

WHAT A DIFFERENCE AN ALLY MAKES

By Mereia Alston-Torres, 16, Staff Writer

IT WAS FRESHMAN YEAR IN GYM CLASS WHEN I HAD MY FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH HOMOPHOBIA. I REMEMBER EVERY LAST DETAIL, RIGHT DOWN TO THE RAINBOW COLORED SMILEY-FACE EARRINGS I WAS WEARING.

The air in the gym was hot and thick even though it was the middle of November. I was hanging around a corner of the gym with my friends, socializing and pretending to play basketball. I decided to go out to the hallway to get a drink from the water fountain with my best friend. There were other students from my gym class hanging around the water fountain, too. I went to get a drink, and as I raised my head up from the fountain, a boy from my gym class snickered at me and said nastily, "What's with the earrings? Are you like a dyke or something?"

At the time, I wasn't completely open about being bisexual, and his comment threw me off guard. I didn't know how to respond. I could feel my face getting hot with humiliation, and all around me I felt the stares of the surrounding students.

"Man, I can't stand fags these days," he continued as he turned away towards his friends. I lowered my head in defeat. I was willing myself not to cry, when I heard my best friend shout, "Hey, man, what's your deal? What gives you the right to talk to her like that?" The boy turned around. He looked surprised that my heterosexual friend had spoken up in my defense, but then he just dismissed her and went about his business.

As he walked away, I turned towards my friend and thanked her for speaking up for me. Even though the boy probably didn't learn his lesson, it was comforting to know that someone had my back. Her actions showed a lot of bravery because she could have chosen to keep quiet and not stand up for me at all. Instead, she stepped up and defended me. Later on that day, I asked my friend why she had spoken in my defense. She said that she spoke up for me not only because I am bisexual, but also because I am a human being and nobody deserves to be spoken to in such a manner.

That fateful day, when I realized that I'm not in this alone, will forever be ingrained in my mind. It never really occurred to me why allies are so important. But after that day, I really understood the importance of allies, and what a positive impact they can have on someone's life.

WHAT'S AN ALLY?

So what exactly is an ally? An ally is a person who is not a member of a group that tends to be discriminated against, but who speaks out against discrimination against this group. My friend is a heterosexual ally who stands up to homophobia and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people. Allies can participate in activities to reduce harassment against LGBTQ students, such as joining their school's gay-straight alliance (GSA), participating in workshops to educate students about LGBTQ people and—most of all—speaking out against homophobia.

As a person who identifies as bisexual, I feel that it makes a difference when a person who is heterosexual speaks out against homophobia. It takes a lot of courage to speak out in another person's defense. Oftentimes, people will look away when they witness someone being bullied. This may be because they are scared of becoming a target themselves. But this is a risk heterosexual allies take when they speak out against homophobia.

REAL FRIENDS

Prior to that day at the water fountain, I was pretty nervous about coming out to most of my friends. I thought that they would think differently of me, or they wouldn't want to be my friends anymore. But after my friend stood up for me, I wasn't really concerned about coming out to the rest of my friends. It dawned on me that my real friends would accept me no matter what, and even if some people didn't accept me, I knew I had someone who did. And since that day, I can definitely say that, I have become so much more comfortable with being bisexual.

There are a lot of LGBTQ teens who are in the same predicament that I was. Unfortunately, not everybody has friends who are allies. This is why it is very important for you to show your support. If you know someone who is LGBTQ, let them know that you care and that you accept them.

SOMETHING TO
TALK ABOUT



SPEAK UP

If you hear someone saying "That's so gay" in a hallway, classroom or locker room to describe something that they don't like or think is stupid, you can tell that person that what they are saying is offensive to someone who really is gay or has friends or family who are gay and they should probably use another word to describe what they don't like.

INTERVENE

If you see an LGBTQ person being bullied, intervene. Stand up to anti-LGBTQ bullying, such as name calling, harassment and violence, and tell an adult about the incident.

PARTICIPATE IN ALLY WEEK

A great way to show your support is to participate in Ally Week, which takes place in October. Rally your friends, teachers and coaches to sign an Ally Pledge, and help spread the word about standing up to homophobia. Go to AllyWeek.org for more information.

JOIN YOUR GSA

If there is a GSA at your school, join it. If your school doesn't have a GSA, consider starting one. Visit Sexetc.org's Action Center or the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network at GLSEN.org for more information about starting a GSA at your school.

Ultimately, you should never hesitate to speak out against homophobia. You never know what a difference it could make. I know it made a huge difference for me.



Find out what else you can do to be an ally. Visit Sexetc.org's Action Center at Sexetc.org.