



Tough Beginnings to Tough Action

Anthony Colín, 17, just returned from National Youth Pride Day in Washington, DC, where he gave a speech to a crowd of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning teens. “I’m exhausted,” he told me, laughing. “But this is what I love—spreading the word about being proud of your sexuality and willing to battle ignorance.”

Anthony gained national prominence in 1998—at 15 years old—when he sued the Orange County School District for barring him from starting a Gay-Straight Alliance at his high school. “When Matthew Shephard was murdered, I was afraid to leave my house for a week, and I was completely terrified in school—always looking over my shoulder—for a whole year. Then I started to get angry: how could those men kill another young man just because he was *gay*? But I realized that if anger isn’t used to do something constructive it leads to hate, and hate leads to violence.”

Anthony came out at school when he was only eleven years old. “I didn’t know what gay meant then,” he says. “I just knew I liked the boys.” He was thirteen when he came out to his family, and the next several years were the hardest of his young life. He even ran away from home, surviving on the streets of Los Angeles for a month. “It wasn’t easy for my parents to come to terms with my sexuality, but they’ve grown so much over the past four years. We are so close now,” he says.

School had never been a welcoming place for Anthony, but it became nearly unbearable. “I sank so low then, I felt like I was just surviving from day to day. But at some point I decided that things weren’t going to be like this for me forever,” he says. He decided to take action to promote tolerance in his own high school. He decided to start a Gay-Straight Alliance.

It wasn’t an easy task. He put in an application to form a club, but his principal repeatedly tabled it, claiming that she hadn’t looked at it yet or that the school board was still deciding whether a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) was “appropriate” for El Modena High School. When the school board tried to hold a closed meeting to rule on the GSA, the *Orange County Register*, the local newspaper, got wind of it and printed a scathing story, forcing the board to cancel their meeting and hold open sessions to decide the fate of Anthony’s GSA. Even with GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network) of Orange County and a cohort of supportive family and friends rallying behind him, the school board ultimately denied the GSA equal access to club status at El Modena High School. “My mother always told me that whatever is worth having is worth fighting for,

so there was no question about whether to fight for the GSA. I had to do it,” Anthony says.

Colín and other students filed a lawsuit. They won a preliminary injunction, marking the first time school officials were judicially rebuked for trying to silence a GSA.

The El Modena High School Gay-Straight Alliance was the first in Orange County. Since its inception, Anthony has helped start GSAs in other high schools in his conservative county.

Anthony was thrust into the media spotlight as a result of his successful activism. He now speaks regularly at LGBT functions and has won several awards for his work. “Sometimes teens are intimidated and reluctant to ask me questions or share their experiences with me. But just to have one young person come up to me and tell me that I’ve made a difference in their lives makes it all worth it,” Anthony says.

Some people he credits as role models include Martin Luther King, Jr., Ghandi, and John F. Kennedy, for “promoting change through nonviolence.” Bessie Smith, an openly-gay jazz singer in the 1920s, is another of his role models. Anthony is a singer himself, something he hopes to pursue seriously in the future. “My voice is my weapon and my instrument,” he says. “I feel most at peace when I sing.”

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To arrange to interview Colin Higgins Courage Award winner Anthony Colin, contact Paul Cates at Pro-Media Communications at 212/245-0510.