

LGBTQ 101, Café aimed at support

By Brian Bushard

bbushard@inkym.com Sean Allen understands the questions. Growing up gay on Nantucket has not only meant feeling isolated from family and peers, but learning a new vocabulary for how to talk about queer rights. It's a difficult vocabulary to learn.

"You have people who don't know how to talk about it, and they might love their family and want to support the community, but it's intimidating when you look at the lingo and the new words and definitions. I know because I talk to my parents about it," said Allen, who organized the island's first gay-pride march in 2018.

Supporting the island's LGBTQ community, and giving their parents and friends the language to talk about queer issues with them is at the center of an information session at the Atheneum Great Hall Wednesday night.

On Feb. 5, A Safe Place, the Alliance for Substance Abuse Prevention, Health Imperatives Nantucket and the Unitarian Universalist Meeting House are holding a support café for that community at the Handlebar Café. It's the first of a series of support cafes running once a month through May.

"It can get confusing and that's OK," Allen said. "We don't want to alienate people from being loving friends and allies. It's trying to help provide a safe space for people who identify and for people who love and care about them develop the tools to talk about it."

The idea of a support café is to give people who identify as LGBTQ a space where they feel supported, A.S.A.P. co-president Sue Mynttinen said. The need is greater than people might think, she said.

"LGBTQ folks are at a much greater risk for substance abuse and mental health issues," she said.

"It's of course more than we think because most people aren't thinking about it. One of our primary goals is to help wake people up and say there are people here living a life a little bit different than yours but you should know them and accept what they have to offer. They deserve the same dignity."

Health Imperatives Nantucket director Sunny Daily also sees the need to support people who identify as

People also need support in school, Daily said. She reached out to the Nantucket High School Gay Straight Alliance, asking them how she could help. The answer, she said, was a workshop for parents to learn the language around LGBTQ issues.

"There's a huge need," Daily said. "I see it at the clinic. Then you go to the high school and you hear from the guidance department and from the students that identify as LGBTQ that they want somebody other than their peers to go to for information and support. They said they don't know how to talk to their parents, they don't speak the same language and culturally we don't even have the words."

For Allen, the lack of communication sounded all too familiar.

"When I was a kid, I was very depressed," he said. "I hid who I was because of fear of the negative associations of my identity."

The issue is particularly bad on Nantucket, he added. You might not hear about it every day. You might not hear it at all. But the feeling you might have if you identify as LGBTQ, or if you have a loved one who is, is not always a positive one, Allen said.

"I think when you grow up and you're not conforming in gender or sexual orientation, the way you express yourself on the outside and privately, it's hard for people to understand," he said.

Allen is now a teaching assistant at the high school. Just by being at the school has helped give students a supporting mentor who can walk them through the issues of not feeling welcomed, he said.

The next step is staff training at the high school to help teachers and guidance counselors embrace the same supporting role, where they can use the same vocabulary that gender- or sexuality-queer students might use. Daily said Nantucket Cottage Hospital is holding a similar training.

Unitarian Universalist minister Linda Simmons thinks those training sessions and workshops will go a long way.

"We work with many people who feel invisible," Simmons said. "We are hoping through this work to

LGBTQ at the clinic on Vesper Lane.

Part of it is a medical need. Health Imperatives offers medication for men having sex with men to prevent HIV. Daily said it's more people coming in than you might think, without giving an exact number.

support family and mentors and friends of LGBTQ people, that they will feel more heard.”

LGBTQ 101 is scheduled for 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 29 at the Atheneum Great Hall, 1 India St.

The Support Café will be held at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 5 at the Handlebar Café, 15 Washington St. For more information, visit nantucketpflag@gmail.com.