

When the  
Drama Club Is  
Not Enough



Jeff Perrotti and  
Kim Westheimer

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*Walk into any school and you will find teachers who care about kids, teachers who are distressed to hear that students are hurting, and teachers who literally gasp when they hear the degree to which isolation can damage a young person's mind, body, and soul. Walk into any school and you will find students seeking justice as well as knowledge, students who want to create a better life for themselves and for others.*

— from the Introduction

Part how-to, part testimony to gay, lesbian, and bisexual students and their allies, *When the Drama Club Is Not Enough* presents the work of two educators and activists who have been at the forefront of the successful Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students in Massachusetts, a model for states and school districts nationwide. Their concrete, hard-won, and often inspiring lessons show how integrating gay and lesbian issues into classrooms and activities can transform school culture.

Perrotti and Westheimer speak directly to those who want to change school climate—parents, teachers, administrators, and students. Emphasizing the central role of students, they tell the stories of young people who have publicly expressed why and how schools must engage in conversations about sexual orientation. Involvement in groups like gay/straight alliances has helped many of these students go from feeling scared and isolated to courageous and connected.

Hand in hand with the students' accounts are the equally moving stories of teachers and administrators, some gay, lesbian, or bisexual themselves, others straight allies. With determination, and inspiration from their students, they have overcome inertia and outright opposition to help make schools a comfortable place for all students to

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experience the fullness of their lives.

Along with these stories comes practical, hands-on advice. Teachers and administrators will discover that addressing sexual orientation is a new but fundamental part of the everyday business of schools. With this book, they will have a ready resource on the laws and policies that support equity. And concerned parents will learn what they can do from elementary through high school to make schools safer for their children.

With chapters on race and gender, sports and school climate, elementary and middle schools, the challenge and opportunity of controversy, the “nuts and bolts” of creating change, and sustaining your spirit, *When the Drama Club Is Not Enough* is a warm, wise, and comprehensive guide. Perrotti and Westheimer show that it's possible to create a school environment in which *all* students feel valued and respected.



Susan Wilson

Jeff Perrotti and Kim Westheimer have each served as director of the Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students, a nationally recognized initiative of the Massachusetts Department of Education.

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We dedicate this book to our parents,  
Paul and Rose Westheimer and Sam and Lillian Perrotti,  
and to our partners,  
Madeline Klyne and Steve Fleming

approach could have been satisfying on some levels, but it was probably best in this instance to compromise and save adversarial tactics for bigger obstacles.

### Sex, Lies, and Audiotape

Opposition to safe schools efforts is sometimes based on the belief that such programs are a way for adults to convert children to homosexuality. As one right-wing Web site stated, "Any observer can see that the actual purpose of these programs is to promote homosexuality among children and to break down any religious, moral, or psychological barriers they might have about it. Furthermore, it is to encourage as many children as possible to feel free to experiment with homosexual sex." In the face of such statements, it is tempting to respond that our programs are not about sex, but about suicide and violence prevention. After all, the Safe Schools Program was designed in response to data showing that gay and lesbian students were more likely than their heterosexual peers to attempt suicide and to be the targets of violence. When the Governor's Commission and the Department of Education (DOE) initially created the parameters of the program, there was a conscious decision *not* to address sex directly. It was thought that raising the topic of sexual orientation in schools would be controversial enough without combining it with sexuality education.

There are limitations, however, in setting this narrow a focus when designing programs for gay, lesbian, and bisexual students. The safety and well-being of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students can't be separated from sexuality and AIDS/HIV prevention. Obviously, safety refers to physical safety—the ability to attend school without being threatened or being attacked. For young people, it also means being safe to express and explore their identities, including their sexuality. Currently most gay, lesbian, and bisexual adolescents do not have this kind of emotional safety. Many do not see themselves or their sexuality reflected by their families, schools, or culture. They do not have the opportunity to go through the typical dating, breakups, and other rites of passage that help young people develop a sense of

themselves. In this absence, they may not feel empowered to make choices about whether or not to be sexually active and may not know how to engage in healthy relationships. They may not have relevant information about HIV prevention. Because of these factors, they may explore their sexuality secretly and be vulnerable to abuse.

The impact of this lack of safety is reflected in the epidemiology regarding sexually active young gay men. As a group they are at increased risk for AIDS/HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. The Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior data show that gay, lesbian, and bisexual students are less likely than their heterosexual peers to use condoms. According to a multi-city research study published by the Centers for Disease Control in 2001, 12.3 percent of young gay and bisexual males in urban areas were HIV positive. The data for urban African American young gay men were even more disturbing: 30 percent were HIV positive.

To be effective, any HIV prevention program needs to include explicit discussions about sex. If adolescents can't talk about sex, it is unlikely that they will be able to negotiate safe sex. The AIDS/HIV prevention program at the Massachusetts DOE has been at the forefront of addressing these issues. The staff of this program have focused on educating adults in schools regarding those populations that may be at increased risk: special education students, students who speak English as a second language, youth of color, and gay, lesbian, and bisexual students.

Many of us at the DOE recognized the political reasons to separate the work of the AIDS/HIV and Safe Schools Programs. The staff of the two programs collaborated with each other, and the work overlapped at times, but the programs had substantially different goals. When both programs eventually came under attack, the distinctions between them were indistinguishable to most people. It became apparent that separating out sexuality was a mistake and that the foundation needs to be laid to include sexuality education as part of safe schools work. It is clear that to do this without educating key players is also a mistake. The following chain of events helped us to learn these lessons.

In March 2000, two of our colleagues in the DOE's AIDS/HIV prevention program conducted a workshop, "What They Don't Tell

You about Queer Sex in Health Class," at the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) conference in Boston. The workshop was one of fifty offered at this conference for teachers and students. The workshop facilitators used an activity common in many health classes, asking participants to write anonymous questions about sexuality on cards. Students' questions included "What is fisting?" "Can lesbians have orgasms from rubbing their clitorises together?" and "Can someone get HIV by swallowing semen?" The adults answered these questions with input from the students.

Without the knowledge of the facilitators or the students, a workshop participant made an audiotape of the workshop. The man who taped the workshop was the director of the Parents' Rights Coalition (PRC), a group that has been vehemently opposed to the Safe Schools Program.

The PRC and a right-wing Web site that published the first accounts of the workshop used language that exploited fears of homosexuals as predators. The Web site stated that when the PRC realized the substance of the workshop, they wondered "whether it was similar to the experience of American GIs when they first approached concentration camps. They had heard stories and rumors, but no one could imagine it was like this." The PRC consistently referred to the participants as children, conjuring up images of elementary school students. The Web article said that "three homosexual presenters acting in their professional capacities coaxed about twenty children into talking openly and graphically about homosexual sex." In fact the workshop consisted of a small number of *high school* students who voluntarily attended the sexuality education workshop.

In no time at all, the PRC and its supporters were calling for the resignation of education commissioner David Driscoll, the dismantling of the Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, and the rescinding of state dollars designated to provide support and safety for gay and lesbian youth. The group distributed a spliced version of the secretly recorded tape to reporters and legislators. One talk show radio host devoted thirty consecutive hours to playing excerpts of the tape and railing about "the sexualization of children."

For a number of weeks, other media did not take on this issue. A few news articles on the subject were small and inconsequential. A

press conference about the workshop held at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., yielded little publicity. But the media silence ended when the DOE, in a press release publicizing its investigation of the workshop, voiced its disapproval of the DOE employees' actions and labeled their behavior "prurient." One reporter said that the tone of the press release turned the story into front-page news.

With the legitimacy handed to them by the DOE, the PRC's spin controlled the tenor of the debate. The fact that the workshop was illegally taped, violating the privacy of the young people who attended, was largely ignored. The fact that gay and lesbian students need sexuality education that speaks directly to their experience was not mentioned. Instead, media coverage focused on allegations of impropriety by workshop facilitators.

In the wake of the publicity that ensued, the DOE employees lost their jobs. One was fired and one resigned when she heard she was about to be fired. Hardly anyone came to their defense. By and large the message was clear: If it has to do with sex, you're on your own.

Once it was apparent that the education commissioner was not supporting his staff, the opposition went for the jugular. Firing staff—an act that arguably was meant to appease the opposition—did not satisfy them. In fact, one PRC member published an article calling the fired DOE employees scapegoats. The PRC members set their sights higher. They persisted in the pursuit of their goals: the commissioner's resignation and the elimination of both the Governor's Commission and the Safe Schools Program.

Administrators at the DOE were not prepared to support employees who were talking explicitly about sex with young people. Nor were most individuals and organizations within the youth-serving community and gay and lesbian community prepared to take on this issue.

A few organizations did take action. Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders (GLAD), the AIDS Action Committee of Boston, GLSEN Boston, and the state employees' union all condemned the firings. GLAD filed an injunction to stop the PRC's tape from being distributed. Larry Kessler of the AIDS Action Committee and Wallace Bachman of GLSEN Boston wrote thoughtful editorials in the local gay and lesbian newspaper. The union picketed outside the DOE build-

ing and supported a grievance against the DOE for the firings. This grievance and a civil suit against DOE and the PRC are still pending.

This controversy and its aftermath have been painful for those of us working with the Safe Schools Program. Talented and committed friends lost their jobs, legislators wrote language into the state budget that restricted funding for gay and lesbian youth programs from being spent on sex education, and people feared that the chain of events following the GLSEN workshop would decrease schools' participation in the Safe Schools Program.

Although there was diminished support for the Safe Schools Program in some quarters, that was overwhelmingly not the case. The year after this controversy occurred, almost two hundred high schools in Massachusetts applied for and received Safe Schools grants, most for gay/straight alliances. The 2001 GLSEN conference was attended by more students and teachers than the year before. Some administrators, teachers, and students needed additional encouragement when they came under attack in their individual school districts, but almost everyone was certain of the importance of this work and stuck with it.

The lessons learned from this controversy were hard-won. Now we are even more committed to incorporating sexuality education into safe schools initiatives. We know that in order to make this happen, there must be a tremendous amount of education about why sexuality education is critical for gay, lesbian, and bisexual young people. Finally, we know that the gay, lesbian, and bisexual community; educators; and the larger youth serving community must prioritize ways to address the politics and pedagogy of doing this work.

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### Nuts and Bolts

We have been fortunate to work with teachers, administrators, students, and activists, with whom we have developed concrete steps to help schools become safer and more welcoming. We are excited to see the ideas and resources that are emerging as part of this national and international movement.

#### **Supporting and Mobilizing Adult Leadership**

As we've seen, the leadership of students has been powerful in the movement to make schools safer for gay, lesbian, and bisexual students. Students, however, are transient members of school communities. Adults who can take on long-term leadership roles help ensure the longevity of programs. The following models have successfully fostered adult leadership and support for students.

#### ***Safe Schools Task Forces***

Some of the most successful planning to create safety for gay, lesbian, and bisexual students has come from the leadership of school and community task forces. Task force members have included administrators, social workers, community members, parents, students, teachers, and service providers. Some task forces have a broad focus and create districtwide programs, whereas others focus specifically on one school. A safe schools task force serves as an institutionalized presence that provides visibility and support for gay, lesbian, and bi-

vidual healing and activism. We believe in creating occasions where people who want and need to express what they have endured can do so in the company of others.

Safe Schools regional workshops give participants the opportunity to share tales of homophobia in their schools and the obstacles they face. For many people, just being in a caring environment where they can say these things is in itself transformative. On a small scale, our staff meetings and retreats have furnished such a place for us as well. On a larger scale, the Governor's Commission sponsored a series of hearings in which students, teachers, and community members testified regarding their experiences of discrimination in schools. These events provided an opportunity for political activism as well as communal lament.

### ***Seeing the Work in a Broader Context***

Another strategy to combat feelings of isolation and powerlessness is to remember that our work takes place in a broader context. Our work is part of a movement for equality and is connected to other civil rights movements and struggles for social change. Although each of these movements has unique issues and challenges, we can learn and gain strength from them.

We draw energy and ideas from our involvement with other groups working for youth empowerment. We have collaborated with the Bill of Rights Education Project from the Massachusetts Civil Liberties Union, *A World of Difference* from the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, and *Facing History and Ourselves*.

We often hear people express frustration regarding not being able to do "the work" because they have to spend so much time responding to opposition. We believe that dealing with opposition—moving two steps forward and one step back—is the work, not a distraction from it. Feeling frustrated, confronting barriers and working through them, defending programs—all of these are just as much part of the work as presentations, meetings, and program development. The lesson that setbacks and obstacles are all part of a larger struggle can be learned from other civil rights movements. Others came before and others will follow after.

### ***Facing Fears***

In the face of mean-spirited attacks, and the fear and isolation they engender, it's easy to feel intimidated and defeated. Rather than letting ourselves be defined as shameful or marginal, we work to become a valued part of the larger community. Sometimes this means seeking opportunities to understand and find things in common with people who are opposed to our work—or with people who are merely different from us.

What follows is an account of Jeff Perrotti's experience at a Parents' Rights Coalition (PRC) rally at the Massachusetts State House in July 2000. The PRC was in the midst of leading an attack on the Safe Schools Program and had managed to get then presidential candidate Alan Keyes to speak at the rally to protest state funding of the program.

After the rally, which included speakers implying that gay people were to blame for AIDS and were trying to influence "the moral dimension of the classroom," I noticed two young men and, I assumed, their mother being interviewed by a reporter. My friend Pam Garramone, who directs the Safe Schools Project for Massachusetts Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), said she thought he was a reporter for the PRC. My ears perked up when I heard the woman say, "What about kids with pimples? They get picked on, too." I'm always interested to hear people's arguments against gay, lesbian, and bisexual students' rights, particularly ones that have "Gay kids aren't the only ones that have it rough" at their core. Because we've all been fed this message that we shouldn't be crybabies and we should just "suck it up," we often aren't aware of how this translates into being shut off from the ability to feel pain in ourselves or in others—basically a lack of empathy.

We tried not to look too conspicuous as we lingered around this little group, hoping to hear a few more comments. "I think homosexuality is a—." The woman fumbled. "a—a—perversity." And then she seemed to gain momentum, "Yes, that's what I think. Homosexuality is a perversity."

Her teenage son agreed, "Yeah, that's what we think."

The other young man, who didn't say anything, turned out to be her son's friend. We then overheard the reporter say, "You felt strong enough about this to come here today?"

The mother confirmed, "That's right."

I said to Pam, "I'd like to talk to that woman."

Pam said, "I wouldn't. I'm afraid that if I start talking to these people, they'll come at me with things and I won't know how to respond."

"You'll know what to say," I said. "Just trust yourself."

When the reporter left, Pam and I hurried down the state house steps after the woman and boys. I got the woman's attention by saying, "I apologize for eavesdropping, but we overheard you being interviewed, and we wanted to meet you." I told her that Pam and I were gay. And that some of the things she had said were hurtful.

At this point, her son and his friend walked away, but she said, "What did I say that hurt you?"

I responded, "Well, for one thing, when you said you felt homosexuality was a perversity."

She looked down with an embarrassed smile, and then said, "I grew up with lesbians—one, no, two of my friends were lesbians. . . . They were great. It's those gay guys who are so flamboyant that I have a problem with. You know what I mean, don't you?"

Instead of challenging her on what made her uncomfortable about flamboyant gay men, I decided to try to find some common ground. I asked her if she was Italian—she said yes—and I told her that Pam and I were, too. I said that many people, when they hear Italian, they think Mafia. It's a stereotype that is used to judge Italians negatively.

She said, "Well, that's not all Italians."

I said, "Well, that's how prejudice works."

I asked her where her family had come from, and she said Boston's North End. I said, "No, before that."

She said, a bit tentatively, "Foggia."

"I don't believe it. My family came from Campobasso—right next to Foggia," I enthused. Nothing gets me more excited than talking about Italy. "Have you ever been there?" I asked.

"No," she said, regretfully.

I said, "Oh, you should go. It's beautiful!"

"Yes, my husband wants to go over there."

"Is he Italian, too?"

"No, Irish."

"Really? My partner is Irish, too," I prattled. "Irish and Italian is a good combination. Did you know there was a time when the Irish were prejudiced against Italians and wouldn't let their children marry or even date them?" No, she didn't. I asked her maiden name—she told me—a long name—and I said, "That's a beautiful Italian name. And you gave that up?" She laughed. "Are you still married to him?"

"Yes," she proudly answered, "twenty-five years."

When I asked her where she lived, she said a suburb north of Boston. "Does your son go to high school there?"

"Yes, he's a sophomore."

I asked her whether she knew the former health coordinator for the school district, whom I was quite fond of. She did know her, but apparently did not share my fondness. She launched into a story of the health coordinator having taught her son's fifth-grade class an explicit sexuality lesson. "You know, talking about hard-ons and the way a penis goes in a vagina. My son came home and said, 'Mom, why did you send me to that? I thought you said it was going to be about puberty.' So I went in there and got the whole sexuality curriculum thrown out."

Genuinely curious, I asked her what the problem was with her son learning this information. She was adamant: "That teacher doesn't know what's appropriate for fifth-graders—she doesn't have any kids of her own." And then in a lowered voice, she leaned toward me and asked, "Tell me, is she a lesbian?" I decided not to argue with her about the content of the lesson, but instead answered her question. "I don't think so," I said. "She's married. Not that that means she's not a lesbian," I added. She paused and took that in. I was amused at her question and pleased that we were immersed in conversation.

She then launched into a story about when her daughter, who was in kindergarten at the time, had come home with a boy she'd been playing with, and asked, "Mom, what is sex?" "I told her, 'You're a girl and he's a boy—that's sex. Now go play.' 'Okay, thanks,' they said, and went back to what they were doing." Her



position was clear: teachers don't realize that they're telling kids more than they want or need to know.

I commended her for being involved at the school—and said that often teachers can benefit from parents' input about what their children are ready to hear. We agreed on this and also on the fact that many parents aren't involved and are oblivious to what their children are learning in school. Then I said that I was concerned about how her views might be hurting her son, his friend, and others she may be unaware of . . . like what if her son or his friend is gay?

"Well, I know they're not," she quickly assured us.

Pam jumped in, "You never know. I didn't come out to my parents until I was thirty-one." Both of us shared our stories of coming out to our respective Italian families, until her son and his friend came back, saying, "Mom, we gotta go." We said good-bye and thanked her for talking with us.

We had three more conversations, this time with people who appeared to be in the inner circle of the PRC. The first one was a woman from southern California. She had been carrying a sign at the rally that said "Grades, Not AIDS." After we introduced ourselves, we asked her what had brought her to Massachusetts.

She proudly told us that she travels all around the country to make sure that her grandson doesn't have to be exposed to "this stuff" in his classroom. When we asked her what she meant, she said, "You know, fisting, that sort of stuff." When we realized that she was referring to an AIDS education workshop offered at the recent GLSEN Boston conference that the PRC was using to discredit the Safe Schools Program, we attempted to set her straight. We said that the PRC had illegally taped this workshop and now was using it to attack a program that was about school climate and safety. We corrected her misconception that the conference had been sponsored by the DOE.

She lit up a cigarette and said, "Don't tell me. I know. I've read all these documents and seen the state seal on them. I know what this state is doing. And anyway, what about the fat kids? They get called names, too."

Here was that argument again. We agreed that fat kids get called names too, and that that isn't right either. Again we pointed out that the workshop was being used to misrepresent the work of the Safe Schools Program.

When it was clear she did not have the facts to support what she believed to be true, she laughed. "Well, you're never going to get kids to stop calling names. Kids are rotten. They can be rotten at times."

I said that we were more hopeful and that we actually believed that kids and schools could change.

At this point she became flustered and said, "I'm not going to talk to you anymore. You don't know what you're talking about. Come back and talk to me when you've lost a brother to AIDS, like I have." With this, obviously choked up, she went back into the state house.

Pam and I were a bit shocked to all of a sudden see this woman leave in tears. Before we had a chance to move from our spot, less than a minute later, another woman approached us and said, "I'm supposed to continue talking to you two. That workshop definitely was supported by the state of Massachusetts." She was apparently sent to talk to us by the woman whom we had just upset. I interrupted her to introduce ourselves. She seemed a bit taken aback by this. I remembered her from earlier at the rally, enthusiastically clapping for Keyes during his speech and carrying the sign "GLSEN = pedofiles" (*sic*). She said that the reason she felt so strongly about this work was that she had been sexually abused as a child and didn't want that to happen to another child. She said, "Also, I have a good friend in Rhode Island, he's gay and has been in a monogamous relationship for twelve years, and now he's dying of AIDS. I don't want to lose him, and he's going to die."

We discussed the myth that all gay people have been sexually abused and talked about the purpose of the Safe Schools Program. We agreed with her that abuse is a bad thing, and we distinguished abuse from homosexuality. She left us saying she would think about our conversation.

The last person we spoke to was an author and researcher on gender identity. She told us, "Homosexuality is preventable and treatable. It originates in the child's insufficient bonding with his or her same-sex parent." We had an extensive discussion with her about Freudian theory, the assumptions underlying it, gender identity, and her contention that feminists have rewritten history. She insisted that girls aren't discriminated against in our society; to prove her point, she told us that her grandmother was a doctor.

She expressed her concerns that if gay people are allowed to go into the schools and say that it's acceptable to be gay, then more kids will be gay. We agreed that probably the kids who *are* gay would be more likely to feel better about themselves, and come out, if they heard positive messages regarding homosexuality. Then we acknowledged that what she seemed to be concerned about, though, was kids who *aren't* gay becoming gay. That's when Pam said, "Do you really think that if we talked long enough, that I could turn you gay?" The woman replied, "No, but I know that I'm straight. I'm sure of it. I've been married for thirty-eight years to the same man. In fact he's coming to pick me up right now."

We were able to have a good discussion about our areas of disagreement. I made it clear that the major problem we had was that she was supporting a group, the PRC, that was using inflammatory rhetoric, telling lies, and misleading people for the sole purpose of advancing its belief that homosexuality is not natural and should not be discussed in school in a positive manner. She laughed it off. "Doesn't everybody engage in those tactics to get the press's attention for their position?"

"No," I said. "Everybody doesn't. I find it disingenuous and I hope you'll think about what it means to be participating in and associated with a group that operates this way." She said that she had to go meet her husband and that she'd enjoyed talking with us. We said good-bye and went on our way.

Afterward, Pam and I had a long discussion about our interactions with the members of the PRC. We felt quite energized by our conversations. We were pleased at our courage in taking the risk to make these connections. We felt that to some extent we'd been able to make contact with each person's humanity and vulnerability. Pam said, "From now on, when I hear people spouting some of their antigay ideas, I'm going to want to ask them, 'What kind of pain are you in?'" We were left thinking about how many of the religious right's followers seem to be in distress and how easily they can be manipulated by others to become involved in a movement that causes great harm to gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth.

There is power in confronting our fears and in facing opponents directly. Sometimes, we feel enlivened, strengthened, and even en-

couraged by the very people who are committed to undermining safe schools work. Our belief in the power of making personal connections, listening to others, and finding areas of commonality is reinforced time and time again. Engaging in conversations with people whose opinions are different from ours can leave us feeling less animosity and anger, and more galvanized and inspired to continue our work.

### **Taking Action**

Action is the natural antidote to both denial and despair.

—P. Romney, B. Tatum, and J. Jones in *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 20 (1&2).

As important as it is to be open to the humanity of the opposition, those of us doing safe schools work need to remember that our opponents are well-organized and are a real threat to the lives of young people. Their influence is everywhere. George W. Bush is unapologetic in his support of antigay groups and of policies that erode civil rights. In Massachusetts, when Jane Swift became acting governor in the spring of 2001, she dismissed same-sex marriage and civil unions, saying to the press, "It's not on my radar screen." And students across the nation continue to inflict violence on themselves and others as a direct result of being the victims of harassment.

Much remains to be done. Although the work can be challenging, the rewards are enormous. For us, being part of the Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students has been a gift. The process of writing this book has helped sustain our spirit as we have reflected on the bravery and boldness of the people whose experiences we have shared.

Our contact with the next generation gives us hope. We leave you with the words of one student who was frustrated that no one in her school was taking the lead to start a GSA. While waiting for someone to step in and take charge, she had an epiphany. "I wondered why someone didn't do anything, then I realized, I am someone."