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## GSAs Thriving In Rural America

Mar. 4, 2010 ? Danielle

Like many states, Virginia has a history as a battleground state when it comes to LGBT rights. Recently the Governor of Virginia repealed non-discrimination protections for state employees on the basis of sexual orientation. However, in rural parts of that same state, students like **Timothy Rogers** are taking the bold and brave step to form Gay-Straight Alliances to fight discrimination.

When asked about forming a GSA at his own school, Timothy said, "Our county has two Gay-Straight Alliances. Some schools are more welcoming to them than others. Our principal at first seemed really opposed to the idea."

Every week, students outside of California call GSA Network to get more information about their rights and what they can do to start a Gay-Straight Alliance. Last week, Timothy in Virginia reached out to GSA Network's **National Program Manager Danielle Askini** to get information about his rights, and specifically how to talk to his Principal.

Timothy shared, "Our Principal wanted us to call the group 'Spectrum'. When we first talked to her about starting a gay-straight alliance, she seemed completely opposed to the idea of having the word 'gay' in our title. She also said she needed to approve everything our club did. It left me feeling like we weren't going to be able to do much but have a support group. We really wanted to start the Gay-Straight alliance to tackle the homophobia at our school."

"I get lots of calls like Timothy's," says Danielle. "Students from around the country call me when they face an administration that is initially opposed to having a GSA. I always encourage students to [read the legal rights](#) <sup>[1]</sup> section of our website, as well as to locate local legal organizations in their area. I help students come up with a solid plan of what their GSA will do to engage their school administrator in a conversation about their GSA goals as well as their legal rights."

Timothy, his fellow students, and club sponsor found that after giving their principal more specific legal information and asking her what her concerns. By engaging in a dialogue, they learned that what she was really concerned about was how parents would react.

"She was afraid about what she would do if a student's parents called to find out if they were in the Gay-Straight Alliance. We reminded her that it is made up of both gay and straight students. So, being involved

could mean you just want to stop harassment in school. We also talked to her for a while about the need for safety in our school," shared Timothy, who also learned that his principal felt reassured after talking to other schools in the area that have a GSA. "After we spent time talking about the issues, she really opened up and seemed to be much more willing to let us call the group the Gay-Straight Alliance. Having the legal resources, the information from the ACLU and GSA Network really helped us to make our case. She has come around to being very supportive."

Timothy offered other students advice. "I think that students who want a GSA should fight for it. However, they should go about it peacefully and follow the school's procedures. Get together with your friends and others and go as a group to peacefully show them how much support the group has. I feel the best thing to do is to be as kind as possible and not rude."

As for his GSA's plans this year, Timothy shared, "We plan to get together and help make our school safer for all LGBT students. We are planning some fun activities to enjoy ourselves, such as going out to the movies together and having some discussions about ourselves and sharing our experience with others."

Across the country there are nearly 4,500 GSAs with over 760 registered in California alone. Each region has its own unique challenges, but all students across the country are protected under the Federal Equal Access Act. States in the South Eastern part of the US represent some of the fastest GSA growth according to statistics from the National Association of GSA Network's annual survey. Courageous students like Timothy are the leading reason for that growth. Currently there are four thriving GSA Networks in the South East United States. You can learn more about those networks through our [National Directory](#) [2]. GSA Network coordinates the National Association of GSA Networks. If you are interested in starting a GSA Network in your state, please visit our website or email **Danielle Askini**, National Program Manager at [danielle@gsanetwork.org](mailto:danielle@gsanetwork.org) [3]

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#### Links

[1] <http://gsanetwork.org/resources/legal-resources>

[2] <http://gsanetwork.org/national-directory>

[3] <mailto:danielle@gsanetwork.org>