

Film Review

The Year We Thought about Love (2014) Ellen Brodsky – Director/Producer

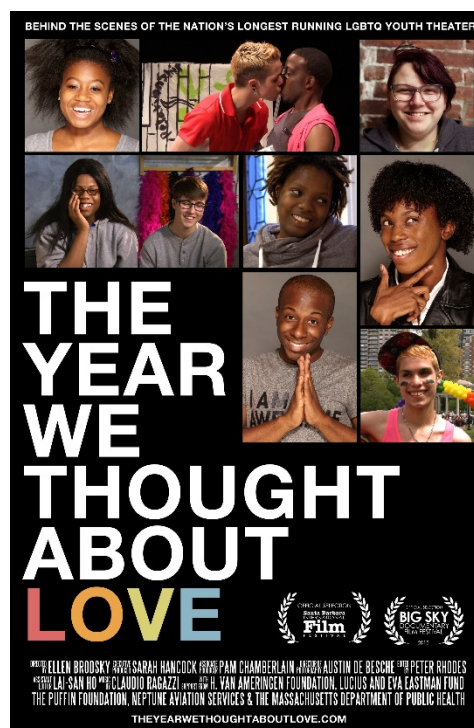
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*Laughter—that’s the constant power that drives **The Year We Thought about Love**, a film about an LGBTQ youth troupe out of Boston. The teens are a part of True Colors, a program for queer youth formed by The Theater Offensive, a 25-year-old organization whose mission is “to present the diversity of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender lives in art so bold it breaks through personal isolation, challenges the status quo, and builds thriving communities.”*

--Review by Kim Hoffman (May 27, 2015)

In 68 minutes, Ellen Brodsky, Director/Producer, and Sarah Hancock, Executive Producer of *The Year We Thought about Love*, spend a year behind the scenes of a diverse LGBTQ youth theater troupe in Boston. The camera crew follows the 16-member cast of True Colors: OUT Youth Theater in rehearsals, school assemblies, and their homes as they transform life issues into performances for social change. The film includes the following eight vignettes:

1. Alyssa, 18, starts as Dellandre and soon claims her transgender identity;
2. Chi, 22, believes that a relationship with God helps him to survive but is troubled by his church's condemnation of homosexuality;
3. Giftson, 19, seeks a life in professional theater, but a personal tragedy and finances force him to focus on immediate employment;



4. Kriss, 21, describes himself as genderqueer accepting all pronouns and looks forward to a first date;
5. Roxas, 17, faces physical danger as a gay man and is protected by a loving mother in a safe supportive home;
6. Trae, 15, has confidence and energy but bad luck with love, and she is wary of any new relationship;
7. Nick, 34, the youth theater director, faces the stress of planning his same sex wedding; and
8. Ayden, 17, searches for a comfortable gender expression and ultimately identifies with a combination of masculine and feminine styles.

The award winning video has accommodations for equity and diversity. The film is closed captioned with subtitles in Spanish and Haitian Creole.

Each year thousands of independent documentaries are made in the United States, but less than 1% are licensed for franchised movie theaters. Outstanding documentaries such as this one are shown at film festivals and by film societies. *The Year We Thought about Love* has been shown in 21 states and six nations. In 2015 the film was featured at the Miami Gay & Lesbian Film Festival; the St. Louis QFest; the Mumbai International Queer Film Festival; Frameline, the San Francisco International LGBTQ Film Festival; Los Angeles Outfest; San Jose Cinequest; and the Seoul International Women's film fest.

The film's eight episodes run the full gamut of emotions from utter joy to dismal despair. Each participant shares similar but individual stories about coming out after concealing their sexual/gender identities, preferences, orientations, and relationships. Many were in traditional relationships before they recognized and accepted their sexual/gender orientations and identities. Many parents, struggling to understand this time of change, think their child is going through a phase from which they will emerge as normal or straight. Others understand the prejudice and discrimination awaiting their child and become protective and at times paranoid, fearing their loved one will be a victim of a hate crime. Some parents reject their LGBTQ child as abnormal and expel them from their home. Too often religious organizations, while preaching acceptance and forgiveness, condemn homosexuality or any activity and ceremony that their dogma does not regard as traditional. Two major unresolved faith-based issues are non-traditional marriages and the adoption of a child by a LGBTQ individual, couple, or family.

The cast's life experiences form the basis of classes, workshops, and plays conducted by *True Colors: OUT Youth Theater*. The group for the last 25 years has trained lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and allied youth leaders (ages 14-29) to

change knowledge, perception, attitudes, appreciation, and treatment of LGBTQ community members. Most of the film follows the daily life of eight individuals participating in classes, workshops, and plays intertwined with scenes of interactions with their families and significant others. Since many cast members are in their teens, the content of the performances in Boston area middle and secondary schools is generationally appropriate and necessary. Peer pressure reinforces traditional attitudes and stereotypes about gender and sexuality. The film captures the emotional reactions of high school audiences, for instance, to a scene in the play where two males spontaneously kiss each other.



After the play concludes, the cast remains on the stage and responds to questions and comments from the audience. This is when the hard learning occurs. To prepare teachers, counselors, and facilitators to obtain the maximum benefit of showing *The Year We Thought about Love* to students and community members, there is a 59-page online downloadable [discussion guide](#) which suggests gender sensitive policies for schools:

- Fairly enforced non-discrimination and anti-bullying/harassment policies that explicitly protect LGBT students
- School forms and applications that are inclusive of all identities and family structures
- Gender-neutral dress code, including yearbook photos
- Gender-neutral and/or private bathrooms and changing areas
- School events and celebrations that are safe for and inclusive of LGBT students
- Proms, homecoming, and athletic events that allow for gender-neutral alternatives to “King” and “Queen”
- Valentine’s Day celebrations inclusive of LGBT and non-coupled students
- Observations of Mother’s Day and Father’s Day that affirm all family structures

- Health and sexuality education that is inclusive of all sexual orientations and gender identities
- Curriculum that regularly includes information about LGBT people, history, and events
- Media center resources and displays that are inclusive of LGBT people, history, and issues
- Athletic teams and events that are safe for and inclusive of LGBT students
- Gay Student Alliances and other student clubs that combat name-calling, bullying, and harassment
- School publications that include LGBT people and issues

Each year approximately 13 million American K-12 students from diverse racial, social, ethnic, religious, economic, and sexual orientation backgrounds are bullied. Most of the victims suffer silently, hoping to minimize and conceal their humiliation. Many self-advocate because teachers, school administrators, parents, adults, and law enforcement accept the social cliché that bullying is a natural stage of growing up in a competitive society. The video deals with stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination directed against LGBT people, even though recent survey and tracking data lack reliability because of the associated consequences of coming out or being outted.

Twenty-five years before the video was filmed in Boston, a group of Massachusetts educators, in 1990, formed a group currently known as GLSEN, the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (<http://www.glsen.org/>), which has since grown into a national organization. GLSEN conducts and publishes extensive research about LGBT issues in school, where 8 out of 10 LGBT students are harassed, with the objective of creating bullying-free environments. GLSEN works to assure each member of every school community is valued and respected regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. They work to educate teachers, students, and the public about the damaging effects of homophobia. Based on data from the 2013 National School Climate Survey, GLSEN state snapshots provide facts on school climate for LGBT students in Massachusetts and other states. The screen shot of its website in the next page illustrates rich information provided by this organization. Resources such as this will assist educators and parents as well as students when educating themselves and others.

GLSEN[®] SCHOOL CLIMATE IN MASSACHUSETTS



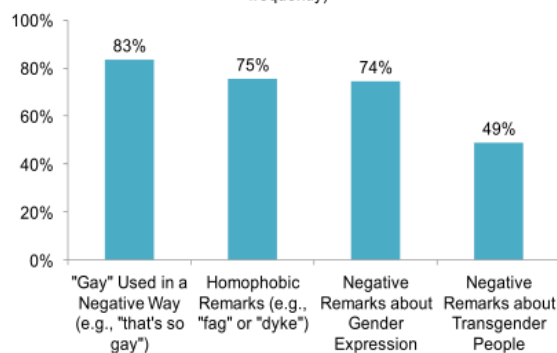
2013 STATE SNAPSHOT

Findings from the GLSEN 2013 *National School Climate Survey* demonstrate that Massachusetts schools were not safe for many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) secondary school students. In addition, many LGBT students in Massachusetts did not have access to important school resources, such as having an LGBT-inclusive curriculum, and were not protected by comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment school policies.

FACT: The vast majority of LGBT students in Massachusetts regularly heard anti-LGBT remarks.

- More than 8 in 10 heard “gay” used in a negative way (e.g., “that’s so gay”) and more than 7 in 10 heard other homophobic remarks (e.g., “fag” or “dyke”) at school regularly (i.e., sometimes, often, or frequently; see Figure 1).
- More than 7 in 10 regularly heard other students in their school make negative remarks about how someone expressed their gender, such as comments about someone not acting “feminine” or “masculine” enough (see Figure 1).
- 5 in 10 regularly heard negative remarks about transgender people (see Figure 1).
- Students also heard anti-LGBT language from school staff. 18% regularly heard staff make negative remarks about someone’s gender expression, and 8% regularly heard school staff make homophobic remarks.

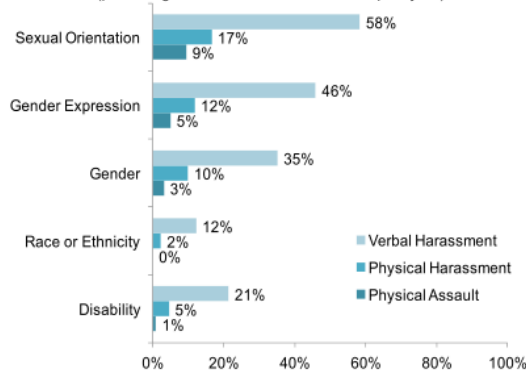
Figure 1. Hearing Anti-LGBT Remarks from Students in Massachusetts Schools
(percentage hearing remarks sometimes, often, or frequently)



FACT: Most LGBT students in Massachusetts had been victimized at school. The majority of these incidents were not reported to adult authorities.

- The majority experienced verbal harassment (e.g., called names or threatened): nearly 6 in 10 based on their sexual orientation and more than 4 in 10 based on the way they expressed their gender (see Figure 2).
- Many also experienced physical harassment and physical assault: for example, nearly 2 in 10 were physically harassed (e.g., pushed or shoved) based on their sexual orientation and 5% were physically assaulted (e.g., punched, kicked, or injured with a weapon) based on the way they expressed their gender (see Figure 2).
- Students also reported high levels of other forms of harassment at school: 88% felt deliberately excluded or “left out” by peers; 69% had mean rumors or lies told about them; 44% were sexually harassed; 37% experienced electronic harassment or “cyberbullying”; and 34% had property (e.g., car, clothing, or books) deliberately damaged and/or stolen.

Figure 2. Harassment and Assault in Massachusetts Schools
(percentage harassed or assaulted in the past year)



- 58% of students who were harassed or assaulted in school *never* reported it to school staff, and 60% *never* told a family member about the incident. Among students who did report incidents to school authorities, only 39% said that reporting resulted in effective intervention by staff.

Conclusion

The eight vignettes in *The Year We Thought about Love* and the troupe's daily lives give viewers a profound and intimate insight into the struggles, challenges, frustrations, and joys of diverse LGBT youth in an urban setting. The film makers deserve recognition for producing a video that expresses the power of dramatic arts to change awareness, attitudes, and behaviors about others and ourselves.

The video earns a 9.5 on a scale of 10 in terms of addressing social issues; engaging anecdotal dialogue; promoting self-reflection about LGBT youth; and showing excellence in cinematography, pacing, sound, and editing. Schools and other community organizations should consider acquiring this DVD for their resource library and hosting a public showing and discussion of this powerful and moving documentary.

Resources for LGBTG Youth and Families

Discussion Guide (2014)

<http://www.theyearwethoughtaboutlove.com/>

Helplines for LGBTQ Folks, Mostly for Youth

<http://www.theyearwethoughtaboutlove.com/resources/#helplines>

LGBT Resources for Various Faith Communities

<http://www.theyearwethoughtaboutlove.com/resources/#Faith>

LGBTQ Youth- friendly Organizations

<http://www.theyearwethoughtaboutlove.com/resources/#orgs>

Resources for Parents

<http://www.theyearwethoughtaboutlove.com/resources/#Parents>

Transgender Resources for Educators

<http://www.theyearwethoughtaboutlove.com/resources/#Transgender>