

Senior Bobby Walker found the idea endearing at first. Peer Ministers at Santa Margarita, a private Catholic high school, are tasked with exemplary leadership and maintaining the spiritual well-being of the school. Santa Margarita's Peer Ministry project, which aims to combat hookup culture, requires senior Peer Ministers to formally ask out another student on a "date." Walker had his boyfriend in mind until he found the instructions of the assignment.

"Boys must ask girls before Dec. 18."

He didn't bother reading the rest.

"I guess I was more disappointed than anything," Walker said. "I would hope that, in today's day and age, we recognize that implying heterosexual norms are universal can be very misleading."

Walker recalls how he went on the date with his boyfriend anyway, but wrote down the name of his female best friend to turn in for his assignment. Both parties were understanding of the circumstances, but in retrospect, Walker said he wishes he had told the truth instead.

"I felt ashamed," Walker said. "It reminded me of my childhood, of being 'othered' because I didn't feel comfortable in boys' clothing, and because everyone told me I was feminine. It made me feel like I wasn't okay in my own skin, that society wasn't okay with it, with who I was."

Sophomore Camila Martinez said she grew up in a very religious family and shares similar formative experiences as Walker. However, Martinez stresses her belief that religion and her sexual orientation have never been at odds with one another.

"I was lucky, because my family and I never considered homosexuality a sin," Martinez said. "I am Catholic and a lesbian. That is how I want people to see me—as both these things, simultaneously, and not either or."

To provide safe spaces for LGBTQ+ youth, students like senior Clay Nelson, who identifies as trans, have attempted to start a club on campus for LGBTQ+ students. According to Nelson, the request was denied because the club's values didn't adhere to church doctrine.

"The sad fact with this reality is, censoring queer expression is happening everywhere in the world. People are killed. The government is passing bills against us, and it's very discouraging as a young person to see where the future is heading with these lawmakers," Nelson said.

Nelson has since written to the Diocese and spoken with administration, but received little response. He envisioned a student-run Gay-Straight Alliance that could provide a safe space for LGBTQ+ and allied youth to build community and organize around issues through protest. Though he was unable to begin a new chapter on campus, Nelson decided to contact LGBTQ+ organizations such as the Prism Initiative and encourage students to join.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, LGBTQ+ adults ages 18 and older reported roughly twice the rate of mental health challenges as non-LGBTQ+ adults, including anxiety and depression. LGBTQ+ youth suffer from higher suicidal ideation and are subject to bullying and feelings of isolation.

According to Santa Margarita wellness counselor Caitlyn Bueno, using the correct pronouns is key and the campus Wellness Center is available to discuss resources and provide student support.

“Even something as simple as using the correct pronouns, ones that match the student’s gender identity, is beneficial,” Bueno said. “On campus, the Wellness Center is open for students to de-stress, and our doors are always open to any conversation you may need to have. Please don’t hesitate to reach out.”

Nelson agrees that LGBTQ+ students especially need educators that support their orientation and use affirming words in the classroom. Across the U.S., LGBTQ+ policies have sparked controversy. Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” law bans instruction on gender identity and sexual orientation in kindergarten through third grade classes.

Nelson argues that with the proliferation of anti-LGBTQ+ bills intensifying mental-health issues among LGBTQ+ teens, queer students need access to safe spaces and need to see themselves reflected positively in the curriculum.

“Some of my classmates support the “Don’t Say Gay” law,” Nelson said. “They ask why these queer, ‘indoctrinating’ subjects need to be taught in school. What they don’t understand is how many lives could be saved when we truly understood ourselves and each other.”