



The Homecoming Project

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The Homecoming Project: Do It Yourself

If you attended high school, you have a story to tell! Share your story through Live Out Loud's latest initiative, **The Homecoming Project**. This exciting initiative encourages "out" LGBT people to return to their high school and use their story to inspire a new generation of youth. Your story doesn't have to be heroic, comical, or filled with drama. You simply have to be willing to tell kids about how you made it through high school and lived to tell the tale.

Do you want to make a difference in the lives of LGBT youth through The Homecoming Project? Live Out Loud will be with you every step of the way. As you contact your high school, schedule your Homecoming Project, and prepare your "talk," Live Out Loud will stand beside you to make sure you have the tools you need!

Don't worry – you don't have to speak at a school-wide assembly or for a gym full of kids. In fact, most Homecoming Projects take place in classrooms for small club meetings, health classes, or small groups of LGBT identified students.

The following guide will get you started. In the following pages, you will learn how to:

- Make contact with your high school
- Arrange a time to speak for a class or club
- Prepare your presentation

You don't have to do it alone!

If you want your Homecoming Project to be really fun, team up with a few former high school classmates and share your story together! You can also ask members of your college GSA or members of your company's LGBT affinity group to support you as you take this important step.

The first step in participating in the Homecoming Project is contacting your high school.



Developing a Connection With Your High School

The first step in returning to your high school is, of course, contacting your high school. When making the first phone call, it's helpful to remember that you're not simply trying to arrange a visit through The Homecoming Project. You're also building a relationship with your school.

Who do you call? What do you say during your first conversation? How does the process start?

STEP ONE: Do some homework.

Visit your school's website and browse the list of teachers, coaches, and guidance counselors. Is it possible that any of the school's faculty might remember you? If so, this person is your first point of contact.

If you don't recognize any of the teachers at your school, simply call the school and talk to their version of the "main office." Briefly introduce yourself to the receptionist and ask, "Does your school have a Gay-Straight Alliance club?"* If they do, ask to be connected with the club's advisor. If not, ask to be connected with a guidance counselor. These men and women work to ensure that students enjoy a safe and healthy high school career. **When speaking with guidance counselors, you have the opportunity to communicate that you would like to work with them to make their school a more welcoming place for LGBTQ students.** Who doesn't want that?

**A Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) is a student-run club in a high school or middle school that brings together LGBTQ and straight students to support each other, provide a safe place to socialize, and create a platform for activism.*

STEP TWO: Introduce yourself.

Briefly introduce yourself to the GSA advisor, teacher, or guidance counselor. Tell them about Live Out Loud and the Homecoming Project. Explain that you would like to arrange a time to speak to a group of students at the school.

Remember: *The Homecoming Project doesn't have to be a school-wide assembly! Ask the school if you can speak to a GSA club, diversity club, health class, or psychology class.*

Consider the following script when beginning a conversation with your school:

Hi. My name is [name]. I attended [school name] from [years attended]. I'm calling because I recently learned about The Homecoming Project, an initiative started by Live Out Loud, a nonprofit organization that works with LGBT youth. The Homecoming Project is helping LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) individuals return to their high schools to offer encouragement to LGBT students and their allies. I would love to tell you more about the project and hopefully come back to [school name] and speak to either your Gay-Straight Alliance club or another group of students. If you would like to learn more about Live Out Loud, their website is filled with great information – including a short video from a past Homecoming Project with Academy Award winner Lance Black.

On page 16 of this guide you will find more information about our programs, mission, and history that you can use when talking with your school. Also, visit our website at www.LiveOutLoud.info.

Some Homecoming Project participants encounter the challenge of leaving repeated messages with school personnel without getting a response. Keep in mind that guidance counselors, teachers, and club advisors are often overworked and extremely busy. Because of their teaching schedules and after-school responsibilities, school personnel may be unable to answer the phone during certain times of the day. Unfortunately, it's easy for a message from a stranger to fall through the cracks. Consider the following tips when making first contact:

1. **Keep track of your calls.** Make a list of both what day and what time you leave messages. Vary the timing of your calls. Some teachers will be more reachable in the morning. Others may be easier to connect with in the afternoon.
2. **Use email.** Ask the school's receptionist for the email address of the Guidance Counselor or Gay-Straight Alliance advisor. The school's website might also have a "contact" page through which you can send an email. Page 15 of this guide contains a letter you can send to school contacts to give more background about you, Live Out Loud, and the Homecoming Project.
3. **Be persistent.** It is important to make sure school personnel don't forget about your call. Calling several times per week not only ensures that teachers and guidance counselors are frequently reminded to call you back, it also communicates that the Homecoming Project is important to you. A school principal we recently worked with told us, "Your persistence is the whole reason The Homecoming Project happened!"

What if your school says no?

Unfortunately, some schools may tell you that they are unwilling to host a Homecoming Project. Page 13 of this guide gives you suggestions about what to do if your school says say "no."

STEP THREE: Ask questions.

Once you've made contact with a guidance counselor or GSA advisor, ask questions that will help you gauge the climate of the school and how receptive they are to LGBT issues. **Remember, when you have a conversation with a school, you are not just gaining information, you are also building a relationship!** Some questions to consider during your conversations:

- How active is your GSA? How many students attend? How often do they meet? What do they talk about?
- Has there been any recent LGBT "news" on campus?
- What is the general feeling about LGBT issues and "coming out" at the school? Do you know of any students that have recently "come out"? How did other students respond?
- How many "out" kids are there at the school? How many "out" teachers or school administrators does your school have?

STEP FOUR: Set a date.

Your school may be ready to set a date for the Homecoming Project during your first conversation. Your contact may, however, need to get permission from a school administrator before scheduling a time for your Homecoming Project.

To help ease this process, send your school contact a letter that can be shared with administrators to provide more background about you, Live Out Loud, and the Homecoming Project. A customizable letter can be found on page 15 of this guide.

You can also recommend that your school contact visit the Live Out Loud website and view the informational Homecoming Project PSA at <http://www.liveoutloud.info/wp/programs/the-homecoming-project/>

Don't be discouraged if a few conversations are required before you are able to set a date. Once the date is set, be sure to ask:

- What time will the club or assembly start?
- How long will I have to speak?
- Will there be a computer and projector available for visual aids?
- How many students do you expect to attend? What are their ages?

Do you need help with this stage of your Homecoming Project?
Call us at 212-651-4220 or email Tom Hernandez (Tom@LiveOutLoud.info).

Developing Your Presentation

Crafting a Homecoming Project “talk” for a group of teenagers isn’t as difficult as you might expect. Remember, when you prepare your speech, you don’t have to think of something to teach these students. You’re not being asked to change their minds about a complicated issue or prove a logical idea.

All you’re being asked to do is tell your story – which makes you an expert on your subject matter!

As you begin to dream about your presentation, remember the following points:

- **Consider your audience.** Although your speech shouldn’t sound like a presentation for a room full of business executives, it’s best not to try to talk like a teenager either. Talk to your audience the same way you would talk to a friend. Sincerity is the best way to connect with any audience.
- **Find metaphors in your story.** Use your stories as illustrations and metaphors. As you prepare, ask yourself which elements of your story can be used to illustrate larger points.
- **Don’t try to cover too much ground.** Speakers sometimes feel obligated to pack as much into their speech as they can. They hope that if they say a lot of things, hopefully one of those things will connect. The best speakers choose a single theme (or maybe two) and stick with it.
- **Allow time for questions.** Ideally, the Homecoming Project is a conversation between you and a group of students. After you’ve presented your story, ask the students a few questions that will invite them into the conversation. Then, give students time to ask you questions as well.

And most importantly....

Be true to your own style. Kids are drawn to sincerity more than they are to personality. When you speak, don’t try to be what you think the youth want you to be. Instead, be yourself. If you are a naturally funny person, use your humor to connect with your audience. If you’re not funny, there’s no reason for you to try to be. If you’re an “intense” person, be intense. If you’re goofy, be goofy. There will be kids in your audience who are **just like you**. Speak to them.

Need some inspiration? Read this quote from a student that attended a recent Homecoming Project:

“I was inspired by the speaker’s story. I feel that his experience could really help someone in a similar situation and it is interesting to hear how he felt while he was going through it. It is sad to know that there are people in the world who are afraid to be themselves, whether it be because of their sexuality or something else. However, with people like him, working and fighting for gay rights, we could someday live in a world where no one is ashamed of who they are.”

If you would like some help getting started, spend a few minutes reading through a former Homecoming Project participant’s speech that can be found on page 18.

Getting Started

Don’t worry... the basics of crafting a Homecoming Project speech are easy. All you have to do is *remember*.

To begin, take a few minutes and sit down at your computer or grab a pad of paper and start writing your story.

- *Were you in the closet during high school?* Did you feel afraid that your “secret” would come out? What did you do to make people think you were straight? Tell a story about how you hid your sexuality from your friends and family. What did you wish someone had told you when you were a teenager during that difficult time? **The Homecoming Project is your opportunity to say to students what you wish someone had said to you!**
- *Were you “out” during high school?* What was it like for everyone at school to know something so intimate about you? How did your friends and family react (either positively or negatively) when you came out? Tell a story about either a person who gave you confidence or a situation that made you afraid. **Now that you’re**

older and wiser, what perspective can you share through the Homecoming Project that will make high school easier for a new generation of “out” teenagers?

- *What has happened since you graduated?* How did life change after high school? Did you go to college or plunge into the working world? What’s it like to be “out” as an adult? Tell a story about either the freedoms or struggles of being an out LGBT person in the “real world.” **Use your story to show kids both triumphs and struggles. Paint an honest picture of what waits just around the bend.**

As you craft your presentation, remember that the purpose of your Homecoming Project is to **share your story**. Although there are many issues and topics that you may be passionate about (marriage equality, bullying, Don’t Ask Don’t Tell, etc.), the Homecoming Project is not a platform for political or social agendas. Instead, your Homecoming Project presentation should focus on telling your story in a way that helps students find hope and encouragement.

Design Your Speech

Once you’ve decided what you’re going to say (what stories you will include, what encouragement you want to offer, etc.), it’s time to decide *how you are going to say it*.

There are thousands of good ways to organize a speech. The following template works well for The Homecoming Project.

Opening

The opening of the speech is your first impression. It’s a time for the kids to get acquainted with you. Your opening doesn’t need to be filled with information. It’s simply the pleasant small talk before a conversation.

1. **Begin with a story.** A story is great way to start your speech not only because everyone loves a good story, but also because our stories connect us with each other. A story makes you seem real and vulnerable. It helps your audience get to know you better than a dry, bullet-pointed list of accomplishments can. Begin your speech by sharing a memory of high school, or how you felt when you decided to come back to your school to speak.
2. **Introduce yourself.** Tell students who are you, where you live and work, what do you do for a living, what your family (both of “birth” and of “choice”) are like, what you do for fun, etc.
3. **State your purpose.** Tell students why you want to speak to them. What inspired you to make the effort to come to their school? Briefly state what you want the audience to come away from your speech knowing, thinking, or feeling. For example, you might say, “Today I want to tell you a bit of my coming out story and let you know that every time you have the ‘I’m gay’ conversation with a new person, it gets a little easier”. Preparing this “main idea statement” will both help students understand what you want to say to them, and help you stay on track as you plan your speech.

Body

The body of your speech is your opportunity to use the metaphors you’ve found in your story and the lessons you’ve learned through your journey to encourage the next generation! If you need help finding the stories you should tell, try answering a few of the following questions:

- What was coming out like for you? What did your family say? How did your friends react?
- Looking back, what would you do differently? What were the costs of living in the closet? What were the rewards of coming out while you were in high school?
- What do you wish someone had said to you when you were coming out?
- Who were your mentors during your coming out process?
- What lessons are you still learning?

Your Homecoming Project speech shouldn't only be in the past tense. Give youth a sense of what your life is like now. Youth sometimes lose sight of the fact that they won't be teenagers forever. Youth may glamorize the lives they dream LGBT adults must lead. Use your story to paint an honest picture of life after high school.

Conclusion

Many professional communicators live by the following rule:

"Tell them what you plan to tell them (introduction), tell them what you want to tell them (body), and then remind them of what you just told them (conclusion)."

As you start to wrap up your speech, remind students of the main points of your talk. What is the main idea that you want students to understand and remember?

Continue with your conclusion by giving students a call to action. Your speech will make a much deeper impact if it inspires your audience to action. What can you ask students to do as a result of your talk? Consider asking them to:

- Give a presentation about an LGBT subject or person at their next GSA meeting.
- Collaborate with different groups in the school to create an awareness event.
- Organize a Facebook campaign that encourages everyone to change their statuses to raise awareness about an LGBT issue.
- Raise money to purchase LGBT themed books for your school library.
- Volunteer with a local LGBT organization.
- Invite another LGBT alum and/or professional to speak at the school.
- Work with a teacher to integrate a section on LGBT Rights/History/Literature into their class curriculum.
- Have a fundraiser at your school for an LGBT organization like Live Out Loud.
- Organize a group to film your own Public Service Announcement around LGBT issues. Send it to Live Out Loud for potential placement on our website.
- Wear a PRIDE bracelet in support of an LGBT friend.
- Host a movie night with friends with an LGBT-themed movie.
- A printable version of this list that you can pass out to students can be found on page 16.

Question and Answer Time

Be sure to leave time at the end of your speech for students to ask you questions. Keep in mind that simply saying, "Does anyone have any questions?" might not open a floodgate of questions. The group might be shy. They might simply not know what kinds of questions to ask. During the question and answer time, consider these tips:

- Begin the Q&A by asking the students a few questions. By asking students a question, you break the imaginary "wall" that often separates speakers from their audience. You initiate a conversation and ask them to join. This takes the pressure off of the youth to think of relevant questions. It also helps eliminate the silence that sometimes descends when a leader asks, "Does anyone have any questions?" For example, you could ask:
 - What are the biggest challenges you face at [school] as an LGBT student? What's it like to be "out" here?
 - "I would like for somebody to tell me about a similarity you see between my story and your story. How are our stories different?"

Remember: *If you don't have a good answer for your own questions, students probably won't either. Ask yourself your own questions and make sure they initiate good conversations!*

- Give students hints about what kind of questions to ask. You can help facilitate a successful Q&A time

by helping students know what kinds of things they should ask. For example:

- “Does anybody have any questions about how to deal with family members that aren’t very accepting?” (or other questions that reference part of your story)
- Anticipate what students might ask. It’s not hard to guess a few of the questions youth may ask after your Homecoming Project presentation. “How old were you when you had your first boyfriend?” “Do you think you’ll ever get married?” “Is it hard to be out at your job?” If you can anticipate what kind of questions your Homecoming Project might inspire, you can also pre-plan your answers!

Remember: *You don’t have to answer every question that is asked. Your audience may ask simplistic or even insulting questions. It’s possible that they’ll ask candid questions about your sex life, politics, health issues, religion, and relationships. Feel free to say, “That’s a good question, but it may bring up issues that I don’t feel comfortable talking about right now.”*

- Restate the Question. It’s a hallmark of a good speaker that when they are asked a question, they restate the question before answering it. For example, if a student asks, “Are you out at your job?” you should start your answer by saying, “The question was, ‘Am I out at work?’”

Remember: *If the question doesn’t make sense as it’s asked, you have an opportunity to clarify what the questioner wants to know.*

Now that it’s almost time for your Homecoming Project, consider these important “Day of Your Presentation” tips.



Do you need help with this stage of your Homecoming Project?
Call us at 212-651-4220 or email Tom Hernandez (Tom@LiveOutLoud.info).

The Day of Your Presentation

When your alarm sounds on the day of your Homecoming Project, you may be filled with a rush of emotions – anxiety, excitement, and uncertainty. Questions may flood your mind: Will they like me? Will they ask questions? Am I ready?

Remember: *By taking a brave step through the door of your alma mater, you are making life a little easier for LGBT kids at your school. Today, you get to say to these kids what you wish someone had said to you!*

The day of your Homecoming Project, remember to:

- **Make a list.** Don't forget to take your notes and any other visual aids you have collected such as old yearbooks, football jersey, photos, or other memorabilia.
- **Bring a bottle of water.** It's hard to speak when your throat is dry and your lips are sticking to your teeth. Make sure to hydrate!
- **Get there early.** Plan to arrive at the school 30 minutes before the presentation. Arriving early will give you plenty of time to meet with your contact, take a stroll through the school, use the restroom, and find your meeting space. It's better to have time to sit quietly reviewing your notes in a classroom than to be stuck in traffic, stressed because you are late for your presentation! Plan in advance how you will get to the school, including directions, mode of transportation, and travel time.
- **Go for it!** You have thoughtfully prepared the words you will share so speak loudly, clearly, and confidently. Don't forget to smile! Be sure to save the last 10 to 15 minutes for questions and answers. We encourage you to ask students to take some type of action that will continue after you leave. A list of possible actions can be found on page 16.
- **Document the moment.** Be sure to bring a still camera or video camera to document the moment. Be sure to share your pictures and videos with us so that we can include them as success stories on our website. Don't be afraid to ask your school contact to videotape or photograph your presentation, or invite a friend to come with you who can offer support!

Your Homecoming Project is almost finished! There's only one more step.

Do you need help with this stage of your Homecoming Project?
Call us at 212-651-4220 or email Tom Hernandez (Tom@LiveOutLoud.info).

Follow-Up With Your School And Live Out Loud

After your Homecoming Project is completed, it's important that you send a note of thanks to the school. Make sure to formally thank your school contact, the GSA, and any other school personnel or student that helped you with your presentation. It would be great for you to continue fostering your relationship with your school contact. Let that person know that you would be happy to come back again, arrange for other speakers, or help with a special project.

Live Out Loud also wants to hear about your Homecoming Project experience! Send us your reflections on how your Homecoming Project went, what the kids said, and how you feel about your experience. Your insights and encouragement are the best tools we have to get other brave LGBT men and women involved in the Homecoming Project!

Contact us with your story about The Homecoming Project to info@liveoutloud.info



Do you need help with this stage of your Homecoming Project?
Call us at 212-651-4220 or email Tom Hernandez (Tom@LiveOutLoud.info).

Homecoming Project Checklist

- ☐ Initiate contact with your school through either a teacher, guidance counselor, or GSA (gay-straight alliance) club advisor.

Sponsor's name: _____

Sponsor's extension: _____

Sponsor's email address: _____

- ☐ Leave messages and send emails until contact is established (keep a log of calls and call times).

- ☐ Introduce self and explain the Homecoming Project.

- ☐ Send information letter regarding The Homecoming Project and Live Out Loud.

- ☐ Send link to Live Out Loud website and Homecoming Project PSA (public service announcement).

Live Out Loud website: www.liveoutloud.info

Live Out Loud PSA: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pvhTOW3H7_Y

- ☐ After the school expresses interest, ask questions:

- How active is your GSA?
- How often does your GSA meet?
- How many students attend your GSA?
- What does your GSA typically talk about?
- Has there been any LGBT "news" on campus in the recent past?
- Do you know of any students that have recently "come out"? How did other students respond?
- How many "out" kids are there at the school?
- How many "out" teachers or school administrators does your school have?

- ☐ Set a date for your Homecoming Project.

Your Homecoming Project date: _____

- ☐ Ask questions re: Homecoming Project specifics.

- What time will the club or assembly start? _____
- How long will I have to speak? _____
- Will there be a computer and projector available for visual aids? _____
- How many students do you expect to attend? _____
- at are the students' ages? _____

- ☐ Read the Homecoming Project Speaker's Guide.

- ☐ Develop your Homecoming Project presentation.

- ☐ Think of 3-4 questions you can ask students that will initiate the question/answer time.

Question 1: _____

Question 2: _____

Question 3: _____

☐ Brainstorm an action for students to take after the Homecoming Project.
My action: _____

☐ Send "Thank You" email to school.

☐ Send a few reflections on your Homecoming Project to Live Out Loud! (info@liveoutloud.info)



What If My School Says NO?

Unfortunately, some schools might not be willing to host a Homecoming Project. Whether it's for political reasons, religious reasons, or because administrators don't understand the importance of supporting LGBT students, your school contact may tell you that they don't want to participate in the Homecoming Project. What do you do now?

Don't be discouraged! Read this quote from a student that attended a recent Homecoming Project:

"I was extremely moved by [the Homecoming Project]. I feel that he has truly inspired me to be my true self and love the body I'm in. I can honestly say that he has affected me for the rest of my life... When I attended this seminar and heard his story about finally accepting who he is, I realized that I am beautiful and unique, and someone someday is going to love me for who I am. He has immensely helped me and I will never forget what he said, 'Be your true self.'"

Don't let a "no" stop you from participating in the Homecoming Project! The following strategies will help you navigate past a "no."

Remember.... If you get stuck, give Live Out Loud a call. We'll do everything we can to help you find a way into your school! Call Tom at 212-651-4220 or email Tom@LiveOutLoud.info.

Go To The Source

If a teacher, GSA advisor, or guidance counselor tells you that they can't sponsor a Homecoming Project because the school's administration won't approve your visit, try to speak directly to the person who is saying "No." Call the vice principal, principal, or other person in charge.

Then, ask questions and engage the person in a non-threatening conversation. **Remember, part of the beauty of the Homecoming Project is that it gives us the opportunity to build a bridge between the LGBT and straight community.** Here's a good strategy to use during your conversation:

- **Ask Questions:** "What is your concern about the Homecoming Project?" Give your school contact an opportunity to voice his/her concerns, but don't feel like you have to provide an answer for each one. Let them talk. Become an ally by listening to what he or she wants to say.
- **Clarify Your Motive:** Your school may be hesitant to host a Homecoming Project because they are afraid you will come into their school and push a "gay agenda." Build a bridge with your contact by letting them know that you have no desire to promote a "platform" at the school. You simply hope to partner with them to make their school a healthier place for LGBT students... and isn't that what we all want?
- **Tell a Story:** Stories often convince people when other "arguments" do not. Tell your contact a story about your experience at the school. "I want to participate in the Homecoming Project because when I attended this school I [insert a brief story about your experience as a LGBT person at the school]. I just want to make sure the kids in our school..."
- **Make a Case for Action:** School administrators want their schools to be safe. They want their students to succeed. Help the school official understand how important it is that we do everything we can to support LGBT students. The following facts from Lambda Legal might help:
 - 77.9% of LGBT students hear remarks such as "faggot" or "dyke" frequently or often at school. The average high school student hears such slurs up to 25 times a day.
 - 39.1% of LGBT students have been physically harassed (by being shoved or pushed) and 17% have been assaulted (by being punched, kicked, or injured with a weapon) at school because of their sexual orientation.
 - 64.3% of LGBT students say they feel unsafe in their school because of their sexual orientation.

- LGBT youth are 4.5 times more likely than their straight peers to skip school because they feel unsafe.
- 31% of LGBT students had missed at least an entire day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe based on their sexual orientation.
- Nearly one-third of LGBT students drop out of high school to escape the violence, harassment, and isolation. This is nearly three times the national average.
- LGBT youth are four times as likely than their straight counterparts to have attempted suicide.

Find Someone New To Talk To

Your school's guidance counselor will likely be your greatest ally in organizing a Homecoming Project. It's possible that she or he may tell you "no" either through a direct refusal or by simply not returning your calls. Don't be discouraged! Find someone new to talk to!

- Reach out to your classmates through Facebook, Classmates.com, or other social network. Your graduating class may have a Facebook group you can use to connect with old friends. Ask if anyone has connections at the school. You might be surprised at who is still involved with your high school. Your classmates' children may even currently attend the school. They may know teachers, members of the parent-teacher organization, administrators, or school board officials that can help!
- Call the next person on the chain of command. If a teacher says no, call the guidance counselor. If the guidance counselor says no, call the vice principal. If the vice principal says no, call the principal. Just because one person at the school is resistant, doesn't mean everyone will be!

Tell Your Story Another Way

Even after using these strategies, you may still reach a dead end. If your school absolutely refuses to host a homecoming project, consider these alternate ways to tell your story.

- Record a short Homecoming Project video. Live Out Loud will post your video on our Homecoming Project YouTube channel. Kids from all over the country can be inspired by your story! Email your video to info@liveoutloud.info
- Write your Homecoming Project as a short essay. Live Out Loud will post your reflections on our website. Your thoughts will inspire not only the kids Live Out Loud serves, but also future Homecoming Project participants who need the encouragement you can provide! Email your story to info@liveoutloud.info
- Look for other youth organizations in your town. Many local YMCAs host groups for LGBT youth where you may be able to tell your story. Your town (either where you grew up or in the city where you now live) may also have an LGBT community center where you can speak to a group of students.
- Reach out to your middle school, a "rival" high school in your hometown, or a high school in the city where you currently live. Use the GLSEN network to find a school with an active GSA you can speak to. (<http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/library/record/2342.html?state=what>)

Finally, send your school a "safe space kit" to help them make your school a safer, more welcoming place for LGBT students! (<http://safespace.glsen.org>)

Remember... if you get stuck, give Live Out Loud a call. We'll do everything we can to help you find a way into your school! Call Tom at 212-651-4220 or email Tom@LiveOutLoud.info.

Sample School Contact Letter

Dear **[insert name]**:

My name is **[insert name]**, a former student at **[insert school name]**. I am writing because I recently learned about The Homecoming Project, an initiative that helps “out” lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) men and women return to their high school and offer encouragement to students in GSA (gay-straight alliance) clubs, diversity groups, psychology classes, and other student organizations.

The Homecoming Project is sponsored by Live Out Loud, a non profit New York City based organization that connects LGBT youth with “out” professional role models. Many of us are saddened when we read that nearly one third of LGBT youth drop out of school because they feel alone, isolated, or bullied. We are devastated when we realize that gay youth are four times more likely to attempt suicide than their non-gay peers.

Live Out Loud hopes that through The Homecoming Project, LGBT students and their allies will gain a sense of empowerment through hearing from someone who once shared similar emotions in a similar place.

I attended **[insert school name]** from **[insert dates]**. **[Insert short, 4 sentence biography of what you did after you graduated, where you went to college, and/or what you are doing now.]**

In support of The Homecoming Project, I would like to share my story with student members of your school’s Gay/Straight Alliance, diversity, humanities, LGBT studies classes, or other appropriate groups at the school. It is my hope that together we will be able to offer new perspectives regarding sexual identity and growing up LGBT to LGBT and straight students alike.

You can learn more about The Homecoming Project and Live Out Loud by visiting our website at www.LiveOutLoud.info.

Please call me at **[insert phone number]** or email me at **[insert email address]** so we can begin planning my visit back to **[insert school name]**. If you know of a teacher, guidance counselor, or other faculty member that I should contact to arrange a visit, please forward them this email.

Thanks in advance,

[insert name]

More Information about Live Out Loud

About Live Out Loud

Live Out Loud connects LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) youth to positive out role models whose stories and experiences can inspire LGBT students to live more enriched and empowered lives. Our mission: **To empower, energize and enable Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth to live the life of their dreams through the celebration of the richness and diversity of our shared experience, the visibility of role models and the dissemination of information.**

Live Out Loud began in 2000 when Founder and Executive Director, Leo Preziosi, Jr. spotted an article in *Metro Source* called "The Gun in the Closet" about two students who committed suicide because of hostile school environments, isolation, ostracism and fear. Compelled to action, Preziosi began assembling LGBT professionals to speak at high schools and colleges about their obstacles, triumphs, and journeys towards affirmed lives.

Since then, Live Out Loud has brought over 500 LGBT role models to high schools and universities. From spiritual leaders to fashion designers to corporate powerhouses and grassroots activists, Live Out Loud works with a diverse body of outstanding leaders throughout our community to touch the lives of thousands of youth.

Live Out Loud Programs

Homecoming Project

Through The Homecoming Project, Live Out Loud encourages out LGBT individuals to return to their high schools to speak with a new generation of students about the unique experiences that have shaped the individuals they are today. To see our PSA produced by Showtime featuring Alan Cumming, please visit our website at www.liveoutloud.info.

School Programs

Live Out Loud conducts programs for GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance) clubs in schools throughout NYC. Programs are generally held after school in a classroom setting. Typical programming elements include speaker panels, discussion groups, activity-based learning, and presentations of student actions.

The Gathering

The Gathering is a community-wide program that draws together LGBT youth and their allies from across the city to help them find support, have fun, and learn from their peers in other NYC schools. Gathering programs include discussion groups, speaker presentations, community service projects, and learning activities.

Lesson Plans

Live Out Loud writes lesson plans that serve as both stand-alone resources and as an accompaniment to The Homecoming Project. Topics include "How To Be A Role-Model," "We Are All Minorities," and "Global Viewpoints of Sexual Identity."

Behind the Scenes

Live Out Loud takes students "behind the scenes" at local corporations to give them a glimpse of the possibilities that await them in the working world. Through networking with gay affinity groups, Live Out Loud is able to help youth see the LGBT community that is available in many corporations.

Living the Life

Living the Life is a weekly after-school program that Live Out Loud co-leads with a local YMCA. Typical programming elements include speaker panels, discussion groups, activity-based learning, and presentations of student actions.

Live Out Loud Scholarship

Every year, Live Out Loud awards four \$2500 scholarships to college-bound LGBT high school seniors. Award criteria are based on the demonstration of past leadership and community service involvement, academic credentials, personal essay, an individual interview, financial need and future goals.



Take Action!

- Choose an LGBT subject or person and give a presentation at their next GSA meeting.
 - Collaborate with different groups in the school to create an awareness event.
 - Organize a Facebook campaign that encourages your friends to change their status to raise awareness about an LGBT issue.
 - Raise money to purchase LGBT themed books for your school library.
 - Volunteer with a local LGBT organization.
 - Invite another LGBT alum and/or professional to speak at the school.
 - Work with a teacher to integrate a section on LGBT Rights/History/Literature into their class curriculum.
 - Have a fundraiser at your school for an LGBT organization like Live Out Loud.
 - Organize a group to film your own Public Service Announcement around LGBT issues. Send it to Live Out Loud for potential placement on our website.
 - Wear a PRIDE bracelet in support of an LGBT friend.
 - Host a movie night with friends with an LGBT-themed movie.
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Sample Homecoming Project Presentation

(The following Homecoming Project presentation was given by a recent college graduate who was eager to speak for his high school's GSA. The speech that follows represents the true spirit of a Homecoming Project presentation. It is honest, engaging, and encouraging. Like most speeches, it is not written in grammatically perfect English, but rather as the speaker would talk.)

My first draft for this speech took an hour to read, because I have so much to say, as all of us do. I wanted you to get an idea of me as a person, as a well-rounded individual, and not just that I was gay, although that is an important part of who I am. Because of time, however, I decided to strip it to its bare bones and the reason I'm here today; my coming out story. I'll probably be talking for fifteen minutes and have ten minutes for a Q and A.

My name is [name removed]. I am a recent graduate of [University name removed] with a degree in English Literature and minor in Jewish Studies, as well as a teaching certification in ESL. I've just started an internship at Dixon Place, a small queer experimental theater on the Lower East Side. I'm living back at home with my parents. Some time ago, I evidently signed up for this program, LiveOutLoud, though when they called me, I had completely forgotten about it.

The following is a quote my fraternity brother Kyle, in an article he wrote for his school newspaper. He wrote, "Being gay doesn't define me. I define being gay."

There are a few main reasons why I'm here today. The first is that I want everyone who's listening, whether you're queer or not, to have a better idea of what it's like to be gay, and what we have to deal with. I want people to realize the oppression we face.

However, I don't know if I really want to break stereotypes about gay people, but I would like to say

something about them. When I was in high school, on the surface I was relatively all right with myself, but underneath, I really wasn't. There were few other out gay boys in my school, and the ones who did I felt were clichéd and effeminate, or femme. I hated them—I thought they were shallow and unoriginal. There are quite a few received ideas about queer people, gay men in particular, and it is important to recognize that not every gay man is the same and not every lesbian is the same. But how many of these assumed attributes are bad? For example, is acting effeminate bad?

So one day in eighth grade I hit puberty, I had a dream about Spike from Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and when I woke up, I knew I was gay. I was still dating Lulu for a few months after that, though. It didn't seem to compute in my head that I should break up with her. Lulu dumped me a few days after our first kiss, right when I was going to dump her. I was shocked, but the rest of the year was amazing. I wasn't out to anybody, but I had strangely developed immense self-confidence. Lulu and I were still really good friends, and I hadn't made any new ones, but I seemed to respect myself enough not to settle for the group of friends that I had had. I joked around and laughed a lot with everybody, and I didn't really think about things too much. I loved English, and I may as well give a shout out to Mrs. Decker, then Miss Boland, who was my teacher that year. I was alone a lot that year, but I wasn't lonely.

My sister Sara and I got really close that year, and that year was the year

I fell in love with lesbians. My sister and I had apparently been really close when we were younger, but I only know this from family lore and baby pictures. Soon after, she was the Devil. But my sister had taken an interest in my well being in seventh grade when she decided I was dressing like a loser. She gave me a thrift-shop t-shirt and corduroy pants makeover. That year, we drove to Hebrew school together and rented gay and lesbian movies and listened to gay and lesbian music. I loved all things lesbian. And I still do.

Ninth grade came, and I came here. I became very depressed that year. My sister had gone off to college, and I missed my English teacher a lot. Moreover, the boys in high school were a lot hotter than the ones in middle school. I was going crazy. In November, I came out to Lulu, who responded, "Yeah, I kind of figured when you were showing me all the cute guys in our Spanish book."

I came out to my very liberal dad in ninth grade, who reassured me very enthusiastically about how normal those feelings were and that they were just my hormones bouncing around and I'd be fine. I believed him—in my ninth grade journal, I've written quite a bit about other boys who are "temporarily gay" and about how there's no such thing as a gay freshman.

In tenth grade, I got involved with GSA. I told my dad, who cautiously asked me if I'd told my more traditional mom. I said no. In October, my dad told me he found my camp

journal and started reading it, because he didn't know what it was. He paused and told me he still thought I was the greatest kid in the world. And I knew what he was referring to, and that's a really amazing thing to say, but at the time I was wondering what was on the first page that made him realize. So I turned to it, and I had written, "Joe is such a hottie."

Soon, though, I met the people who really tore me out of the closet. In English class, there was this crazy girl—let's call her Melinda—who had absolutely no boundaries whatsoever. She was brash and crude and hysterical. I started sitting with her and her friends at lunch, instead of some other boys who made gay jokes a lot, friends of a guy friend I had. My friendship with Melinda didn't really last, but my friendships with Lisa and Maria did. Lisa was a lot like Melinda, though a lot more sane. My best friend Lisa was a champion and indirect mentor to me and continues to be. Lisa inspired me to come out of the closet completely and not selectively. I couldn't be around her for long before growing to be a lot more comfortable with myself, and that included the gay part of me. Before long, my personality was back to the way it was in eighth grade, and now I was out, and I had friends.

Later that year, my mom took me to the doctor because I'd done something to my finger during gym. At the doctor's office, I found some NJ newsletter, and there was some article about gay couples, and I was reading it, and I realized that one of the people interviewed was my old second-grade teacher. I showed it to her, and we were talking about it, and we got onto the subject of ambiguity, and she asked me if I liked boys and girls. I said no. She asked me if I liked girls. I said no. She asked me if I liked boys. I said

yes. And I can't remember her initial reaction, but I do know it worked its way up to—and we're in the car this whole time, NEVER start an important conversation with your parents (or anyone, for that matter) like this when you're in the car, because you can't get away—"well, can't you just give me some HOPE that you'll be STRAIGHT!"

I was hurt, but I was calm. I explained to her that there wasn't anything wrong with me, that I was happy, that it was more accepted now. She countered that homosexuals lived unhappy lives. I countered—badly—that my uncle, her brother, was gay and he was perfectly happy. My mother didn't reject it on a religious basis, although she was very spiritual, but more because she didn't like it. She said she didn't want me to be discriminated against, and I said I already am. I'm Jewish. So are you.

After all that, I went home. I went online. My sister IMed me. She said, "So Mommy tells me you think you're gay." I said, "I am gay." She said, "I think it's bullcrap. I think you just want to be a lesbian and this is the closest you can get." I sat there for a minute. I didn't say anything. Then I logged off. A few minutes later, I received an email from her apologizing, slightly skeptical, but ultimately accepting. A year later she came out to me, and a few months later, to my mother. That's another story.

Parents are hard to deal with. That's obvious. I found they're especially hard to deal with in situations like these. I cast her as the homophobic villain for awhile, but then I found out that wasn't working. I cast her as crazy. She was going through it, too. She went through a very, very, very, serious stage of denial. A year later or so, my mother had grudgingly accepted that I was gay, to

an extent. First, she told me not to "broadcast it". Not to tell people. She was shocked when I told her my friends knew. Next up, my mother told me to "keep my options open". Sometimes I wonder if I'm being overly sensitive; when my mother told me that, what I heard was, "Don't be gay. You still have a chance to redeem yourself." I don't want to redeem myself.

At the beginning of my junior year in college, my mother told me she accepted me. She also went to a meeting of PFLAG of her own free will, something I had NOT expected. She wasn't into it, but she went quite a few times.

I think a major turning point for my mother--and me, though in a different way--was when I discovered the group Nehirim, a spiritual group for LGBT Jews, in college. I had been increasingly estranged from my synagogue and Judaism in general, and the group looked interesting to me; besides being a chance to meet nice Jewish boys. The group was an amazing one, a group of people who understood gay jokes and Jewish jokes at the same time.

Also in my junior year, I responded to a Facebook invite to organize a chapter of the Delta Lambda Phi National Social Fraternity for gay, bisexual, and progressive men. It was one of the most life-changing experiences I've had. For the first time in my life, I had close gay guy friends. We became the founding fathers of what's now the Rutgers Colony—the second stage a fraternity chapter goes through. In Delta Lambda Phi, I was forced to come to grips with many aspects of gay culture and myself, including my prejudices against what I saw as stereotypical gay men, either effeminate or party-loving or both.

I'm still learning how to deal with

strangers and people saying “that’s so gay” or faggot. Basically, whether or not, and when I want to change things or just live my life. I think I’m too hard on myself sometimes. I’ve had second thoughts about coming back to high school. I can’t stop everyone who does it from saying homophobic things. I hate when I hear people yell faggot or that’s so gay or that’s retarded, but I also hate hating. I hate being so offended, and I hate the stress I cause myself when I tell myself: “You have to say something.” I don’t want to live my life educating every single person who walks by or feeling like I have to. I just want to live my life.

There are all kinds of gay people. There are all kinds of people. There are obnoxious gays, there are really nice gays, there are religious gays, there are politically angry gays, there are gay Republicans, there are gay people against gay marriage, there are gay people who hate femme gay guys and call them the f word, there are sexist gay guys who will have nothing to do with women, there are sexist lesbians who will have nothing to do with men, there are lesbians who aren’t sexist at all.

If you want to be really involved, talk to Mr. Owens and/or go to a GSA meeting. If you’re worried about being perceived as gay—whether or not you actually are—keep in mind that it is the “Gay-Straight Alliance”. But take all the time you need.

Be there for your queer friends, if you have any. Don’t pressure them if they don’t feel like talking about something. In some ways, you have more power as an ally of the queer community. You don’t have to be a social worker. Just be there for someone and listen. The smallest thing can make a difference. If someone says something you

know is offensive, say something back. Though they may not realize it, using ‘gay’ as a synonym for ‘lame’ is extremely offensive. Ask the person how they would feel, if someone said a similar thing regarding an oppressed or minority group they belong to; i.e. “That’s so Jewish”, or “that’s so Asian.” A lot of homophobia is not pure evil—it’s based on misunderstanding, fear, and ignorance, which manifests itself as bullying. The words faggot and dyke—and often queer and homo are also offensive, even if said jokingly towards someone’s friends.

This is hard. No one’s asking you to be a hero; hurtful language is a global problem, and you cannot put that on yourself to stop it all. Maybe say something subtle, and leave it at that. Maybe something like, “You are so right, that has so much to do with two guys getting it on.”

Having heard this, I want the queer students in the audience, closeted or not, whatever level you’re at of acceptance or understanding of yourself, however femme or butch you are, to know that you are not alone. That everything works out. That no matter how much people try to put up a brave front sometimes, we all go through things; you are not alone in your struggle.

