



Published on *Genders & Sexualities Alliance Network* (<http://gsanetwork.org>)

[Home](#) > Why Prom Matters

Why Prom Matters

May. 25, 2010 ? Carolyn

You probably know a lot about Constance McMillen. Constance is the 18-year-old senior at Itawamba Agricultural High School in Fulton, Mississippi who had the guts to challenge her district's ban on same-sex couples attending prom. She asked her Vice Principal for permission to bring her girlfriend and to wear a tux. He said no. So she sought help from the ACLU. A federal judge ruled it was unconstitutional for the district to ban same-sex couples. So school officials cancelled the prom. Then parents organized two proms: a real one for the whole senior class, and a fake one for Constance, her girlfriend, and five other students. It was a cruel hoax designed to insult and exclude.

The lawsuit against the district continues. Meanwhile, every day at school is hell for Constance. Her classmates won't speak to her. Despite receiving death threats, she is enduring the hate because she is determined to graduate.

An important part of the prom story is missing from the media narrative, and thus, from the national conversation. Constance took the courageous step to stand up for her rights because she has the support of movement organizations dedicated to helping all of us join together to win equality and justice. The media mentioned the ACLU and the lawsuit. But there was another important organization that played a part.

You probably didn't hear that the [Mississippi Safe Schools Coalition \(MSSC\)](#) ^[1] has been organizing students in that state for nearly two years. In 2008 when a Jackson public high school prohibited students from bringing a same-sex date to prom, MSSC intervened and got the policy changed. Now, through its PromWatch project, MSSC encourages students to report discriminatory prom practices. Constance knew about this. GSA Network helped educate Constance through our training and continued support of MSSC activists.

The whole truth is that Constance felt empowered to do what she did precisely because of the larger movement.

I am reminded of Rosa Parks. Too many people think that her refusal to give up her seat on the bus to a white passenger in 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama was an isolated act of civil

disobedience. In truth she was part of a larger organized effort. Yes, she had had enough that day. And she was among a group of dedicated African-American activists building strong organizations that would engage ordinary people to challenge institutionalized racism. Rosa Parks did spark the Montgomery bus boycott, but community organizing already had laid the groundwork for its success.

At GSA Network, we debunk the myth that movements are sparked by a lone hero. We empower youth to organize other students to stand up for their rights. We teach them about grassroots social change movements, and how they can be leaders in the safe schools movement through GSA organizing and fighting for non-discrimination policies. We teach them the Rosa Parks story. And we help statewide GSA organizations that support courageous students like Constance McMillen when they challenge the system and stand up for justice.

Prom matters a lot. It is an iconic rite of passage for high school seniors. Sadly, the cultural norm still is that prom is only for opposite-sex couples.

When Constance decided to challenge her school's ban on same-sex couples attending prom, she was challenging a deeply entrenched tradition ? and she knew it. She understood the ramifications, and knew she was part of a movement.

GSA Network is proud to be able to train 25 statewide GSA organizations through our [National Program](#) [2]. These groups train youth activists to organize in their communities. Safe schools activists in Mississippi empowered Constance McMillen. Now Constance is inspiring youth nationwide and shining a spotlight on the injustice of discrimination in a way that resonates with mainstream America.

Source URL: <http://gsanetwork.org/news/blog/why-prom-matters/05/25/10>

Links

[1] <http://www.mssafeschools.org/>

[2] <http://gsanetwork.org/get-involved/change-nation>