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Queer Students Alliance kicks off Awareness Week

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After their first event was canceled early Monday evening, the Queer Students Alliance began its second annual Awareness Week with a Town Hall Meeting in the Student Services Building.

The alliance is holding the week of events in conjunction with MBA OutSource's Unique Week, as well as the National Day of Silence on April 25. MBA OutSource is the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender business students' association. This week's events will include activities ranging from a creative writing workshop to a "Rent" sing-a-long, said Eli Oldham, a radio-television-film sophomore and public relations director for the alliance.

"This year we expect a higher turnout due to all the other events going on around campus," Oldham said. "There is going to be a lot of queerness around these next few days."

The theme of the week, "Live Out Loud," will focus on building pride within the gay community. The Queer Students Alliance chose the theme because the event falls close to the National Day of Silence, in which participants take a vow of silence for part of the day. The national event is held in memory of Lawrence King, a junior high student in California who was murdered at school by a fellow student because of his sexual orientation.

The alliance held its first Queer Texas Conference last year after attending a similar national event in Kansas City, Missouri.

While the Creating Change conference in Kansas City does a good job of keeping queer activists informed on current issues and creating a sense of community, Oldham said, the UT students who attended the conference felt that a similar event should be offered to the Austin community.

The application process for Creating Change can also be selective and expensive, Oldham said.

The organization will also host a conference Saturday featuring city council Place 3 candidate Randi Shade and Mara Keisling, the director of the National Center for Transgender Equality. The annual Queer Texas Conference will conclude this year's Awareness Week.

"Events like this one, I feel, really do empower people," Shade said. "It gives them the tools to make a difference now, rather than waiting until after they have graduated."

Shade, who, if elected, will be the first openly gay Austin City Council member, said she feels it is important for prominent gay and lesbian figures to create a sense of community particularly for students.

"I had such a wonderful time as a student when I was here and I wanted to give back," said Shade, who graduated from UT almost 20 years ago.

Following Saturday's conference, UT organization Queer People of Color will host Queer Prom from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. at Rhizome Collective, which is located at 300 Allen St. Admission to the event is \$10.

"This is all about celebrating our hard work throughout the week," Oldham said. "After five days of workshops and luncheons, we will be ready to just enjoy ourselves."

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