

Public Forum

Former Senator Lederer-Plaskett: Basically, I am here to talk to you guys about something that I haven't spoken to about before. Basically, it's program that I am starting to put together that I worked with about 7, in the last week, I have talked to about 7 identity based groups on campus about coming together. Basically, this little girl, I used to baby-sit for, she's from my hometown, and she killed herself last week, age 14. She was bullied relentlessly on Facebook, at school, over the phone, just constantly. And they are starting to find at investigations, just endless records of constant episodes of bullying through messaging, through just every form that you could think of. And this is not a face that you should see at the website for a funeral home. She was 14. There is no reason that she should be in this page. And it's something that we've heard a lot about in the news, in the last year and a half. Basically we've heard over and over again, LGBTQ teams killing themselves, because they have been bullied to a point that they cannot take it anymore, and they are scared for their lives. You hear about kids in their first years of college who are so out of their comfort zone, and so out of position, where they are around people who do not except them, and do not tolerate them for who they are. So they see no way out of being miserable that they kill themselves. They take their own lives, before they even have a chance of having more than 3 sentences in their obituaries. This little girl had no chance to have anything more to her obituary because she was 14. And so, a group of us are putting together a group called "Call It out". Basically, we're really tired of watching campaign after campaign. The "It gets better" is a really nice idea. It's a really sweet idea. It's good for about the first month after a tragedy, and then people stop caring, and then you have teens, like the kid who made "It gets better," and in 9 months killed himself, because people stopped caring. So we're trying to put together an organization that would ultimately be SGA recognized in the next couple of months. Potentially we're about to communicate with the, but we'd potentially like to exist to ourselves, as an organization. I have been communicating with the superintendent of Burlington High Schools with Edmonds Middle School to try to put together a group that goes into middle schools, into high schools, as much as once a week, or as much as couple of weeks, depending on what seems plausible to start off. And we put together in the last week, it's something that we've

worked really really fast and really really worked hard on. We've put together a curriculum that LGBT issues, body image issues, and a combination of sort of slut shaming but on a broader spectrum of sort of, I know what happened with this girl's death was that they were calling her a "slut" at age 14, and they were bullying her with things and names that when people aren't educated and informed about what those words mean, and when they're given some secrecy, have a lot more power than they should. So we're going in with sort of a small range of topics that we're going to discuss, and with the intent of also having the support of the counseling center, and a bunch of campus resources, to put together a safety net for those students that are visibly or not so visibly slipping through the cracks and heading towards something that we'll eventually call "too late." I know personally, I'm really tired at sort of looking back and saying 20 hindsight, how did I not this this little girl in this place? How did I not see that that kid is having the crap beat out of him on a regular basis? Whether it's verbal, whether it's physical, we've all—I think, to some extent, experienced intolerance, abuse. Whether or not you personally have, or whether or not you've watched someone do it, I'm seeking—we're trying to put together a group of 15. So if you're interested, I'm sure you all probably still have my contact information. I am not on the list serve, but I am always in the office. SO you can easily find me, send me an email, Facebook message, if you're interested. We're going to eventually, hopefully set up an application process for future years. This is something that continues past when I graduate, especially since a lot of the participants who are going into the schools, or will be going into the schools are junior and sophomores. So I would really appreciate it, since you guys are some of the biggest campus representatives, the biggest student leaders, not jus in Senate, it would be really great if people who are near other organizations, especially identity-based organizations, could step up. This is not just an LGBTQ issue; it's not just a black and white issue, and I think that motivation that we're trying to get across is that the time for sort of looking back is geared way too often, and if we can get people to call out others on their sort of really abusive actions, that's what we're seeking. That's why it's called "Call it Out." We're tired of having people stand by and be abused and pushed to the point where 14-year-old girl is having a funeral tomorrow. So that's about it. We're going to seek recognition. In the next couple of months I will working

with Robby and put that together, and I really would appreciate as much Senate, I am here because I would like as much Senate involvement as possible.

Chair Burns: So, not only does this fall under the current issue, this is something that is really important me, so if you need any help with this me and my committee will be there.

Chair Goodnow: Thanks for coming in. I think that this is awesome. My only question for you was, being as a Vermont student, and someone who went to high school; I know that we had a suicide, a student suicide, when I was a senior, I think. And there were a couple in my community, and none of them were LGBTQ related, but more like stress or tension put on by the family. I was wondering that might be a direction you might be interested in pursuing. I just didn't hear that in your presentation at all. So maybe a thought.

Aliza: Yeah, we've thought about putting that into the curriculum. We've been, it's been our 7th day, so we're still in our early days of planning. It's something that was brought up by the school. So yeah, we're going to look to eventually add that. That is sort of a whole another ball game, and it sort of something that parents aren't as willing for their kids to be around. We're going to look for that and set up the safety net. Hopefully that will patch as well, but the curriculum we're starting, we're trying to start small.

Senator Bates: I went to high school with Chair Goodnow, so I know what he's talking about. I remember when I was in 8th grade, my neighbor committed suicide from bullying. One thing that I was going to say was, we went to Essex High School, like 20 minutes away from here, and a couple months ago, there was a bullying incident where an openly gay student was beat up in a park near our high school. And he was like covered in bruises with cuts and stuff. But because it happened off school grounds, the administration did not take care of it, the way that they wanted to, or what the students wanted them to. So about a week after this incident happened, there was actually a sit-in, a demonstration of all the students getting mad at the administration for not taking any action. My point is that this program might be good to extend to other high schools. Have you considered reaching out to other schools in Chittenden County like Essex, or CVU, or any of those other schools?

Aliza: Ultimately, I would like to, it would be a huge thing obviously. I mean, the little girl that I am most connected to is not from Burlington. But we're trying to start small. The goal is for us to get into Edmunds Middle School, because I think if you can start while they were younger. It's something that you can carry on into the high schools. But eventually yeah, I would love to expand it, and have it really reach as far as it can go. It's something, especially right now, this semester; it's going to be a tough spot.

Senator Daley: As representatives of Vermonters, I know in my (inaudible) North, we have a lot of interventionist harassment and bullying programs. Are there any existing programs that you would be working with?

Aliza: To my knowledge, no. That's why we're trying to investigate this superintendent, because they have not yet given me a full straight answer on that yet. I will probably have a more in-depth meeting with her next week. But right now, the only program that they have right now is they have Rachael's Challenge. It's an assembly that they have once a year from a girl who was killed at the Columbine High School. From personal experience, I can assure you that assemblies were really a great way to take a nap. So, I am hoping to do something where it's smaller groups.

Senator Holland: Is this going to be like an after-school program or are you going in and speaking?

Aliza: We'd ideally like to have it during the day for a window of 45 minutes to an hour, if we could get it. That's why it would not be a super frequent thing. We'd like to meet with as many students as possible, but we'd also (inaudible) as frequently as plausible. It would be during the day. Another program that I was trying to hopefully link up with is that there's a really cool program put on by the Unitarian Church down Church Street, that ultimately, they run one of the most progressive forward-thinking programs. It's a combination of sex-ed, sort of like life goal oriented training. Like it's a whole spectrum of things they cover. And they do it in one of the most open-minded ways I have seen anywhere. So we're hoping to link up with them.

Senator Holland: If you're trying to do it during the day, are you trying to go through home economics?

Aliza: Ultimately, we're trying to get our own time period. No teacher takes it well having their curriculum sort of stepped upon. So that's something that we're going to try and work out in the next couple of weeks.

Senator Keenan: Thanks for coming in. Also a Vermont person, I went to school here and stuff, and you mentioned it a little bit, but wow much are you working with school counselors? And creating resources for people, whether it's for people who are bullying or for people who are getting bullied. Because I think it's pretty good to have, to consider that the kids who are bullying too, you know, just kind of look at it logistically. I don't know.

Aliza: Sometimes there is motivating reason for why bullying is occurring in the first place. Sort of there is a reason for the kid bullying, is acting out the way that they are. Other times, I think that if you just saw Facebook messages that are coming out, there is no plausible reason for someone to be calling a 14 year girl a "slut." So we'll be working from all angles. We're talking with the counseling center tomorrow to start working with them, to hopefully get that component under way, and bring one of them with us at some point to meetings

Senator Keenan: Which counseling? Edmunds counseling?

Aliza: No, when I meet with the superintendent hopefully they'll grant me access to work with the counseling center. I am working with the UVM counseling people.

Senator Keyes: Just a quick suggestion, if you're in looking at getting in touch with guidance counselors, you should look in "big buddies," I know that already work with them, and they've already helped with getting a program off the ground right now. They can get you in touch with the right people.