



Abandoned by School Principal He Vows to Change Board of Ed

The sleepy, southwestern artist community of Santa Fe, NM, may seem like a safe place to grow up gay. It's not. Just ask Colin Higgins Courage Award winner Jed Hoffberg how he survived his high school experience.

Jed squeaked past his freshman year at Santa Fe High relatively unscathed. Sophomore year he wasn't so lucky at the 4000-student campus that serves half the public school students in Santa Fe. Almost from the first day of his sophomore year, Jed was harassed between classes and even during class for being gay. His desk in math class was carved with death threats, homophobia and anti-Semitic slurs. Outside of class, the student who did the carvings bragged about how he was going "hunting" for "fags" and "Jews."

But if math class was dreaded, art class was worse. "It was common practice for one student to distract the teacher while nearly the entire class took turns spewing hate," said Jed. The hostility escalated until one day following class, five students ganged up on Jed and attacked him on campus, spitting on him, sticking gum in his hair and hitting him to the point of severe bruising.

Seeking the help of the principal did more harm than good. The principal deferred to the art teacher who threw the five students out of the class. This action only fueled the abuse so that Jed had to watch his back wherever he went on campus. He often ditched class for the safety of the school library or a nearby Hardee's restaurant.

When a manager at the Hardee's called the school on Jed, he was forced to return to the unchanged environment at the school. The harassment and violence came to a head when a substitute teacher showed up for his chemistry class. During class, a school football player began calling Jed names and screaming homophobic slurs. At one point he grabbed a pair of shoes and threw them at Jed, hitting him in the face.

With no help from the substitute, Jed left class and reported the incident to the principal who told Jed to inform the security guards. When the security guards questioned Jed and his attacker together. They took the side of the attacker and stated, "we don't tolerate faggots at our school."

That night Jed went home and convinced his parents to send him to a private school. The private school was less than ideal and Jed ultimately chose to go for his GED, which he earned at the end of his junior year.

Jed is being recognized by the Colin Higgins Foundation because he was able to redirect the hate and hostility he faced into a determination to bring about positive changes in the Santa Fe public schools.

Jed began volunteering for the People of Color Aids Foundation, teaching safe sex and AIDS awareness classes in the school system. Soon he was speaking up to other groups, including P-Flag meetings and law enforcement and security conferences.

This work led him to become involved in Project Glyph, a program aimed at ending homophobia in Santa Fe schools. A tight-knit, supportive group of gays, straights and children of gay parents spent a summer producing a video about homophobia. Later, Jed made a landmark presentation to the Santa Fe Public School Board. Jed's speech garnered a standing ovation and helped convince the board to adopt the Glyph curriculum that instructs all administrators, teachers and students in the Santa Fe Public School district on homophobia.

Like most 20 year olds, Jed is currently trying to figure out what he wants to do with his life. Though his parents, especially his Mom, have always been supportive, he's currently living happily on his own. To support himself, he works two jobs, but still finds time to intern for the Theater Residency Project. He's also managed to squeeze in a few semesters at the Academy of Art College in San Francisco and hopes to continue his studies.

Standing up for gay rights is still a priority. This April, the religious right persuaded the school board to abandon the Glyph curriculum. "They haven't defeated me yet, and I'm not about to let them now," said Jed whose already rehearsing for his next opportunity in front of the board.

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