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# Graduation Binary? Campaign for Gender-Inclusive Graduation!

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Most seniors are excited for graduation, but for gender nonconforming and trans students, it can mean a choice between being themselves and walking across the stage to get their degree. Amanda Harris, GSA Network's NorCal Program Coordinator, talks to GSA alum Javi Pinedo about his campaign for a gender-inclusive graduation ceremony.

If your school assigns gowns of different colors according to gender, forces male students to wear a tux and female students to wear a drape in their senior photos, or has a discriminatory dress code for its graduation ceremony, you have the right to contest it! Hear Javi's story and check out your state's GSA Network and nearest American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) for help.

You can also read the transcript below. Enjoy!

## Transcript:

**AMANDA:** Hey GSA activists! It's May and we know that many of you will be graduating this month and next month. We want to say, congratulations and we're so very proud of you! Unfortunately, some of you might be facing issues with dress code during graduation ceremony or leading up to photos that you take and their placement in the yearbook.

I have with me Javi Pinedo, who personally experienced this issue at his former high school. He's going to tell us what he did at his school to make change.

**JAVI:** There was this assembly for all the senior, during which they went over the contract all the seniors had to sign to graduate. When they went into rules for the ceremony, they discussed the dress code that students were required to follow. It stated that women were required to wear a dress, skirt, or pantsuit with heels or wedges, and that men were required to wear slacks and a t-shirt. And that was the entire thing -- there was no option for either/or.

The first thoughts that were racing through my head were, "why do I have to sign this? It's ridiculous. It's completely illegal." And I knew that even if I wanted to wear a dress, I wasn't

allowed to. There were several gender nonconforming students in my GSA including trans folks, and I knew that they were restricted from being able to wear the outfits that they wanted to wear.

I had started becoming a part of youth council, and we went over our rights and we went over to how to teach other people about those rights. And one of the laws I found out about was, which was actually the law my school was breaking, was the California Student Safety and Violence-Prevention Act. What that law states is that your schools are not legally allowed to harass or discriminate against anyone who is or is perceived to be LGBTQ, and that you are legally allowed to file a complaint if you choose to do so.

**AMANDA:** How did you end up using these laws that protect LGBT students at your school in regard to the gender dress code?

**JAVI:** I walked in to a meeting with my principal with my complaint form in hand. I handed it over to my principal for him to sign. I had it copied as well, with the date on it, so that way I had one just in case -- so they can't say they lost it, it got burned, or whatever.

I had to go to the district and it was a content thing of me having to say the same thing: this law is illegal; we need to change it; this is the education code; this is how long we've been out of compliance; and these are all the other things we're out of compliance with.

**AMANDA:** You had a meeting with the principal, you filed a complaint, you unfortunately had to go through some bureaucracy, but ultimately, what was the end result?

**JAVI:** The end result was that two days before my graduation, after I'd threatened to go to the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union], they pulled me into the office and they gave me this sheet that stated the new dress code. It was completely gender-inclusive and all individuals were given set options. And it was great!

But I still didn't accept that because no one would have known about it. I said, "I'm still not going to sign this until you tell everyone in school through the morning announcements or through the speakers that we hear throughout periods."

So, they did and I signed the policy and I was able to walk.

**AMANDA:** That's awesome, Javi! High five!

What other advice would you give to other GSA activists like yourself who are facing this issue in school of gender dress codes and really want to do something about it?

**JAVI:** First and foremost: always consider your own safety. Know who your safe with and know how fast you can get to those safe spots. Also, make sure you find out your rights! Find out how you're protected and how you can use those protections. You can find a lot of these by going to GSANetwork.org. If you're in California, you can contact the Program Coordinators [1] and they can direct you to the right places to go given the actual protections you have within your county and within California.

If you're outside of California, you can still go to that same website, GSANetwork.org, and if you go to the map [2], you'll see all of the other state GSA Networks who may be able to help you.

**AMANDA:** Exactly. And there are tons of statewide organizations that can help you, including the ACLU near you, who may be able to direct you to assistance.

Thank you so much, and thanks to Javi for speaking with us and for his courage in getting a policy changed at his school. We want to wish you the best of luck as you graduate and go on and do amazing things in the future.

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