



ACLU Applauds Student Victory as Gay-Straight Alliance Gains Official School Recognition

White County School Board Agrees to Heed Federal Law

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ATLANTA, GA – The American Civil Liberties Union today announced that officials at White County High School in Cleveland, Georgia have agreed to drop their attempts to stop students from forming a gay-straight alliance club. The agreement comes after several weeks of negotiation between the school and the ACLU of Georgia.

School administrators initially said that they would not allow the club to form when students, led by 16-year-old junior Kerry Pacer, approached them about starting a gay-straight alliance in January. After Kerry presented documents outlining the school's legal obligation to recognize the club, school officials changed their position but the school board began stalling on a final decision after news of the club became public. The school continued to stall while disapproving community members demanded that the school ignore its obligation under the Federal Equal Access Act to allow the club to form. The ACLU of Georgia stepped in and negotiated on the students' behalf, bringing about today's announcement.

"I can't tell you how relieved I am that the board is finally going to do the right thing and let us create a safe space for gay students at my school," said Pacer, a lesbian who decided to form the club with friends in an attempt to counteract rampant anti-gay harassment at the school. She added, "I understand that not everyone supports this club, and those people have a right to their opinion. But we also have a right to exist, and nobody's rights should be trampled on."

Beth Littrell, a staff attorney with the ACLU of Georgia, applauded Pacer for her role in starting the GSA. "Kerry Pacer has endured a great deal of discrimination at White

County High School – she’s been called names, she’s been booed at a school assembly, she’s been punished for wearing a gay-positive t-shirt, and she’s been harassed by her classmates – and rather than remain silent, she has bravely stood up for her rights and the rights of every other gay student in her community,” said Littrell, who also runs the ACLU of Georgia’s Sticks and Stones Project, which focuses on protecting the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered students. “Kerry and her friends understood that their rights were being violated, refused to be silenced no matter how unpopular their views may be, and understood that there is a real need for a GSA at their school.”

The Federal Equal Access Act requires schools to treat gay-straight alliances as they would any other school group. Federal courts have repeatedly ruled in favor of GSAs where schools tried to block their formation, upholding students’ right to form the groups in Salt Lake City, Utah; Orange County, California; Franklin Township, Indiana; and Boyd County, Kentucky.

“Federal law is crystal clear when it comes to the rights of students at public high schools to form gay-straight alliances, and we’re happy that White County High School has finally recognized that,” said James Esseks, litigation director at the ACLU’s national Lesbian Gay Rights Project. He added, “Gay-straight alliances foster tolerance and help students who have traditionally been marginalized feel safe and valued. Schools not only shouldn’t discriminate against GSA’s, they should be encouraging them to form.”

The students decided to call the club PRIDE, which stands for Peers Rising in Diversity Education.

More information about the ACLU of Georgia’s Sticks and Stones Project can be found here:

<http://www.acluga.org/safeschools/index.html>

More information about the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered students can be found here:

<http://www.aclu.org/getequal/>

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