

Towards Visibility: A Youth's Work in LGBT Equality in Central Nebraska  
By: Nathan Leach

The first time I was presented with an opportunity to contribute to a dialogue of equality for LGBTQ people was in November of 2013. I was a junior in high school, and the Nebraska Legislative Judiciary Committee was holding a public hearing to evaluate the implications of the recent US Supreme Court DOMA ruling. My friend, Griffin Mims, and I decided to drive to Lincoln to testify and listen to the committee's proceedings. The experience opened our eyes to the power of youth engagement in democracy. Both Griffin and I waited until the end of the day to speak. As we spoke, every senator on the committee leaned forward and listened, because unlike everyone else--we were youths. Our opinions were fresh and represented views held by our peers, views that can oftentimes be overlooked in political settings. In addition, our actions represented a sort of courage and drive that can be hard to find among individuals our age. Especially a gay male and a straight ally advocating in a balanced but traditionally conservative state. As we drove home, Griffin and I decided our age could be used as a tool to fight for and promote justice and equality in Nebraska. We realized that what youth lack in experience they make up for in vision.

In December of 2014, I was approached by a fellow LGBTQ student about helping create a Gay-Straight Alliance at Kearney High. I was hesitant at first, unsure of the role the organization would play. However, after assessing the needs of the LGBTQ community at Kearney High School and networking with other potential members, I saw an excitement and passion from students who might never get involved otherwise. I decided that as a leader and member of the LGBTQ community in my school, I had an obligation to support and serve my peers. After finding a staff sponsor, we submitted a proposal to the administration. By the end of the term, we knew for sure a GSA would soon surface in the halls of Kearney High.

The summer before my senior year was a whirlwind of experiences. I wrote my first Letter to the Editor to articulate to the Kearney community the need for marriage equality, and also the purpose and positive impact the newly-formed GSA would have at Kearney High School. I also traveled to Ecuador for a month with my church. During my time there, I met a young man who was struggling with his sexuality. I didn't know very much Spanish, but he knew enough English for us to get to know each other. I was the first person to whom he came out. I witnessed firsthand the frustrating consequences that both a country and a fundamentalist church community that refused to value the LGBTQ community exacted on LGBTQ members of their communities. I realized that the dialogue of equality is global.

As school began, the work of getting the GSA off the ground loomed over me. We had an organizational meeting the second week of school, and our staff sponsor selected an Executive Board from applications. I was pleased to be selected, and was thrilled to be elected President by the board later that month. What was originally a theory was now a fact, and frankly I was scared. It is one thing to be a presiding officer, and quite another to be a leader. It is even more complicated to fill these positions in an organization whose voice and presence on Kearney

High's campus was both fresh and if not already, then surely soon, controversial. It was of utmost important to ensure the organization was open to the entire student body and wasn't a sort of "gay nucleus" that refused to consider all voices that may comment on their work. Inclusivity was, and is, both the goal and primary working action of the organization. This, too, is representative of what should be the means of action between the LGBT community and those "outside" of it. Activism does not and should not seek to perpetuate the otherness of the other. Instead, it's goal should be one of a mutual welcoming that deconstructs boundaries and distinctions that deface the human condition by dehumanizing the abnormal. The core of my work both in the community and in the GSA has not cycled around my sexuality, but has instead cycled around my personality. I do not do as I do because I am gay but because I share a burden with humanity. My efforts serve as a testament to this and inclusive of my greatest accomplishments.

Working with students on the GSA has been an incredible honor and privilege. I would say these relationships, although not as dramatic as testifying to a committee or writing a letter to the editor, is the biggest positive contribution I've made to the local LGBTQ community. I would further assert that these strong, positive relationships are what will allow for my work and the work of others to carry on beyond this. These relationships are essential ingredients to change and primary components of activism and visibility, not I am different from you but I am in solidarity with you. My narrative, so to speak, of the work I have done for the LGBTQ community and the community of Kearney is not a story of me alone but a part of a collective epic concerning the concerted work of all and any individual working to break down the walls that separate us. The question goes beyond sexuality to the very human condition--a the assertion that I, we, you, are not alone in this and "alone" is the enemy.