

YOUTH SPEAK OUT: Safe Schools

A report from
About Face Youth Theatre



It was so unsafe for me to be on that school campus they transferred me to an alternative education school. It's common for queer kids to get transferred. And it was not an okay option at all. We had a sixth-grade reader and we watched movies on Fridays. I mean this is a quality of education issue. My transfers, to this school and then subsequent schools, were all based on an agreement that I had to stay in the closet. When they transferred me they said, "This is not a classroom matter, this is a bedroom matter. You can't discuss being gay in public school".

-Jason, 20 year-old gay male from Utah,
interviewed at the National Youth Advocacy Coalition Conference
in Washington, D.C., 2002.

Who we are:

About Face Theatre creates and implements innovative performances and performance-based educational programs that examine gender and sexuality and participate in the development of community. Since its founding in 1995, About Face has achieved its success through a guiding conviction that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender experience could become the theatrical perspective through which universal human concerns are explored.

About Face Youth Theatre (AFYT), the acclaimed Educational program of About Face Theatre provides an innovative and rigorous arts-based series of programs designed to increase the safety, empowerment and leadership capacity of LGBTQQ youth and their allies in order to catalyze youth-led civic dialogue and action within schools and communities. AFYT thrives in a synergistic relationship with About Face Theatre and shares a commitment to high quality production values and innovation in form and content.

AFYT offers all programs free of charge to a racially and economically diverse group of Chicago-area youth including participation in a theatre workshop series, performance in an AFT mainstage production and a role with the Youth Leadership Council.

AFYT also produces three touring shows, abridged versions of our mainstage Youth Theatre productions, for approximately 10,000 Illinois students, teachers and administrators each year, catalyzing dialogue in school communities to promote safer, more tolerant learning environments for all youth.

AFYT has been featured in national news media and recognized with the prestigious GLSEN *Pathfinder Award*, two *After Dark Awards* for Outstanding Work, the *Human First Award* from Horizons Community Services, the *Community Empowerment Award* from the Cook County State's Attorney's Office and a *Presidential Citation* from the American Psychological Association. About Face was named one of five national-level grant partners with The Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund (U.S.).

The Creators of this Report

Tony Alvarado-Rivera

(research, writing, story gathering) was born on January 24, 1981 in Cicero, Illinois. He has been very active as an organizer for both the Queer and Latino/Chicano communities in Chicago. He is currently freelancing, and working part-time as the Educational Programs assistant for Chicago's Premier Gay and Lesbian theater company, About Face Theatre and is the program coordinator of a Latino BGT social support group, ALAS.

Brenna Conley-Fonda

(research, writing, story gathering and project direction) was born on May 17, 1983 in Chicago, Illinois. She has been involved in queer activism for almost four years now. Brenna is a photographer and a freshman at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She is very dedicated to integrating the arts and political activism.

Charlie Morris

(research, writing, story gathering) was born on March 2, 1984 in Evanston, Illinois. He began his career in activism at a young age, spearheading a petition to allow third graders to leave their lunch tables and use the bathroom without teacher permission. Since then, Charlie has been primarily involved in both queer activism and mental health advocacy, starting his high school's Gay-Straight Alliance, chairing a youth panel that discusses GLBT issues at area schools, and being involved in a youth group that learns about mental health and performs peer-to-peer outreach. Charlie is a freshman at The George Washington University in Washington, D.C.

Julia Fabris

(editor, writer and project direction) is an artistic associate at About Face Theatre and was part of the founding artistic staff of About Face Youth Theatre. She is deputy director for programming at the Illinois Arts Alliance Foundation - the statewide arts advocacy organization.

Megan Carney

(editor) Artistic Director of About Face Youth Theatre, is a founding staff member of the Youth Theatre. She was project director and playwright for *Turning Corners*, a play exploring true experiences with race and racism shared by over 150 students and teachers from fifteen Chicago-area high schools that has toured to schools throughout Chicago and to the Illinois High School Theatre Festival. Megan has worked as playwright and director for many community-based performance projects including partnerships with the acclaimed Scrap Mettle SOUL, the U. of Pittsburgh Theater Department, the Urban Studies Program of the Associated Colleges of the Midwest and Catholic Schools Opposing Racism at Queen of Peace H.S., Megan received the Theatre Communications Group Observership Grant, teaches in various settings and is a playwright.

Dear friends, advocates, activists, and policymakers of all ages:

Researching and writing “YOUTH SPEAK OUT: Safe Schools” just seemed like something that needed to be done. As members of the About Face Youth Theatre ensemble, we don’t even question why we participate in queer activism or work for safe and inclusive schools for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, questioning and queer students. We work on this issue both because we have experienced discrimination, and because we realize that the homophobia we encountered in high school pales in comparison to what other American lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, queer youth (LGBTQQ) face.

The three of us can reflect upon our high school experience and say we enjoyed parts of it. Charlie adds to that, “It wasn’t perfect. I was physically and verbally threatened by other kids. When I brought my issues of discrimination to teachers, some ignored me, and some told me outright that they had no desire or responsibility to help me. The curriculum in my health class didn’t mention a word about safe sex for non-heterosexual partners. But I made the effort to change that and my activism did make a difference, in my classroom and in the whole school.”

Many students are less fortunate than Charlie. There are youth who go to school every day in fear of being bullied, harassed, or sexually or physically assaulted for their real or perceived gender or sexuality. Out of our group of LGBTQQ friends, we know very few who have not faced physical abuse or threats of it.

With the thoughtful support of The Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund (U.S.), we have spent the last several months researching and compiling this report.

We believe it is one of the most expansive youth-developed visions for change in American schools.

So, what does our vision include?

- Politicians and educators working to include protections for students in regard to gender and sexuality in school.
- Queer history taught alongside the history of other minority groups—contributing our threads to the colorful fabric of the collective American identity,
- Sexual health issues for LGBTQQ youth included in health classes,
- All students walking through the hallway, focused on their classes, confident that their teachers will defend them against harassment,
- The entire school staff equipped to respond to the different and individual needs of their queer students.

These are the images that came into our minds when we decided to work on this issue. Are these realistic expectations? Yes. The scope is huge, but we are certain that all of the suggestions of our report can be put into action.

Our involvement with this project is fueled by our desires to see change and improve the situation of our friends who are still in high school. But it's also more than that. This report was created to grant a voice to those who are voiceless, to empower those who are not out, who can't be out, those who are ostracized just for looking queer, those who are harassed because of their queer family members, those whose homes are not safe, those who are just holding out until college, those who may get infected with an STD or HIV just because no one told them how to be safe. This is for all of them.

In addition, we created the report for the following audiences:

For youth activists, we want the report to remind you that you are not alone and to serve as an inspirational tool for effecting change in your own schools.

For teachers and school staff, we hope that the report will help you advocate for change at work and inspire the first steps needed to make those changes.

For policy advocates and policy makers, from local school boards all the way to Congress, we hope you will sponsor and create bills to make schools safer.

For adult allies, we hope this report makes you angry enough to take action and motivated enough to join with youth activists in creating positive change in schools.

We want this report to offer a voice to all those who have not benefited from the opportunities we have been offered and to be the first step in facilitating a dialogue between LGBTQQ youth and the policy makers in our schools and government.

It is up to all of us to work to end the kind of hatred, fear, and complicity that denies youth their voices.

Use this report as a tool, a resource guide, and a reference for the action that you will take, but remember that it is only the first step. It is the desire for change and the exertion of effort that actually makes a difference.

Thank you for your time,



Tony Alvarado-Rivera
Member, AFYT Ensemble



Brenna Conley-Fonda
Member, AFYT Ensemble



Charlie Morris
Member, AFYT Ensemble

Hey, adults: listen up!

Whether you are a Member of Congress or a member of a local school council, a member of the board of a foundation, corporation or non-profit organization - even if you are just someone with your own phone and a voter registration card - you have the power to make life better for the youth whose stories are contained in this report.

You have the power to make American high schools and the communities they serve safer and healthier for everyone.

I hope this report will inspire you to join me, my colleagues at About Face Theatre, the staff and board of The Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund (U.S.) and countless other adult allies across the country in working for the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and allied teens.

What does it mean to be an ally?

Three things, I think: *Compassion. Awareness. Action.*

There are no other requirements.

Compassion is a no-brainer, the simplest of the three requirements. Compassion means suffering with another. Read just one of the stories in this report and then try to stop yourself from feeling compassion for the storyteller.

Awareness is a bigger job. It requires effort. Awareness means carefully educating yourself about the problems confronting queer youth. It means seeking out and paying attention to queer youth and their allies. Awareness means believing that these young people know how to make their world - and ours - a better place.

While Brenna, Charlie, Tony and millions of other American youth were moving through grade school and middle school and on toward high school graduation, we adults have spent a lot of time talking about the problem of bullies and bullying. We talk about it on TV and in newspapers. We discuss the issue in homes, meetings rooms and halls of government. Teachers talk about the problem. Soccer moms and hockey dads talk about the problem. My feminist friends talk about girls bullying girls and boys bullying boys and girls and boys bullying each other. My arty friends create projects and programs to help young people understand each other. We talk to each other, we talk to young people, we collect statistics, we come up with solutions, we evaluate and we celebrate our successes. But many of our conversations and a number of our statistics (and, I dare say, *most of what we think of as our successful programs*) contain major gaps - gaping holes where we have failed to consider the experiences of queer youth. It is up to *all of us* to close those gaps.

Which brings me to the most difficult of the three requirements: *Action*. Compassion and awareness only get you as far as understanding. A real ally moves beyond understanding and begins to work for change.

As allies, we must take action to make sure that queer youth are included in all conversations about safe schools. It is up to us to make sure that these smart, creative, wonderful young people are not lost to our communities. Whoever you are, wherever you live and whatever community you represent, LGBTQQ youth are your neighbors. They are being harassed and discriminated against in your local schools. And if you want to be an ally, you must embrace their struggles as your own.

As allies, we must teach our children to report discrimination and speak out against it. We must show our children how to honor difference in other people's children.

As allies we must advocate for laws and policies to end verbal and physical abuse of queer youth. We must work together to broaden the curricula in our high schools to include and welcome LGBTQQ people. We must take responsibility for teaching other adults how to behave toward LGBTQQ students. We must insist that homophobic words and actions are not acceptable, in school or anywhere else in our community. Young people need access to the power that we have gained through age and experience. They need access to the power we claim because we can vote, pass laws, fund surveys, enact programs, hire, fire, mediate, and engage the media.

It doesn't matter who you are or where you live. You can be an ally. You can help to make the world a better place for queer and questioning youth. You don't have to know all the answers. I have asked questions of young people and been rewarded with thoughtful and thought-provoking answers. You don't have to be afraid of doing or saying something wrong. I have made mistakes as an ally, have apologized and been forgiven. I continue to learn.

Become an ally. *Compassion* may make you sad. *Awareness* will make you angry. But *Action* will give you hope.



Julia Fabris McBride
Artistic Associate, About Face Theatre
Founding Member, About Face Youth Theatre

I [remember] the day I officially came out to the school...My sponsor and I decided that it would be a good idea to announce it over the PA...I was handed the microphone and realized that there were 3,000 kids in the school and a good number of faculty. I spoke for less than twenty seconds and then I just walked out of the office and to my advisory. My legs were still shaking but I had this understanding that I had become a real activist, that I was going to be one of the kids that everyone in the school knows is gay. That was such a weird feeling, but sort of a powerful one, too.

-Andrew, 16-year-old genderqueer, AFYT participant

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Forty BOYS in two gym classes put together, testosterone buzzing wildly...I grudgingly strapped on my flag belt. Ever since transferring into the gym class I had gotten into minor arguments about people using words like gay and fag, and word had spread that I was the class faggot to watch out for. But up until that day, they were just a pack of hyenas circling their unsure prey.

I was determined not to worry about it. I caught the ball and began to run.

-James, 17-year-old genderqueer, AFYT participant

THE POWER OF TRUE STORIES

We collect stories and we believe in **Safer Schools**

We believe that true stories can inspire dialogue and create change.

When people at The Diana, Princess of Wales Fund (U.S.) commissioned us to develop this report, they told us to pick the topic that was most urgent for us. We selected safe schools unanimously. Once we started researching the issue, we chose a method that fits the work we do with About Face Youth Theatre, interviews and the collection of true stories, as our way to document youth experience around the issue of safe schools.

For this report, we attempted to reach youth from a range of public, independent and religious schools as well as urban, suburban and rural regions. We also wanted to make every effort to interview subjects and get survey responses from youth diverse in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic levels and ability.

Some of the stories in this report were written and contributed through AFYT workshops, some were told to a single youth interviewer, some were revealed in a story circle or meeting and some were scrawled on a survey sheet.

At the beginning of each story, we list the age of the storyteller at the time they told the story. We believe that youth should identify themselves, so we included their own words to describe their sexual orientation and gender identity. There is a glossary in the back for further explanation of any unfamiliar terms. We edited the interview transcripts and wrote morals, or short lessons, from each one to demonstrate how we interpreted the events and feelings expressed by the storyteller and to make a connection between the stories.

All of the stories are true. All but a few are told by young people. Only their names have been changed.



...sometimes it's hard to call someone on saying stuff, especially when he or she is a friend of mine. When I do say something, they usually apologize. I almost feel like the apology is worthless; I know they won't stop saying stuff. Actions speak louder than words, after all.

*-Margaret, 17-year-old female ally,
interviewed via email for this report*

CATEGORIES

The stories are grouped in these categories:

- Group 1:** Students' self-esteem can be made or broken depending on the school environment.
- Group 2:** In a hostile environment, students, allies and parents are forced to defend themselves while staff and teachers look on.
- Group 3:** Ignorant and homophobic teachers and staff can contribute to a hostile school environment.
- Group 4:** Threats can quickly escalate to violence when left unchecked.
- Group 5:** Homophobic school environments create obstacles for learning that cause the quality of education to suffer.
-

We believe the stories are powerful evidence of the need for all of us to work together to make schools safer for all students.

GROUP 1:

Students' self-esteem can be made or broken depending on the school environment.

The storyteller:

Nathaniel 20-year-old queer male

An opportunity to have a gender-bending experience came up just a few weeks ago. The queer group (at school) was going to have a drag show, and they were looking for some guys to do it. I had been eyeing some Christina Aguilera videos for some dance moves on the off chance that I would do it. Maybe I really wanted to. But things were getting a little rough to be openly queer at school. People were getting threats of murder and rape over the phone, just because they were known or perceived to be gay. Would I send the wrong message if I was in the show? So I'm not comfortable with my sexuality and relating it to everyone like that. I'm not going to risk my safety to question openly. This pretty much leaves me a coward, letting the violence go on. These are just my excuses to why I'm not doing what I want to do, but the fear feels real nonetheless.

The moral of the story:

A homophobic environment challenges self-esteem and prevents personal growth.

The storyteller:

Elena, 14 years old, bisexual & genderqueer, AFYT participant

I was sitting in geometry class last period, and we were taking this survey about the school's tutorial system. Of course the second question had to be a gender question: M or F? And I had this small panic attack because I realized at that moment that I truly do not identify with just one gender. And it offended me, because there were only the male and female bubbles to fill in. So I asked my teacher whether or not we needed to fill in the gender identification bubble and she said that I should, that it's to see how many of our high school's students have tutors. It's essentially a statistics issue. So I went back to my seat and thought long and hard about which bubble to fill in. What was I feeling like at the moment? A boy or a girl? Well, that answer was obvious: a boy all the way. But! I had the little conscience in my head saying, 'Sam, you need to give your biological gender. That's what they have on your transcripts and school records, anyway.' So I marked F. And now I feel really weird about it. Why didn't I just mark M? Why didn't I just mark what I believed I identified as? If it doesn't matter to me how people perceive me (because gender identity is everyone's own personal issue), then how come I held back?

The moral of the story:

Freedom of gender expression is relevant to high school students. Restriction of gender identity causes students to feel excluded and diminishes their self-esteem.

The storyteller:

Andrew, 16-year-old genderqueer, AFYT participant

I [remember] the day I officially came out to the school. I was re-starting the GSA at our school and was just a sophomore, but realized that just putting up signs wasn't going to bring people in. My sponsor and I decided that it would be a good idea to announce it over the PA. So I wrote this whole short speech about the GSA and I went early in the morning before advisory to the main office. I was handed the microphone and realized that there were 3,000 kids in the school and a good number of faculty. I spoke for less than twenty seconds and then I just walked out of the office and to my advisory. My legs were still shaking but I had this understanding that I had become a real activist, that I was going to be one of the kids that everyone in the school knows is gay. That was such a weird feeling, but sort of a powerful one, too.

The moral of the story:

Supportive teachers help create a school environment where students can come out and support each other.

The storyteller:

Rafael, 19-year-old gay male, AFYT participant

"It was AP English class, first period, at my private all-boys Catholic high school. My senior year in a place where racist, classist, homophobic, and sexist comments ran rampant. For some reason, the teacher of my class had asked to write up on the board what we saw as 'masculine' and 'feminine' traits. And the whole time, I was sitting there thinking about how I identified with and would embrace a lot more of the 'feminine' qualities before I would the 'masculine' ones. I felt out of place for a second, until someone else in the class expressed what I was thinking. Alright for Brian! And now Jack and James and Max and Peter! A bandwagon! I had felt really alone there for a few seconds, ostracized.

The moral of the story:

When teachers encourage discussion of gender or sexuality and facilitate it in a welcoming way, all students are more likely to open their minds and LGBTQ students feel less alone.

The storyteller:

Anonymous, 18-year-old AFYT participant

I feel good about the future. I do. I have no idea where we will be in twenty years, but I know it will be a safer place, a better place for our queer youth. We are creating a community with concerns for the future that is doing everything it can. This community is strong and active: We have youth summits and organizations that empower youth to fight for their rights and to teach acceptance! We have Gay-Straight Alliances in high schools that are promoting safe environments for LGBTQ youth! With all that our community is doing to fix the future, I can only conclude that things will get better.

The moral of the story:

A positive environment for queer youth in school is necessary for positive self-esteem and a first step toward true equality.

GROUP 2:

In a hostile environment, students, allies and parents are forced to defend themselves while staff and teachers look on.

The storyteller:

Lala, 16 years old and genderqueer, AFYT participant

Homophobic people really get on my nerves. What really makes me mad is when teachers don't even say anything when the person makes an offensive joke. I am usually left to defend the rights of gay people solo, which is not an easy job. [For instance, someone in biology class made a dumb joke]: Then this kid said, 'That joke is so gay!'...What, does that joke like other jokes in a sexual way or something?' I retorted. 'It isn't logical to call something that is inanimate "gay" because, having neither a brain nor sexual functions, it can't be happy or homosexual. Secondly, if you say that something is stupid or bad by calling it 'gay', you are equating homosexuality with stupidity or evil.

The moral of the story:

Homophobia, when unchecked, forces allied students to either hide their true feelings or defend themselves against their entire classroom or school system instead of focusing on learning.

The storyteller:

Margaret, 17-year-old female ally, interviewed via email for this report

I have not directly witnessed harassment towards anyone who identified as LGBTQ. I have, however, heard of others' harassment. I have also heard derogatory terms (fag, that is so gay, etc) directed at those who do not identify (to my knowledge) as LGBTQ - mostly in the hallways at school, sometimes in the younger classes. I've noticed a decrease in derogatory language as the grades increase.

Admittedly, sometimes it's hard to call someone on saying stuff, especially when he or she is a friend of mine. When I do say something, they usually apologize. I almost feel like the apology is worthless; I know they won't stop saying stuff. Actions speak louder than words, after all. Most of the time, ...if the teacher does do something, it's more of a "don't say that" than an explanation or attempt to curtail future slurs.

The moral of the story:

Allied students are concerned about anti-gay slurs and work hard to change minds and behavior in their schools.

The storyteller:

Libby, 16 year old, female ally, interviewed via email for this report

I have heard the usual words that are directed to LGBTQ people, and often hear those terms used in a derogatory way. I have also experienced a lot of harassment from some of my friends because I am a straight ally. ... Often comments are made towards me, saying that for example I'm gonna burn in hell if I don't stop supporting the LGBT community.

It feels good that I do something to stand up for LGBT people. But it often brings me down how people just don't listen. They often get mad that I am so insistent in defending LGBT people and they stop taking me seriously. That makes me sad. Some teachers... make up stupid comebacks that end up also being anti-gay.

The moral of the story:

Homophobia also affects allied students and weakens the school community.

The storyteller:

Eliza, mother of a 17-year-old gay male

I actually got involved with the elementary school district when Henry was in 6th, 7th, 8th grade about the practices in his middle school.... Henry's identity wasn't anything that Henry tried to hide.... Henry has always been who Henry is, and everybody in our house has always been ok with that, and that's been who his friends were. But Henry went to middle school in a different attendance area from where he went to elementary school, so when he hit middle school he didn't know anybody. And so, being Henry - wonderful and friendly and outgoing - he just tried to be friends with everybody, and ended up having things happen to him that were really unkind, unfriendly, and sometimes even violent.

I just went directly to the school and said, 'you cannot do that. My son is being sexually harassed, and you're telling me there's nothing you can do about it? I don't think so.' Their response was to tell me to go to PFLAG, where I would find a lot of support from other parents. So I went to a PFLAG meeting and what I found was a lot of parents basically trying to make themselves feel better.... I mean, no offense to the PFLAG people, but at the time I was dealing with trying to get the school to be accountable.

This happened to be a time when there was a high school in Naperville [Illinois] that actually made the news, when a group of students there worked with their superintendent and board of education to pass a piece of legislation specifically intended to add sexual orientation and gender as protected classes in their high school district's sexual harassment policies. So I gathered up all this stuff, it was like a press packet, and I went to my K-8 school board, and I said, 'You know, [our community is] supposed to be so diverse, you know, we get written up in all the newspapers as 'Gay Friendly,' and we just got out-liberalled by lily-white Naperville! Here we've got people harassing my son calling him all these epithets - heck, if it was the 'N-word,' if this was about 'race,' you'd be on it in a second, so don't give me this crap.'

Long story short, I'd helped elect some of these people to the school board, and they just stopped talking to me. They said things like, 'Oh, well, no, we don't really deal with sexual orientation, because this is the elementary district. We don't encourage sexuality.' It was a very bad experience.

The moral of the story:

Parents are concerned about safety in schools and can be a strong resource in making change.

GROUP 3:

Ignorant and homophobic teachers and staff can contribute to a hostile school environment.

The storyteller:

Jose, 17 year-old ally, interviewed by AFYT

Um, my story is a little different, it's about when I joined the sports team my junior year. Afterwards, one of the people on the team decided to quit. And the coach was a really tough coach and he'd basically be the typical coach and call us 'gay wusses' and stuff. After the guy quit the team he gave us all a pep talk and started telling us, 'You know, that guy quit the team—you can't let any of your team members quit this team. You have to go up to him and call him a wuss, call him a pussy, call him a fff-' He almost used the F word. 'Think of him as a horse that you have to break down. Work on him until he has no choice but to come back to the team.'

I see the guy and every time he's in the hallway the guys from the team are literally surrounding the kid, like calling him names and stuff. I didn't think it was right so one day I go up to him and I started talking to him. 'Don't worry, I'm not gonna make fun of you like the other guys are,' I told him. And we just talked for a while.

A couple days later I went back to track practice and he was back on the team and I look at him and he was just like, 'they got me.'

The moral of the story:

Hurtful words from teachers and staff can destroy self-esteem and incite other students to act in a harassing manner.

The storyteller:

Naomi, 15-year-old lesbian, AFYT participant

I had heard about Dr. Brooks' views on homosexuality from friends in his classes, so I knew that he had some strong ones. I wanted to interview him to find out more about his thoughts on gay issues.

[Dr. Brooks said this to me about the right for gay/lesbian people to marry]: 'I think that presents a real problem, historically, in terms of family...It creates unnecessary problems from kids who find themselves in a nontraditional family. It's a direct contradiction to that concept. It creates a lot of problems for kids.'

[About bisexuality]: 'Well, perhaps we could say they are greedy. They want to have both worlds. The males often—they do it for money. Homosexual men pay them for it but they enjoy women.'

[About sexuality, and masculinity]: 'The male is usually the aggressor; the woman succumbs to the man. In a homosexual situation, I presume it's giving in, like a weakness. In a lesbian relationship, one is aggressive and someone is giving in, in terms of carrying out a sex act.'

[About gay/lesbian people raising children properly]: 'It's not that they're incapable of raising them; but when one is wife-like and the other is man-like, it's not fair to the kid. My main concern would be for the poor kid.'"

The moral of the story:

Ignorant words from a teacher can challenge a student's self-esteem and perpetuate stereotypes.

The storyteller:

James, 17-year-old genderqueer, AFYT participant

I wonder why they split our classes on gender lines. Forty BOYS in two gym classes put together, testosterone buzzing wildly. The twenty or so guys from the other gym class whooped it up, jostling each other and vowing that they'd destroy our team.

I grudgingly strapped on my flag belt. Ever since transferring into the gym class I had gotten into minor arguments about people using words like gay and fag, and word had spread that I was the class faggot to watch out for. But up until that day, they were just a pack of hyenas circling their unsure prey.

I was determined not to worry about it. I caught the ball and began to run.

'RUN FAGGOT!'

Forty teenage/laughing/strong/hateful/malicious/frightening guys. Surrounding me. The hard swallow filled up my throat, my eyes grew large, my heart beat rough and fast. There was no one in the class to stand up for me. Where was my teacher?

I dropped my belt and walked off the field. When I asked why he wasn't doing anything, my teacher told me that I needed to talk to someone else about my problem and took off points for not participating.

The moral of the story:

Unsupportive and homophobic teachers send the message that harassment and threats are acceptable at school. This lack of support causes LGBT youth to lose faith in the school as an institution and sometime lose hope for themselves.

GROUP 4:

Threats in school can quickly escalate to violence when left unchecked.

The storyteller:

Matthew, 17-year-old gay male, AFYT participant

There was always the name-calling - fag, faggot, cocksucker. They seemed to follow me throughout my life. I never really felt safe anywhere - home or at school. I did what everyone else did, liked what everyone else liked, dated who everyone thought you should date or else I would get threats. I couldn't fight it; it was all around me. Even at home. Especially at home.

When I started to really deal with my sexuality I had to take a train and a bus to go to a drop-in-center in another community an hour and a half away to find someone who wanted to listen to what I was feeling. My mother noticed how much I was gone and when she asked where I was going I decided to tell her the truth, hoping to get at least one more person on my side. I'll never forget what she said. She said, 'I'm glad your father's not alive to hear this.' She actually said that.

I got really depressed. A group of guys at school started to really pick on me, like it was sport to them. I just took it - I couldn't fight it. It kept getting worse until one day I felt I was going to cry which I couldn't, I wouldn't do in front of them, so I broke away and started to cross the parking lot...I heard them call after me, the names and the laughter, so I sped up a little. Then I could feel that they were coming behind me and there wasn't any laughter...closer, and closer and I was half way to the bus when one of them grabbed my back and swung me around. The next thing I remember was a sense of wetness, and pain and the clouds reflected in the puddle my face was in. And then there was the blood, the red on my hand I noticed as I wiped the water from my face, coming from my nose and lip.

I was stunned by the pain, but more so by my emotions - an intense anger not at my attackers, but at myself for allowing it, for being helpless and ashamed.

The moral of the story:

Repeated name-calling, harassment and violence can lead to a sense of isolation and depression for LGBT youth.

The storyteller:

Jason, 20 year-old gay male from Utah, interviewed for this report at the NYAC conference in 2002

It starts with you know verbal stuff, and when that isn't addressed on campuses, it really escalates quite immediately and... [the] big thing that happened to me on my high school campus was that a group of students tried to lasso and tie me to the back of a truck and drag me down the highway. And that went completely un-addressed by the administration. So much so that they lost control of the student body.

The moral of this story:

Without a response from the school leadership, discrimination and harassment in classrooms often continues after school.

GROUP 5:

The quality of education and the opportunity for personal growth ultimately suffer.

The storyteller:

Jason, 20-year-old gay male from Utah, interviewed for this report at the NYAC conference in 2002

It was so unsafe for me to be on that school campus that they transferred me to an alternative education school. It's common for queer kids to get transferred. And it was not an O.K option at all. We had a sixth-grade reader and we watched movies on Fridays. I mean this is a quality of education issue that we are talking about. The other really interesting thing that happened to me was that my transfer to this school, and then subsequent schools, were all based on an agreement that I had to stay in the closet. When they transferred me they said, "This is not a classroom matter, this is a bedroom matter. You can't discuss being gay in public school".

The moral of the story:

When excluded from the educational system, LGBTQ youth are denied equal access to education that will limit their future potential to contribute to society.



My campus is Discrimination Central. I cannot go a day without hearing the word "fag" uttered in the hallways.

-Student in a Chicago school

SURVEY SAYS

In the beginning, we started with two questions.

We decided complex surveys are better left to national organizations with a staff equipped to handle large-scale research and documentation. Instead, we hoped to achieve a sense of the opinions, needs, and stories that queer and allied students have about their schools. We hoped that the survey would help us determine some questions for storygathering interviews.

We created a survey and handed it out to over 60 youth in Chicago and the near suburbs. It came to our attention that because the research was being done in Chicago - an urban and relatively progressive region - we were receiving a very narrow view of what LGBTQ youth in this country are faced with. An opportunity arose for Brenna and Tony to go to The National Youth Advocacy Coalition (NYAC) conference to interview youth from different regions. We convened a caucus of 25 youth to speak out and tell their stories about discrimination.

At the top of our half-sheet survey we stated:

"About Face Youth Theatre is creating in a national youth report on discrimination. We are trying to find out what issues are important to LGBT youth, and how they feel discriminated against."

Then we listed these questions:

- 1. Have you ever been harassed or discriminated against at school because of your sexual orientation or your gender identity? If so, how?**
- 2. How would you like to see schools change to better serve the needs of LGBTQ youth? What would your ideal school look like?**

The only demographic information we asked for was age and zip code.

Between April and June 2002 we surveyed 67 young people between the ages of 13 and 23. We contacted them at drop-in session at Horizon's Community Services Chicago, at Pride Youth in suburban Evanston, Evanston Township High School's Gay-Straight Alliance, at rehearsals and workshops at About Face Youth Theatre, and at a GLSEN conference at DePaul University.

Looking for the most efficient way to reach youth, we contacted the adult allies who coordinate the groups listed above. With their help we handed out written surveys at meetings, rehearsals and drop-in sessions. We stayed in the room, facilitating and answering questions, and collected the surveys 15 minutes later. In every case it was important that our survey did not take too much time away from the rest of the day's agenda.

The Survey Results

Most of the young people we approached filled out their surveys and returned them to us immediately. We received 67 surveys from youth residing in 37 different zip codes, 23 Chicago, 14 suburban. Based on our observations when we collected the surveys we know that the 67 respondents include: biological males and biological females, individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, members of several ethnic/racial groups and students and former students of city and suburban schools with a wide variety of policies and response mechanisms regarding LGBT issues.

We asked:

Have you ever been harassed or discriminated against at school because of your sexual orientation or your gender identity? If so, how?

Here's what they said:

75% of those surveyed reported that they had been harassed or discriminated against at school because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Of those who had experienced harassment or discrimination, **26% reported physical abuse at the hands of schoolmates.**

Most of the young people surveyed reported repeated verbal harassment at school:

- *“My campus is Discrimination Central. I cannot go a day without hearing the word fag uttered in the hallways – let alone a million racial slurs.”*
- *“I receive lots of verbal discrimination at school. Though never around administration. I am called a stupid dyke on a daily basis.”*
- *“(I was harassed) by my teacher.”*

Descriptions of physical harassment include:

- *“(I was) Jumped on by gang members from my school.”*
- *“Rocks thrown at me.”*
- *“My girlfriend got sexually abused/harassed. The teachers did NOTHING”*

We asked:

How would you like to see schools change to better serve the needs of LGBTQ youth? What would your ideal school look like?

The majority of respondents offered suggestions for changes that would improve the lives of LGBT students. Recommendations fell into five broad categories.

1. Gay history, literature, health and sexuality should be integrated into high school curricula. (25%)

2. Teachers, peers and parents should be more tolerant and accepting of sexual and gender diversity. (25%)

3. Anti-discrimination policies must be implemented and enforced. (20%)

4. Teachers and other faculty are needed who are better trained and more inclined to be more supportive of GLBT youth. (15%)

5. There should be more support groups and/or discussion groups for GLBT youth. (14%)

Behind the statistics.

Of over 60 youth who completed the survey:

17 said that **gay history, literature, health and sexuality should be integrated into high school curricula.** Several respondents likened their own situation to the struggle by African Americans and other minorities for equal representation in American classrooms:

- *"I would like to see... more gay history in U.S. history class"*
- *"...Perhaps more gay/lesbian authors discussed, more artists – with mention of their sexuality or lovers. We talk about Shakespeare's love life. Why not Jeanette Winterson's? Or Virginia Woolf?"*
- *"[We need] comprehensive health classes covering gender identity, sexuality, safe sex (specifically covering queer people!)"*
- *"[In my ideal school] gay literature would be read in English, just as books like Black Boy are."*
- *"Just a better education on the subject of queerness."*

13 youth urged administrators to **implement and enforce anti-discrimination policies** and to abolish rules that discriminate against LGBT youth. Several of these mentioned the need for perpetrators of anti-gay or anti-trans verbal or physical harassment to suffer consequences.

- *"When a student uses a derogatory term they should be reprimanded. Actions need to be taken instead of just talked about."*
- *"Ideally: School Policy outlining how teachers and staff are **REQUIRED** to reprimand gay bashing."*
- *"Rules about who you can take to prom/school dances/etc. should be banned as should gendered dress codes."*
- *"[In my ideal school] homophobic slurs (fag, etc.) would not be tolerated, just as racial slurs aren't."*

9 respondents said that schools need **teachers and faculty who are better trained and more inclined to be supportive of GLBT youth.**

- *"I think that teachers and administration need to be properly trained to deal with queer related discrimination and harassment," wrote one 18-year-old from Chicago's West Side.*
- *"Every teacher, staff member and administrative person in schools should be educated in all areas of queer issues. They need to know we exist and how to treat us as people and how to handle inappropriate language/actions and discrimination," said a 20-year-old from suburban Skokie.*
- *We need information for "young LGBTQA students on what is around them, means of support, help, law enforcement agencies, homes for those kicked out, etc.," wrote an urban 20-year-old.*

8 respondents mentioned the need for **support groups and/or discussion groups for GLBT youth.**

- “[My ideal school] would have a drop-in program for gay youth.”
- “I would like to see a gay group in [my] school.”

16 of our respondents used the survey as an opportunity to call for **tolerance and acceptance by teachers, peers and parents:**

- “I want everyone to be able to go to school happily and be accepted,” stated a 15-year-old from the South Side of Chicago.
- “People should be more caring,” wrote a North Side 20-year-old.
- “In my [ideal] school, students and faculty that identified as GLBT would be comfortable being out and feel accepted.”

One 20-year-old from Chicago’s Morgan Park neighborhood wrote three short phrases that summarize the overlapping needs expressed in so many of the surveys we collected: “I would like the queer population to be at least mentioned in the curriculum; I would like the staff and faculty to take definite steps to fight all prejudice; I would like queer students to be seen as just another texture in the student-body tapestry.”

A 19-year old from South Elgin provided this brief conclusion: “Offer support. Punish discrimination. Acknowledge. Educate.”



"I would like the queer population to be at least mentioned in the curriculum; I would like the staff and faculty to take definite steps to fight all prejudice; I would like queer students to be seen as just another texture in the student-body tapestry."

-A 20-year-old from Chicago's Morgan Park neighborhood

IN SUMMARY

A Call to Action

It's time to move forward to ensure that no LGBTQ youth are left behind. Our Constitution includes an Equal Protection clause that should entitle all students to a fair and equal education. We have also learned that groups throughout history have fought for a fair and equal education.

It is now the year 2003. The struggle for equality in education continues for LGBTQ students who want to see their lives integrated into school curriculums and who want to feel safe at school.

As the stories and survey results gathered for this report show, the current system of responding to bullying in our schools is not enough nor specific enough to anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender harassment. It is time to develop new ways of combating harassment that may begin with name-calling but so often escalates into violence.

When we are addressing the issue of safe schools, we are addressing the issue of freedom for students to be and represent themselves as they choose. We are addressing the need to teach the valuable history of LGBT people that has been made invisible over the centuries. We are addressing the need to educate all youth on how to take care of their bodies.

We hope this report will galvanize you and your community into action. So, please, use it.

Start in your own jurisdiction, whether that's your classroom, office, school board, or particular level of government and do whatever you can to make sure that everyone finally recognizes the severity of harassment and exclusion that LGBTQ youth around the country experience on a daily basis.

If this means working closely with administrators and showing up to board meetings to talk about your concerns, then do it.

If it means writing letters to your representatives and senators, go ahead and do it.

If it means showing up and sitting in an office until your principal meets with you then that's what it takes.

Use this report as your tool, your jumping off point, and then take the next step.

Together, we can make a change.

The Next Steps

Through expanded anti-discrimination policies, the development of inclusive curriculums and programs and through the creation of a system that insures accountability, we believe that the needs of LGBTQ youth can be met in school.

These are our suggestions for the beginning steps in a proactive, collaborative effort to address this issue that will go beyond the symptoms and address the roots of the problem.

We believe that these steps will go far in creating safer school environments for all students.

If you do not know how to get started, consult with your local LGBT advocacy groups or the LGBTQ youth activists in your school or community.

Expanded Anti-Discrimination Policies

There is a need for each school district and each individual school to post a non-discrimination policy that includes sexual orientation and gender identity where all students, faculty, staff, schools board members and community members are aware of it. Also, rules regarding appropriate dress for “boys” and “girls” should be revised so that they are gender-neutral. School policy regarding couples tickets for dances should be revised so that they are inclusive of all students.

There is a need to include the active and growing population LGBTQ youth activists and their allies in the development of safer school legislation. Many students, already active in their GSA's will step forward to help determine language and needs for the policy.

There is a need to advocate for state-level and county-level anti-discrimination policies including sexual orientation and gender identity that will send the message that adults are paying attention to this crisis.

There is a need for protective and inclusive legislation at the federal level. An expansive non-discrimination act should be passed that includes sexual orientation and gender identity and extends beyond the workplace and into the schools.

Inclusive Curriculums and Programming

There is a need for curriculum revisions so that LGBT history is taught alongside the histories of other identity groups. Some examples include English classes that are inclusive of queer protagonists and experiences; science classes recognizing more than two genders; math courses using more varied examples than just “Bill and Sue” figuring how many gallons it will take to paint their house; and health courses offering comprehensive information on sexuality, gender, and safer sex for all students, including queer youth.

There is a need for a support system to serve each school’s population of LGBTQ youth. School counselors should be taught how to support the needs of their queer students and know the appropriate referral resources.

There is a need for LGBT resources in the schools. The school library should have books about coming out, activism, history, art, and queer fiction that can be checked out by students. Teachers should also have access to LGBT-oriented materials in both the library and audiovisual center to supplement their curriculum.

Gay-Straight Alliances should be encouraged, and in areas where there is no accessible out-of-school support group, one should be established within the school and be facilitated by someone trained in the issues of adolescent gender and sexuality.

All students should also be exposed to diversity training and cultural events about queer subjects. Bring About Face Youth Theatre to your school for a performance and workshops, or contact a speaker’s panel for a classroom discussion.

System of Accountability

There is a need for accountability in the school system. Any advancement or policy is useless unless there is a system to enforce it.

Administrators should develop a systematic method for responding to incidents of harassment and discrimination within the school that all faculty members understand. Penalties should be put into place when the system is not followed or is disregarded completely.

Faculty and Staff should be required to attend sensitivity training, and all new teachers should pass through this training upon being hired. Faculty members should repeat this training every few years to keep up-to-date. The training should also include role-playing practice for incidents of harassment so that teachers know how to stop it and address the issue when they encounter it.



I want everyone to be able to go to school happily and be accepted.

-A 15-year-old from the South Side of Chicago

APPENDIX

APPENDIX A: AFT Staff, Artistic Associates and Board of Directors

About Face Theatre Staff

Eric Rosen

Artistic Director, About Face Theatre

Kyle Hall

Associate Artistic Director, About Face Theatre

Megan Carney

Artistic Director, About Face Youth Theatre

Brian Goodman

Educational Programs Director

Tony Alvarado-Rivera

Educational Programs Assistant

Lara Dieckmann

Development Director

Shelley Echerd

Audience Development Director

Allie Kurtz

Office Manager

Eric Reda

Marketing Associate

Heather Schmucker

Production Manager

About Face Theatre Artistic Associates

Amy Beck
Joel Butler
Brad Cawley
Jane C. Cho
Greg Copeland
Geoffrey M. Curley
Scott Duff
Julia Fabris
Scott Ferguson
Ted Hoerl
Patricia Kane
Amy Matheny
James McKay
Andre Pluess
Steve Scott
Mark E. Smith
Paul Stovall
Ben Sussman
Jessica Thebus

About Face Theatre Board of Directors

Jim Andrews
Jennifer Bielstein
Nate Berkus
Bill Cospers
Ted Grady
Criss Henderson
Marko Iglendza
Drew Jemilo
Chris Landgraff
Dwight McBride
Bob McCament
Scott McCausland
Bill Michel
Clyde Patterson
Tim Phillips
Don Ratner
Eric Rosen
Gigi Sturgis
Ivan Noah Uldall
Ellen Wiggins

APPENDIX B: Glossary of terms used in this report

¹ Thanks to the National Council on Communities and Justice for this definition.

AFYT – an acronym for About Face Youth Theatre.

Ally – a heterosexual or non-trans person who, recognizing his or her privilege, fights for the rights and acceptance of non-heterosexual and/or gender-variant people.

Bisexual – someone who is attracted (sexually, emotionally, romantically, and/or intellectually) to both men and women

Discrimination – the effective injurious treatment of other groups so as to give an advantage to one’s own group.

Gay – a man who is attracted (sexually, emotionally, romantically, and/or intellectually) primarily to other men.

Genderqueer – someone who defines their gender as they see fit, often with the understanding that gender is fluid and therefore shouldn't be limited by traditional labels.

GSA – an acronym for Gay-Straight Alliance. A school group whose intentions may include, but are not limited to, providing a safe place for students to talk about sexuality and/or gender, providing a social space where students can feel comfortable “being themselves,” being an activist group working for acceptance and rights for queer students within the school and/or the greater community, being a resource for learning about sexuality, gender, and safe sex, and being a group that just has fun (i.e. showing queer-related videos).

Homophobia – the fear, dislike or hatred of gay men, lesbians and bisexuals. Also, the fear of being labeled by association with gay men, lesbians, bisexuals or transgender people.¹

Independent school – a school that may not receive the majority of its funding from the government, and often is paid for directly by a student’s caretaker(s).

Lesbian – a woman who is attracted (sexually, emotionally, romantically, and/or intellectually) primarily to other women.

LGBT – an acronym for ‘lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender.’

LGBTQQ – an acronym for ‘lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning.’ Particularly with the youth community, the inclusion of all the letters in the acronym remains important as we create new language to describe our identities.

Public school – a school that is funded primarily by the government and community through taxes.

Queer – (1) someone who defines their sexuality and gender as they see fit, often with the understanding that sexuality and gender are fluid and therefore shouldn’t be limited with traditional labels. Often this can be seen as the “next step” beyond bisexuality, because the label queer recognizes that there are more than just two genders. (2) Sometimes used to describe the whole community of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning youth.

Questioning – someone who is reviewing what either they believed or were told about their sexuality or gender.

Religious school – a school whose mission is to provide religion integrated into education. It does not receive the majority of its funding from the government, and is often paid for directly by a student’s caretaker(s).

Transgender – someone who transgresses normative gender boundaries. This may include, but is not limited to, cross-dressers, drag performers, androgynes, gender-fluid people, transsexuals, intersexed people, butch women and feminine men, etc.

Transphobia – the fear, dislike or hatred of transgender people. Also, the fear of being labeled by association with transgender people.

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The National Youth Advocacy Coalition for hosting our workshops and allowing us to collect stories at their event.

A lot of research and important work has been done on safe schools and LGBT youth by other organizations. We benefited from the documents and research done by GLSEN (the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network), Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, The American Civil Liberties Union and Human Rights Watch while we prepared for our own research.

Staff representatives from Senator Fitzgerald's office for meeting with us during a Washington, D.C. roundtable to discuss the issues addressed in our report.

The entire staff and the Board of Directors at About Face Theatre for their advice, resources and guidance, including our fabulous interns Karen Anderson and Helena J. Bliss for their great work.

All the participants of the About Face Youth Theatre for the courage they have to speak out and tell their stories.

Each person who took the time and gathered the courage to return a survey or contribute a story for this report. Your story is making a difference.

Endorsements

The testimonials (in this report)...are an eloquent argument for requiring schools to have and act upon anti-harassment policies that specifically include sexual orientation. Schools that are relatively free of harassment ought to be a primary goal of everyone with an interest in the welfare of kids and their sexual health and well being.

– John Love, Upper School Director, Latin School

The report is a powerful tool to persuade the lawmakers and policymakers that something has to be done to prevent the systematic harassment of our queer youth. For the first time, we are presented with a report by the youth, of the youth, and for the youth. This is reality, this is the way it is for queer youth in our schools... and this report makes us look at that reality. The report makes you see the faces of those who have suffered discrimination and violence, and you can't ignore it. You have to do something about it.

– Miranda Stevens Miller, Legislative Director, Illinois Gender Advocats

Again, the youth of About Face Youth Theatre are on the forefront of creating a safer existence for queer youth. This report clearly gets to the point of what needs to be done within school communities to make them safer for LGBTQQ youth in a manner in which everyone – gay, straight can understand.

– Joe Hollendonner, Program Director, GLSEN Chicago

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