

Noel Diem

ENG 226

15 April 2011

It's Getting Better

The scene opens with a teenage boy, Kurt, working on an arts and crafts project in a lounge at his private school known for their “No Tolerance Bullying Policy.” The boy is played by openly-gay actor Christopher Colfer. Another boy, Blaine, soon joins him, looking nervous. Blaine is played by the straight Darren Criss. Both Blaine and Kurt are openly gay, and they are about to make television history. On March 15, 2011, a network television station (Fox) aired the first ever consensual gay kiss between two teenagers on the television show *Glee*. This was a particularly bittersweet moment because Kurt left his previous school a few months before because a bully had threatened his life for being gay. What Kurt dealt with in his high school is something LGBTQ students deal with everyday.

Many young people face daily tormenting and bullying, leading them to feel like they have nowhere to turn. This is especially true for LGBTQ kids and teens, who often hide their sexuality for fear of bullying. In many instances, gay and lesbian adolescents are taunted — even tortured — simply for being themselves. The bullying of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered teens is an epidemic in the United States today, and it does not appear to be getting any better. 95% of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning (LGBTQ) teens experience name calling, physical threats, and bullying impact (Ledger). The bullying not only affects the teenager, but his or her family, life, grades, friendships, and outlook on life. Gay bullying has effects that not only shape, but can also ruin, the lives of those victimized; fortunately there has been an outcry of support for the teens that need it the most. Gay bullying

often leads to GBLT teens committing suicide or running away, but recently it has also resulted in a firmer support system for these teens.

Tyler Clementi was a freshman at Rutgers University, a distinguished musician, and a beloved member of a close-knit family. In late 2010 he was the victim of gay bullying – his roommate in college filmed him having sex with another male, and proceeded to show it to his other friends. When Tyler found out about this, he posted "Jumping off the gw bridge sorry" as his Facebook status (Friedman). His body was later found washed up on the shore. Suicide amongst gay teens has risen 30% in the past decade (Kahn). Many gay, lesbian, transgendered, and bisexual teens feel as though they are less than human because of the way society constantly pushes them down. There is little to no acceptance in most forms of mainstream entertainment. Heterosexual couples have become the norm for many people. Nearly one-third of gay teens will commit or attempt suicide by the time they turn 18 (Radford). Of the one-third that try, over half will lose their lives. Suicide is not the result of everyday bullying, it results from long-term, continuous bullying that frightens and damages the victim. Many of those who attempted suicide but did not succeed say that the main reason they attempted was to “escape the names, stigmatism, and labels” (Radford) people gave them. Many LGBTQ teens also commit suicide over fear of what would happen when they “came out” to their parents. Many do not feel safe to "come out" with their orientation because countless LGBTQ youths have been rejected by their families or friends, verbally abused, physically abused, or bullied as a result. Some also commit suicide because family members or society bully them into “play straight” and not admit their sexualities: "No service is done to our children by offering them lifestyle options before they are properly able to make informed choices about them," says Dr. George Rekers, Professor of

Neuropsychiatry and a specialist in psychosexual disorders at the University of South Carolina School of Medicine.

Like Kurt Hummel, many LGBTQ teens run away from the lives they knew in school, and transfer because a bully or a group of bullies forces them to leave with either threats or a general uncomfortable feeling. In public school “75% of gay students and 95% of transgendered students felt unsafe” (Gonzalez). Many of them walk down the halls waiting to be pushed into lockers, verbally assaulted, or taunted in some way. Because of the bullying epidemic, there are very few people these students can turn towards, because often enough they are the only out student in the school, and the faculty sometimes have prejudice against them as well. When the HAVEN School opened in New York City, over 60 people applied for the 30 spots open to the LGBTQ students (Hazelton). HAVEN stands for: Hope, Acceptance, Validation, Equality, and Nurturing. The first year the school was only opened to students who identified themselves as homosexual, bisexual, or transgendered. However, in 2010 the school opened their doors to the first 20 straight students in hopes of fostering an environment of understanding amongst gay and straight teens. Of the 2,000 gay teens who responded in a recent poll, 84% of them said they would transfer to a new school if it promised that bullying on sexual preference would disappear (Ledger). This is an alarming statistic. High school is supposed to be the years where teens learn and grow with a community that loves and supports them. Instead, many teens now spend their days wishing they could leave. This has a negative impact on grades as well. Many LGBTQ students perform below their abilities (Ledger) because they do not wish to attract attention to themselves anymore. When students do transfer, they usually perform 10-15% better in their classes. This epidemic amongst LGBTQ teens has come far enough and it shows no sign of stopping.

Suicide and running away are only two of the problems teens face when dealing with the bullying. Fortunately, there has been a change in tide for these teenagers. The United States government, school districts, colleges, and non-profit organizations have come together and created support groups for teenage victims of LGBTQ bullying. While the effects of gay bullying are tragic, the turnaround has created a beautiful support system that reaches all over the country and world. While these results of gay bullying do not nullify the results above, they are certainly a step in the right direction.

Darren Criss, who plays Blaine on *Glee* provided the theme song for The Trevor Project, a 24-hour hotline dedicated to LGBTQ teens who need someone to listen to them. His song “Not Alone” became the anthem for the group: “I’ve been alone/surrounded by darkness/I’ve seen how heartless/the world can be/I’ve seen you crying/you felt like it’s hopeless/I’ll always do my best/to make you see/baby, you’re not alone” (Criss). Their first mission is to impact the lives of every LGBTQ teenager that feels as if he/she is alone. Because of the rise in gay bullying, The Trevor Project turned its focus towards educating high school students about the effects of gay bullying as well as suicide prevention. The project also focuses on awareness to create greater acceptance of LGBTQ youth in schools and at home through suicide prevention education to reduce peer and family rejection (The Trevor Project). A large portion of this step involves representatives from the project going to high schools and university campuses to talk and discuss issues and create a positive environment. So far the project has reached over 20,000 middle school students, 25,000 high school students, and 15,000 college students. It is reported that bullying “declined by about 30% overall and 70% in cases of gay and lesbian bullying” in school districts that had the project speak (The Trevor Project). The Trevor Project is indeed changing lives in multiple ways by providing a space for gay teens to feel as if they are cared about and educating high

school students about bullying. The Trevor Project recently started a second project to provide support for LGBTQ teens in a more widespread format.

Like The Trevor Project, the “It Gets Better Project” aims at educating bullies and providing an outlet for LGBTQ teens. The aim of this project is to inform LGBTQ teens that living life in an open way does not mean that one has to live a life of shame, torment, and unhappiness (It Gets Better). The project focuses on users creating YouTube videos documenting how their lives got better once they left high school and the bullies behind. To date, over 35,000 videos have been uploaded to the popular website, and many videos have over one million hits (Savage). The project has reached the entertainment industry. To date, the project has received submissions from celebrities, organizations, activists, politicians and media personalities, including: President Barack Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Rep. Nancy Pelosi, Adam Lambert, Anne Hathaway, Colin Farrell, Matthew Morrison of "Glee", Joe Jonas, Joel Madden, Ke\$ha, Sarah Silverman, Tim Gunn, Ellen DeGeneres, Suze Orman, the staffs of The Gap, Google, Facebook, Pixar, the Broadway community, and many more (It Gets Better). In one special clip, Max Adler, who plays the bully that forced Kurt Hummel out of his school on *Glee* directs his attention to the bullies. This clip was shown after *Glee* episodes for a few weeks due to the high number of LGBTQ teens that watch the show. Many schools are also using these videos in conjunction with programs about bullying and acceptance.

The LGBTQ bullying phenomenon often leads to the teens running away or committing suicide. But the recent outpouring of support for these teens is uplifting. The teens now see that they are not alone and that there are people that care for them. Maybe one day there will not be a need for these organizations and everyone will be able to live in harmony. Though that day is far away, it is definitely one that should be seen in this lifetime. April 15, 2011 marks the National

Day of Silence. On this day, everyone who has not had a voice and has been bullied into silence will finally get their voice by those who support them not speaking the entire day. This silent protest shows the support for LGBTQ of all ages. Perhaps the kiss on *Glee* is the first step for widespread acceptance of gay teenagers, and bullying will become a thing of the past. The most important element right now is that LGBTQ understand that bullies do not make up the majority of the population, and that they are indeed not alone.

Works Cited

- Criss, Darren E. "Not Alone." *Not Alone*. Darren Criss. Darren Criss, 2010. MP3.
- Friedman, Stella. "Anti-gay Bullying Left out of School Harassment Law | Gay-Straight Alliance Network." *Home | Gay-Straight Alliance Network*. Web. 15 Apr. 2011.
<<http://gsanetwork.org/news/anti-gay-bullying-left-out-school-harassment-law/072910>>.
- Gonzalez, Denise. "Education Will, Hopefully, Put an End to Homophobia in Schools." *New York Times* 23 Feb. 2011: 16. Print.
- Hazelton, Marilyn. "Communities Need to Offer a Safe Haven for GLBT Teens." Editorial. *Out Magazine*. 13 Nov. 2010, sec. A: 20. *Proquest*. Web. 15 Apr. 2011.
- It Gets Better Project. "About." *It Gets Better*. Web. 15 Apr. 2011.
<<http://www.itgetsbetter.org/>>.
- Kahn, Joseph P. "For Gay Teens, It Still Needs to Get Better." *Boston Globe* 6 Nov. 2010, sec. B: 1. Print.
- Ledger, Brent. "High School Should Be Easier for Today's Gay Teens." *Psychology Today* 11.4 (2011): 6. *ProQuest Education Journals*. Web. 15 Apr. 2011.
- Savage, Dan. *It Gets Better: Coming Out, Overcoming Bullying, and Creating a Life worth Living*. New York: Dutton, 2011. Print.
- The Trevor Project. "About Trevor | The Trevor Project." *Home | The Trevor Project*. Web. 15 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.thetrevorproject.org/organization>>.