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## Hostile Climates Don't Stop GSAs

Dec. 19, 2011 ? laura

*This post is the second in a series from Laura Wadden, GSA Network's National Program Manager, who just returned from a 9-day road trip through Missouri, Tennessee, Kentucky, Indiana and Illinois.*

Over 1,328 miles, 9 days and visiting 5 organizations, I heard a lot of stories. Some stories of LGBT youth and their organizations sounded familiar ? like name-calling, harassment, and lack of funding for programming. Other stories stopped me in my tracks.

In a presentation about local activism, Lindsay Kee, Communications Director of the [ACLU of Tennessee](#) <sup>[1]</sup>, showed us several slides explaining the issues GSAs face at school. This school was Sequoyah High School in Madisonville, Tennessee, where students are trying to start a GSA, but were [facing threats and harassment from administrators](#) <sup>[2]</sup>.



One

photo featured a photograph of community members standing together, holding hands and surrounding the entire school and all of us ooh?d and awed at the activists on the screen. Kee quickly stopped us from ooh?ing and aweing. ?No, no?They?re praying that the GSA will go away,? Kee said. The room got quiet. In fact, the community member activists were praying in opposition to the formation of the GSA and had surrounded the high school.

In **Louisville, Kentucky**, at [Louisville Youth Group](#) [3], I met with over 15 youth activists from five different GSAs in the Louisville area. One young person shared his story about the violent threats he heard at school. Many of the other students nodded their heads in understanding because they too had faced the same violence.

**These activists in Tennessee and Kentucky are facing extremely hostile climates, and one thing is still true. The GSA movement is going strong in both of those states.**

While in Tennessee, I met with Rebecca Lucas, member of the Board of Directors of [East Tennessee GLSEN Chapter](#) [4], who is planning a community forum about the issues facing the Sequoyah High School GSA. We talked about ways that they could support GSA youth activists at school and in the community. They explained **several ideas that have worked for the local GSAs**, including:

- utilizing resources for discussing issues about the intersection of religion and LGBTQ issues,

- building the skills of youth and adults to have difficult conversations with administrators and community members about GSAs
- holding the GSA meetings outside of school,
- and promoting youth leadership.

I also pointed Lucas to the resources that exist for dealing with opposition and hostile climates, especially GSA Network's [?Dealing with Hostility and Opposition?](#) <sup>[5]</sup> resource and the [GSA Advisor Handbook](#) <sup>[6]</sup>, which has a page called, ?Common arguments against GSAs? And why they're wrong.? Along with the [?Developing a Strategy?](#) <sup>[7]</sup> section of GSA Network's website, this is a good tool for all GSA activists working in hostile climates.

In Louisville, the student who was threatened with serious violence is also the founder of his GSA, which debuted during the last school year. His GSA recently organized a successful campaign to get books with LGBTQ topics into the library, a major accomplishment for any GSA!

While one would think that GSAs are non-existent in hostile climates, they are surviving thanks to brave youth leaders. When I worked with several of the youth to list high schools with GSAs in the Louisville area, the youth activists named over 10 high school GSAs already in existence. And more are forming all the time.

**These were just a few examples that show a simple and powerful fact: GSAs are everywhere. And hostile climates don't stop and will never stop youth activists from making it better.**

**Do you have a story about making it better for LGBT youth in a hostile climate? We'd love to hear it!** Email Jill Marcellus at [jill@gsanetwork.org](mailto:jill@gsanetwork.org)

<sup>[8]</sup>  
*Check back at [gsanetwork.org](http://gsanetwork.org) to learn more about my trip and read the final blog in the series, ?Making the Shift from Clients to Activists?.*

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#### **Links**

[1] <http://www.aclu-tn.org/>

[2] <http://www.change.org/petitions/investigate-harassment-of-lgbtq-youth-at-sequoyah-high-school-allow-a-gsa>

[3] <http://www.louisvilleyouthgroup.org>

[4] <http://www.easttngsa.com/>

[5] <http://gsanetwork.org/resources/building-your-gsa/dealing-hostility-opposition>

[6] <http://gsanetwork.org/advisor-handbook>

[7] <http://gsanetwork.org/resources/gsa-actions-events/developing-strategy>

[8] <mailto:jill@gsanetwork.org?subject=!%20have%20a%20story%20about%20making%20it%20better!>