

Monday, April 25, 2011

Statement of Wendy Walsh, Mother of 13-Year-Old Seth Walsh, to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights



Seth Walsh

To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Wendy Walsh, and I want to tell you about my 13-year-old son Seth. Seth told me he was gay when he was in the sixth grade. He was a wonderful, loving child, and I loved him for who he was. My son's school in Tehachapi, California, however, did not provide Seth with the support or protection that should be given to all our children. Anti-gay harassment was a part of Seth's daily life at school.

When Seth was in the fifth grade, other students started calling him "gay." As he got older, the harassment became more frequent and severe. By seventh grade, taunts and verbal abuse were a constant occurrence. Students regularly called him "fag" and "queer." He feared using the rest room or being in the boy's locker room before gym class. In fact, he started changing for gym class in a bathroom stall because kids picked on him so much in the locker room.

My pleas to the school for help and protection for Seth repeatedly fell on deaf ears. At one point, kids were calling him anti-gay names in the hallway at school. A school administrator was right there and heard it all, and turned and walked away without doing anything.

In some instances, those who were tasked with protecting Seth at school and ensuring that he received an equal education actually directly participated in the harassment. One of Seth's teachers called him

“fruity” in front of an entire class. Seth had always been a good student, receiving A's and B's, but his grades quickly dropped to failing as the harassment continued year after year. He became depressed and withdrawn.

I pulled him out of school twice to homeschool him because the harassment and bullying got so bad. The second time, I reported on the form you have to fill out that it was because of harassment based on sexual orientation. But even that didn't stop the abuse.

On September 19, 2010, Seth could bear no more pain. I found him hanging from a tree in our backyard. He passed away after nine days on life support. A note Seth left upon his death expressed love for his family and close friends, and anger at the school “for bringing you this sorrow.”

I can't bring my son back. But schools in Tehachapi, California and across the nation have the power and a responsibility to protect **all** students from discrimination and harassment. Congress also has a responsibility to act to protect young people all across the country just like Seth who are or are thought to be lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. I hope they will act by passing the Student Non-Discrimination Act.

Schools need to take harassment and bullying seriously when parents or students tell them about it, and when they see it and hear it on the school campus. No mother should ever have to lose their 13-year-old child to intolerance and anti-gay harassment, especially in a place that should be providing them with an education and putting them on a path to a promising future. Schools should be places where all students can enjoy an education free of discrimination and harassment because of who they are.