Radio program gives gay youths a voice

Travis Amiel, 15, of Briarcliff Manor prepares David Diamond, left, of PFLAG Westchester for an interview Tuesday during the first recording session for the OutCasting radio program at WDFH, 90.3 FM, in Yonkers. OutCasting airs tonight and features local teens and their guests discussing topics and concerns of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youths.

Mady Taibi, 16, and Juliana Peciosvalle, 17, both of Rockland County, talk about the program before recording Tuesday.

Teens educate and empower

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YONKERS — On a recent visit to the studio of WDFH, 90.3 FM, several high-schoolers brainstormed topics for their radio show, ranging from what it means to be transgender to being “out” in a small town.

Their ideas were thoughtful and engaging. Their mission was clear: to be a resource for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youths and to provide a meaningful voice for this often marginalized group.

“I’ve been out since the end of eighth grade, and I’ve never felt rejected. I’m very fortunate,” said Travis Amiel, 15, a sophomore at Briarcliff High School who is gay. “I want kids listening to know that coming out is a positive step to take and that they can make that first step.”

Amiel and five other teens make up OutCasting, a new program that will debut on WDFH at 6:30 p.m. tonight. The students have been
meeting each week since June, developing ideas, interviewing subjects and learning the technical aspects of producing a radio show under the guidance of WDFH founder Marc Sophos and other volunteers.

The program, which will air biweekly, comes on the heels of both setbacks and advances made in the LGBTQ community this year, including several teen suicides, the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" and the passage of the Marriage Equality Act in New York.

Sophos said OutCasting will "inject some humanism, and specifically an LGBTQ youth perspective, into the media conversation."

"It's tremendously exciting. This kind of show could have done me a lot of good as a kid," said Sophos, who is gay. "These groups don't have a voice, and that can be really disempowering. We're hoping this show will allow them to see themselves in the media."

The first episode will feature the role of gay-straight alliances in high schools, a "crash course" on LGBTQ definitions and the Kinsey scale, also known as the Heterosexual-Homosexual Rating Scale, which measures a person's homosexuality or heterosexuality based on a seven-point continuum. There will be an interview with Mary Jane Karger, co-chairwoman of the Hudson Valley chapter of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network. The chapter is based in Yorktown.

Juliana Percivalle, 17, of New City, a senior at Clarkstown South High School, said she has been involved with her school's gay-straight alliance since her freshman year. She is a "straight ally," she said, "big on human rights."

"I think it's important to understand what we're doing is for the education of everybody and not just a niche group," Percivalle said of OutCasting.

On Tuesday evening, the group gathered at the Fuller Avenue studio to record a show with David Diamond, a volunteer with the Westchester County chapter of PFLAG — Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays — and a special-education administrator at New Rochelle High School.

The interview included questions about what happens at PFLAG meetings and what draws people to them.

PFLAG Westchester is an educational, support and advocacy group that meets at 7:30 p.m. the second Monday of each month at the LOFT in White Plains.

Diamond said OutCasting will be a viable and helpful resource.

"It's really easy for a person questioning things about themselves to get incorrect information that can have a lasting impact," said Diamond, of Bedford. "This program is going to be giving good, solid information in an audio format that anyone can access."

Future episodes are expected to include an interview with columnist Dan Savage — who last year co-founded the It Gets Better Project, an online site working to prevent LGBTQ youth suicides that has spawned more than 25,000 videos — and Brian Ellner, a key activist in the campaign for same-sex marriage in New York.

"I like to think our show is the next step from 'it gets better' to how to make it better," Amiel said. "The main objective of the show is the normalization of LGBTQ youth."

Sophos came up with the idea for OutCasting in 2006, he said, but was only able to execute it this year after the station acquired a long-awaited signal expansion in 2009 and studio space in Yonkers in 2010.

The commercial-free, community radio station extends over the airwaves to much of central and northern Westchester County, eastern Rockland County and southern Putnam County and has the potential to reach 400,000 listeners.

It is the only station of its kind in the Lower Hudson Valley.

Sophos said that he hopes to attract more teens to work on the program and that, in time, they will be able to produce shows, from concept to broadcast, on their own.

Sophos said he hopes OutCasting will serve as a model for future WDFH shows about disenfranchised groups.

"I think this is a powerful statement of the kinds of programs that community radio can do," he said.