



The New Trier News

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Changing student body challenges advisery tradition

This is the second in a three part series on transgender students at New Trier

by Nora Crumley

For 90 years, the gender segregated adviser system has been a New Trier tradition, but as recent headlines demonstrate, a gender binary advisery system many not fit the needs of today.

Transgender rights have quickly become a topic among the student body and administration at New Trier.

"It's really a work in progress where we are now," Assistant Principal of the Northfield Campus, Peter Tragos said. "We have had transgender students in the past, but none that have been so open with us. The national conversation around the topic has shifted."

One major place where the discussion is focused, when talking about transgender rights at New Trier, is the school's historic adviser system that splits the student body into gender segregated adviseries.

Lizzy Appleby, the Pride Youth Program Coordinator at Angles in Northfield, expressed the discomfort many transgender students face.

"Asking students to identify as a certain gender is creating a problem for those who don't fit into the gender binary," Appleby said. "Even basic activities in educational settings cause discomfort for transgender students."

Rachel Hess, sponsor for New Trier's LGBTQ group Committed to

Action, acknowledges the challenges many transgender students face at New Trier.

"The advisery system might be a challenge, especially if they transition during high school," Hess said. "The administration has been very accepting of students and the work that we do, and they are very open to listening to our concerns."

The administration's effort is "a work in progress," as Tragos described.

"We are trying to learn best practices, and trying to make sure school is safe and equitable for all students," Tragos said.

Junior Alex Vlahandreas said, "It's not a question of if we feel safe, but if transgender students feel safe at our school."

Student comfort is at the forefront of every administrator's mind according to Tragos.

"We are focused on doing what's right for students and families," said Tragos. "This kind of work is not done through policy but by working closely with students and families."

Students have noticed the administration's efforts in making the school a welcoming environment, especially for freshman transgender student Alex Singh.

"The administration was all for putting me in a boys advisery. I am comfortable in my advisery, I'm just not used to being counted as a boy," Singh said, "the school has been doing a good job, teachers are using the correct pronouns, and I can go to the boy's bathroom if I need to," he noted.

The benefits of the gender segregated advisory system are seen by Singh, but he also notices one



A long-standing tradition at New Trier, gender segregated adviseries at the Winnetka Campus in 1977 | Echoes 1977

major flaw.

"I can see why girls and boys would need their own space, especially in high school. The only problem is when students don't fit in to the gender binary," Singh said.

Singh's concern was shared by other students, including junior Hannah Coffey.

"Splitting adviseries by gender was relevant a long time ago, but when you have a system that has strict categories, and if you don't fit them, whether you identify as transgender or not, it makes you feel excluded and unsafe," said Coffey.

Junior Marnina Hornstein agreed, saying, "Your adviser helps you make your schedule, and I don't get why that has to be gender segregated," Hornstein said. "A co-ed advisery wouldn't be any different or take away from the values of advisery."

In response to student questioning of the advisery system,

Principal of the Winnetka Campus Denise Dubravec said, "Students that don't identify as transgender have expressed a need to mix advisery, so this is not a new topic. We work with these students and listen and understand their position."

However, Dubravec went on to say, "We are not looking to change the structure of the adviser system. We believe our current program benefits students as they experience life during their adolescent years."

Many students still hold the belief that gender segregated adviseries are beneficial.

"Advisery has to create a safe environment. A co-ed advisery would be basically like a normal class," senior Amanda Wong said.

"I would feel a little uncomfortable if a transgender student joined my advisery, but at the end of the day it doesn't matter," Junior Andrew Phillips said. "If a student identifies as a girl she should

be in a girls advisery—it's not a big deal."

Coffey sees positive changes in how New Trier is addressing the transgender community, but in her eyes, there is still room for improvement.

"More people need to know this isn't just about Caitlyn Jenner. There are lots of people around the world, including at our school, who might feel unsafe or uncomfortable, and don't like school because of it. If we learn to accept transgender students, then hopefully school will become a better environment. There's a lot more progress to make, but I'm hopeful," Coffey said.

But with 4,000+ students, student attitude is also important. Freshman Pallavi Simhambhatla sums this idea up. "What body parts you have don't matter any more; it matters more what's inside."

Shane Koyczan shares wisdom with the Class of 2019

Spoken-word poet talks to freshmen as part of The Identity Project

by Liz Byrne

Shane Koyczan, Canadian writer and spoken-word poet, gave a talk and performed for New Trier freshmen on Nov 9 and 10 as part of The Identity Project.

The Identity Project invited Koyczan to share his poetry--which addresses topics ranging from his first crush to bullying. His spoken word poem "To This Day" has over 17 million views on YouTube since its release in Feb2013.

New Trier is the first school in the United States that Koyczan has officially visited. He admits it's different performing for high school students as opposed to a live theatre audience.

"I get to swear more in front of audiences that aren't highschoolers," Koyczan said. "If I'm doing a theatre show, I can do a wide range of things, If I'm going to a school, I try and talk about things that may be affecting the lives of the students at the time."



Portrait of Koyczan drawn by Sly Aida, a depiction of his identity | Facebook

During his performance to freshmen, Koyczan performed several original pieces including "For Many", his most recent piece which focuses on body image and the harsh question: "If you could

change anything about yourself, what would it be?"

"That poem actually was born out of an interesting circumstance," Koyczan said. "I got a photo from an 8-year-old boy with the caption: 'Am

I Ugly?' and it just broke my heart. I realized I wasn't the only one who was going through this. That was sort of the catalyst to sit down and write the piece."

"For Many" was just one of several poems performed around the theme of identity. According to Koyczan, his writing process is never exactly the same. He said it varies from piece to piece, but the main chunk of time is spent on editing.

"I can write a piece in 40 minutes, but it may take me six to seven days to edit it into what I want it to be," Koyczan said.

One aspect that is consistent is that he always writes the ending of his pieces first.

"I find the summation of what I want to say and I start with that," Koyczan said. "Then I write to the beginning, so that when I'm finally reading the piece, I am drilling it down to the main point I am trying to make at the end."

Outside of writing and performing, Koyczan admits to being a normal guy.

"I've turned my hobby, the thing that I love, into my career," Koyczan said. "So I like going to the movies, bowling, hanging out with friends, things like that. I like pretending I

can dance."

When asked about advice he would give to students currently having a rough time in high school, Koyczan reflected on advice he wish he took as a kid.

"Everybody knows growing up where their moral line or where their ethical line is," Koyczan said. "But you get put through a lot of stressful situations going through school, whether it's peer pressure from friends or people you don't even know, or making new friends. And there should be a question you constantly should be asking yourself: 'Am I Okay with this?' 'Is this gonna lead me to where I want to be?'"

Koyczan continued, talking about the importance of standing up for your beliefs.

"You answer that question for yourself because you do know that answer," Koyczan said. "You should hold true to it and not worry about how people are going to perceive you because you've taken a stand. Be proud that you've taken a stand."

After speaking at New Trier, Koyczan will be on tour around North America promoting his new album, "Debris."