



Testimony of Matt Shankles before the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) on June 8, 2012

Dear Chairman Harkin and members of the HELP Committee, thank you for giving me the honor of testifying before you today. My name is Matt Shankles, and I am a rising junior at Linn-Mar High School in Marion, Iowa. I would like to speak about the terrible bullying and harassment I faced in school because of my sexual orientation, how this treatment affected me, and what we can do to help to make schools safer for all students.

My experience with bullying and harassment began in the eighth grade when my classmates learned that I was gay. Although I had been popular, after I came out, I lost many friends and others began to bully me relentlessly with slurs, threats, and by spreading false rumors about me. I couldn't even be free of the bullying when I left school –students driving by would yell slurs at me as I walked home. Several students even began to cyberbully me through Twitter by ridiculing me and spreading lies.

While all of this was happening, I became more and more depressed. I couldn't escape the bullying, and I didn't feel there was anyone I could turn to. I didn't report the bullying because I didn't think that the school administration could do anything to help me.

At one point my best friend even suggested that I pretend to be straight in order to stop the constant bullying. I was so hurt by this suggestion; I did not feel different from everyone else - what was it about me that I needed to hide just to be able to go to school every day and be treated like a human being. Lost in despair, I began to hate myself. One day, after enduring constant bullying, I simply lost hope. I locked myself in my bathroom, planning to end my life with a knife. I sat there in the dark for a long time. Fortunately, my stepfather eventually found me and loudly slammed open the door, snapping me out of my daze. I really believe he saved my life that day. But to this day, I worry that he does not trust me.

After that day, things at school did gradually begin to improve. Though I was still depressed, I confided in my school's guidance counselor who offered me hope. I also became involved with my school's Gay-Straight Alliance, which we call Spectrum. The support of other students helped to restore my self-esteem and made the relentless bullying more bearable. Eventually, I became co-president of the group.

Fortunately, I never again felt the way I did that day. Over time, I saw the ordeal I had gone through as an opportunity to help others, and I dedicated myself to fighting back against bullying and harassment. I began to use Twitter to reassure other students facing bullying by providing positive messages instead of ridicule. I also began to help spread awareness of bullying and harassment by telling my story to other students, to teachers, and even to lawmakers.



Earlier this year, I had the opportunity to visit Washington, DC, to advocate for two important pieces of safe schools legislation. I am grateful to GLSEN, the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, for giving me the opportunity to learn about advocacy and to meet with my senators and representative. For me, it was a truly life changing experience, and I am so excited that GLSEN has invited me to become a Student Ambassador and continue telling my story as a way to make positive change.

While in Washington, I learned about the Safe Schools Improvement Act (S.506) and the Student Non-Discrimination Act (S.555). These two bills will ensure that every school district has a comprehensive anti-bullying policy with effective protections for ALL students. While Iowa and 14 other states already have comprehensive anti-bullying laws, most states have only generic anti-bullying laws that are unable to provide protection for vulnerable students. Two of the lawmakers I met with have been very supportive. Senator Harkin is a cosponsor of the Safe Schools Improvement Act and the Student Non-Discrimination Act and has been a leader in trying to make schools safer for all students. Representative Loeb signed on to the bill after I met with him and told my story.

I was lucky. No student should have to fear going to school like I did or become hopeless that things will ever change. Although I still face bullying in school, I am fortunate to have family and friends who care about me and a school that takes this issue seriously. My mother has told me how proud she is to have a son who fights to help others who are suffering. I hope that by telling my story and by helping others realize that resources and support are available, we can make a difference for students all across our country.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify today and tell my story.