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Breakthrough Conversations for Safer Education

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GSA Network is part of a coalition of organizations participating in the Breakthrough Conversations Project, which encourages LGBT people and allies to have one-on-one conversations with their friends and family about how issues like marriage, bullying, and the FAIR Education Act matter to them personally.



As a former faith-based organizer trained in the art of strategic questioning to surface core values, participating in the Breakthrough Conversations project has for me produced thought-provoking, heart-warming, and inspiring dialogue.

These days many volunteers are engaged in speed-dial election phone banking, instructed to spend no more than 2 minutes to get simply a "yes" or "no" answer. Callers must quickly and politely move on to the next hundred calls to make that hour. For the "maybes," talking points are rehearsed verbatim. There is nothing visceral about it.

These conversations on the other hand, are deep. For some activists who have forgotten what it's like to feel conflicted or hear the conflicted speak their truth - however ignorant - these conversations can feel like forever. **These conversations don't ask people to lock arms in a march for LGBT equality; they make the road.**

And in our road towards full equality and freedom for LGBT people and all people, lie many barriers both real and imagined. "It's the classic divide and conquer maneuver," a member of

Comite Latino, a devout Catholic and grassroots immigrant rights organization from Coachella, told me in Spanish. He was finally seeing why the FAIR Education Act is so important. "U.S. History emphasizes the stories and successes of individuals over movements. Highlights military victories and imperialistic conquests over unsung heroes, every-day people, and workers that resisted and decided it's time to win better standards of living. Some of these people were gay and when we don't learn about their human struggles for dignity, it is easy to stereotype them and think they are different from us." Wow. I cried at this barricade now removed.

Out of the 10 conversations I have had, 5 were with Latinos (I am Latina) and 3 of those Latinos are parents. Two of those conversations were only in Spanish. And three were bilingual -- English and Spanish. All were revealing.

In one conversation with a paralegal and mother of four from Riverside County, she talked about how her education in Mexico involved learning a more comprehensive history, one where you also learned manners.

"Classrooms that teach respect and acceptance of all people would" she believed, "instruct students on how to treat each other better. They would teach students about where they came from and who stood up for their rights."



Without my needing to probe, and through many a Mexican dicho from her, she began talking about her gay uncle. How her family used to tease him about his sexuality and gender expression, "until he finally came out and owned it. His pride in himself gave me the courage to leave my abusive husband and begin working towards a law degree. Where I grew up, my family expected a woman to stay until she was married. To go to college was unheard of. Here was this man breaking barriers and stereotypes of who he was supposed to love and how he was supposed to act and he was not apologizing." Otro barrier demolished.

Alicia, a married mother from Moreno Valley and a small business owner also opened up to me about her gay uncle and her nephew who has developmental disabilities. "We need teachers and public safety officials to stand up and enforce the laws that say bullying of a student because they are gay, have down syndrome, or are undocumented is NOT okay."

These are the conversations GSA Network youth leaders have everyday. Julian Araujo, a GSA Statewide Advocacy Council member who attends a public high school in Orange County says he listens more than speaks when he talks to a school superintendent about FAIR Education Act implementation. "I try to meet them where they are and go from there."

It's this type of slow and steady and welcoming conversation that invite more people to join us in this march for freedom and equality. Of course there are bumps in the road, like when I heard my mother tell me she believed in the notion that "only God can judge us..." or another friend said "I believe in marriage equality and am still learning about why civil unions don't satisfy people's interests." But with each opportunity to listen and let people talk, they are seeing that these are not mean streets. With gentle encouragement, folks can come out to support us more firmly based on our shared core values. After all, the first revolution is internal. And Breakthrough Conversations help us realize a path to justice that is broad and una amplia gama de colores.

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