail and did not plan to visit the school.

Avery estimated that about 100 people — including students, faculty, staff and parents — participated in the 10-minute Pride walk. He said the event was not mandatory but was an invitation for members of the Otter Valley community to show their support for LGBTQ students and celebrate Pride month.

Despite the school's investigation, some students said they did not feel safe after the incidents on June 10. Manney-Hart said one of his friends hid in the bathroom on June 11, the final day of the school year, for fear of harassment. He also said some LGBTQ students were concerned about being interviewed for this article because of potential backlash.

## **Past issues**

Manney-Hart, who is trans, said this is far from the first time he has experienced harassment from Otter Valley students about his identity. He described being called transphobic and homophobic slurs and receiving threats for using the men's bathroom. He also said a student recently threatened to “bash [his] head in.”

“When I reported it, they said they couldn't do anything because it's a he said, she said,” Manney-Hart said.

Manney-Hart said he was suspended earlier this year after bringing a weapon to school, which he said he carried due to concerns for his safety.

Aiden, a rising ninth-grader at Otter Valley, said he was subjected to transphobic slurs and comments from peers throughout the school year. He asked not to be identified by his full name because he and his parents are concerned that people will be angry at him for coming forward.

Aiden said he has reported harassment to school employees.

“I report almost everything, and they say they’re going to do something, and then nothing happens,” he said.

Aiden said he took to keeping a knife in his school bag because he did not feel safe at Otter Valley. He said he was suspended after it was discovered.

Brickell said reports to police of homophobic or transphobic behavior at Otter Valley have been infrequent. However, he said they were “pronounced” from one student last week, who he confirmed was Manney-Hart.

Avery said Otter Valley has not previously had to address incidents on the scale that occurred June 10, but the school has addressed issues of intolerance toward LGBTQ students in the past.

“Any school, every school, would say they’ve worked on those issues in the past, of course, and continue to,” he said.

For next school year, he said, Otter Valley plans to have the LGBTQ youth organization Outright Vermont work with faculty. The school also plans to restart an organization called Otter Alliance, which works to “foster a positive, respectful, safe and welcoming school climate for ALL students, faculty, and staff,” according to a [description](#) on the school’s website.

But many LGBTQ students do not want to return to Otter Valley next fall, according to Aiden. He plans to attend a different school.

“I really don’t want to go back to Otter Valley next year,” he said.