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TRANSCRIPT



Challenging media

SPEAK UP!

IMPROVING THE LIVES OF GAY, LESBIAN, BISEXUAL & TRANSGENDERED YOUTH

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Improving the Lives of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgendered Youth

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Danny and Julie *MTV's Real World, New Orleans*
Sara Just Teacher, Amherst Regional High
Charlie McCarthy Principal, Arlington High School
Anthony Rapp Actor/Musician, *Rent*
Judy Shepard Mother of Matthew Shepard
Linda Sullivan Health Educator
Al Toney III Safe Homes of Central Massachusetts
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And the following students:

Alison
Elena
Evan (and his mother **Andrea**)
Jason
Tim

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[Student] I think high school kids are vicious, and just walking down the hallway, you can hear people saying faggot, flamer, fag, faggot, muff-diver, queer, queen, fairy, and that's a menacing thing to hear when you're walking between classes to hear someone yelling out derogatory terms to you just left and right like they're meaningless.

[Student] I think it's a question about how much you try to stand out.

[Student] Faggot. Flamer. Homo would be another one.

SARA JUST: How can we get people to not just stop saying it because they'll get in trouble but actually think about why they shouldn't be saying it.

[Student] I think those who really forced their orientation on other people, and walked around saying, "I'm gay and you better be OK with it," tended to have a harder time.

EVAN: People who get assaulted in middle school primarily, or high school, are the shy ones.

CHARLIE McCARTHY: Nobody would question that at home – you should feel comfortable at home. Well, kids spend six and a half hours a day here, this is the place they spend more time other than their own home. They shouldn't have to come here and feel uncomfortable.

KIM WESTHEIMER: The Safe Schools Program for gay and lesbian students was an outgrowth of work done by the Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, which was formed in 1992. It was a commission that was formed by then-Governor William Weld in Massachusetts to look at issues such as youth suicide and see what the climate was look for gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth in schools. They held a series of hearings across the state to get information about students. Teachers, and parents and such testified about the climate in schools.

[Student at hearing] *I thought that I could just pretend to be straight...*

KIM WESTHEIMER: What they found was that schools were a particularly difficult place for gay, lesbian, and bisexual young people. And as a result of those hearings, they brought a series of recommendations to the State Board of Education. The Board of Education adopted four of those recommendations and they became the basis of the Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students. The four recommendations were to create policies in schools – anti-discrimination policies that included sexual orientation, to conduct faculty in-services looking at suicide and violence prevention in relation to gay, lesbian, and bisexual students, to form support groups and student organizations such as gay/straight alliances in schools, and also to work with family members of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students.

MARY BONAUTO: So if you have a student who's being harassed so pervasively by administrators, by staff, by peers, so that they're not able to get the education that they deserve, then it's a clear shot to say, that law is being violated, and there is a way that individuals can bring a lawsuit seeking monetary damages. And monetary damages are not necessarily the goal, the goal of every single family I've talked to, the goal is to have this behavior stop.

[GLSEN PSA]

That's so gay.

Homo!

You faggot!

You're a queer, aren't you?

Fag!

Queer!

Faggot!

What're you a, a fag?

The next time you use words like these, think about what they really mean. Better not be a next time.

JUDY SHEPARD: I was worried about his safety, I think, most of all. Which was an issue always with Matt because he was small and always sharing his opinion even with people that he shouldn't have been sharing his opinion. And he didn't really know when to not talk. So safety was always the issue. And the concern of a parent for their child is of course their safety, but also their happiness. And I just felt that Matt would never find sublime happiness in a society that always discriminated against who he was for what he was. I thought there would be discrimination in the job market, in the housing market, just among new people that he would meet, that he would never feel truly happy. I've since learned that that was a fear that I shouldn't really have had. That just as in any community, there are those who are and those who aren't, and that wouldn't have been something I needed to consider just because he was gay.

JASON: In middle school I was constantly harassed and sometimes in violent situations where I was the victim, because of my perceived sexual orientation. I was beat up and called names and stuff like that. And the support I had was unfortunately non-existent. It was a subsequent lawsuit against my public school district because of the discrimination against – the school against me – and teachers failing to report the incidents, and having knowledge about it but not necessarily saying anything about it.

ANDREA: I feel much more worried about the safety of my son than of my daughter because I think the world, our culture is much more afraid of gay men than it is of lesbian women, with experiences like Matthew Shepard and what his parents have gone through, there is a little part of me that is remains afraid and yet I don't let that fear govern my daily life or how I relate to Evan or what I let

him do or not do. But it's always there and I think it's a shame that any parent has to fear for their child's safety just because of some aspect of how they were born.

CAROL GOODENOW: Certainly any questions we have that would relate to harassment – although we never use the word harassment – but all the questions that might relate to that, gay, lesbian, and bisexual kids have always significantly higher rates. For example, they're much more likely to be threatened or injured with a weapon at schools at some time in the past year, with something like 29% versus 7%. They're much more likely to say that they've skipped school in the past month because they felt unsafe at school: 22% versus about 5%. They're much more likely to have been at a fight in school, so it's 33% versus 13%. Also, just considering kids who say that they've had any fight at all in school, gay kids, GLB kids are more likely to have a greater proportion of their fights *in school* than is true for kids who identify as heterosexual. There's a strong association between being victimized in school and being suicidal. So that kids – any kids – who are victimized in school by being threatened or who feel that they're not safe enough to even attend school, are far more likely to be suicidal than kids who are not victimized. The issue with gay, lesbian, and bisexual kids is they're likely to be victimized so much more often.

AL TONEY III: And one of the biggest, biggest myths that I hear in talking to the youth is “Well, I don't mind if so-and-so is gay, as long as they don't try anything on me.” Again, it's about sexual identity, to let's take the sex part out of that, and then you have identity – it's not all about sex, it's about knowing who you are. Somebody can be straight, somebody can be gay, without having any sexual relationships with anybody of the same sex or opposite sex, or opposite gender. It's just who they're attracted to, who they want to pursue a relationship with, and it may or may not involve sex.

JULIE: In high school, for me, I had never been around anybody that was gay...Actually, there was one kid in my high school and I had an awful crush on him. And he actually told me one day that he was gay and I remember just feeling this very disgusted, like, just bad feelings about it because I didn't know any better and I was confused and hurt and I didn't have anybody to talk about it with, so therefore I just manifested my feelings into this kind of – I don't know if it was discrimination, I guess – so I think it's really important to be open to talking about things, be able to educate each other so it's not a weird thing, so it's a normal part of life.

TIM: A lot of students don't see gay people as actual people, they see all gay people as the very boisterous, flamboyant, wearing Daisy Dukes and pink stuff and flapping their wrists everywhere, and that's what I think people see gay students as and that's kind of dumb.

DANNY: In high school, basically the people running the show – the superintendents, and the school board or whatever – were so afraid to talk about *anything* that’s taboo, whether its sex in general, homosexuality, drugs, whatever – they’re so afraid to branch out and talk about important things like that. So these kids continue to stay ignorant about these issues.

JULIE: The way you live your life, *that* is the true testament of what you believe, and you can see it through the actions – the discrimination, the fag jokes, and just little things, that’s what shows the condition that our schools are in right now.

CHARLIE McCARTHY: Racial epithets, homophobic epithets, they’re hurtful, period. There’s no right of passage in there. They can’t be accepted as something that’s normal for kids to go through. Its normal for kids to go through it in the sense that its age-typical behavior, but its not normal to accept it. Kids are going to do it, but we shouldn’t accept it, or give signals that we’re not going to do something aggressive about bringing it to an end.

KIM WESTHEIMER: If I were to think about a safe or welcoming environment for gay, lesbian, and bisexual students within a school, there would be a number of different levels to it. On a very basic level, it would be an environment where name-calling and harassment based on *any* piece of identity didn’t exist. Because when we’re talking about gay, lesbian, and bisexual students, these are young people who identify as gay, lesbian, and bisexual –they may also have other elements to their identity as well. The other important piece to a safe environment is that it’s a place where people feel acknowledged about their identity. So that would mean that in History class, or in English class, there would be examples of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people in history or literature that would allow young people to realize that there have been gay, lesbian, and bisexual people who have come before them, and there will be gay, lesbian, and bisexual people who will come after them. And I’ve seen wonderful examples of teachers doing that. Those sorts of things can make a huge difference in people’s lives. And then the other thing piece of the safe environment for gay, lesbian, and bisexual students would be that they would be able to express who they are in a way, similarly to heterosexual students. So that would mean that if a boy wanted to bring a boy to the prom, or a girl wanted to bring a girl to the prom, or wanted to be able to put something on their locker that says you know, “I love Judy,” that they would be able to do that and not fear any kind of repercussion from their peers or from adults in the building.

ANTHONY RAPP: I just so firmly believe, and I have so much anecdotal evidence from the stories I hear as I travel around the country that people being visible – and not just people who are in the public eye like myself, but people being visible in their own lives, that’s one of the major steps in making a difference in people’s acceptance and people’s awareness and people getting beyond their prejudices and stereotypes.

AL TONEY III: There are still a lot of communities – the African-America, the Latino, the Asian communities – are still very much closeted communities, although Martin Luther King’s widow just recently has stated that the African-American community needs to embrace our lesbian and our gay brothers and sisters. So there’s a start of unification on that front. But there’s still a lot of work to be done, not only within that community and others, in the images that we can put out there, because its still looked upon as a White male thing.

KIM WESTHEIMER: It’s important for the community to realize what a gay/straight alliance is. Sometimes there are misconceptions and fears about that. The misconceptions aren’t going to *change* unless gay/straight alliances and the work in schools become very visible.

ELENA: If it is all a White group, which we mostly were – not all the time, but majority White folks – why is that? And to have that conversation and to really talk about race a lot, because I think that when you’re talking about one oppression, you can’t *not* talk about all of them.

ALISON: Its good not to be homophobic, but if you’re not active in the cause it doesn’t really do much.

TIM: I try not to let other people influence what I do, and if I feel something goes against what I believe in, or I feel something’s wrong, then I’ll say something about it.

JULIE: Kids especially will use “queer”, “gay”, without bad intentions.

DANNY: Like I said, most of them have no clue what they’re saying or they don’t understand the meaning behind the words, and they’re just using the words loosely and have no clue what they’re saying.

JULIE: If someone’s using it with hateful intentions, then I think you have the right to go up and say, “listen, that is not cool.” But if you’re not sure, if its not bad intentions, I think maybe just make them think about the fact that they use it – “oh, what do you mean by that?” And then they think twice and you haven’t done anything reprimanding and you haven’t waster your time.

EVAN: I think the people that were in the administrative positions, guidance counselors especially, at my middle school, yeah, they cared about gay rights and all, but their heart wasn’t in it.

JASON: I don’t think that there’s enough people in my school saying, “that’s not ok to say ‘that’s so gay’.” There’s not enough people reporting these simple little instances because they’re not simple.

SARA JUST: I think that a lot of teachers, because they're uncomfortable about where it will go, where the discussion leads if they face, or if they ask students to take back what they've said or they ask them to think about what they've said, a lot of teachers out of fear, just ignore it. So they hear it as they're walking down the hall, and they don't respond. Or they even hear it in their own classroom and they say, "Ok, let's get back to what we're doing." And they don't respond. Teachers need to be trained and they need to learn how to respond.

LINDA SULLIVAN: Well the kids at my school decided that they really needed to address our faculty because our faculty, the students felt, was not responding quickly enough or appropriately to homophobic slurs. So they decided to take it upon themselves to write a letter and the letter was very eloquent. And in the letter it says, we're asking you to take a look at the kind of climate you're creating in your classroom and the kinds of words that you allow people to say. And we're asking you to respond when you hear somebody referred to as gay or a faggot or a dyke, we're asking you to not allow those words. We're asking you to interrupt the flow of your lesson when you hear it and speak to the issue. And that letter went out along with a sticker and the sticker said that it was a gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender safe space. And we asked teachers if they chose to create such a safe space, to put a sticker in their classroom in a highly visible place so that students coming in would know that this room is a safe space. And these stickers are blossoming all over our school. And I am just delighted to see that happen because that action had to come from the teacher as a result of being educated by these students.

ELENA: For students who are coming in as GLBTQ students, being able to see that and be like, "Oh, I feel a little bit more relaxed," and "Oh, this is a teacher that if something comes up, I know its kind of cool to talk with them." And it also challenges students about their own behaviors. You're not going to come into that classroom and call something gay.

SARA JUST: The fact that they know that I'm a lesbian, they know that I have a partner and two cats and whatever else – already they know that they can't really be openly homophobic in class and already I've seen transformations. I can see them sort of struggling with their own homophobia – like how can I like this person so much, and like this class so much, and still believe this? And so its like I'm a real person in their lives.

ELENA: You know just knowing that they're there is so important. And knowing that there's people that have grown up to be gay – you know, there are grown up gay people, that's really good.

JASON: In the spring there's The Beat, which is a poetry slam, and kids go around and its poetry in motion and its activism in words and rhythm and rhyme. It's really good, it's really great. And the messages go from stop the hate against gays, lesbians, racism, everything.

My father asked if I was gay. I asked him, “Does it matter?” He said, “no, not really.” I told him “yes.” He said, “Get out of my house.” I guess it mattered. My boss asked if I was gay. I asked him, “Does it matter?” He said, “no, not really.” So I told him “yes.” He said, “You’re fired, faggot!” I guess it mattered. When my best friend asked if I was gay, I asked him, “Does it matter?” He said “no, not really.” I told him “yes.” He said, “Don’t call me your friend.” I guess it mattered. My lover asked, “Do you love me?” I asked him, “Does it matter?” He said, “Yes, it does.” I told him, “I love you.” He said “Let me hold you in my arms.” For the first time in my life, something matters. My god asked, “Do you love yourself?” I asked him, “Does it matter?” He said, “Yes, it does.” I asked him, “How can I love myself? I am gay.” He said, “Jason, that is the way I made you” and nothing again will ever matter.

EVAN: And then we had the drag show this year, that was something very different.

ANDREA: And last year.

EVAN: And last year – this was the second year. Y2Queens: When Queens Attack, it went really well.

ANDREA: And there he was, up there, allowing this part of himself to be expressed. The moderator who was also a student there, at the end, said something like, “Here we are, twelve queens from high school strutting our stuff and you’re out there cheering us on.” It still brings tears when I think about how great that felt.

JASON: Huge events like the gay pride, gay/straight youth pride march that happens every year just sends out a message about how supportive the city is, and how many groups there are that support gay and lesbian students, you know GSAs and GLAAD comes out, Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders, PFLAG, GLSEN. And you have tourists coming out too, sometimes joining in the fun or just being spectators. And its just delightful to the eye to see how proud and how supportive people are of their friends or their family or their children or their students.

DANNY: I would say I had this one instance where I was at work in the office and this guy was sitting here talking about how gays are sick, and going off about it. And I’m just sitting there listening to him. Finally after he went on for a while, I was like, “that’s cool that you believe that or whatever, but I’m gay so...” and I just stated to him that I’m gay and that I think whatever, your beliefs are your beliefs – I think you’re full of crap and you don’t know what you’re talking about, I think you’re ignorant, but you can think what you want. And I walked away and I think he felt like a jackass and probably sat there after that and thought about

what he was saying. I didn't attack him, I didn't sit there and lecture him, or try to change his beliefs, I just made him feel like a jackass.

ANTHONY RAPP: I have this funny feeling about the word "tolerance" because *tolerance* has a connotation to it like there's something... you know, you like tolerate a bad smell. And it goes beyond tolerance to me, its *acceptance*. And again, its not like acceptance, like OK, I accept the fact that I'm about to die. Its – this is part of life, this is *really* part of life – and its OK...and its not even a question of whether or not its ok, because its just life!

CHARLIE McCARTHY: No matter how hard we think we've worked, we know there's always more work to be done out there. Even though if ostensibly it looks like everything is fine.

SARA JUST: We're not even talking about whether it might be good; we're talking about the fact that it might save people's lives.

JUDY SHEPARD: Trying to open their minds to see what's going on around them is a very difficult thing. Just dialoguing is really the most important first step. Fixing it, I don't know. Talking about it is a good start.