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## Fund established to support LGBTQ students at Stillwater Area High School



By **MARY DIVINE** | [mdivine@pioneerpress.com](mailto:mdivine@pioneerpress.com) | Pioneer Press  
May 12, 2021 at 4:43 p.m.

Nan Leekley knows how hard it can be for LGBTQ students in Stillwater Area Public Schools.

Leekley, who is lesbian, worked as a paraprofessional in the district for 12 years before retiring in 2017. She recently established an endowed fund to support LGBTQ students at Stillwater Area High School and students at the school who have LGBTQ family members.

"I wanted to help these kids, but I needed to do it in a way that they will accept the help," said Leekley, of Afton. "It's my hope that this fund will help make Stillwater Area High School a place where all youth feel safe, heard, seen and cared for."

Leekley, 67, and her ex-partner were the first non-married same-sex couple to adopt in Washington County. They adopted two boys. Their eldest son, Colton Leekley-Winslow, died by suicide last year. He was 27.

Leekley-Winslow's death was "part of what drove me to do this," Nan Leekley said. "I have been out as a lesbian for 50 years, and there have been great changes and better acceptance, but when he was in fourth grade, he was told he couldn't play at certain friends' houses, and he had friends who weren't allowed to play at our house."

The death by suicide of a bisexual teen in the district was another factor, as was learning that another young gay man had moved out of the district because he did not feel safe and welcome at the high school, Leekley said.



Nan Leekley, of Afton, recently established an endowed fund to support LGBTQ students at Stillwater Area High School and students who have LGBTQ family members. She is pictured here with her eldest son, Colton Leekley-Winslow, who died by suicide last year. He was 27. (Courtesy of Nan Leekley)

"It wasn't just one thing," she said. "It was, 'This is happening.' 'This is happening.' 'This is happening.'"

## Fund established to support LGBTQ students

The Nan Leekley LGBTQ Youth Fund will support programs for teen mental health, crisis intervention and suicide prevention. It also will be used to aid staff and/or parents with acceptance education, support social clubs such as the school's Gay Straight Alliance and assist with housing and employment resources for at-risk teens.

The fund was established at the St. Croix Valley Foundation in cooperation with The Partnership Plan, the nonprofit that funds extra programs in Stillwater Area Schools. Officials with The Partnership Plan will determine how the income off the endowment will be distributed, Leekley said.

"The effects of ignoring this vulnerable youth community are all too evident," Leekley said. "LGBTQ youth who don't have supportive parents are 8.4 times more likely to commit suicide."

According to the PFund Foundation of Minneapolis, lesbian and gay students in Minnesota are four times more likely to struggle with drug and alcohol addiction and undergo treatment.

"My main focus is to try to make sure that there is support for this minority population," Leekley said. "Stillwater could lead the way for other schools in the St. Croix River Valley and in the state — keeping at-risk teens from becoming mired in solitude and hopelessness."

### TO DONATE

Donations to The Nan Leekley LGBTQ Youth Fund will be distributed according to the fund's intent by The Partnership Plan. To learn more or to donate in support of the fund's mission, go to <https://www.scvfoundation.org/fund-support-nan-leekley>.



### Mary Divine | Washington County reporter

Mary Divine is a reporter for the St. Paul Pioneer Press. She covers Washington County and the St. Croix River Valley, but has also spent time covering the state Capitol. She has won numerous journalism awards, including the Premack Award and the Minnesota Society of Professional Journalists' Page One Award. Prior to joining the Pioneer Press in 1998, she worked for the Rochester, Minn., Post-Bulletin and at the St. Joseph, Mo., News-Press. Her work has also appeared in a number of magazines, including Mpls/St. Paul Magazine, Twin Cities Business Monthly and Minnesota Magazine. She is a graduate of Carleton College and lives in St. Paul with her husband, Greg Myers, and their three children, Henry, Frances and Fred.