

# LGBTQ students harassed at Otter Valley

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BRANDON — An end-of-year celebration of LGBTQ pride was met with resistance from some Otter Valley Union High School students Friday.

In recognition of Pride Month, students showed their support for the LGBTQ community by wearing Pride flags and rainbow colors as they marched around the school building at the close of the half-day of classes late Friday morning.

June is Pride Month, a national celebration of the LGBTQ community commemorating the Stonewall riots in 1969 — regarded as a catalyst for LGBTQ rights in the United States.

That celebration, however, was not embraced by all students.

As the queue of marchers, which included students, faculty and staff, circled the school building, a small group of students displaying politically conservative symbols looked on. One student wore a Gadsden (“Don’t Tread on Me”) flag — commonly used among far-right groups and individuals — as a cape. Another did the same with a “Trump 2024” flag. Other students wore Trump tee shirts.

Later, as marchers dispersed, several students driving in a truck displaying the U.S. flag exited the parking lot and sped down Route 7, honking the horn while one individual waved his middle finger at students.

Hostilities were less restrained Thursday, according to rising sophomore Finley Manney-Hart, who alleged around 30 students whom he characterized as anti-LGBTQ openly harassed Manney-Hart and other LGBTQ students, calling them homophobic slurs and walking through the halls wearing Gadsden and Trump flags.

He said the aggression appeared to be in response to LGBTQ students wearing pride colors and to school accessories over the past week.

Manney-Hart did not attend the march Friday because he was suspended Thursday following a verbal altercation with another student.

He said two other LGBTQ students were suspended Thursday due to similar altercations, but claims the other students involved received no punishment.

He also alleged that some of the confrontations even got physical, claiming that a friend of his was punched in the head Thursday because he was wearing a Pride flag.

Manney-Hart said he doesn't believe the administration has done enough to respond to his and other students' reports of harassment.

"I have reported probably over a dozen microaggressions, harassment — both verbally and physically — amongst me and my friends in the past few weeks," he said. "I'm not seeing a change. It's the same students every time. It's the same issues every time."

Manney-Hart further alleged other students have physically assaulted him in the past and called him names like "f-ggot" and "it" — which, he said is a derogatory term for gender nonconforming or transgender people.

He said that one of his friends told him they allegedly hid in the bathroom all day Friday to avoid being harassed.

"We do not feel supported or safe at school," Manney-Hart said.

In a post to OV's Facebook page Friday morning, Principal James Avery wrote, "Yesterday's events here at Otter Valley were difficult, disturbing and so distant from what I, the faculty, staff, and students would hope to be the climate and environment that we want our school to be. Many years ago I began the phrase 'Having Pride and Being Proud.' It was hard for me to feel that way when I and all of you experienced the events that happened yesterday. Those events were a reflection of more deep seated issues that we as a school must address."

On Thursday, Avery released a letter to the OVU community announcing Friday's march, stating, "We value our students' activism and bravery, and will continue to lift up, listen, and affirm that we support our LGBTQ students."

He continued: "It is important to note that Pride clothing does not discriminate against any group of people or carry any message of hate, and therefore is welcome at OV. However, it is important to recognize that there may be some students who in response to Pride month, try to bring other flags or symbols to school that have a history of discrimination and hate, and we firmly state that these are not allowed in our school. Our goal is to create an inclusive and diverse environment throughout our school."

Speaking Friday, Avery confirmed “incidences of intolerance” instigated by anti-LGBTQ students occurred at the school Thursday, but did not elaborate and stated that he could not speak to any physical altercations occurring.

“I think there were things that were said that were unnecessary triggers that resulted in behaviors that were disturbing,” he said.

Looking toward the fall, Avery said OVU will be “developing a relationship” with LGBTQ youth advocacy organization Outright Vermont to see what kind of support the organization can provide to build a more inclusive and welcoming school community.

Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union Superintendent Jeanne Collins characterized the situation as a “societal issue” that plays out in schools like anywhere else.

“I do think that in the past few years, it has become more and more acceptable in society for hate speech and hate incidents,” she said.

Collins said issues like this are why RNESU has been stepping up its professional development and support for staff and students.

“It’s important that we do that for all of our kids, that we have an inclusive environment,” she said.