

West Valley VIEW

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Gay students tout PRIDE at EMCC

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Equality, individuality, diversity and respect are four words a group of students at Estrella Mountain Community College preaches daily.

Arrange the words differently and you get what the students feel: pride - Practicing Respect Individuality Diversity and Equality.

"It's an acronym for the words that the students feel embody the club," said Sandy Zetlan, a biology professor who has taught at the Avondale campus for 15 years. She is also one of three faculty advisers for PRIDE, the 9-year-old club formerly known as the Gay Straight Alliance.

"I understand students can feel very alone and isolated, and sometimes unsafe in public places, especially schools," said Zetlan, who has advised the group for about six years. "[PRIDE] is a support system for students."

"We have a melting pot of people who are trying to feel safe and understood and not be judged," said Mark Valenzuela, president of PRIDE and the man behind the name change.

Valenzuela came up with the name PRIDE, and after a brainstorming session with club members, the words fell into place, in much the same way the club is doing this year.

"When the right people come together, you get action," Zetlan said. "What is special about this club, we have a lot of students doing a lot of the work."

Membership soars

Valenzuela joined the then Gay Straight Alliance back in August when it had about six members. PRIDE now numbers 46, the Arizona native said.

"We've grown a lot in the one semester we've been here," Valenzuela said.

In fact, it's the largest the club has ever numbered, Zetlan said. And it's about a 50-50 mix between women and men, she said.



TIERRA BEASLEY OF AVONDALE, left, Mark Valenzuela of Phoenix, front, and Chris Whitelaw of Long Island, N.Y., are members of Estrella Mountain Community College's club PRIDE, formerly known as the Gay-Straight Alliance. View photo by Ray Thomas

PRIDE is for all students, too, not just those in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning community, Valenzuela said.

"It's for anyone who wants to feel safe, express themselves and not hide who they want to be," he said.

The club president credits the growth to becoming highly visible, manning tables at many college functions, as well as organizing special events, such as Spirit Day when all members wore identical shirts emblazoned with seven names - students who had committed suicide as a result of bullying.

"We want to create an environment that is equal to everyone without prejudice, where everyone can feel safe, whether it be in school, at home or in work life," Valenzuela said.

Zetlan credits the Maricopa Community College District with setting the example for students to follow.

"We value diversity," she said. "It's part of the mission of this college, and I feel we do celebrate that mission here.

"I'm proud of our district for the support they have given faculty, staff and students with different sexual orientations. They can find a lot of support here if they reach out to the different clubs on campus."

Having a diverse group of clubs on campus helps students succeed, she said.

"It's important for students to thrive and achieve their educational and personal goals," Zetlan said.

PRIDE has been thriving ever since Valenzuela took the reins, Zetlan said.

"Mark is a phenomenal student," she said. "He has helped bring the club along with his enthusiasm and connections in the community. He has pushed it in a positive direction and we're proud of that. Once people show up, they tend to stay; it's a pretty positive experience."

Giving back to the community

Valenzuela works to ensure the club keeps an "overall positive outlook."

"There is a lot of potential in what we want to accomplish," the criminal psychology major said.

"They want to spread awareness and education of social issues that affect the community," Zetlan said. "They've given out information on HIV/AIDS, teen suicide. They could just go to class but they don't. They give up their free time to give back to the Estrella community."

This is the first time Valenzuela, who's been openly gay "as long as I can remember; since kindergarten," has been involved with such a group. Mainly, because his former schools did not have any support groups in place.

"It would have been very helpful and beneficial," the Trevor Browne High School graduate said. "Especially for others I knew who weren't out. It would have been a great support system."

High school wasn't as big of a problem for him as junior high was, Valenzuela said.

"I was never in bodily harm, but it was intense to say the least," Valenzuela recalled.

There was some intimidation and danger in high school as well, Valenzuela said, but as he progressed through the grade levels the intensity decreased.

"College life is a lot more liberal in terms of sexuality than high school was," he said. "There have been a few stares or side glances, not anything that is too intimidating or forceful.

"In my experience, you are always going to have those few who have a fear or phobia," Valenzuela said. "And it's all about education."

Which is where PRIDE comes in, he said.

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