

# Blending Support and Social Action:

## The Power of a Gay-Straight Alliance and PrideWorks Conference

Reva Friedman-Nimz

University of Kansas

Jennifer Altman

Mamaroneck High School

Spencer Cain

Mamaroneck High School

Shira Korn

Mamaroneck High School

Mary Jane Karger

Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network

Michael J. Witsch

Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network

Sarah Muffly

Smith College

Melanie Weiss

LILITH Magazine

The role of a Gay-Straight Alliance as a force for social justice, as well as for support in a school community, is highlighted in one GSA's story. The GSA and an annual countywide conference, PrideWorks, have as their key goals education and advocacy. Their focus on making schools an inclusive and respectful place where all are welcome and valued carries a message for students, parents, and professionals. An underlying theme of bright, articulate teens as the leadership force emerges through the students' words and adults' reflections. The stories of the GSA and conference are told through interviews with key individuals, including teachers, current and former students, and other school personnel. Connections are made to the larger context of the "new gay teenager."

**I**nterviewer's note: For several years, I (Reva Friedman-Nimz, first author) have been involved with the National Association for Gifted Children's (NAGC) initiative relating to gifted and gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (G/GLBTQ) youth and allies. NAGC established a G/GLBTQ task force, on which I served, and currently has created a work group (which I have the fortune to co-chair with Richard Cash) focusing on a Gifted Sexually Diverse (GSD) agenda for the organization. When my niece, Shira Korn, joined her high school's Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), we started to talk about GSAs, their role in supporting students (gay, questioning, and allies) and affecting school climate. As Shira moved into leadership positions in the Mamaroneck High School's GSA, she also shared with me her experiences with a countywide conference, titled *Healing the Hurt*, now

called *PrideWorks*. From our perspective on the NAGC task force and work group, we believe that the GSA and *PrideWorks* conference are unique, and that there is a larger audience that could benefit from their work. I conducted by telephone and e-mail interviews with several key individuals, including current and former students, teachers, and a school social worker who also represents the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN). Because in many instances I paraphrased interviewees' words, or comments were similar across individuals, quotes are used sparingly. To ensure accuracy, the manuscript was e-mailed to all interviewees for their review and edited accordingly. For ease of understanding, note that adults are listed with first and last names, and students with first name and last initial.

## Context and History

The Mamaroneck School District is located in Westchester County, NY, a relatively liberal and financially diverse community at the edge of the New York City metroplex. Ethnic diversity is present but varies among school districts. A health teacher at Mamaroneck High School started the Gay-Straight Alliance as a support group for self-identified gay students and their allies. Initially the group emphasized support.

**Jenn Altman, English teacher and current GSA advisor:**

I took over advising the group when Bobbi (founder and advisor) retired. I have been involved with the GSA 5 years, for the past 4 years as its advisor.

**Sarah Muffly, former co-president, now entering her junior year at Smith College:** I was going to a Unitarian Universalist camp. We had a leader who was openly gay. He led a social action/social awareness program that inspired me to get involved. I felt compelled.

**Shira Korn, a rising senior, will serve as co-president for the school year 2006–2007:** I started attending the group at the request of my friend George, who came out to me in middle school. That experience triggered my values and made me aware of my prejudices, biases. George found out about the club in high school and asked me to accompany him. I found the GSA's messages to be powerful and compelling—like “Whoever you are, you are welcome.” “I love you because of this—because now I know more about you.” I loved being around people who were brave enough to be open about their beliefs.

**Spencer Cain, a rising senior and active GSA member:** I joined the GSA during the middle to end of my freshman year. I already had many friends in the group (only girls, though). As a member of the club it helped in the coming out—although I did not really need to “come out” in that I had surrounded myself with the right people—people who accepted and valued me.

**Mike Witsch:** I was a media teacher at the time. Bobbi recruited me because she knew I was active in GLSEN.

## How Did the Group Develop Its Focus on Social Action?

**Jenn Altman:** Membership had shrunk dramatically. There was only a small group of active students (about five or six). The group's three leaders were trying to

put together a schoolwide diversity day conference. They had huge dreams of 20 speakers, 20 workshops, and schoolwide speakers. They had been told by the administration that there was no reason *not* to plan it. All three were very smart, competent, high overachievers. They had plans to transform the school in one day. I got involved in putting the day together with them. It was highly successful! Our school had in the past sponsored a Diversity Day, but it had been at least 4 years since there had been one. A number of the workshops focused on LGBT issues, which started to raise awareness, especially on issues related to teens.

When I started advising the club, one of the assistant principals reminded me about Mamaroneck School District Foundation funds. I wrote a proposal to bring a speaker to school and to fund several students to go to the Healing the Hurt conference. Our speaker was Kevin Jennings, from GLSEN (Interviewer's note: JA describes in a later section how Jennings involved the GSA in collecting, compiling, and analyzing a school climate survey information he used as the basis of his assembly talk). The MHS administration supported the speaker by making the assembly with Kevin Jennings mandatory, as well as follow-up breakout sessions. Our district then designated funds to support GSA activities.

## Expanding the Membership

**Jenn Altman:** There were only three–six kids when I first became involved. All were girls. Three were graduating seniors. I was starting to take over for a teacher who was retiring. I talked with these three girls about bringing in more people in. They made a plan—identified individual kids who they thought could be persuaded to get more involved.

These students had connections to the high school's theatre crowd. There was also a sophomore, Sarah, and a boy who was a junior who had moved from the Ukraine about a year earlier. He especially was looking for community—gay kids in the school. Sarah and Peter were “anointed” as co-presidents. Peter launched a flyer campaign, thoughtful ones, too, like “Promote equality—fight injustice” [and] “You can make a difference”—nonconfrontational, inviting messages. He would meet kids in the library at 7 a.m. to copy and distribute flyers.

The first year they participated in the Day of Silence they set up table and cards. At this point there were only seven members in the GSA. By first period, more than 100 kids had signed up. Peter and Sarah capitalized on this burst of enthusiasm and publicity.

Sarah formed a phone chain. She phoned and sent e-mails before every meeting. At first, this strategy brought in about 10 freshmen—coincidentally [they] were kids who I taught (English). I continue to make the GSA's message public—I have GSA information and posters all over my classroom.

**Sarah M.:** Instead of choosing support *or* social action, we decided to create a balance between action, to get students to commit themselves to a cause and to support each other. We started a schedule of weekly meetings. We switched off between social action and support focuses each week. I sent out weekly agendas via e-mail two days before each meeting to mentally prepare students for the meeting, and then I would make phone calls. Our group met on Fridays at lunch in Jenn Altman's classroom. I had a master e-mail list of all the members. The officers (co-presidents, vice president) would talk our advisor, Altman, about assigning work—not according to power but dividing responsibility according to who was available. Our basic principles were to pick broad enough issues that everyone could relate to them—“everyone is working toward the same goal, not everyone uses the same means.” For instance, one of our members created a flyer campaign with pretty noncontroversial slogans. That was a time when lots of flyers were getting torn down at school. We decided to write on the back of our flyers something like “If you tore down this poster, you have now committed a hate crime.” We also held bake sales to raise money. They were good money raisers.

**Jenn Altman:** Offering a balanced program has sometimes been a source of heated discussion within the group. Sarah Muffly served as co-president her senior year with Emily Rosen, who is a year younger than she. The following year, Emily Rosen and Emma Kravet were co-presidents and Shira Korn became a vice president. Emily wrote exceptionally thoughtful and moving e-mails to the entire group that were truly inspirational. Both Emily and Emma were extremely dedicated and led interesting meetings and organized great events. An interesting debate emerged during their year as president when another club officer felt that the GSA did have enough of a social action component and desperately wanted the GSA to cosponsor events with the school's AIDS Awareness club. Emma felt very strongly that the GSA should be a safe haven for kids in our school first and foremost. Of course, some of the debate was more about the personalities involved than the issues, but there was a social action vs. community-building element in that dispute.

## What Makes the GSA Such a Vibrant Force at Mamaroneck High School?

**Jenn Altman, Sarah M., Shira K., and Spencer C.:** The GSA at MHS is different from other clubs—its purpose is not narrowly focused as other clubs do. For example, it is not pure social action, like Save the Children. Although one of the goals is social action, the central goal is to create a community at school. The GSA continues to build community through delegating even the most mundane of tasks so that everyone who participates has an investment in the club.

For example, when we contracted with Kevin Jennings (founder of GLSEN, the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network) to give a schoolwide assembly and to lead an evening community meeting, he had the group (about 12 students) administer a school climate survey beforehand. About 1,300 kids responded. Compiling and analyzing the results was a huge amount of work, but the project brought kids together and gave them a purpose for involvement. Kevin then came to our school as an assembly speaker, told his life story and talked about social action on an individual level. In an evening session for parents, he focused on how he formed a GSA with his own students, about founding GLSEN and its purpose.

We have printed and distributed “supporter” T-shirts. We presented one to a representative of the Board of Education. We considered this campaign a success when our current assistant superintendent of schools asked for a T-shirt.

Now we try to strike a balance between business and social time when we meet. We might discuss business or other social action activities like the conference, or purely social activities like a movie night with just our GSA or with another high school. We participate in events like the Pride parade (Interviewer's note: The conference to which they refer, PrideWorks, is described later). People come to us for different reasons and to fill different needs. Our GSA tries to meet all needs. There is a broad range, from people looking for a place to come out, or who are struggling, who people who are friends, family members, or generally supporters.

## A Gifted Connection?

Interviewer's note: As a school in a state with permissive legislation, Mamaroneck High School does not offer a gifted education program. I asked each interviewee about their perception of gifted student involvement in the GSA.

Their advisor's comment sums up a general perception. Their views, particularly of the leadership, confirm the informal findings of the NAGC Work Group on Gifted Sexually Diverse Children and Youth—that bright, creative teens are often at the core of instigating a GSA or particular GSA-sponsored projects.

**Jenn Altman:** There is a high proportion of bright students at the core of the GSA. Membership has lots of overlap with the theater community and the literary magazine. It attracts very bright kids who are highly active in many different spheres. I would call the group's leaders the intelligentsia of our school.

### The PrideWorks Conference

Currently, GLSEN's Hudson Valley chapter is the umbrella organization that coordinates funding and provides major underwriting. Planning and production are a collaboration of GLSEN Hudson Valley, PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), the Westchester Jewish Community Services' Center Lane, and the Westchester County Executive's LGBT Liaison. The Center Lane agency offers a support group for gay and questioning teens. According to the adult leadership, the conference's prime purposes are education and advocacy. There is a focus on helping attendees to understand the key problem—that schools are not safe—and then to learn how to advocate to make schools safe, inclusive, and respectful places for learning.

**Mary Jane Karger, school social worker and GLSEN representative:** The idea for the conference was sparked by a similar activity PFLAG created. We read in the Texas chapter's newsletter about an educational conference they sponsored. In 1999, we decided to try a similar approach to educate the community, but primarily through GLSEN. One gay man from our community was very helpful in starting to organize us, and there were a few people from PFLAG and GLSEN. We went to a local community college to give us some space. We had a \$5,000 gift from a wonderful gay man who read about the conference in a brochure. In retrospect, the startup funding was pivotal. We used our mailing lists to get the word out. Anyone planning an event like this needs access to some kind of significant mailing list, like through churches or the state. I had a contact through New York State who helped with lists and mailing labels for guidance counselors, health teachers, school social workers, and school psychologists, as well as principals and student

assistance people. We also contacted social service agencies in the county. We got a nice return of school people. The first year we had 120 people show up—at about \$50 per [person]. It morphed over the years to becoming more school connected, which fits right into the mission of GLSEN. We got two more sponsors—Center Lane and the LGBT liaison from the Westchester County Executive's office. We also cost share with the county—they do the printing, we do the mailing. Each year we apply to the Paul Rappaport Foundation through state, which generates between \$2,500–\$4,200. They want us to provide scholarships to school districts so that low-income students can participate, especially children of color.

**Mike Witsch:** I have participated in the conference for [more than] 6 years. As of this year, there were about 600 attendees—[more than] 300 kids, including more middle school kids whose schools are participating in GLSEN's No Name Calling Week. This program, which targets one week and includes a national competition of student-produced artistic expression relating to the theme (posters, prose, and poetry), takes the stance that name calling is unacceptable in America's schools (see <http://www.nonamecallingweek.org>). One school formed a sticks and stones committee, which produced a year-long program. This year there were [more than] 2,000 entries. PrideWorks honored a local middle school girl who received an honorable mention for her poster.

**Sarah M.:** I was involved in the conference throughout high school. It was valuable to connect with other GSA leaders in my county, to share experiences, ideas, and strategies. It was reassuring to find that there were other kids like me—kids my age who were as passionate about the issue as I was. They reduced feelings of isolation and answered my question, "Are there really more groups like ours?" It also confirmed my hopes for a more inclusive community.

### Constructing the Program

**Mary Jane Karger:** Representatives from each sponsoring agency get together and brainstorm about what they think people need to learn. We try some kind of focus often—such as for parents or for teachers on how to stop name-calling, on hosting a no name-calling week, or a Day of Silence. The thing that is rich about this program is that it mixes students and adults very well, which is reflected in their evaluations. It is good for

students to hear about what the adults are struggling with to try to make a difference.

When we develop the program, we look at what was popular, at the last conference, what was well attended, and there is always an LGBT 101 type of session. Topics are rotated so that there is always something new to attend. We generally include a forum where students can speak. Another type of session considers life after high school: out at work, out teachers. We always have a gay news session about LGBT issues. We have had a GSA club advisor and an administrator round table. We try to raise awareness of heterosexuality and how an anti-LGBT bias hurts us all. Sessions on issues related to sports are always huge. One thing that goes over well is inviting authors of new books. For example, this past year we had an author whose book emphasized what straight allies can do.

As part of our advocacy-building mission, we make a point of looking beyond narrow venues. We ask participants to consider other organizations in which they volunteer so that they get LGBT concerns on the lips of others who are in their organizations. One effect of the conference is that we were able to get people to create more inclusive policies. We were able to get people who have done this in a school district to bring their staff to talk about it. What I love about the PrideWorks advocacy message is that we are getting endorsements through school board associations and PTAs going on record as supporting us. When this happened, I felt it gave our program and our conference real validity—that we were legit. By doing the work to be able to offer continuing education units for social workers, we have added to our legitimacy and value.

The education department of GLSEN has training to help teachers and others to use their kit to analyze a school/district's policies, programs, and practices. Advocacy is at the heart of GLSEN, which is why this conference seems a little different. Our expectation is that participants will go home and make changes. The research shows that once there is a policy that specifically states gender identity, kids are safer, cut school less, and feel safer.

### Qualities of Notable Sessions

Shira K. and Spence C. reviewed “standout” sessions and commented on unexpected learning.

### Transgender

There has been a progression of content and goals over the past three years. The same person, “Evan,” has led the session. He shared a PowerPoint about terms, which created a basic understanding. His message is that you cannot generalize about people, that you need to ask—everyone is different. For example, if a boy wants to date other boys, it does not necessarily mean that he is gay. He could be transgender.

### Young, Gay, and Religious

This was our favorite of the last two years. This year, it was interesting because there was a Mormon, a Jew, and a Christian. The Jewish person led the session. It was interesting to see that you could be part of two communities. I do not think of sexual tolerance and religion. They emphasized that all religions do not necessarily view being gay as a sin. What was rewarding was that you can see that you can carry on normal things, things that are important to your family, and still keep your identity.

### Getting Bi

This panel focused on bisexuality, which is such a controversial topic in our high school. People have a lot of curiosity. The panelists were fairly older, and the leader was a 30–40 something. They disputed the view that bisexuality was a “phase,” countered stereotypes, worked through stereotype problems. The leader talked about his experience—like the adults who said, “this is a phase you’ll come out of,” or “you’re on the path to becoming gay.” They did not offer answers as much as they raised the questions. They focused on a bigger theme of acceptance and acknowledgement, and also addressed meaning of stereotypes and the expectation that one will encounter them. There was a huge response to the session. Even the conference organizers underscheduled the space.

### What PrideWorks Has Meant to You

**Mary Jane Karger:** We have 43 school districts in the county and a total of 47 high schools. We researched how many had some kind of antiharassment policies (23) and invited all of those superintendents to come and be honored with a “Dignity Diploma.” We were delighted that 18 people who represented those districts came to be honored publicly. The framed diploma honored them for at least having a policy. We

have more and more schools that either pay for the bus or for other staff to come. I love it that schools see this as valuable use of staff and student time.

**Spence C.:** “There was a lot I didn’t relate to personally—not affecting my own life. But, it was important to know everything that goes into the self-identity process.” If it pertains to one person in the community, it pertains to every person. Especially in our community, which is liberal but sheltered. In general, I think more people are into donating money to support a cause than into taking the step to bring people together. It expanded my base, like, by getting to meet someone who was transgender or to talk about the issues of bisexuality.

## Reflections

**Shira K.** (*From the perspective of an ally—opening the conversation*): “Being gay is part of the person but it doesn’t define them.” The things we do around the school help people be more aware—the opposite of love is not hate, it is indifference. We make people have a reaction, we make them aware so that they will start thinking and questioning their beliefs and their relationships to the subject (of discrimination against homosexuality).

I think our school is pretty tolerant but it still has problems occasionally. I hear kids say, “That’s so gay.” During the Day of Silence observance, I saw a kid looking at a poster of Matthew Shepard turn to me and say, “Matthew Shepard deserved to die.” I said, “You can believe what you want, but you have no right to wish death on somebody.”

**Jenn Altman:** In our school, it not “the weird kids” who do GSA. Over my 5 years here, I find fewer people expressing prejudices. There has been a gradual change in the value system, resulting in an attitude that is not cool to be prejudiced. There is more of a perception that everyone linked in some way.

**Spence C.:** Our grade in particular has a lot of kids who have come out and really fight for the cause. There are about 50 kids at most meetings, with a core of 20 kids who go to every meeting. Last fall, [more than] 150 signed up for our GSA at the club fair. “By its mere existence, I think that means it is successful. On the most basic level, a GSA should be a safe haven. There is a place where people who are struggling can go, no matter what their orientation. Then you reach out into the school.”

**Sarah M.:** It is important that people know they are not alone in what they are doing—stay focused. You need to strike a balance between the business and the personal sides of the cause—do not be too militant. You do not want to isolate the people you want most to reach. It is so easy to get angry because you know you are right. That righteous anger can give you energy for a while, but it is important to control it. Consider the audience—not everyone will respond to the same tactics. Experience taught me a lot about how this would work—I had to learn quickly what worked and what did not.

I think it would be wonderful if through reading [this article] people would realize or reaffirm their ideas that small actions could have an enormous impact.

## A Last Word

In his thought-provoking book *The New Gay Teenager*, Ritch Savin-Williams (2005) profiles the history of Gay-Straight Alliances, a phenomenon started in 1984 with the inception of Project 10, a school-based program focusing on sensitizing and educating faculty and staff on the existence and needs of gay students (p. 19). He indicates a trend of GSAs proliferating, especially during the past 5 years, as the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network has supported and publicized a mission of support through safe spaces, educating faculty and staff about homophobia, and increasing awareness of gay issues. GLSEN emphasizes that each GSA needs to develop a structure and agenda based on community standards and related needs.

For bright youngsters, self-awareness may be heightened relative to intellect, affect, and gender. Cohn (2003) pointed out that there appear to be patterns of differences in intellectual functioning between heterosexual and homosexual individuals. He reviewed cutting-edge research that suggests the important role played by gifted education services in the lives of gifted and gay students and the increased risk of bullying for gifted and gay students (Peterson & Rischar, 2000).

Savin-Williams offers a larger frame for understanding gay teenagers through his compelling history of the social construction of homosexuality and its modern-day pathologizing and disconnecting from what is known about adolescent development. He asserts that psychologists have had “. . . a concentration on what goes wrong in the lives of gay youth rather than the features associated with the capacity to remain resilient when confronted by adverse life circumstances” (p. 61). Further, he suggests that a focus on labeling youngsters, a feature of the adult world, hampers

effective coping. He highlights the goal of GSAs in supporting successful navigating through the shoals of adolescent development. In the case of Mamaroneck High School, a school without designated gifted education services, I believe the GSA offers an outlet that combines education, support, and advocacy through leadership opportunities. Savin-Williams echoes the comments of Sarah, Shira, and Spence in urging a shift away from labeling, pathologizing, and reducing risk to examining strengths, promoting a positive self-image, and supporting structures that foster a sense of belonging. “The risk factors have been well-documented; the protective factors, which can be innate or environmental (including *good schools* [emphasis added] and families), have not” (Savin-Williams, p. 183).

The active involvement of a key adult in the school community, in this instance in the person of the GSA’s advisor, elaborates Savin-Williams’ (2005) comment. Students, even highly intellectual, capable, and world-savvy, need an advocate. Melanie Weiss, former GSA participant and officer, now a college graduate, articulates Jenn Altman’s pivotal role:

I was one of those three graduating senior girls whom Jenn Altman describes, with wildly unattainable aspirations and many issues about myself still to work out before I could function as an adult. Plus, we had a group that was, we worried, about to become a shambles, missing its core base. Jenn was totally instrumental in changing all of those things. We regarded her a little warily at first—we weren’t used to being kindly treated by the school community, and didn’t understand why a brand-new teacher would want to associate herself with us—but she quickly won us over. She was funny and goofy and *organized* and she understood what we wanted to do. We were 17 years old and, [and] while she tempered our plans and helped us work incrementally, with progressing goals, etc., she never said that we couldn’t or shouldn’t reach past what even we thought was probably impossible.

Moreover, she listened to each of us as we struggled with various issues (college-applications stress, family issues, health problems, coming-out struggles, the spiritual growing pains that are the important focuses of the senior year of high school)—and by “listened,” I mean, “allowed herself to be held hostage as we colonized her tiny office multiple times a week.” She was a teacher who, for me at least, became and continues to be a mentor and a friend. She’s awesome.

Shira Korn and I conceptualized this project as a way to tell the story of a successful support group and an interesting conference. During the course of visiting with the teens and adults involved in both ventures, I experienced a personal shift to reframing the role of a Gay-Straight Alliance as a key instigator of a positive school climate, a place that promotes tolerance and reduces prejudice based on labels. The countywide conference performs a valuable educational function: advocacy for and celebration of safe, respectful, and inviting schools and communities, welcoming all learners. The intergenerational aspects of both ventures create a powerful model of the participatory democracy we hope the next generation will carry into their adult lives.

## References

- Cohn, S. (2003). The gifted gay learner. In J. A. Castellano (Ed.), *Special populations in gifted education* (pp. 123–134). New York: Pearson Education.
- Peterson, J., & Rischar, H. (2000). Gifted and gay: A study of the adolescent experience. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 44, 231–246.
- Savin-Williams, R. C. (2005). *The new gay teenager*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.