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S.O.U.L.: Campaigns Address Suicidal Youth

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Last year, the media reported on a series of suicides among LGBT youth. Suicide among LGBT youth is not a new phenomenon. Several research studies during the past decade have found the rates of suicide and suicide attempts are higher among LGBT youth as compared to the general population. However, media recognition of the suicides has sparked speculation about possible causes and has inspired social campaigns that address suicide among LGBT youth.

Many factors may contribute to someone's decision to attempt or commit suicide. Some risk factors for suicide include lack of social support, a sense of isolation, a history of trauma or abuse, feelings of hopelessness or depression and familial, social or school-related stress.

It is apparent that social environment is significant as a risk factor of attempting suicide. Harassment and bullying in schools contribute to all the mentioned risk factors and are now recognized as key factors in suicide among LGBT youth.

Two leading social campaigns have emerged in efforts to address harassment of LGBT youth and the suicides among them: The It Gets Better Project and the Make it Better Project. Though they have similar purposes, each project takes a different approach.

Dan Savage, an author and journalist, created the It Gets Better Project in September 2010. Some of you may be familiar with this campaign and the related videos. It Gets Better focuses on the LGBT youth themselves, giving them messages of hope that can function as a form of social support.

Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) Network of California launched the Make it Better Project in October 2010. This initiative provides tools for youth and adults to make schools safer for LGBT students. With the Make it Better Project, GSA Network is directly targeting harassment of LGBT youth.

Though the It Gets Better program has become widely recognized, with numerous famous faces appearing in personal videos for the project, it has a somewhat superficial approach. There is no tangible way to gauge the impact of the project. Meanwhile, some may argue with the message of this project. Supporters insist that "it gets better," but the unanswered question is "when?"

According to the It Gets Better Project website, the lives of LGBT youth will get better, "if they can just get through their teen years." While this sends a message of hope and may hold true for some people, it also glosses over the widespread problem of discrimination and violence against LGBT people of any age. Ignoring the fact that it might not get better does a disservice to LGBT youth, but the It Gets Better message is a step in the right direction.

The Make it Better Project, on the other hand, has all the resources for taking action against harassment, but little recognition. The resources provided by GSA Network on the Make it Better Project website are numerous and invaluable. The website has separate sections for youth and adults with actions each group can take to make changes. Some examples include steps to start a GSA, how to interrupt bullying and harassment, and how to start safe schools training.

The most prominent device from the Make it Better Project is the "Write a Letter, Make it Better" campaign. GSA Network offers a template of a letter urging school principals to make schools safer and more supportive for LGBT students. Participants can simply write the information of their school on the letter template and sign it or write a more personal letter.

Trying to change policy can be difficult. It takes work and time, and results may not be immediate, but it is a truly distinct way to take action against injustices. The Make it Better Project makes it easy for anyone — LGBT youth, allies of any age, parents, teachers, etc. — to get involved.

Both campaigns have their merits, though the key differences between the two are apparent in the names. The It Gets Better Project imparts just that message, while the Make it Better Project takes the next step and supplies all the resources to actually do the bettering.

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