



## Education Department Resource

# Homophobia 101

Teaching Respect for All

### *Anti-homophobia Training Outline For School Staff And Students*

#### **PREFACE**

The attached outline is the basic approach used by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) in trainings which have already been held for nearly 400 school staffs around the country. This training has been highly successful and led to GLSEN being selected to develop the faculty training program of the Massachusetts Department of Education's "Safe Schools for Gay and Lesbian Students" program – the first state-wide effort aimed at ending homophobia in schools. Drawing heavily from individual testimony, it uses personal stories to give a human face to the problems gay and lesbian youth face in schools.

This outline is designed to be user-friendly, with attachments providing substantial supporting materials and information on how to find resources. Ideally timed for two hours, the outline can be shortened by limiting the number of film excerpts and student testimonies used. We encourage you to supplement these sections by having panels of gay youth speaking whenever possible.

An additional resource now available is the video **TEACHING RESPECT FOR ALL**, which features GLSEN Executive Director Kevin Jennings doing this training for a live audience. The video can either be shown to

a faculty, or can be used to train presenters on the use of this outline.

We welcome your feedback. May this staff training outline be helpful to you in your work!

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#### **GOALS OF THE WORKSHOP**

- 1) To provide basic awareness of prejudice against sexual minorities;
- 2) To provide basic information on sexual orientation;
- 3) To explain stresses on gay/lesbian/bisexual youth and how this impairs educational performance;
- 4) To explain how prejudice against sexual minorities impairs educational performance of all students; and
- 5) To equip teachers with some tools and skills to use to reduce prejudice against sexual minority youth and to create an inclusive classroom & school environment.

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#### **BASIC PREMISES OF THE WORKSHOP**

1) Personal feelings of staff towards gay/lesbian students are irrelevant. Staff are paid to serve all students, and it is inappropriate to allow prejudice to serve as an excuse for not meeting the needs of students against whom staff is prejudiced.

2) Prejudice against gay & lesbian people impairs the educational climate for all students and must be reduced if students are to learn effectively.

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### **SOME PRAISE FOR "TEACHING RESPECT FOR ALL"**

"I had my workshop yesterday and it went extraordinarily well. The faculty (85 members) sat in total attention and gave me no negative feedback at all. As a matter of fact, I have received mail in my school mailbox saying that this was one of the best in-services we have ever had. The principal came up after I finished the workshop and addressed the faculty stating his support and his expectations for the total support of his staff. He said that he was going to be the first to change in that he would stop students when hearing anti-gay epithets in the halls. This might not sound like a big deal to everyone, but I know you will understand how momentous this is in a typical high school. I also got a letter from him today expressing his thanks for being so enlightened. Thank you so much..."

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### **WORKSHOP OUTLINE**

#### **1) OPENING.**

A. Distribute "Heterosexuality Questionnaire" to all participants. Allow five minutes for completion. Do not allow any questions or collaborative work on the questionnaire; it is an exercise for reflection. After completion, ask participants to summarize their reaction in a one-word adjective at the bottom of the page. Then ask

straight-identified members of the group to share their adjectives: list all on the board. Follow up on specific adjectives. Ask them to specify which questions provoked the most thought or strongest reactions. Introduce the following vocabulary: homophobia; heterosexism; unearned privilege (i.e. privileges you get because you are born into a certain group, both because you "earned them"). Help participants see connections between vocabulary and questionnaire, emphasizing heterosexual privilege but citing examples of male privilege (no fear of sexual assault) and white privilege (no fear of negative reaction based on race) as well. Close by asking them to think as if they are gay or lesbian, and what new adjectives might appear on the list. Emphasize that it is hard for any student to learn when having those feelings.

B. Begin by asking audience to remember when they were 13. Ask who they might have turned to for help at that age, listing these groups on the board. Then ask each to remember a time when they needed help from one of these groups with a problem but did not get it. Split the group into pairs and give them 3 minutes to share their stories. When done, ask the group to share adjectives describing how it felt, listing these on the board. Close by emphasizing the similarity between these feelings and those experienced by GLB youth.

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### **2) DESCRIBE GOALS AND PREMISES OF THE WORKSHOP**

(See the listing of goals and premises above.) Distribute the "Riddle Scale" (Attachment #2) emphasizing that all teachers need to be at the level of Support for all of their students. You can emphasize here that we may disagree with students' religious beliefs but that this does not make hostile treatment acceptable or tolerable: just because some Christians believe Jews are going to hell doesn't mean Jewish students

should be tormented or denied equal opportunity.

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### 3) PROVIDE BASIC INFORMATION ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION

A. Introduce vocabulary: sexual orientation; sexual behavior; sexual identity.

Explain how sexuality is a combination of these three factors. (See attached "Understanding Sexuality.") It can be useful to use the "left-handed analogy" here.

Explain that people who have a left-handed orientation were once victims of "leftophobia" (persecution in Middle Ages, the words "sinister" and "gauche" were used to denote negative things – both words with roots in left-handedness), that we once went to great lengths to try to change their behavior (tying kids' hands behind their back in school, for instance), but that this only led people to hide their left-handed identities and engage in occasional right-handed behavior which never changed their orientation. Although no longer "leftophobic," we are still "rightocentric" in this culture: demonstrate by asking participants who are left-handed to brainstorm number of ways in which right-handed people are favored in society. Then draw the analogy between handedness and sexuality.

For more information on "left-handed analogy," see Blumenfeld & Raymond, *LOOKING AT GAY AND LESBIAN LIFE*, also reprinted in Jennings, *BECOMING VISIBLE*. See also Chandler Burr's keynote at 1994 GLSEN Mid-Atlantic Conference: a 16-point description of a human trait that participants will probably guess is sexual orientation but is actually handedness (the similarity is quite strong in the description). You can also see his book on the subject, *HOMOSEXUALITY AND BIOLOGY*. An alternative way of introducing the analogy is to distribute the document and ask for questions, and not reveal what it is about

unless someone guesses. It can also be used in B(iii). below.

B. If necessary, take on "Why are people gay?" questions. Potential answers include:

i. Why do we Care? We don't seem to care why people are straight.

ii. What if People do Choose to be Gay? Is this a proper basis for denial of equal access? (Use analogy of religion here: Jews choose to be Jewish, so does that mean anti-Semitism is okay?)

iii. Introduce Scientific Data. Best evidence are twins studies that show tendency of gays who are twins to both be gay. Read "Homosexuality and Biology" by Chandler Burr in April 1993 *Atlantic Monthly* for more info. Inform participants that homosexuality is no longer considered a disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 1973), that no professional association (psychiatrist, psychologist, social workers, etc.) advocates or believes it is possible or prudent to seek to "change" sexual orientation.

iv. Ask Participants if they Would Choose to be Gay as a Child. Cite statistics on hate crimes (1987 U.S. Justice Dept. study citing gays as most frequent victims of hate crimes); harassment (NGLTF study showing 1 in 5 adolescent lesbians and 45% of adolescent gay boys suffering assault and harassment due to sexual orientation); Hunter study showing 41% of gay youth had experienced physical attack); verbal abuse (Mass. Gov. Commission studies showing prevalence of verbal homophobia, with 97% of students at Lincoln-Sudbury High School reporting verbal harassment is common); discrimination (only 9 states with civil rights laws); and general alienation of gays in society. (See attached list of sources of all cited statistics). Also see attached "Just the Facts" sheet for additional information.

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#### 4) EXPLAIN STRESSES ON GAY/LESBIAN/BISEXUAL YOUTH.

A. Lack of Support. Begin by asking participants to think of themselves at age 13 and where they would turn for support when confronted with a problem (13 being the median age at which one realizes one is gay). Then explain special isolation of gay/lesbian youth, as opposed to other youth, as they cannot generally access following sources of support:

i. Family. 26% of gay youth report having to leave home due to negative parental reactions to their sexual identity.

ii. Friends. Cite Lincoln-Sudbury survey, with 97% of students having heard homophobic epithets used at school. Cite Hunter study that 41% of gay youth have suffered physical violence.

iii. School. Cite lack of support services, role models, homophobia by teachers/staff. Cite Mass. Governor's Commission survey showing 53% of youth had heard teacher use homophobic epithets in school. Cite Sears Univ. of South Carolina study showing 80% of teacher hold anti-gay attitudes, with 1/3 classified as "high-grade homophobes."

iv. Religious Communities. Surely you don't need us to give you examples, but be sure to emphasize that some denominations (Unitarians, Quakers, Reform Jews) are in fact pro-gay, so that you do not demonize people of faith.

B. Explain how these Stresses Impair Student Performance. This is best illustrated through human stories. Do this by:

i. Oral Readings of Written Testimonies. See Attachment #6 for testimonies: in this segment choose samples from #1-13. Ask for volunteers to read; distribute samples and ask listeners to make 2 lists: one on what the youth feel, and one on the behaviors they engage in as a result of these feelings.

Follow up by listing the first list and then the second on two halves of the board. Use statistics (see C below) to show they are not isolated stories. Save the feelings list-do not erase as you will need it later.

ii. Film/Video Excerpts. This does not preclude use of written testimonies and can often bring a "human face" to the issue as well as provide a welcome change-of-pace in presentation style.

If dealing with a high school audience, show first half of Gay Youth by Pam Walton (available from Wolfe Video, P.O. Box 64, New Almaden, CA 95042, cost \$60), which details the suicide of a teen named Bobby Griffith through his journal and testimony by his mother. This segment takes about 18 minutes.

If dealing with an elementary-middle school audience, use the 12 minute video Both My Moms Names are Judy. This video features elementary-age children of LGB parents discussing their experiences in schools. Copies are available from the Lesbian and Gay Parents Association of San Francisco. (415-387-9886).

Another option is "It's Elementary," a documentary produced by the San Francisco-based Women's Educational Media.

iii. Student Panels. While often effective, it is important to:

\* make sure students are emotionally prepared to give personal testimony;

\* give them clear time limits and a sense of what topics to cover;

\* be sure to bring up important points students might have missed in focusing on their personal experiences in order to give context.

C. Citing Statistics. This is best done as a follow-up to stories. You may wish to

supplement these statistics with additional ones from the "Just the Facts" sheet or from your own research. Be sure to illustrate following issues:

- i. Poor School Performance. 40% of gay youth report schoolwork being negatively affected by conflicts around sexual orientation.
- ii. Dropping out of School. 28% of gay youth drop out of school.
- iii. Homelessness/Runaway. 42% of New York City street youths are lesbian, gay, or bisexual.
- iv. Alcohol/Drug Use. 58% of gay male youth at some point have a substance abuse disorder; 18% of adult lesbians and 31% of adult gay men do.
- v. Suicide. U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services found that 30% of all youth suicides (5,000 annually) are by lesbian/gay youth (extrapolates to one gay youth death every 5 hours and 45 minutes), with gay youth 2-3 times more likely to attempt suicide (500,000 attempts annually) than heterosexual youth (extrapolates to one lesbian/gay youth attempt every 35 minutes). Latter rate confirmed by Pediatrics study.
- vi. Inappropriate Sexual Behavior.
  - a. Compulsive Heterosexual Behavior ...as students try to "go straight" or deflect suspicions of classmates. Discuss risk of pregnancy & STD.
  - b. Unhealthy Same-Sex Behavior. Explain self-hatred and how it inhibits respectful interaction with other gay youth. Cite promiscuity and public sex outlets because of inability to connect emotionally with same-sex partner.

Both leading to:

c. HIV Infection. Explain lack of self-esteem and link to unsafe sex. Cite high rates of HIV transmission among teens: Centers for Disease Control statistic that 19% of all men and 24% of all women with AIDS diagnosed in 20-29 age group, positing infection period during adolescent years due to incubation period. AIDS seventh leading cause of death for adolescents.

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## 5) EXPLAIN STRESSES ON HETEROSEXUAL YOUTH.

Utilize similar techniques to those above: use Readings 14-16 (attached); refer to film excerpts if used above; draw on testimony of panels of family members (if available).

Emphasize: a. Youth With Gay/Lesbian Family Members. Address special needs of youth with lesbian/gay family members, who are often as "closeted" as their relatives for fear of adverse reactions.

b. Burden of Hatred on Frightened Youth. Explain high incidence of hate crimes and teen participation in perpetration of those crimes. Cite violence/harassment statistics (see 3-B-iv above): emphasize that hatred, fear, and ignorance are bad for the bigot as well as the victim.

c. Gender Role Expectations and Limitation Of Educational Opportunity. Begin by asking participants to raise hands if they ever feel hostile and show this feeling; then ask them to raise hands if they ever feel sad and show this feeling.

Discuss how their reactions are "inappropriate" (most will raise hands for both we hope) — women are supposed to be nurturing and men dominant, according to our gender roles, but we don't show those feelings/develop that side because of labeling. Explain use of homophobic epithets to frighten youth who do not conform to gender role expectations. Explain how students avoid activities (arts

for boys, athletics for girls, for instance) out of fear of such labeling. Explain how this limits educational development: use examples such as Mikhail Baryshnikov, who could have been frightened out of being a ballet dancer because of homophobia although he was straight, and explain the loss then entailed by society when students self-select themselves out of activities.

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## 6) SHOW HOW SCHOOLS CAN HAVE A POSITIVE IMPACT.

It is important for people to see examples of positive programs so that they will feel empowered and have concrete examples of how to go about changing the climate in their schools. To demonstrate this, use the following:

A. High School audiences: i. Use Testimonies. Readings #17-25 are testimonies by both gay and straight kids from the Concord-Carlisle H.S. "Spectrum" Gay-Straight Alliance: ask volunteers to read them, asking listeners to once again make notes on what kids feel and what the school provides that helps them feel better. List these on the board afterwards. Contrast them with the negative list generated during the stresses segment.

ii. Use Film Excerpts. The second half of Walton's Gay Youth begins with a sampling of success stories and then focuses on Gina Gutierrez, an "out" lesbian senior who receives the "Bobby Griffith Award" at her high school. The segment illustrates Gina's family and her "normality" as a teen confronting many of the same issues—peer pressure, coping with family dynamics, etc.—as do other teens. Segment is 20 minutes long.

B. Elementary-Middle School audiences. Use "It's Elementary," a 78 minute documentary showing actions taken by elementary school teachers combatting homophobia (available in from Women's

Educational Media, (415) 641-4616: they are also producing other videos on the subject).

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## 7) QUESTION AND ANSWER PERIOD.

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## 8) CLOSING.

Distribute "What You Can Do" brochure from GLSEN. Emphasize responsibility to meet needs of all students, responsibility of all teachers to create a welcoming climate for all students. Ask each participant to think of a specific action they can take in the next few days to create that climate.

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## HETEROSEXUALITY QUESTIONNAIRE

(This questionnaire is for use with adults only.)

Note: You have received this questionnaire to help you to recognize what it might feel like to be asked the following questions and hear the following comments about your sexuality.

1. What do you think caused your heterosexuality?
2. When and how did you first decide you were heterosexual?
3. Is it possible heterosexuality is a phase you will grow out of?
4. Is it possible you are heterosexual because you fear the same sex?
5. If you have never slept with someone of the same sex, how do you know you wouldn't prefer that? Is it possible you merely need a good gay experience?
6. To whom have you disclosed your heterosexuality? How did they react?

7. Why are heterosexuals so blatant; always making a spectacle of their heterosexuality? Why can't they just be who they are and not flaunt their sexuality by kissing in public, wearing rings, etc?

8. Most child molesters are heterosexual men. Do you consider it safe to expose your children to heterosexual males? Heterosexual male teachers particularly?

9. How can you have a truly satisfying relationship with someone of the opposite sex, given the obvious physical and emotional differences?

10. Given the problems heterosexual's face, would you want your children to be heterosexual? Would you consider reparative therapy?

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Before looking at specific actions that a school might take to increase awareness and provide support, it is important to look at what is already being done, and to get a sense of the climate in the school. The following assessment (on the next page), adapted from one that appeared in the Minnesota Department of Education report, *Alone No More*, might give a school a better indication of its current environment and general level of support for lesbians and gays. It may be helpful to give this assessment to more than one individual at the school to look at how the homophobia and heterosexism are perceived by different individuals. After responding to each statement, look not only at the number of 'No' and 'Unsure' responses (and the areas in which they appear), but also at the discrepancies between individual responses (for example, why some individuals feel that one area of the school is inclusive while others don't).

One psychologist developed a scale of attitudes towards homophobia (Riddle, in Minnesota Department of Education, 1994), a scale that might be used to describe the

institutional attitude at a particular school. After completing the assessment, it might be interesting to take the responses and determine where on the scale the school lies, and where on the scale the school would ideally like to be. This scale, although developed for homophobia, can be used to describe attitudes towards differences in general.

### **ATTITUDES TOWARDS DIFFERENCES: THE RIDDLE SCALE**

ATTITUDE [Characteristics]

REPULSION [People who are different are strange, sick, crazy and aversive]

PITY [People who are different are somehow born that way and that is pitiful]

TOLERANCE [Being different is just a phase of development that...most people 'grow out of']

ACCEPTANCE [Implies that one needs to make accommodations for another's differences; does not acknowledge that another's identity may be of the same value as their own]

SUPPORT [Works to safeguard the rights of those who are different]

ADMIRATION [Acknowledges that being different in our society takes strength]

APPRECIATION [Values the diversity of people and is willing to confront insensitive attitudes]

NURTURANCE [Assumes the differences in people are indispensable in society]

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### **UNDERSTANDING SEXUALITY**

It can be helpful to educate participants about the structure of sexuality in order to

avoid confusion. Many think it is inappropriate for people to talk about their "sex lives" with students, which reveals their misunderstanding about the ways in which we already discuss sexuality in the school setting.

Trainees should be educated about the three basic components of sexuality:

### 1) SEXUAL ORIENTATION.

This describes the attraction that one feels toward either or both sexes. Individuals are homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual in their attractions. Why people feel the attraction they feel is unclear. For workshop participants who persist in saying that people "choose" to be gay, a quick rejoinder is to ask when they "chose" to be straight. A University of South Carolina study (Prof. James Sears, *Growing Up Gay in the South*) found that the median age at which youth recognize the nature of their orientation is 13. Based on Kinsey's statistics, ten percent of people are believed to have homosexual orientation (this judgment is based on both behavior as well as the fantasy life of people interviewed by the researchers): other studies show a range, with between 7-10% as the norm. People may challenge this figure: sometimes it is best just to avoid the numbers game and focus on actual stories as this humanizes the issue in a way statistics do not.

### 2) SEXUAL BEHAVIOR.

This describes the sexual activities in which individuals engage, i.e. their "sex lives." Sears found that just under fifteen was the median age for first sexual experience for students in his study. The Kinsey Report found that 28% of boys and 17% of girls have a same-sex experience during adolescence. Realistically, while sexual behavior can be modified for a short time under extreme duress (situational homosexuality in prisons, for example), eventually one's behavior will conform with one's orientation.

### 3) SEXUAL IDENTITY.

This is how one is recognized by others. Heterosexuality is automatically assumed unless a person "comes out" as gay or bisexual. Heterosexual people regularly talk about their sexual identity, in both explicit (mentioning spouses) and implicit (wearing wedding rings) ways. Gay people are rarely free to do so without suffering significant negative reactions. Thus, a disjunction occurs for gay people, who possess one orientation and behavior pattern but are forced to "pass" as something they are not to avoid discrimination. This leads to the isolation that puts gay youth specially at risk. Participants must understand that:

It is the dissonance created between orientation, behavior, and identity that creates problems for gay youth.

The necessity of hiding creates the isolation that puts these youth at higher risk for suicide and other ills.

This three part structure helps to clear up many questions individuals have about exactly what we are proposing for discussion with students. Teachers are reluctant to talk about their (or anyone's) sexual behavior with students, and thus may be initially resistant to addressing gay issues because gay is automatically equated with sexual behavior. This model helps them to understand how we already discuss sexual orientation and identity, and that we are simply trying to redress a double standard which currently exists and creates unnecessary stress for GLB students.

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## 16 ASPECTS OF A COMMON HUMAN TRAIT

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1) This trait is a "stable, behavioral polymorphism."

2) It is a bipolar trait with two basic orientations, with around 90% accounting for the majority population and around 10% for the minority orientation, although there is debate about these percentages.

3) There are a small number of people who are oriented both ways.

4) Evidence from art history suggests the incidence of the two different orientations has been constant for five millennia.

5) A person's orientation cannot be identified simply from looking at them: those with the minority orientation are just as diverse in appearance, race, religion, and all other characteristics as those with the majority orientation.

6) Since the trait is an invisible, internal attraction, the only way to identify orientations is by the behaviors that express them. But the trait itself is not a "behavior."

7) Neither orientation correlates with any disease or mental illness. Neither is pathological.

8) Neither orientation is chosen, and

9) Signs of the orientation are detectable very early in children, often by age two or three.

10) Although the behavior of either orientations can be changed through coercion and social pressure — in the past, those with the minority orientation were forced as children to behave as if they had the majority orientation — the internal orientation remains.

11) Adoption studies show that the orientation of adopted children is unrelated to the orientation of their parents, demonstrating that the trait is not socially rooted, and

12) Studies show that monozygotic twins (i.e., from the same egg) have a much higher-than-average chance of being concordant for the minority orientation — about 50% — than dizygotic twins (i.e., from different eggs), who are more concordant in turn than adopted siblings, indicating a genetic component.

13) At the same time, there is of course a 50% discordance among identical twins.

14) Familial studies show no direct parent-offspring connection, but the trait clearly runs in families.

15) The pattern in which it runs shows a genetic "maternal effect" with a higher incidence in male offspring.

16) The incidence of the minority behavior is 27% higher among males than among females.

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**SOURCES OF CITED STATISTICS: Other statistics may be found in "Just the Facts"**

3.B.iv. Why Would You Be Gay?

Hate Crimes: U.S. Department of Justice. THE RESPONSE OF THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEMS TO BIAS CRIMES: AN EXPLORATORY REVIEW. 1987.

Violence: National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, NATIONAL ANTI-GAY/LESBIAN VICTIMIZATION. 1984;

Hunter, Joyce. "Violence Against Lesbian and Gay Male Youths," JOURNAL OF INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE, 1990, pp. 295-300;

Verbal Harassment: THE MASSACHUSETTS GOVERNOR'S COMMISSION ON GAY AND LESBIAN YOUTH. MAKING SCHOOLS SAFE FOR GAY AND LESBIAN YOUTH. (1993) p. 50.

(Also reprinted in Remafedi, G. DEATH BY DENIAL. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1995.

#### 4. Stresses On Gay Youth

i. Family: Remafedi, G. "Adolescent Homosexuality: Issues for Pediatricians," CLINICAL PEDIATRICS, 1985 pp. 481-485.

ii. Friends: See studies cited under violence and verbal harassment above.

iii. School Staff.

Anti-Gay Remarks THE MASSACHUSETTS GOVERNOR'S COMMISSION ON GAY AND LESBIAN YOUTH. MAKING SCHOOLS SAFE FOR GAY AND LESBIAN YOUTH. (1993) p. 51. (Also reprinted in Remafedi, G. DEATH BY DENIAL. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1995.

Anti-Gay Attitudes Sears, James. "Personal Feelings and Professional Attitudes of Prospective Teachers Toward Homosexuality and Homosexual Students: Research Findings and Curriculum Recommendations" paper presented at 1989 American Educational Research Association Conference, Eric Document #312222.

#### 5. C. Impact of Stresses on Gay Youth.

i. Poor School Performance. Sears, James. GROWING UP GAY IN THE SOUTH. New York: Haworth Press, 1991.

ii. Drop-Outs. Gibson, Paul. "Gay Male and Lesbian Youth Suicide," in REPORT OF THE SECRETARY'S TASK FORCE ON YOUTH SUICIDE. U.S. DEPT. OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES, 1989. (Also reprinted in Remafedi, G. DEATH BY DENIAL. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1995.)

iii. Homelessness. Buce, J., and Obolensky, N. "Runaway and Homeless Youth," in Bradley, M.J., and Obolensky, N., eds., PLANNING TO LIVE: EVALUATING AND TREATING SUICIDAL TEENS IN

COMMUNITY SETTINGS. Tulsa: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1990.

iv. Alcohol/Drug Abuse.

55% Youth Figure: Remafedi, G., "Male Homosexuality: The Adolescent's Perspective," Adolescent Health Program, Univ. of Minnesota, 1985, unpublished;

Adult Figures: EMT Associates, "San Francisco Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Substance Abuse Needs Assessment, Executive Summary" 1991, pp. 2-3.

v. Suicide.

HHS figures: Gibson, Paul. "Gay Male and Lesbian Youth Suicide," in REPORT OF THE SECRETARY'S TASK FORCE ON YOUTH SUICIDE. U.S. DEPT. OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES, 1989. (Also reprinted in Remafedi, G.)

DEATH BY DENIAL. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1995.

PEDIATRICS figure: Remafedi, G, et al "Risk Factors for Attempted Suicide in Gay and Bisexual Youth," in PEDIATRICS (1991) pp. 869-76.

#### 6. Inappropriate Sexual Behavior.

c. HIV Infection. Statistics provided by National AIDS Clearinghouse, Centers for Disease Control, Atlanta, 1991.

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### YOUTH TESTIMONIES

The following readings give a "human face" to the issues we are discussing. They can be supplemented by films recommended in the outline. You may wish to have these on separate sheets of paper and/or note cards to facilitate reading by volunteers.

I would also suggest that each trainer begin to make his or her own file of appropriate writings, as ones from individuals with whom you are familiar will speak more powerfully to you and this will show in your delivery of them. Another technique, if you have such access, is to ask students from the school you will be visiting to write anonymously on the subject of homophobia before your arrival, forward them to you, and then use those voices anonymously rather than these. Testimony from students from the actual school will be most effective, although this can sometimes be difficult to procure.

Three types of testimony are included and are for use at different junctures in the outline provided:

#1-13 are by les/bi/gay youth who have had problems

#14-16 are by straight youth addressing problems brought on by homophobia

#17-24 are written by students at Concord-Carlisle High School, a public high school in Concord, Massachusetts, who belong to Spectrum, the school's Gay-Straight Alliance. They are focused on how the Gay-Straight Alliance has helped and contain students of all sexual orientations.

INDIVIDUALS ARE ENCOURAGED TO SEND ANY TESTIMONIES THEY DEVELOP TO GLSEN SO WE CAN FURTHER DEVELOP THIS RESOURCE.

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1) STUDENT, 17, LESBIAN

"There is one difference that sets sexual minorities apart from other minorities — we can be invisible, and are assumed to be a part of the heterosexual majority until we declare otherwise. I tried that for a while, going so far as to use a guy to prove to myself that I could be straight if I tried hard

enough. But instead of being accepted into the mainstream, I lost my self-respect.

"I felt completely isolated from my friends and family. It appeared that I was the only one who ever had these 'queer' feelings. I couldn't come out to anyone, because surely they wouldn't want to be friends with anyone as sick and deranged as I.

"This initiated a downward spiral of self-hatred and anger motivated by homophobia. I hated myself for seeming to be everyone's worst nightmare — a homosexual. I was angry because no matter what I did I couldn't change that. I was angry because it seemed that I could never be happy. I was angry because I felt I had no right to be angry. I created impassable walls, shutting out love as well as hate. I grew increasingly cynical, trying to stave off hurt, because I felt no one would try to see the person behind the sexual label. I virtually branded myself with the message, 'Stay back!' "

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2) STUDENT, 16, LESBIAN, ATTENDING BOARDING SCHOOL

"I wish I could be more open with my parents, but having realized that my father might cause me physical harm, I realize that this is not an option. I live in utter dread that someone will let something slip, or that they'll see or find something that will tell them I'm a lesbian. Before they arrived for the weekend, I scoured my room, jamming the newspapers, the buttons, the pins, anything with the word "gay" on it in the bottom drawer under every item of summer clothing I could jam in there. When they arrived — early — they spent a moment or two in my room, unguarded. Luckily, they didn't find anything. Nor, luckily, did they find anything when my mother cleaned my desk out at home. But when I'm with people I'm not out to, I'm always on guard against what might slip out. It makes me very tense."

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 3) STUDENT, 17, LESBIAN

"I'm 17 and I'm gay. Adolescence is hell for me. I am told that my sexuality is something to be ashamed of, something to hide, something evil. I have cowered in my closet in shame and fear. I found myself lying to my parents and friends, being constantly afraid of discovery, and censoring my words and actions with paranoid concentration. I remember hiding books from my parents because I was ashamed of them discovering about me. In short, I hated my sexuality and myself. My closet wasn't a refuge, it was a prison, and it was destroying me. By staying silent, I was confirming the emotions that were killing me inside. I am not just a statistic. I live in a Boston suburb in a white house with black shutters. I go to school every day, feeling that I can't be honest, that I have no right to be proud, that I am a second-class citizen. Just this past week, as I was walking down my street in my town where I have lived all of my life, a pick-up truck full of guys ran me off the road, screaming "You lesbian!" at me. Homophobia is everywhere, and bigotry is inexcusable. It's time to start showing you care."

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 4) TEACHER

"At 3:40 today Tracy called me and told me she had slashed her wrists and taken two bottles of pills. Tracy is a brave young woman who has struggled to come to terms with her sexual orientation and has bravely taken the lead in raising awareness on our campus as one of the Heads of our Gay-Straight Alliance. She said to me on the phone, 'I always thought, when I reached the breaking point, that it would be some big thing that pushed me over the edge. But it's not.' Later at the hospital, while waiting for her father to arrive from out of town, she said to me, 'What do I say when he asks me

why I did it? – Dad, I just don't fit in with the world?'

"As Tracy convulsed in her hospital bed, her stomach torn to bits by the pills she had taken, I murmured 'I know, I know' and in fact I do know because – yes, just like you Tracy – I took 140 aspirin one night in high school because I couldn't see a way out, I couldn't see a future, I couldn't see a way to go on. You see, when you're a gay teenager, you don't need some big thing to push you over the edge, as Tracy discovered... You get the message every day of your life, just like Tracy did, that you just don't fit in with the world. You get it driven through your skull. Sooner or later you get the message, you get the point. Tracy got the point at about 3:40 this afternoon. Wonderful, brave Tracy, whom everybody thinks has it so together with her student leadership position and her 1420 on her SAT's, yeah, Tracy got the point today."

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 5) STUDENT, 17, LESBIAN

"Imagine that you are looking at the world through the bottom of a glass. The image you get is distorted, twisted, and sometimes frightening, and who you are and your life experiences color the way you see things. I look at my life in this way: each part of me is a tint that is put in front of the glass and shades everything around me.

"Imagine now that I am looking and there is a black tint to the glass. This color, this blackness, represents my race and my background. I come from Harlem, New York. I am a first-generation American, my family being from Jamaica and, without any exaggeration, we are poor. We are on welfare. There are eight of us who live in a two bedroom apartment with three beds to share. I am a part of the America most people don't want to see and never encounter unless it is through the media or while driving through my neighborhood, safely tucked away in their cars. Imagine

how baffled I was when I set foot in Wallingford, CT, to attend Choate. Carefully manicured lawns and for the first time in my life I had my own room, my own bed, my own space. Imagine how angry I was last year when a carload of kids drove by and screamed, "Nigger, go back to Africa!" Sometimes, looking at the world through this glass, I lose faith in it and its people. How can some people have so much and others so little? How can some people be so ignorant and malicious?

"Can you see through the black-tinted glass I am looking through?"

"Now imagine there is a pinkish tint to the glass. This pink stands for my sexual identity. I am a lesbian. To break it down even further for you, I love women, I don't hate men, I just love women. But getting to the point where I could say this was not easy. Before I came to terms with my homosexuality I had to get rid of my own internal homophobia and a lifetime of anti-homosexual programming. Growing up I had feelings for other women. I didn't know what they meant, but I knew it was something I was taught was not right, and I hated myself for it. I thought I was the most disgusting thing on the face of the earth, not worthy of being loved or of even existing. This winter I had a long talk with a good friend of mine. With her I started a process of questioning, reflecting, and eventually coming out to myself. And now here I am.

"What does all of this mean? Well, 4 years ago I would never have said any of this. Four years ago, I was ashamed of my background and terrified that someone might find out I was from Harlem. Four years ago I couldn't even accept that I was a lesbian. But I have changed and gained strength from the faculty members and friends I have met at Choate, and I feel you can learn something from my experience. Take risks. Be proud of who you are, every part of you. Dare to be different, dare to be who you are. And even though the glass that we all look through may be frightening,

tinted, or for some even broken, it doesn't always have to be that way."

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#### 6) STUDENT, 18, GAY

"I was very different from other students and they picked up on it. Immediately the words 'faggot' and 'queer' were used to describe me. Freshman year of high school is hard enough, but with the big seniors pushing you around because the rumor is you're the faggot, it's ten times worse. I knew I was gay. But who could I talk to? I had been conditioned into believing that gay was wrong. How could I tell my Mom that what I was, was bad and wrong? I lost respect for myself and wanted to die. Sophomore year came. I wanted so much to tell someone that I was gay. I got more involved with the school. I joined the drama club and the choir. I began the very slow process of coming out to my friends. This made things worse. I was spit upon, pushed, and ridiculed. My school life was hell. I decided to leave school because I couldn't handle it.

"But I quickly found out that I needed a high school diploma. I decided to go back to high school. I respected myself now and wanted to have a normal high school senior year. When I went back, things were even worse. I can't tell you how many times the first week of school kids asked me 'Are you gay?' I answered 'yes' proudly. No one accepted me. Some kids were so afraid of my homosexuality that they would run away saying 'I don't want to catch your disease.' One day I was sitting with some friends at lunch when, all of a sudden, a container filled with catsup came flying across the room and hit me. I was pissed off. I wanted something to be done. There isn't any education in my school system about homosexuality. The administration allows kids to graduate so ignorant. We are forced to cope with the results on a daily basis."

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## 7) STUDENT, 18, GAY

"I remember back in high school, before I dropped out, feeling really out of place and alone. I never quite understood why I felt so different. I didn't withdraw from anything – in fact, I was kind of popular, playing on the soccer team and all. I had a girlfriend for three years but the whole time it was a lie. Everything I did was never true to me. It was what everybody said I was supposed to be doing or what I thought I was supposed to be doing. I had this friend Mike. He and I were best friends for the longest time and, as time went on, I realized I was in love with him. It felt so wrong, like there was something wrong with me, and I just couldn't handle it anymore. I had nowhere to go, no one to talk to.

"When I did confide in a school counselor, she screwed my life up. She went back to my parents and told them all these things I had been saying. I never told her I was gay because to me being gay meant you put on lipstick and wore dresses because that's all you ever see on TV, and I never thought that was me.

"I got kicked out of my house in July. There was violence involved. My mother came at me with an iron and I called the police. The police came and my mother told them I was always in Boston with fags and that I'm doing this and doing that. The policeman started to crack all these fag jokes and telling me what he would do if his kids were gay and told me that I should just leave. I said, 'Where am I supposed to go?' He said, 'That's not my problem,' and my mother took my keys and made me leave. I went to a friend's house. By that time I had come out to a lot of my friends. It was okay to have a gay friend but when it came time and I needed somebody's support, it wasn't okay to help me out. 'What would people say about me?' these 'friends' said."

## 8) STUDENT, 16, LESBIAN

"I think what has changed for me the most because of coming out has been school. It is not a place where I can feel comfortable being gay so therefore I cannot feel comfortable being myself. In the past year my life has become extremely unstable. My attendance at school has fallen steadily and school has become a place I no longer want to be. I'm scared of the confrontations I may run into because I'm about to start basketball season. Basketball has been the love of my life since I was a small child and I could never imagine not playing. But recently thoughts of not going out for the team have been very strong. I have spent the last two seasons ignoring homophobic comments made by the team, and I have even laughed along with them at times. Things are different now, because they know I'm gay. Will the comments and jokes end? Will I have to endure the pain of walking into a room that's noisy and having it suddenly fall silent upon my entrance? The school itself is accepting but students don't always give off that attitude. Thoughts of suicide and dropping out more than occasionally pass through my mind. The sad realization that, at age 16, I am a recovering alcoholic, does not add to this pretty picture."

Note: This student dropped out of high school later that year.

## 9) STUDENT, 17, LESBIAN

"A day in which the issue of sexual orientation is not mentioned or spoken about in school would be unusual. Every day I am forced to listen to the unaccepting or ignorant people around me. There seems to be no escape. Lately I've started to lose hope altogether. It feels like nothing I can do will make a difference. If I confront the homophobia around me, it takes up all my time and energy, and I feel totally alone in doing it. Furthermore, the students have no reason to listen to me. I am not a teacher, not an adult. I don't have power here. I think

one of the reasons that the homophobic students are so comfortable with expressing their opinions is that many teachers are not aware of what is happening, and some of the ones that are aware are homophobic themselves and choose to do nothing to change the situation. I hear homophobic comments all the time in my classes.

Sometimes I think teachers don't hear what goes on in their classrooms. Other times, though, I think they don't listen. Maybe they don't listen to the offensive comments because this issue isn't important to them. I think there is a difference when its people like you who are being constantly slandered, misunderstood, and hated. I want teachers to remember that I can't block out the homophobia. I hear it even when I don't want to listen. I hear it every day that I am in this school. And it hurts a lot."

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10) STUDENT, 16, LESBIAN

"We live in a straight world and a straight school. That's not going to change, but I wish that gay, lesbian, and bisexual people could have the same advantages that straight people have. Many straights don't realize that you have advantages, but that is because those advantages are so basic, you take them for granted. An example of this that sticks out in my mind is the ease with which you can take a date to a dance. It's not that I would not be allowed to take another girl to a dance, but the decision would be incredibly problematic, and I'd have to think and worry about it a lot. I would have to try and plan for the possible reactions of the students (Will I get beaten up? Will I get taunted in public? Will my tires be slashed?) I'd also worry about the reaction of teachers who saw me there. How would I know that if a teacher sees me with another girl, they might not like me anymore? I would be nervous that some teachers would grade me differently. I don't know that they would, but I also don't know that they wouldn't, either. The point is, straight kids don't have to consider this, and I do. They can take

whoever they want and not think twice. It's another question as to whether or not it's okay to slow dance with my date, and a further question of whether we could kiss. Each of these things straight kids take totally for granted. I wish I could, too."

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11) STUDENT, 18, GAY

"I think it's fair to say I grew up without any real role models. There aren't Asian-Americans on TV – Connie Chung and a few Fu Manchu rip-offs don't really count. There are even fewer gays and lesbians. Experiencing life as a double minority has given me insight into how people focus on the parts of a person rather than on the whole. About a year and a half ago I came out. Being involved in a support group helped me overcome my confusion and helped me to become proud of my sexuality. But I began to distance myself from my cultural heritage. The Chinese family sees homosexuality as abnormal and immoral. This caused me to hate myself for being yellow. Reconciling and integrating my sexual identity and cultural backboard is a major obstacle for me. I am not 'out' to my parents, who highly value Chinese traditions. This puts an incredibly barrier between us. I am afraid they will be deeply hurt and confused when I decide to share this part of my life with them."

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12) STUDENT, 17, LESBIAN

"It is extremely difficult for me to feel safe and open about my lesbianism at this high school. I'm also incredibly tired of people assuming I'm straight. After school today, I was quite upset and a girl in one of my classes asked me if I was okay. When I told her that I was having relationship problems, she said, 'Oh, you broke up with your boyfriend?' I said, 'No, my girlfriend.' She kind of looked at me funny, and said, 'Sorry,' and walked away. Straight kids have

all kinds of people they can talk to at the high school for advice and help in their personal lives. Mostly friends, but also teachers. Lesbians and gays don't. We can't go to teachers because you don't know how they're going to react. And we can't go to friends for the same reason."

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13) STUDENT, 19, LESBIAN

"It was easy for me to be 'out' because I had dropped out of high school. But for one person in my life it was different – my little brother. He still had to deal with high school peer pressure. When I came out to him he begged me to keep it from his friends. He said that if his friends ever found out they would leave him, even torment him, all because of me. I couldn't understand why he couldn't accept me for who I was and put me ahead of his friends. I didn't realize how bad it was, until recently.

"About 2 months ago my brother invited some of high school friends to sleep over. That night, I fell asleep watching TV in the living room, which is right next to my brother's room. Around 4 in the morning I woke up from the noise they were making. They were talking about a kid who had come out to one of his friends, and that friend had then told their entire school. One of my brother's friends said that, if any gay person came on to him, he would kill him. One of the other kids said that homosexuals were sick and that they should be put on an island and bombed. Then someone else said maybe they should 'straighten this kid out' – meaning, beat him up. Everyone laughed. It was very frightening to hear all of this hatred and anger coming from young kids, who have probably never known another gay person in their lives. I snuck to my room and cried. I cried for myself. I cried for other gays and lesbian who have had to deal with situations like this. I cried for the young boy who had trusted a friend and been betrayed. But most of all, I cried for my brother. You see, through all of his, he kept quiet. He

couldn't stand up for me because he was afraid. Afraid for himself. Afraid he would lose his friends. Afraid that their hatred and anger would be turned on him. For any student trying to get through high school, it is tough. But from someone like my brother, it is a cruel punishment. Right now he is just trying to survive, to graduate, without revealing his secret."

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14) STUDENT, 16, STRAIGHT

"Two years ago my parents got divorced and my other started to have a lesbian relationship. This scared and confused me, and she tried to talk to me about it, but I always pushed her away. As far as I was concerned, that topic was off-limits. I know I shouldn't push her away, but it's so hard for me to deal with. After your speech I called her to tell her about it and I felt like what I was really saying was "I realize and accept your relationship." It was likely I was finally admitting that my mother is a lesbian. I don't really know though, because I still haven't really talked to her about it. And I still don't think I can, that's the worst part. But I feel like that phone call was the first step. I feel like I'm carrying this big burden on my shoulders. I don't think any of my friends could understand or, worse still, they wouldn't want to get to know my mother, and she's such a great person. My best friend adores my Mom – in fact, she just invited Mom to her graduation. And I wonder, would she feel the same way if she knew about my Mom's relationship? I remember you saying, "Don't expect the worst in people, but it's hard – it's hard to know who to trust." "

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15) STUDENT, 17, STRAIGHT

"Four years ago, I learned that my mother is a lesbian. How is a girl who has just turned 13, supposed to react to that type of news. I felt life as I knew it was over. The woman

who had borne me, nourished me, put clothes on my back and a roof over my head, was a stranger.

"Homosexuality isn't like divorce. When my parents were getting divorced, so were some of my friends' parents. TV discussed the effects of divorce on children. Family members asked me how I felt and gave me words of advice and shoulders to cry on. But the horizon was bleak for homosexuality. There were no friends going through the same trauma. Relatives didn't flock to my side. There were no TV specials telling them how to deal with it. Phil Donahue, where were you?

"Life as I knew it didn't really end, though – it just changed slightly. The gay women I have come to know through my mother weren't flannel-clad bikers but a diverse group which includes corporate managers, lawyers, therapists, teachers, and artists, some of whom are also mothers. These black women have class, intelligence, and confidence. I am lucky to have them as friends and role models."

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16) STUDENT, 17, STRAIGHT

"Matthew and I were walking down the street on our way to the bank. We walked by a man who was sitting on the steps of his brownstone. As we approached he began yelling at us. 'Hey, gay boy! Can't you hear me fag? I'm talkin' to you! What are you doin' with that girl? Stop killing us and stay with your own kind!' We tried to ignore him. 'Why don't you answer me? I'm sick of you fags takin' over? Don't you hear me?' I then realized that I could simply walk out of my house and be victimized by any bigot who chose to hurt me based on who my friends are, who I am, or who he thinks I might be."

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17) STUDENT, 17, LESBIAN

"Without Spectrum, our school's Gay Straight Alliance I don't know where I would be. I used to convince myself that my suicidal tendencies, low self-esteem, patterns of self-mutilation and anorexia had nothing to do with my being a lesbian in an environment which I did not feel was supportive enough for my needs. Having had Spectrum in our school has empowered me. It has helped me to feel that I have more of a sense of gay community in my school, and support around me from both gays and straights, from both teachers and students. As Spectrum has done its work, and my environment has become more supportive, the problems in my life which I used to think were unrelated to my being a lesbian in a largely unsafe community have diminished.

"I cannot imagine what this school, and the students in it would be like if we did not have Spectrum. A GSA seems to me to be the first step – the most essential necessity – of my and other's survival. I had begun to take Spectrum for granted. I'm glad I was asked to write this."

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18) STUDENT WHO CHOSE NOT TO IDENTIFY HIS/HER SEXUAL ORIENTATION

"Having the group Spectrum at our high school supplies a place for people to talk and share. We're thinking all the time. Our minds are coming up with revelations, questions, opinions, and we need to discuss them, or just tell them to others. When we do, our thoughts become collective and we have power – power to accomplish to express and to share our ideas, yet again, with those who don't seem to want to listen, or who just need some knowledge. And, of course, our group is a security blanket. It feels good and safe to have support and understanding. In general, groups like this are beneficial for all people, no matter what the issue. And because the safety of gays and lesbians in our school is being

challenged right now, Spectrum is especially helpful."

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19) STUDENT, 17, LESBIAN

"Through all the bad things that have happened to me, and the rough times I've had to endure at school as I've questioned whether or not I'm a lesbian, there have been a few prominent people and places that helped me along and gave me happiness. Spectrum, our school's gay-straight alliance is the first. Throughout the school year, I have looked forward to Spectrum because it is a place where people don't look at me funny for who I am, and a place where I know there are people who are allies and who support me. The second is the only out teacher in my school. He has been a friend and role model for myself through the times which I was most confused. One day, a day when I was particularly confused and feeling helpless, I went to this teacher and asked him a question about something I had read about gay youth. Because I was so distraught, I began to cry. The teacher, unaware of my confusion, took time out of his class to help me. From that time on, he has been there to talk about whatever I am feeling about myself, of even everyday random things. With Spectrum and this teacher, my life, which is normally fairly stressful, has been a little happier and easier to deal with."

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20) STUDENT, 16, STRAIGHT

"I think that gay-straight alliances benefit the entire school by providing an opportunity for everyone to ask questions they may have, to discuss a topic that may be bothering them, and to rally the help of others to change problems and spread awareness to those who do not attend the GSA meetings. Alliances like Spectrum can focus on international issues dealing with homosexuality or bisexuality, and bring

them to a local level. They can provide a supportive environment to students who cannot find support anywhere else. But gay-straight alliances benefit straight students as well as homosexual or bisexual students. No one benefits from ignorance, and everyone needs to be aware of people's differences because, whether they like it or not, they will all be affected by them."

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21) STUDENT, 16, STRAIGHT

"Spectrum has made me aware of what my gay, lesbian, and bisexual peers go through on a daily basis. It has deepened my concern for all minorities as well. Above all, Spectrum has given me the confidence to stand strongly for what I believe in. I have noticed a better change in myself as a person since I became a member."

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22) STUDENT, 16, STRAIGHT

"Before coming to this school, I was very much in the dark about homosexuality and gay issues. Although I supported the idea of gay rights, I had very little idea of what the term, or the issue was really about. I thought of all homosexuals as people straight out of La Cage Aux Folles. Coming here to Spectrum has made all the difference in the world to me. For the first time, I became aware of the stereotypes and assumptions I was inadvertently making. I have learned so much about homosexuality this year through the Spectrum discussions! The group has also indirectly helped me and others to overcome such limited views by doing things such as increasing the volume of gay literature in the library and making homosexuality a 'visible' issue in the school. I appreciate everything that Spectrum has done. It has made a huge difference in the way that I view homosexuality, bisexuality and being straight."

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## 23) STUDENT, 17, GAY

"I love having Spectrum in our school. It, in a very fun and supportive way, opens the hearts and minds of those who come and want that to happen. Spectrum has opened me up to myself and allowed me to see and know a part of myself that I've questioned for a long time. Coming to Spectrum has broadened my views, not only of others, but of myself. It is nice to know myself better. Without Spectrum, I fear I still would be unhappy, in the dark, and in the closet."

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## 24) STUDENT, 17, BISEXUAL

"Being a bisexual woman in a school is often a difficult experience. Until recently, I didn't

realize how many wonderful and supportive people I have around me. Every day I look forward to going to my history class specifically, because my teacher has made it clear the his classroom is a place that is safe for everyone, including people of all sexual orientations. He works really hard to incorporate information regarding gay rights and history along with the rest of the curriculum. Another thing that makes my school a happier and more comfortable place for me is Spectrum, my school's gay-straight alliance. It meets once a week, under the supervision of an openly gay teacher. Since last year, I feel like we have accomplished so many things! Sometimes I get frustrated with the realization of how much work we still have to do, but then I stop to think of how incredibly far we've already come."