



Leanne Iskander

I found that the kids at our school never really had a sense of community, they never really had anywhere to go and there wasn't anything about queer people in the curriculum, so I felt like we needed a safe place. It was really upsetting when I found out our Gay/Straight Alliance was denied at school because I wasn't expecting that. I would have thought that it would have been discrimination for them to say no. We already had a bunch of students who were really excited about the creation of a GSA, so after it was denied, we decided that we didn't want to take no for an answer. We wanted to change people's minds.

We started a Facebook group to keep track of the members and to help decide what we wanted to do next, and then *Xtra!* found out about it. After talking to them, a whole bunch of newspapers picked our story up. It was a real surprise because I didn't expect people to care as much as they did. When this first hit the media, there was a lot more bullying from the other students, they immediately treated us worse and we weren't expecting that. But once we got a group of students who were really supportive, a lot of that stopped. Bullying for queer youth has always been an issue and I think a lot of it still goes unreported. So it's important to have support, so you know that if you are being bullied there are 50 of us who will stand up for you and understand what you're going through. That's why a GSA is needed.

Eventually, the bishops and trustees came up with a memorandum that allowed LGBT groups, but they were to be strictly anti-bullying groups, which is what we ended up having until the end of the school year,

last year. So we didn't get the name we wanted for our group. They were adamant that we couldn't have a GSA. Even when we had our anti-bullying group and we treated it as our Gay/Straight Alliance group, we couldn't call it that.

We really want to push for it to be named a GSA because we feel it's really important. It needed to have a name that reflected the purpose of the group so that students in need of its support would know where to go. The group has to be student run as well; it can't be run by the chaplain and have them saying homophobic things, because that's not a support group.

It's been amazing to see how many people do care. All the media attention is worth it and we were really able to get the word out about the need for GSAs in Catholic schools by marching in the Pride parade this year as well.

I really don't think the School Board can do anything to us, so we have nothing to lose. We're legally obligated to be in school, so the school should serve us and give us the support we need. You just have to know that you're right. If you know your rights and you have a good support group, then you can't be intimidated. If you want change, then try and make it happen.

Leanne Iskander attends St. Joseph's Catholic Secondary School in Mississauga, where she continues to struggle to have her GSA officially recognized. She was 2011's most honoured dyke, "unofficial" youth grand marshal and named Inspire Awards 2011 LGBTQ Youth of the Year.