EAST LANSING -

Nearly 80 students gathered at Michigan State University's Erikson Kiva on Sept. 28 to discuss the future of the gay rights movement with a panel of experts on the community and politics. The event was organized by the Alliance of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered and Allied Students of MSU and featured representatives from Triangle Foundation, Lansing Association for Human Rights, Michigan Equality, former student leaders and State Representatives Mark Meadows (D-East Lansing) and Lorence Wenke (R-Kalamazoo). The discussion was moderated by ABC 3 reporter Bill Albin of Lansing.

The event featured conversation about what the students at MSU could do to become part of the political process and effect change. The recommendations ranged from registering to vote, to lobbying elected officials to more direct action. There was also a significant conversation about building bridges to other communities within the progressive community.

"Did you know," asked Penny Gardner, president of LAHR, "that we are working to make sure there is a ramp to take people in wheel chairs up the thirteen steps of the capitol to where most rallies are held from? It's the first time it has happened, and had not occurred until last pride march, when we the community made it happen."

The ramp was rented and installed for the 2007 pride march rally by Michigan Equality.

"It's important for you to register to vote," Meadows said. "Register right here, at MSU. You are going to spend the next four or five years here. This is your home. Register to vote so you can impact council elections, or state representative elections. You can also join any of a number of the 21 community commissions here in East Lansing. Each one of them has students on them and we need you."

Wenke said he was saddened by the Republican party's response to the LBGT community. "Look, they are just wrong on the issues of the LBGT community," Wenke said. "But you can make a difference by telling your stories...My friend came out to me as a gay man, and went to Canada to get married. That is what changed me, his story."

Ryan Webster, a former leader of the Alliance, encourage the students to be aware of the groups they are involved in and being out. "LBGT people of color are becoming less visible," he said, "and they're being made to choose between LBGT issues or issues related to their race. As a black gay man I should not have to choose between being out and my culture. I should be able to combine the two. But both subsets are ignoring us."

Webster, who works for Planned Parenthood, also launched into a criticism of health initiatives, noting how many of them ignore transgender health issues. "We have to address those issues," he said, referring to the need for female-to-male transgenders needing pap smears, and male-to-female trans people needing prostrate cancer screenings. He also noted that HIV prevention messages were failing with transgender people because they did not address trans-specific issues.

For more information, visit the Alliance on the Web at www.msu.edu/-alliance.