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Gay students not automatically in the clear at college

By Bonnie Miller Rubin, Tribune reporter

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Juan Gonzalez remembers the first time he heard someone call him a gay slur on his dorm floor.

"I couldn't believe it," said the 20-year-old from Chicago, who transferred this fall to Northeastern Illinois University, where he says the atmosphere is more accepting. "It so affected me ... I thought, this is college. This shouldn't be happening."

For many gays and lesbians, there's no question that college is infinitely more welcoming than the hallways, cafeterias and locker rooms of middle and high school. But despite more visibility, finding acceptance continues to be a challenge on many campuses, experts say.

The suicide of Rutgers University student Tyler Clementi last month after his roommate secretly recorded and posted online Clementi's sexual encounter with another man has raised concerns over whether colleges are the open, tolerant environments for gay students they purport to be. Two Rutgers freshmen have been charged with invasion of privacy.

Last week, comedian and talk show host Ellen DeGeneres made an emotional plea that "we have an obligation to stop this" and a new campaign — called "It Gets Better" — has sent hundreds of gay and lesbian adults to YouTube to share their torment and triumphs with young people.

The connection between bullying and suicide is well-documented. Of all American teens who die by their own hand, 30 percent are homosexual, according to a study from Penn State University. But little was known about experiences on college campuses.

Then last month — before Clementi's death — Campus Pride released a report that surveyed 6,000 students and others at colleges across the U.S. The report found that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students experience "significantly greater" discrimination than their straight peers and were more likely to seriously consider leaving school because of homophobia.

The group also has a campus climate index on its Web site, which rates 250 colleges based on a self-assessment. The criteria include such items as having full- or part-time staff devoted to LGBT issues and whether sexual orientation is included in the university's nondiscrimination policy. Rutgers, for example, rated four out of five stars.

Among Illinois schools, University of Illinois at Chicago earned the highest rating with 4.5 stars,

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followed by Southern Illinois, Northern Illinois and Northwestern Universities with four stars. Because participation is voluntary, not all colleges are represented.

"Once you get to college, you think people would be more accepting ... but that would be a wrong assumption," said Liz Thomson, of UIC's Gender and Sexuality Center.

Some administrators wondered if the Rutgers case was less about anti-gay bullying than a practical joke gone terribly wrong.

But even in its most generous interpretation, many said if Clementi's intimate encounter had been with a woman and streamed online, it is unlikely he'd feel compelled to take his own life.

For Gonzalez, his experiences were not inflicted by a roommate, but someone on his floor at a Chicago-area liberal arts college. He reported the verbal abuse, but nothing happened. After a subsequent incident, enough was enough. "It took me right back to high school ... I just knew that I didn't want to stay."

Mallory Price recalls clashing with a staff member during her undergraduate years at a small Catholic college, where she came out in her junior year.

The Lemont native posted a sign on her dorm door proclaiming that the school's mission of justice should include sexuality, which triggered a confrontation with a residence assistant.

"She had her Bible out and was just screaming at me ... I was a little scared," said Price, now a graduate student at the University of Chicago, where her sexuality is a nonissue, she said.

Others assert that selecting a college outside a large city increases the likelihood of being marginalized — or worse.

But Steven Black, a senior, said that you can't always go by location. His experiences at University of Illinois, Springfield have generally been positive. The environment, he said, started changing his freshman year, when the school sponsored an alternative prom for area teens.

"That was the turning point ... a sign that this really is a safe place," he explained. "I'd call it a downstate utopia."

brubin@tribune.com

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