



Of Pronouns, Protest, and Proactivity

Every day I wake up, get ready for school, and sit in classrooms at one of the most prestigious high schools in the country. Every day I listen to the headmaster say something that offends me. Every day I listen to homophobic comments in the hallways, and sometimes I confront them. Every day I think about how I can change something. Every day I try.

I am a sophomore at St. Johnsbury Academy, a well-known independent school in St. Johnsbury. I am also a queer activist. When I came out in seventh grade, I heard about gay-straight alliances and decided that this was what I needed to make it through adolescence.

Last year, when I entered the Academy, I simultaneously wanted to shout on top of a mountain and go hide under a rock. One day, during an active listening demonstration for health class, I accidentally used the correct pronoun while talking about my girlfriend. The room froze; after class, the teachers asked to speak to me. In that brief meeting, they asked me not to talk about those things in class. They were worried about the response of teachers, parents, and trustees.

At first I was incredibly angry with them; I had considered them allies and they had betrayed me. In truth, though, they were just trying to save themselves and their jobs. You know that you live in a system of fear when your allies come to you as enemies.

That incident woke me up to the situation at my school. I started to talk about it among friends I knew were supportive.

In November, I attended a meeting with Governor Dean about gay-straight alliances. I met about 20 other queer youths who had started GSAs around the state. This meeting inspired me to talk to my health teacher about starting one at our school. I went to see the school psychologist, who said she would send a memo to the faculty asking if they would be interested in leading such a group.

When I went back to see her after a few weeks, she had received no responses. In late November, I contacted Tori Russell and Lore Caldwell, who agreed to facilitate the group. In December 1997, "Create Change ASAP: A Gay-Straight Alliance" started to hold meetings at Umbrella Inc, a women's resource center.

We also started to clash with the administration at school. At

the Academy, there is a bulletin board that is supposed to be an open forum for student opinion. For the most part this is true, as long as you do not post opinions about abortion, contraception, and the legalization of marijuana. The announcements for Create Change also disappeared within the first day. There was a period of time where I would just put up

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a flyer every day on my way to class. Finally, I won the battle of will, and a flyer stayed up for a while.

The rest of my first year, we were content just to exist and consistently pull in a membership of more than three. Personally, I became much more open; I wore my rainbow pin proudly and held my girlfriend's hand all over town. I also attended a meeting with the Commissioner of Education, and discussed my accomplishments and barriers with my peers.

This fall, we tried to put an announcement into 'Chapel,' the non-denominational assembly held every morning at the Academy. The headmaster, Bernier Mayo, blocked it. When I originally went in to talk to him, he said that he had 'wording issues' with the announcement. At a second meeting, he told me that there were parents who would "climb the wall if they heard about this" and he needed to consider their rights. He said that the term 'straight-ally' made it seem like I was recruiting, and that I couldn't just say "off 'em" to my opposition. He said that he "did not want to endorse a heated political debate" and that I should

be satisfied with the steps he had allowed me to take thus far. I was so upset I told him that I could not talk about the announcement then and walked away. I went into the bathroom, and sobbing, swearing, and mutilating a poor garbage can, prepared for the classes I still had to endure that day.

After a few weeks, Create

Change met with Keith Goslant of Vermont Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Rights and Sean Donahue, who works for the Commissioner of Education. They outlined a list of documentation that we could collect so that they could lean on Mr. Mayo about discrimination.

The Academy is in a unique position as far as discrimination is concerned because it is an independent school. This means that they accept both tuition students and students whose towns pay the tuition. Because they are on this line between public and private, there is controversy over whether they are subject to the same discrimination laws as public high schools.

Meanwhile, the group is preparing for an upcoming event, and I am starting to think about college. For me, activism and this group are my lifeblood. I became involved in activism because I refused to sit mute while my school was discriminating against queer youth, and because I realized that it could offer me support and strength. This has been one of the most amazing and most difficult experiences of my life. ▼

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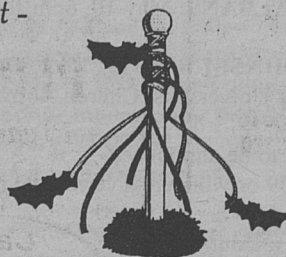
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