

Liz Sederquist Testimony

Bio:

Liz Sederquist is a student at Des Moines Area Community College and Gilbert High School. Liz participates in rugby at Iowa State University and has been active in softball, band, marching band and is a member of Iowa Pride Network's Leadership Team. Liz plans to major in anthropology with a double minor in archaeology and history.

Testimony:

Hello my name is Liz Sederquist and I am a student at Des Moines Area Community College pursuing my adult diploma. I am also, technically, still a student at Gilbert High School although I rarely attend.

The reason I rarely step foot in Gilbert High School is because I slowly dropped classes in order to remove myself from a school that was unsupportive and hostile to me because I identify as a lesbian.

At the beginning of the year I had long hair and tried to "act" straight because I knew it was a conservative school. I did this to protect myself.

Early in the year, I met a guy in algebra who tried helping me better understand the subject. He had crush on me and wanted to go out. I made clear I just wanted to be friends. As friends, we decided to go to the homecoming dance together. Afterwards, he continued to pursue me and I continued to make clear that I just wanted to be friends. He got mad and I confided to him that I am gay. I thought he would understand.

Instead, he got angrier and outed me to the school. He told many people.

I was scared about how people were going to react, but nobody believed it at first.

Then someone wrote "BITCH", "CUNT" and "FAG" on my car. I had also received a text from a friend telling me people were also saying these awful things at school.

I told the principal. I tried to show him my car, but he didn't want to see the graffiti or scratches—instead he told me that he believed me and that he was going to talk to the students responsible. But he never did.

Now that people knew, I slowly started being me.

I went to an LGBT conference at Iowa State University and afterwards decided to cut my hair. That's when people really started harassing me.

I went to the principal numerous times. He would meet with me but brush off my concerns.

I feared for my physical safety and worried about someone starting more rumors.

It felt like 600 people against one. It's a numbers game which becomes a mental game. When you feel like that many people are against you. It's overwhelming. I had some allies, but they were too scared to stand up with me or for me.

When you are worried about your safety it sucks going to school. It's hard to concentrate.

I would get anti-gay texts on my phone. I'd walk down the hall and I'd be called names. The guy that outed me was the ring leader.

This is not how I wanted to go to school. I wanted to feel safe so I decided to start a gay-straight alliance to help educate my peers and faculty and stop the homophobia and hate. I began working with Iowa Pride Network.

Unfortunately, the potential advisor of the gay-straight alliance tried talking me out of it. The advisor said I would be bullied or harassed even more. But I wanted that support and I was tired of hearing anti-gay remarks. I wanted a change.

I kept being told a gay-straight alliance was a bad idea. At the same time I was dealing with teachers who wouldn't call on me in class or involve me. One teacher even felt it was okay to say "that's gay" when describing dislike. Female teachers didn't feel comfortable around me and avoided me because I identify as a lesbian.

Faculty wanted nothing to do with me.

I finally felt so discouraged I gave up on the gay-straight alliance and my school.

I developed anxiety, stomach issues, and depression. I just didn't want to go to school. I didn't want to go to have faculty not pay attention to me, and no one handling the bullying problem.

My mom called the superintendent. He said he would look into it. But nothing changed.

My principal would call my mom to say that I was never in school, and my mom would explain it was because the school wasn't handling the bullying situation.

That's when I decided to enroll in Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC) to get away from the harassment and bullying and get my diploma through DMACC.

I am current a junior and have enough credits to have graduated this spring and I wanted to go to college in the fall, but now I can't because I can only "graduate" once my class does next year. My life is put on hold, and because I'm being held back, so is my financial aid for college.

One bright spot I was looking forward to was going to my high school prom with my girlfriend. I wanted to go to prom and have that high school experience.

I was told I wasn't allowed because of me missing school and attending DMACC for classes. But another student in my grade who had missed school and was attending classes at Iowa State University was allowed to go. It was a double standard. The principal said not only could I not go to prom; I wouldn't be allowed to bring my girlfriend.

My experience at Gilbert High School has been tough.

I hope through this testimony that schools will realize that not providing a safe and supportive environment does affect students and their ability to learn.

Students shouldn't have to worry about being judged for who they are. Judge them on their actions not on how they present their gender or sexual orientation.

You should be able to go to school and know that there is going to be teachers that support you.

School faculty needs on-going training. People who want to become teachers need classes that help them understand how to deal with bullying.

Schools here in Iowa need to follow and understand Iowa's Safe Schools Law as well as federal laws that protect students. People must be held accountable for their actions.

Schools need gay-straight alliances. I know in my school, a GSA would help make students understand that anti-gay remarks do hurt people and that hate towards any group of people makes our school an unsafe place.

Senator Harkin, thank you for allowing me to speak here today.

Liz Sederquist