Lesson 7: “Weaving Us Into the Fabric: LGBT History and Visibility”

Summary:
Students will learn about Sylvia Rivera, an American transgender woman and LGBT activist who argued for the importance of LGBT visibility in American history. Rivera was also founding member of both the Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activists Alliance. For more information, see: http://www.villagevoice.com/2002-02-26/news/a-woman-for-her-time/

Materials: N/A

Goals:
1. Students will discuss why the inclusion of people in LGBT history is important and often excluded in school curriculum.

Objectives:
1. Students will understand the issues of visibility and conformity within the LGBT community.

Session Outline

1. Opening Essential Question: Have you learned about any LGBT history or issues in school?
   ○ Tell the group about the most interesting person or event you've studied in any of your classes this year.
   ○ Ask this question to the entire group. Answer around the circle or as a “pair share.”

2. Guessing Game Activity: Show students the “Historical Figure Guessing Game Cards.” With each historical figure, ask students whether they think this person is/was LGBT.
   ○ Students will then discuss whether knowing the sexual orientation of a historical figure, writer, artist, etc. is important when studying their work and life.
   ○ Students will also discuss why the inclusion of people in LGBT history is important and often excluded in school curricula as well as issues of visibility and conformity within the LGBT community.

3. Discussion Questions
   ○ Is it important for us to know these people’s sexual orientation in order for us to understand their contribution to society, appreciate their work, etc.? Does the same answer apply to every historical figure? (leader note: not all of these figures are LGBT.
   ○ Use this as a springboard to discuss heteronormativity and heterosexism. Heteronormative is the default assumption that people are straight. Heterosexism is the bias people show toward straight people, culture, and relationships. Is it important to know if a person is straight?)
   ○ When you heard that some people were “rumored to be homosexual” or that “history assumes they were straight,” did you find yourself wanting them to be LGBT? Did you question the assumed “straightness” of any of the figures? Why do you think the LGBT community fights against assumed heterosexuality? Why
do we sometimes want certain figures to be LGBT?

- Why is studying LGBT history in the GSA important. Is it also important for these ideas to be studied as a part of the entire school’s curriculum? Why?

(note: if youth are surprised by the sexual orientation of any of the figures represented in this activity, give them the corresponding card and encourage them to do some research! Ask them to present what they find at a future meeting.)

4. **Questions to Guide Discussion:** As you debrief the activity, read the following quote and discuss the questions below. This quote is by Anderson Cooper, a well known journalist who was long suspected of being gay before he officially came out to the media on July 2, 2012. The following is an excerpt from his “coming out statement:"

“I've always believed that who a reporter votes for, what religion they are, who they love, should not be something they have to discuss publicly. As long as a journalist shows fairness and honesty in his or her work, their private life shouldn't matter. I've stuck to those principles for my entire professional career, even when I've been directly asked “the gay question,” which happens occasionally. I did not address my sexual orientation in the memoir I wrote several years ago because it was a book focused on war, disasters, loss and survival. I didn't set out to write about other aspects of my life... Recently, however, I've begun to consider whether the unintended outcomes of maintaining my privacy outweigh personal and professional principle. It's become clear to me that by remaining silent on certain aspects of my personal life for so long, I have given some the mistaken impression that I am trying to hide something - something that makes me uncomfortable, ashamed or even afraid. This is distressing because it is simply not true... The fact is, I'm gay, always have been, always will be, and I couldn’t be any more happy, comfortable with myself, and proud.” (You can read the entire quote at http://andrewsullivan.thedailybeast.com/2012/07/anderson-cooper-the-fact-is-im-gay.html)

- Discuss this quote by Anderson Cooper. Do you agree with his statement that “As long as a journalist shows fairness and honesty in his or her work, their private life shouldn't matter”? Does this standard apply to other LGBT public figures (musicians, actors, athletes, etc.) also or do you think it’s important for them to come out?
- Discuss the statement “by remaining silent on certain aspects of my personal life for so long, I have given some the mistaken impression that I am trying to hide something - something that makes me uncomfortable, ashamed or even afraid.” Do you agree that not being public about your sexual orientation gives the impression that you are afraid? Is it ever ok for someone to “stay in”?

5. **Role Model (Optional):** Role-model will moderate a discussion about whether it is better to conform to society’s standards or to stand out as an LGBT person. They will also participate in the debate by offering their personal insight and experiences.

6. **Questions to guide Discussion:**
Is it important that people know what your sexual orientation is? Why or why not?

Discuss some positive and negative experiences you've had when your sexual orientation or gender identity was disclosed or known by others.

How important is it that public and historical figures' sexual orientations and gender identities are known in school or in the media?

7. Research (Optional)

Ask the students to research Brenda Howard to learn about her contributions to LGBTQ Activism