



Dear Friends,

After 12 years as GLSEN's Executive Director, and nearly twenty in GLSEN leadership, I've decided the time has come for me to start a new chapter. On March 1st, I will step down as Executive Director. Melanie Willingham-Jaggers, GLSEN's Deputy Executive Director, will take over as Interim Executive Director, while the Board launches a national search for GLSEN's next leader.

As I plan to depart, I'm proud to say that the organization is extremely well positioned to continue to act as an agent of change. We are in our strongest financial position ever, with a newly invigorated leadership team that is the most diverse in the organization's history, allies in the incoming administration, and a vibrant period of strategic innovation just ahead.

Perhaps most importantly, GLSEN has been engaged for some time in an on-going process of learning, self-assessment, and transformation, to create the internal culture and external strategies necessary to contribute to the anti-racist work essential to achieving our mission. I am deeply appreciative of my colleagues – at the Board, staff, and chapter level – who have been partners in that work, and to the new leaders whose vision is shaping that future. It is inspiring to see it coming into view.

I am grateful to have led GLSEN through two decades of significant accomplishments and crucial evolution. Since I arrived in 2001, thousands of people – staff, student leaders, educators, and GLSEN chapter leaders – have come together to transform K-12 education and open new worlds of possibility for LGBTQ+ youth. Looking back, it is astounding to contemplate how much the world has changed for LGBTQ+ people, and I am proud of GLSEN's contributions.

When I began this work, it was not legal to be gay in 15 states. Today more than 26 million U.S. students go to school in states with laws that specifically protect LGBTQ+ students from harassment and violence.

Throughout the aughts, we fought fiercely to support LGBTQ+ students forming GSAs in the face of right-wing attacks, and repelled efforts to require access to conversion therapy at school as the "balanced response" to the clubs' existence. Today, more than 80% of teachers and school-based mental health providers consider it their professional responsibility to support, protect, and affirm LGBTQ+ students; 1,300 educators registered for our GSA advisor summit in September; and more than 65% of all LGBTQ+ students have access to a GSA.

Perhaps most affecting, I have personally witnessed generations of students engaged with GLSEN go from being targets of harassment to self-advocates to effective organizers to accomplished leaders in their fields – educators, elected officials, union organizers and social entrepreneurs. How gratifying that some of them are now my colleagues as leaders in the LGBTQ+ movement.

Special thanks are due to GLSEN Board members, past and present, who are such dedicated stewards of the mission and ambassadors for our cause. I am so grateful to all the colleagues, partners, and donors whose commitment to GLSEN has made everything possible. In the weeks ahead, I look forward to connecting with as many of you as I can to say thank you in person. GLSEN and our entire society have urgent and very difficult work ahead. I will continue to learn from you and work alongside you, albeit in a new capacity, as we continue to fight for the future that every single child deserves.

With all my warmest thanks,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Elga Bark". The signature is fluid and cursive, written in a personal style.