

# **Proposal for the Creation of a Gay–Straight Student Alliance at Strathcona High School**

By Carl Swanson

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A year and a half ago, I realized that I was gay. Though now I feel comfortable with both my life and who I am, at that time I felt incredibly alone and alienated, as do all youth and adults who discover that their sexuality is anything but heterosexual. Though I had many friends and a close family, I did not know anyone else my age who was going through the same thing I was, much less anyone whom I could talk to about what I was going through. At this time, all I wanted was to meet someone that truly understood how I felt; someone who knew what it was like to be a gay teenager or who would be supportive of my identity.

High school aged teenagers spend their time in three different places: at home, with their friends, and at school. There was certainly no easy way for me to find a visibly supportive person at school. I had to look outside of school, a place where I spend eight hours of every weekday, in order to find a group of people who were going through the same thing I was. This group was Youth Understanding Youth, an outreach program at the Gay and Lesbian Community Centre of Edmonton. Had there been an opportunity for me to meet other lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender youth at Scona, I would not have had to go downtown, by myself, to an unfamiliar office building full of people who I had never met before. I should have been able to find support at my school. I would have given anything to see a face I recognized. Furthermore, a great many youth would be too intimidated to get out of their house, go to a strange place, and meet strange people when they are already dealing with a great deal of emotional pressure.

Fortunately for me, meeting other gay youth and supportive adults was a wonderful experience. I came home afterwards feeling the best I had in nearly a year. Many students at Scona are currently going through the same feelings of alienation that I went through, and it is essential that they have a safe and caring place to go where they can meet other people like themselves. This is precisely why Strathcona High school needs a Gay–Straight Student Alliance (GSA). A GSA will create a space where lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning and straight students can go to hang out, relax, and support each other. A sense of community, a sense that they are not alone, is incredibly important to any youth who may be beginning to understand their identity. Being a teenager is difficult enough, now imagine feeling like you have no one to turn to, no place to really feel like you can be yourself. Scona was this place for me.

An active GSA will be of great benefit to all the students and teachers at Strathcona. GSAs already exist all over the world, and in a handful of high schools in Alberta. Just the simple presence of such a club will send a message to students that you are safe to be yourself at Scona. The hallways at Scona are full of students who have a secret they can't tell anyone. This is a terrible burden, and added to the casual homophobia that these

students encounter almost constantly, whether perceived or real, can become too much to bear. Students who choose to be involved in the club will get to meet other students who understand what they are going through and accept them for whom they are. And most importantly, students at Scona will realize that they go to a wonderfully diverse and accepting school where diversity is something embraced, not feared.

#### Potential Activities

- Weekly meetings: A chance for students to meet and hang out with other understanding students and supportive teacher facilitators
- Activities:
  - Group Discussions (on topics such as coming out and heterosexism)
  - Q&A Day
  - Planning Meetings
  - Movie Nights
  - Guest Speakers (politicians, PFLAG, community leaders)
  - Barbeques (possibly with other Edmonton GSAs)
  - Outdoor Activities
  - Multicultural Events/Pride Week Celebration
  - Day of Awareness (AIDS, youth suicide, community & history (Stonewall, etc.)

Being a teenager is hard enough without having to hide who you are. It would be tremendous step forward if Strathcona High School became one of the leading high schools that have chosen to help out some of the most neglected, forgotten, and abused youth in our society. I hope that we create a Gay–Straight Student Alliance at Strathcona, so no one has to hide anymore.

Youth who would like more information about starting or sustaining a GSA can contact Carl Swanson directly by emailing: [carl.swanson@utoronto.ca](mailto:carl.swanson@utoronto.ca).