

WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

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Nobody Did Anything

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"I covered myself and shielded my body and he kept hitting. People were watching, but nobody did anything." These are the words of an Ohio high school student, who did not want to be identified, to news reporters.

Nobody did anything to stop it, but somebody posted a picture of this student on Facebook with the label, "Check out the definition of a faggot." Nobody did anything to stop it, but somebody stood by and recorded this beating in an Ohio high school classroom on a cell phone and posted it on YouTube. One could think that bullying is an unusual occurrence. Unfortunately, the tragedy is that this type of incident has become all too frequent in schools around the nation. In fact, a second Ohio incident was reported within just two weeks of this one. Why didn't anybody do anything?

This is not to say that many are not speaking out about such tragedies. Thousands of individuals and organizations are calling attention to bullying, especially incidents that target specific students. But it still happens daily. In their 2009 School Climate Survey, GLSEN (Gay Lesbian & Straight Education Network) reports that nearly 61% of LGBT students in Ohio experience some form of harassment or are threatened by their peers via text messages, emails, and postings on social networks.

Ohio does have anti-bullying laws that are intended to protect students — all students. However that does not appear to be enough. Thankfully, there is a law currently pending in Ohio’s state legislature proposing the addition of sexual orientation and gender identity to other protections to the state’s existing law. Only fourteen other states have laws specific to the protection of LGBT students. Such laws are desperately needed all over the country. Laws that protect victims are extremely important, but they are not the only solution.

The other side of the equation is to address the attitudes and behaviors of the bullies. Where does a bully get the idea that it is okay to harass, demean, attack, and threaten someone else just because of who that person is? We know that youth are at a very impressionable age; they learn their behaviors and attitudes from the adults around them. They learn from the media and their circle of friends, and sadly these influences have proven to be mean spirited and hateful. “Kids will be kids” is a ridiculous excuse for behaviors that are life threatening.

If we don’t believe that lives are actually at stake, we need only remember the story of Rutgers student, Tyler Clementi, who took his own life just a little over a year ago. His private life was exposed in the social media. His dignity was stripped from him by someone who thought it would be funny to post pictures of him with another young man. He could not face the daily mockery of his humanity so he took the only action he could see as a solution.

There are hundreds of students suffering every day in schools and communities in Ohio and every other state in this country. There are hundreds of Tyler’s all over the world. Tyler was a child of God, thus a member of God’s universal family, just like each one of us. As kin, each and every one of us must do something to stop bullying from becoming commonplace in our culture.

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