

Public Pedagogy and the Experience of Video Creators in the It Gets Better Project

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Dedication

In honor of my grandmother, Catherine, who understood my rebellious spirit and told me “never let anyone tell you what to do; you know what you should do.”

For my daughter, Hazel.

Abstract

The It Gets Better Project (IGBP) launched in September 2010 as a grassroots response to highly publicized suicides of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQQ) youth. It provided an outlet for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) adults who felt they could not help the LGBTQQ youth who needed support. The project itself became a cultural force, with 50,000 videos garnering over 50 million collective views; but the act of creating and sharing videos had an effect on the adults who participated as well.

This descriptive, interview-based case study of 35 participants was designed to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences and motivations of LGBTQ adults who created and shared videos, participating in the public pedagogy of the It Gets Better Project.

Findings revealed that making a video was part of a larger and iterative process of reflection and action, with collateral benefits for the video creators. They engaged in dialogue about their videos and stories on multiple online platforms and in person, and many provided direct support and resource referrals to LGBTQQ youth who contacted them via YouTube. For a number of participants, this had transformative effects on their lives in increasing praxis or generativity.

An essential component of this process involved video creators identifying envisioned audiences and taking personal responsibility for filling gaps in representation. I provide highlights of cases in which individuals were “speaking to the gaps” with their

videos, constructing messages to show possible futures to LGBTQQ youth on topics ranging from visibility of racial or gender identities to visibility in a profession or locale.

My research shows that the construction of the It Gets Better Project allowed video creators to engage in a praxis they otherwise may not have felt empowered to do and inadvertently required them to further engage with youth and adults who contacted them via their YouTube accounts. This research constructs a history of the It Gets Better Project and its participants, and challenges us to expand our conception of what kinds of interventions are valuable and why.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT OF THE PROBLEMS FACING LGBTQ YOUTH

When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing. (Adrienne Rich, as quoted in Bruner, 1990, p. 32)

The lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ¹) people are not often reflected in the schools, communities, churches, and homes of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQQ) youth. As a society, we ask that these youth enter spaces of education in which adults have decided that their future identities, loves, families, and communities should be indescribable and invisible. We ask that many LGBTQQ youth accept the experience of finding nothing reflected in the mirror Adrienne Rich wrote of. For those educators, scholars, and activists who hope to see the personal well-being and educational success of LGBTQQ youth valued and prioritized, this is a difficult reality to face. Even with the substantial changes activists and educators have worked to implement in schools over the last few decades, many LGBTQQ youth are subjected to school environments where no supportive resources exist.

A series of highly publicized suicides of young teens who were gay or perceived to be gay in the summer of 2010 drew media attention to the problem of bullying in

¹ A note about language: when I speak *generally* about adults, I use the acronym LGBTQ; when I speak *generally* about youth, I use the acronym LGBTQQ. However, when I discuss research, I try to be specific about who the researcher focused on by dropping the sexual orientation or identity that was not studied in order to be as accurate as possible. When quoting participants in the study, I write whatever term they said, and they often refer to LGBTQ people in multiple ways.

Additionally, because of how participants have asked to be referred to, I use a singular “they” when speaking of particular individuals who do not use he/she pronouns.

schools and its effect on LGBTQ youth. The suicides were especially frustrating to LGBTQ adults, who could remember what it was like to be young and struggling with feelings of isolation or confusion, or experiencing physical danger as a result of their sexual orientations or gender identities. They also felt there was little they could do to help the youth who were most in need and the It Gets Better Project launched in this context, becoming an outlet for LGBTQ adults to provide LGBTQ youth with encouragement and hope, showing them the different ways LGBTQ adults could feel happy, cared for, and successful. The It Gets Better Project became a mirror that reflected thousands of possible futures for LGBTQ youth.

What the people who recorded videos for the It Gets Better Project did was engage in a collective act of public pedagogy. The unexpected result of their participation was that the experience affected their own lives in largely positive ways, inspiring some to further action and healing old wounds for others. I wanted to learn more about the LGBTQ adults who created videos for the It Gets Better Project and designed a study that aimed to identify what the goals of some of the video creators were, what results they experienced, and how their lives were affected.

In order to provide context for the research, in this chapter I outline some of the problems LGBTQ youth face by undertaking a broad survey of the research on the psychological well-being of LGBTQ youth and the school environments they spend their days in.

The impetus for the It Gets Better Project was the death of Billy Lucas, a 15-year-old who hanged himself in his family's barn, which distressed Dan Savage², a well-known syndicated sex and relationship advice columnist, writer, and commentator. Feelings of frustration and the inability to intervene in the situations of these young people—youth who were in situations that many LGBTQ adults had also experienced and lived through—led him to use his platforms (his column, podcast, and media appearances) to focus his anger and pain on trying effect change. He publicized a call to action to LGBTQ adults via his September 23, 2010, *Savage Love* column and *Savage Lovecast* podcast that same week, asking them to create videos talking about how their lives had gotten better, upload the videos to YouTube, and email him the link so he could add it to his YouTube account playlist (Savage, 2010a). The project went viral and over 50,000 videos have been uploaded, which have collectively received over 50 million views (It Gets Better Project, 2010).

As a collective act of public pedagogy, the IGBP is situated in a broader context. LGBTQ adults were once youth; they remember the struggles they went through and they know the struggles they continue to deal with as adults. There is no singular experience or life story for LGBTQ adults, but there are discernible contexts for both adults and youth. Without an understanding of the context of schools and the effect living in a homophobic and heteronormative society has on youth, the cultural importance and impact of the It Gets Better Project as public pedagogy will not be clear. There are powerful cultural and institutional forces at work that prevent many LGBTQ adults from

² I interviewed Dan for this study, so like other participants I will refer to him by his first name when I talk about him.

being able to help many LGBTQQ youth, particularly in environments where that help is most needed.

In 1989, the *Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide*, commissioned by the George H.W. Bush administration, included a chapter on the suicide rates of gay and lesbian youth that was seen by the administration as extremely controversial. I note the following policy recommendations from the report to point to the fact that during the last 25 years, knowledge about conditions that would support LGBTQQ youth has been available outside of academic circles at the highest levels of government. While discussions about bullying of LGBTQQ youth emerged at school, state, and federal levels, the focus is primarily on bullying, not on the bulk of the education policy recommendations from that 1989 report.

The report “recommended providing students at the junior and high school levels in public and private schools with positive information about homosexuality. Curricula should include information relevant to gay males and lesbians as it pertains to human sexuality, health, literature and social studies. Family life classes should present homosexuality as a natural and healthy form of sexual expression,” (Gibson, 1989, p. 135). The entire chapter on gay and lesbian youth suicide, including this recommendation, was disavowed by the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services at the time. Dr. Louis W. Sullivan said, in a written statement, that “the views expressed in the paper entitled ‘Gay Male and Lesbian Youth Suicide’ do not in any way represent my personal beliefs or the policy of this Department. *I am strongly committed to advancing traditional family values...In my opinion, the views expressed in the paper run contrary to that aim,*” (as cited in Sedgwick, 1991, p. 18, italics added for

emphasis). Dr. Sullivan and the administration prioritized ideology over the health and well-being of LGBTQ youth and they were not alone in that decision. The situation LGBTQ youth face in school is not neglect based on ignorance of health and educational disparities; it is a result of the malicious rejection of decades of research that consistently show LGBTQ youth to be at higher risk for a number of negative health and educational outcomes than their heterosexual peers, as well as a structural and entrenched conservatism at all levels of U.S. education that has led to an institutional rejection of the very existence of LGBTQ lives, history, and sexuality.

LGBTQ Youth: Negative Health and Educational Outcomes and the Effects of Victimization

In this section, I describe ways in which LGBTQ youth are at risk for negative health and educational outcomes. The concept of risk comes from epidemiology and in itself is a relatively neutral concept: a population may be at lower or higher risk than another population for a given disease or health outcome for any number of reasons. However, that does not mean that the language of risk, when applied to a particular group of people, remains neutral. One challenge faced by any marginalized population is that they may become seen as inherently diseased or deviant, viewed as objects of pity or derision, or that the explanations for possible negative outcomes they face become as damaging as the fact that the population finds itself at risk for negative outcomes to begin with. To put it more simply, thinking about LGBTQ youth being “at risk” when designing studies and reporting results can actually contribute to the view of these youth as deficient (Savin-Williams, 2005; S. Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009). From a queer theory lens, the focus on LGBTQ youth as inherently in need of special

services to protect them is seen as reinforcing the heteronormative trope of “queer as deviant” (Lugg, 2003).

The term “queer” itself has posed problems as I surveyed the research across public health, psychology, and education. It has emerged as a kind of “umbrella” (Plummer, 2011) term that ostensibly brings everyone in the acronym soup that is LGBTQ and its varieties together. However, it obscures differences when talking about LGBTQ people. There is a danger in collapsing all of those identities into one group, as it does not allow us to be specific about exactly *who* is at risk of *which* outcomes being discussed. It also conflates the experience of being lesbian, gay, or bisexual with one another, which is inaccurate. Worse, both the term “queer” and the LGBTQ acronym erase LGB sexuality from transgender people by conflating gender identity with sexual orientation. The Q that has been added to the end could pertain to gender (genderqueer and its variants) or to sexuality. This is to say that the acronym is actually a series of complex alliances and overlapping communities and interests, and it is important not to lose sight of that.

In terms of research, the LGBTQQ acronym and the term queer present a problem. The experiences of gay and lesbian youth, for instance, are not the same; nor are the outcomes of those experiences. LGBTQQ youth are often treated as a monolithic and homogenous group (Horn, Kosciw, & S. Russell, 2009) and this can lead to a lack of understanding how different social and environmental experiences shape their lives. This specificity presents a problem for intervention as well, as there are few studies that examine which factors are protective of youth in an environment and which factors harm youth (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009); without specificity in who we are talking

about, that will remain difficult to do if there are differences in what kinds of interventions different groups need. To the best of my ability, based on the terminology used in the cited research, I will only include the sexual orientations or gender identities studied.

Most of the research on psychological well-being in regard to LGBTQ youth has focused on lesbian and gay youth, but there is variability in how participants in studies involving sexual orientation are asked to identify themselves or how they are identified in retrospective studies (McDaniel, Purcell, & D'Augelli, 2001), and transgender, bisexual, and queer-identified youth are often overlooked in general. Transgender youth in particular are underrepresented in research, in part because gender identity is not included in the surveys researchers draw data from (Almeida et al., 2009). With that said, there is consistent evidence that LGBTQ youth as a whole face problems of stigmatization that cause social, emotional, and cognitive isolation (Martin & Hetrick, 1988); that youth of color face the challenge of multiple oppressions (Reynolds & Pope, 1991; Kumashiro, 2001); and that the environments in which LGBTQ³ youth live put them at risk for depression, suicidality, drug use, and school problems (Treadway & Yoakam, 1992; Muñoz-Plaza, Quinn, & Rounds, 2002).

These broad statements, as noted earlier, require more specificity.

Alcohol and Drug Use, Truancy, and Educational Outcomes

The focus of the stories in the media in 2010, as well as the It Gets Better Project, was suicide. However, that is not the only negative outcome LGBTQ youth are at higher risk for. Youth who report being attracted to others of the same sex are more likely

³ When the acronym “LGBQ” is used, the “Q” always stands for “questioning.”

than their heterosexual peers to report higher alcohol use (S. Russell & Joyner, 2011) and drug use is higher among LGB adolescents than their peers (Jordan, 2000; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004; Marshal, Friedman, Stall, K. King, & Miles, 2008). However, when the population of LGBTQ youth is examined as a non-homogenous group, recent studies have found that “questioning” youth report greater marijuana and alcohol use than their heterosexual peers, *as well as their peers who claim an LGB identity* (Espelage, Aragon, & Birkett, 2008; Birkett et al., 2009), though alcohol and marijuana use still remains significantly higher among LGB youth than heterosexual youth (Espelage et al., 2008). That effect appears to be moderated when LGB youth have not experienced any homophobic teasing (Birkett et al., 2009). Espelage et al. found that homophobic teasing had a greater effect on increased alcohol and marijuana use among questioning and LGB students than on their heterosexual peers, which is supported by others (Birkett et al., 2009).

LGBTQ students also have higher rates of truancy than their heterosexual peers (Birkett et al., 2009) in addition to being more likely to demonstrate declining school performance and to drop out (Elias et al., 1992). They also have more negative school attitudes and lower GPAs (S. Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001). These higher rates of truancy seem to be explained by victimization, with LGBTQ people reporting that they played sick or skipped school in order to avoid abuse at school (Rivers, 2000; Massachusetts Department of Education, 2004). The 2003 Massachusetts Department of Education study showed students who identified as LGB were almost five times as likely as their heterosexual peers to report not attending school due to feeling unsafe. A recent study that focused on 7th-12th grade students in Wisconsin showed that LGBTQ students

were 1.4 times as likely to skip school than their heterosexual peers who experienced similar levels of victimization in the same school (Robinson & Espelage, 2012). Studies of students in Washington, D.C., and Massachusetts show rates of sexual minority youth reporting skipping school in the past month due to feeling unsafe at 26% and 20%, respectively; significantly higher than their heterosexual peers' reported percentages of 11% and 6% (Almeida et al., 2009). These percentages are comparable to the most recent data from the National School Climate Survey, which reports the rate of LGBTQ students skipping a class at least once in the past month due to feeling unsafe or uncomfortable at 29.8% of respondents and those who have missed an entire day at 31.8% (Kosciw et al., 2012).

Depression and Suicidality

Robinson & Espelage (2012) found that even when differences in victimization are taken into account, LGBTQ students are still 3.3 times as likely to think about suicide than their heterosexual peers and three times as likely to report attempting suicide. Consider the weight of that result in a study conducted in 2011; while many of the more recent studies discussed in this section look for what effect victimization has on depression and suicidality, this one controls for victimization and uses conservative methods of analysis in comparing heterosexual and LGBTQ students. Moreover, the county the sample is drawn from includes Madison, which elected and was represented by the first out lesbian in the U.S. House of Representatives (Tammy Baldwin) from 2000 until she was elected to the Senate in 2012. It is a problem that LGBTQ youth from an area that will support an out lesbian candidate continue to report higher levels of suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts in comparison to their heterosexual peers.

LGBQ youth have been more likely to report attempting suicide and higher levels of depression than their heterosexual peers for several decades (Remafedi, Farrow, & Deisher, 1991; Savin-Williams, 1994; Lock & Steiner, 1999; Rivers, 2004; S. Russell & Joyner, 2011). They have also tended to be at increased risk of suicidal ideation, or thinking about attempting suicide (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995; Remafedi, French, & Story, 1998). This trend holds when the participants are primarily youth of color: Almeida et al. (2009) found LGBT youth reported significantly more depressive symptomology, as well as more suicidal ideation (30% vs. 6% of heterosexual peers) and self-harm (21% vs. 6%). There is evidence that gay and bisexual males are at higher risk of attempting suicide than lesbian and bisexual females and that combining the two groups obscures those differences. One example is a study in which LGB youth were found to be 3.4 times as likely to report attempting suicide than their heterosexual peers. When the data was separated by sex, the rate among GB males was actually 6.5 times higher and the rate among LB females was two times higher (for an extensive discussion of methodology issues and the effect on study results in research on LGBTQQ youth, see McDaniel et al. (2001)).

Questioning students or students who have trouble accepting their identity are more likely to report depression or suicidal feelings (Remafedi et al., 1991; Espelage et al., 2008; Birkett et al., 2009) and this reinforces the need to examine the LGBTQQ youth population in intentional and disaggregated ways in order to identify which populations need which levels and types of interventions and support. These studies indicate that it may actually be protective for youth to claim an identity, though the reasons for that are speculative and could include gaining social support through

increased likelihood of participating in activities with other LGBTQ-identified youth or the results could be a sign that having a more supportive environment to begin with results in less anguish over identity. Espelage et al. found that questioning students reported significantly less parental support in comparison with either heterosexual or LGB students, which lends some support to the latter hypothesis. The former gains credence from research that finds that comfort with sexuality is greatest in LGB individuals who report early trajectories in coming out and lowest with those coming out later and who had low social immersion into the LGB communities (Floyd & Stein, 2002); this suggests that the lack of social support, information, and role models has negative effects over time.

The Effects of Victimization on LGBTQQ Students

Returning to the notion of who is at risk for what, there is a strong and growing research base that indicates that there is *not* something about being LGBTQQ in the U.S. in general that puts youth at higher risk for negative health and educational outcomes than their heterosexual peers. Victimization, which includes homophobic teasing, verbal and physical harassment, and assault, has been shown to greatly affect whether or not (or the extent to which) an LGBTQQ youth is at higher risk for negative outcomes, and one of the most likely settings for victimization is school (D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002; Kosciw et al., 2012). As Robinson & Espelage (2012) found, victimization certainly does not explain *all* of the disparity—nor should it be expected to. Several of the researchers studying victimization cite Urie Bronfenbrenner's Social Ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which provides a framework for explaining interactions between a child and his/her environments. Even

homophobic victimization is situated in this model—its relative frequency and acceptability in schools reveals fundamental problems with how sexuality and gender expression are viewed in that institutional setting, which constitutes part of a child’s microsystem.

Numerous studies have linked a homophobic school climate to negative health and school outcomes in LGB youth (Morrison & L’Heureux, 2001; S. Russell et al., 2001; Murdock & Bolch, 2005; Williams et al., 2005). These climates have been shown to affect self-esteem (Hoge, Smit, & Hanson, 1990), suicidality (Hershberger, Pilkington, & D’Augelli, 1997; Remafedi et al., 1998) and educational outcomes (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 1998; Kosciw et al., 2012). In comparing perceived school positive and negative school climates, there are significant differences found in rates of depression, drug and alcohol use, and truancy. For LGB students in positive school climates, rates of depression have recently been found to be equivalent to their heterosexual peers. In negative school climates, rates spiked and were on par with questioning students (whose rates were consistently higher, but also spiked in negative climates) (Birkett et al., 2009). The same results appeared for low and high amounts of homophobic teasing (Birkett et al., 2009; Espelage et al., 2008), and homophobic teasing had a greater effect on depression and suicidal feelings for LGBTQ than their heterosexual peers. While one might think that social support from family or close friends could help moderate the effects of school climate, Murdock & Bolch (2005) found that they did not moderate the effects of school climate on grades, feelings of belonging, or behavior.

LGBTQQ youth report enduring a great deal of verbal and physical harassment and assault (Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002; D’Augelli et al., 2002; Kosciw et al., 2012),

with the numbers remaining stubbornly high. In the 2011 National School Climate Survey, 63.5% of students reported feeling unsafe because of their sexual orientation, 43.9% because of gender expression; 81.9% were verbally harassed (either called names or threatened) in the past year because of their sexual orientation, 63.9% because of gender expression; 38.3% were physically harassed (pushed, shoved, etc.) because of their sexual orientation, 27.1% because of their gender expression; and 18.3% were physically assaulted (punched, kicked, or injured with a weapon) because of their sexual orientation, 12.4% because of their gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2012). Consistent with other research, students who experienced high levels of victimization because of their sexual orientation were three times as likely to have missed school in the past month (57.9%) as those LGBTQ youth who experienced low levels and those who experienced high levels of victimization due to gender expression were twice as likely (53.2%) (Kosciw et al., 2012). These students also experienced higher levels of depression and lower levels of self esteem. Victimization also dramatically impacts students' grade point averages (GPAs) and their plans to pursue any form of post-secondary education. Students who were more frequently harassed had lower GPAs (2.9) than those who were less frequently harassed (3.2), and students who experienced higher levels of victimization were more than two times as likely to report that they did not plan to pursue college or trade school than those who experienced lower levels (10.7% vs. 5.1%) (Kosciw et al., 2012).

Victimization of LGBTQ youth in schools not only has an immediate effect on their psychological well-being, but the National School Climate Survey's results have been relatively consistent over time in showing the effects on GPAs and post-secondary

plans (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010; Kosciw et al., 2012), which means that the victimization experienced in school not only has effects on the health, well-being, and academic lives of LGBTQ youth while they are in school, but that victimization has radiating effects that potentially impede the achievement of future professional goals and financial stability.

The Context of School: Teachers and Institutions

Among the most egregious cases of school-sanctioned abuse is that of Jamie Nabozny (see Lugg, 2003), and this case laid the groundwork for future lawsuits regarding the harassment students experienced based on sexual orientation (Macgillivray, 2004), including the case involving the institutionally sanctioned hostile environment of the Anoka-Hennepin district in Minnesota (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2012). Nabozny was severely and repeatedly subjected to violence between grades seven and ten: he was “spat on, urinated on, bitten, punched, and subjected to a mock rape in which 20 other students looked on and laughed....In 10th grade, Nabozny was so savagely kicked and beaten that he needed surgery to stop the internal bleeding and repair the extensive abdominal damage” (Lugg, 2003, p. 113). In addition to his brutalization at the hands of his peers, the administration at his school was complicit and negligent: “He repeatedly appealed for help from teachers and school administrators. His middle school principal, Mary Podlesny, told him that ‘boys will be boys,’ and that if Nabozny was ‘going to be so openly gay, that he had to expect this kind of stuff to happen.’ A teacher called him a fag in 10th grade. His assistant principal in high school told him that he deserved his mistreatment because he was gay” (Lugg, 2003, p. 113). The school district was successfully sued for gender and sexual orientation discrimination (Lugg, 2003) and

Nabozny's Ashland, Wisconsin, school district was ordered to pay \$900,000 for their failure to protect him from abuse (Macgillivray, 2004).

Nabozny's abuse and the documentation in the case shine a light on what victimization can mean for an LGBTQ youth: the context of the world in which LGBTQ youth live influences their ability to thrive. In Nabozny's case, the entire system was complicit in failing him: the teachers, the administrators, and the other students in both middle school and high school.

If the *social context* of the school environment does not meet a child's needs, that child may experience academic and social problems (Eccles et al., 1993). It is clear from the data on outcomes and victimization that this happens more often to LGBTQ students than to their peers, but what those studies cannot explain on their own is why the schools have done so little to change the social context. It takes digging into the political history of public schools and the qualitative studies that focus on educators or school environments to discern several intertwined factors that appear to inhibit change. These include: fear of parental reaction to and lack of administrative support for positive discussions of LGBTQ life and sexuality; a resistance to acknowledging anything other than a heterosexual paradigm of sexual identity in youth in middle school; lack of employment protections and other social contexts beyond the walls of the school that make the lives of LGBTQ people more difficult or dangerous; internalized homophobia or a heightened sense of danger in LGBTQ staff and homophobia in heterosexual staff; and a long history of a generally hostile environment to LGBTQ adults and LGBTQ youth within the context of schools.

Hostile Environments and Lack of Employment Protections

There is a long history of lesbian- and gay-identified educators being threatened (Harbeck, 1997; Lugg, 2003). Lugg (2003) detailed the political and policy history of attempts to ban LGBTQ adults or those merely *suspected* of being LGBTQ from working in public schools. Though it did not start with the rise of McCarthyism in the late 1940s, there was a renewed sense of vigor when it came to actively seeking out and purging LGBTQ people from public schools and other governmental offices. An arrest (not conviction) on any charge pertaining to LGBTQ “crimes” resulted in job loss for tenured and non-tenured staff alike. Lugg cites sensationalist news stories from the 1950s about lesbians forming cells in the schools to “corrupt the unwitting into communism and lesbianism” or carrying headlines like the “New Moral Menace to Our Youth.” Because of this, many LGBTQ teachers married and even had children in order to escape not only suspicion and job loss, but the mental hospital (Lugg, 2003). Another moment of renewed vigor was the Religious Right’s mobilization in the late 1970s, which was partially a response to the post-Stonewall gay and lesbian rights movement. The battleground was Florida and the charge was Anita Bryant’s 1977 “Save Our Children” campaign, which was able to overturn a civil rights ordinance protecting gays and lesbians in Dade County from discrimination. The rhetoric of the campaign should be recognizable as it continues to be used against LGBTQ adults: that they are child molesters, recruit children to become lesbian or gay, and threaten “traditional” families and marriages. Bryant’s success led to efforts that overturned similar protections in cities like St. Paul, Minnesota, and Wichita, Kansas. In 1978, Proposition 6 (which would eventually be defeated) was put on the ballot in California. Often called the Briggs Initiative, it would have banned

gays and lesbians from working in the public schools and, again, the child molesting teacher myth was invoked. While promoting the initiative, Briggs warned that only Proposition 6 could prevent “homosexuals from having access to your children. That’s the issue: Do you or do you not want to give homosexuals access to your children?” (Lugg, 1998, p. 270). In the 1990s, initiatives to incorporate positive depictions of LGBTQ lives and people in curricula in New York City and just a vague value of “tolerance” in Pennsylvania met loud resistance and subsequent failure. There is a catch 22 in all of this: the fights against LGBTQ people and equality drove LGBTQ people away from direct interaction with the schools, especially with the dangerous trope of pedophilia invoked; however, as Lugg noted, “The relative absence of gay activists in debates over public education also intensifies the rhetoric of the Religious Right, making gays and lesbians become the immoral and faceless ‘other.’ The ‘invisible homosexual’ is reconstructed into the symbolic enemy of children, their parents, and public schools” (Lugg, 1998, p. 278).

It is worth noting that threats against LGBTQ adults who wanted to be out and work with or at schools were not hollow. Consensual sex in the privacy of one’s home between two men remained illegal in 13 states until the *Lawrence v. Texas* Supreme Court decision in 2003 and in eight of those states it was a felony (Lugg, 2003). As recently as 2013, a national Gallup survey found that 31% of adults in the United States thought that gay and lesbian sex should be illegal, and 38% thought that gay and lesbian sex was morally wrong (Gallup, n.d.). As recently as 2005, 43% of adults surveyed nationally said that gays and lesbians should not be elementary school teachers and 36% said they should not be high school teachers (Gallup, n.d.). The federal government and a

majority of the states in the United States do not offer *any* legal protections for LGBTQ (29 states) or for transgender (33 states) people who are discriminated against in their employment (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.). It is not unreasonable in this context for LGBTQ teachers to fear for their job security and safety—which they still do and this can prevent them from coming out to their colleagues and students (Jennings, 1994; Kissen, 1996; Letts & Sears, 1999; Mayo, 2008), avoid even “acting” gay (J. King, 2004); and veteran LGBTQ teachers may warn novice teachers to not come out (DeJean, 2007). Teachers, LGBTQ and heterosexual, have been fired for sponsoring GSAs, for talking about lesbian and gay issues in the media, and for talking about gay and lesbian people in their curricula; and, obviously, LGBTQ teachers have been fired for being openly gay (see Athanases & Larrabee (2003)). To put it simply, there is a belief that LGBTQ issues are too problematic to be discussed at school (Robinson & Espelage, 2012).

LGBTQ teachers are placed in a difficult position within this context. While it is arguable that teachers who are LGBTQ have some level of responsibility to be out, it is naïve to say that the situation for a teacher is the same in a state without employment protections as it is for a state with them. Being out could allow teachers or staff to help students address homophobia (Gregory, 2004), it could consciously inform their pedagogical decisions in ways that cannot be done while closeted (DeJean, 2007), and it could force schools to face the discrimination within their institutions (Nixon, 2006). “Outness” is still one of the key factors that sways opinion towards supporting lesbian and gay rights—personally knowing someone who is gay or lesbian affects peoples’ comfort level around gays and lesbians, whether they think gay marriage will negatively change society, and even whether or not gay and lesbian sex should be criminalized

(Morales, 2009). However, coming out in an unprotected and hostile environment could easily result in their termination (National Education Association, 2012), leaving the school with no one who is attuned to the problems of LGBTQ youth in a given school at all.

The responsibility for the health and safety of LGBTQ students cannot rest solely on the shoulders of LGBTQ teachers. First, as was seen in the language of the attacks on lesbian and gay teachers, the construct of youth as innocent and “gay” as threat makes it difficult for teachers to be out in the first place, much less to be the role models they are pressured to become (V. Russell, 2010). Second, and almost more importantly, the environment for LGBTQ educators remains damaged and/or outright hostile, depending on the location. Still, though location matters in terms of relative supportiveness of administrators and employment protections (DeJean, 2007), what level of outness is “acceptable” varies based on the age of the students, which will be discussed in more depth in the next section.

An issue with the literature I have examined is that there is a lack of studies that examine the experiences of LGBTQ educators in the physical context of schools, which supports the claim that schools either discourage or forbid research about LGBTQ people in the actual school environment (Duke, 2007). This lends of credibility to what LG educators and administrators (very few, if any, studies on teachers have bisexual or transgender participants, and queer is usually used as an umbrella term, not as a specific identity) repeat in many interview-based studies: they must embrace or tolerate a dual identity (Griffin, 1992; Kissen, 1996; J. King, 2004; Mayo, 2008; Stiegler, 2008; Endo, Reece-Miller, & Santavicca, 2010; deLeon & Brunner, 2013). Often, the interview

participants explain that they keep their personal and professional lives separate, or that their sexuality has nothing to do with their jobs and professionalism (Mayo, 2008; Stiegler, 2008; Endo et al., 2010). It is understandable that participants want to exert some amount of control over how an impossible situation is framed, but it is fundamentally untrue that the decision to remain closeted has nothing to do with or no effect on their jobs, as Stiegler (2008) elucidates in a study of students in a teacher education program. Matthew, an African-American gay man from a working class background, remained closeted in part because he was concerned about advancement opportunities in a field in which institutions can be homophobic and heteronormative; he also did not want to lose his church and fraternity connections. This affected his teaching: “I spent so much time in my classes and in my conversations with students working on issues surrounding racism and classism in school and society that it took up almost all of my time. When it came to dealing with homophobia, of course, I would call students out for using anti-gay slurs. But to deal with it on the same level as the other stuff—I couldn’t even get there” (Stiegler, 2008, p. 117-118). As they try to separate their work and personal lives in an attempt to have job security and safety (Griffin, 1992), they wind up distancing and isolating themselves from others in school (Sanlo, 1999).

A number of these educators have internalized the homophobic discourse that to publicly identify as LGQ is the equivalent of detailing their sex lives (Stiegler, 2008; Endo et al., 2010), and it is frustrating to see that. One would be hard pressed to find someone making the equivalent statement about a heterosexual wedding, but the pressure to justify the decision to remain silent and the omnipresence of the rhetoric from the religious right that invokes the sexual predator is so strong that it is understandable that it

can worm its way into the minds of LGBTQ people trying to live with sanity in that dual identity. I can personally attest to this pressure: when I taught courses to prepare middle school youth in New York City for standardized exams to supplement my income in graduate school, I had an issue with my students using “gay” in a derogatory way. Instead of letting it go or simply admonishing them, I turned it into a lesson for the day—they would write a short essay about what it would feel like to be a gay kid listening to them speak that way. To me, it was innocuous, but it almost got me fired that day and my position was not renewed later. I had a similar problem as a college student with a homophobic colleague in a community center in Minneapolis; the administrator’s response was that I should not come out if I could not handle the response. I quit that job. This is to say that I have a great deal of empathy for the situation of people who have made K-12 education their profession: you cannot simply quit a job or get fired without consequences, especially if it happens repeatedly. That both states in which my own experiences took place had employment protections was irrelevant; the outcome was the same as if I had been in North Carolina. Whether self-silenced or silenced by virtue of firing, this situation creates a void where role models for LGBTQ youth could be. LGQ teachers may feel obligated to helping gay and lesbian students, but feel powerless to do much about it (Mayo, 2008), and are distressed when they witness the homophobic treatment of students and the aftermath of those abuses, but fear parental reaction to any attempts at support (Kissen, 1996). Still, both closeted and out teachers make concerted efforts to help their LGBTQ students (Kissen, 1996; DeJean, 2007; Mayo, 2008; Endo et al., 2010) even as they have to navigate their own environments, which at minimum are lacking in basic knowledge about LGBTQ people and rely on some amount of

stereotyping and at worst force teachers to endure and/or fight homophobic initiatives themselves (Kissen, 1996).

Homophobia, Teacher Education, and the Elementary and Middle School Problem

Since boys and girls become aware of their sexual orientations between 10-14 years of age (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Dubé & Savin-Williams, 1999; D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2008), that puts the grade levels at which children experience confusion and need information and resources at between 5th and 9th grade. With boys being at the early end of that range (10-12), that situates their earliest needs for information and positive reinforcement at between 5th and 7th grades. In a vacuum devoid of political consequences and social pressures, it would be logical and good practice for teachers and schools serving these age groups to be incorporate LGBQ materials into classrooms. Transgender youths' gender identity development has not been researched nearly as extensively, but the work that has been done suggests that youth who identify as transgender may begin that process much earlier (see Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006). The overwhelming majority of the literature on LGBTQ youth focuses on LGB youth, youth questioning their sexual *orientations*, or youth who identify as queer in relation to sexual orientation, and while there are clear overlaps in some needs as gender *expression* can impact victimization in general, there is a need to disentangle the alphabet soup that we rely on. This is relevant to the needs of LGBQ students as well, as was noted in earlier sections about the differences in psychological well-being and rates of victimization between lesbian and gay youth (McDaniel et al., 2001; D'Augelli et al., 2002).

In all cases, this means that the most important points of initial support and information access for youth are *before* they enter high school. However, middle schools

are failing to adopt even basic resources that could help students: only 6.3% have GSAs, they have higher levels of harassment and bullying than high schools, and students have far less access to information or supportive staff, teachers, and administration than high school students (Kosciw et al., 2012). Only 4.1% reported any textbooks or assigned readings that include LGBTQ themes and 20.1% reported a somewhat or very supportive administration; only 35.7% reported having six or more supportive school staff (Kosciw et al., 2012). There is no substantial data about the conditions of elementary schools, but it is fair to extrapolate from the high school and middle school data that elementary schools would have fewer resources and less support.

This should not be surprising in light of the research and cases highlighted in earlier sections, and it points to a problem in the cultural context of school in general, including the preparation of future teachers. In the entirety of a teacher preparation program, it is unlikely that pre-service teachers will encounter any coursework that directly deals with LGBTQ student needs or issues, much less how to incorporate LGBTQ topics into their future classrooms. When they do encounter curricula about LGBTQ students or topics, it is usually initiated by an individual instructor and not the program itself (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003) and may simply be cursory (Stiegler, 2008). Stiegler focused on the silencing of an ostensibly LGBTQ component of the curriculum in a social justice curriculum course. The single session in which they were given readings on LGBTQ issues and homophobia in schools was combined with another topic and, with the exception of a student coming out in that class session, only the other topic was discussed.

Almost 30 years ago, Grayson (1987) called for a focus on both students and educational professionals and that basic factual knowledge and simple understanding of what it is like to be gay or lesbian is not enough. What is necessary is to understand the way that prejudice against LGBTQ people manifests and sustains itself and to link that to other equity issues. The question, then, is what do the people in charge of educating and caring for children in the context of schools know and do?

A small body of research shows that education of pre-service teachers is of extreme importance and that it would fill gaps in knowledge and instigate reflection in the future teachers (Athanasas & Larrabee, 2003; Larrabee & Morehead, 2010). The knowledge gaps are severe: Larrabee & Morehead found that *half* of the students in their study wrote of being shocked that state laws did not include LGB people as a protected class and one even wrote that “I know *I won't be saying [that's so gay] anymore*” (Larrabee & Morehead, 2010, p. 42, italics added for emphasis). Only five of the 97 pre-service teachers in the Athanasas & Larrabee (2003) study, reported having LG-identified friends or relatives, and many said they had never had the opportunity to actually discuss LG issues with an openly LG-identified person like the guest speaker. Older studies support the finding that simply being exposed to people who identify as lesbian or gay results in breaking down some stereotypes and pre-service teachers becoming more supportive (Burkholder & Dineen, 1996; Nelson & Krieger, 1997). Pre-service teachers in the Larrabee & Morehead (2010) study did not even necessarily comprehend that they spoke about LG people in insensitive or biased ways prior to the class session.

The two primary problems that arise in the setting of schools are homophobia, which manifests itself in multiple ways, and a lack of *basic historical and cultural*

knowledge that precludes teachers from being able to add LGBTQ content to their curricula. As Athanases & Larrabee (2003) found, pre-service teachers did not know about the Nazis' inclusion of lesbians and gay men in the concentration camps (forced to wear black and pink triangles, respectively), Bayard Rustin's high profile role in the Civil Rights Movement, or even the challenges that LGBTQ youth face in schools today. The two problems are, of course, inextricably linked. If homophobia and heterosexism are the operating paradigms, whether subtle or overt, the impetus to discover information and fill those gaps is not there. It is much easier to say there is no way to incorporate age-appropriate material or that LGBTQ history or experiences are irrelevant to a specific content area and move on—the educator or administrator can say they tried (because they thought about it for a moment) and failed (because it was an impossible task) and ignore it for the time being.

This brings us back to the elementary and middle school problem. There are multiple contexts for why certain cultures exist in schools, and one of those is the perception of how much administrators support the integration of LGBTQ content and support for LGBTQ students. They may be perceived as not wanting to touch the issue, fearing a scandal that ends up on the news (Endo et al., 2010); may be unsupportive, either passively (by not addressing the issue or avoiding proactive policies and programs) or explicitly (Herek, Kimmel, & Amaro, 1991; Beach, Boulter, & Felice, 1993; Lugg, 2003; Espelage et al., 2008; Anagnostopoulos, Buchanan, Pereira, & Lichty, 2009; Larrabee & Morehead, 2010; Currie, Mayberry, & Chenneville, 2012); and educators have feared that even supportive administrators could turn on them if enough parents complained (Kissen, 1996). Additionally, school districts and individual schools have

been sued numerous times, with litigants attempting to hold them retroactively accountable for their complicity in violating the rights of or negligence in protecting LGBTQ students (Lugg, 2003; Macgillivray, 2004; Mercier, 2009). Location also factors into this equation. LGBTQ youth in urban areas are significantly less likely and youth in suburban areas are marginally less likely to report experiencing victimization than youth in rural areas (Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009).

Combine a lack of training and education with variable administrative support and community context and it is no wonder that, despite small improvements over time (Kosciw et al., 2012), the well-being and educational needs of LGBTQ students in American schools are demonstrably not considered priorities. For LGBTQ teachers, there is serious pressure to remain closeted in elementary environments in particular (Endo et al., 2010; J. King, 2004) and, as was discussed earlier, LGBTQ teachers across grade levels experience the strain of dual identity in remaining closeted while still trying to help their LGBTQ students (Endo et al., 2010; Mayo, 2008). Researchers who have explored educating pre-service teachers on LGBTQ issues find that framing the need for information, resources, and support in an equity or social justice framework is most effective (Larrabee & Morehead, 2010; Athanases & Larrabee, 2003), which may be a beginning, but with the gaps in basic knowledge and the lack of intentional integration of LGBTQ student needs into teacher education curricula, there is little hope that most teachers can translate empathy or sympathy into curricular change or useful student support.

This is illustrated in several studies, including Athanases & Larrabee (2003), because there are still educators who consider lesbian and gay people immoral, and thus

expecting educators to want to provide support for LGBTQ youth may be inaccurate: simply stating the intention to respect LGBTQ youth may be seen as progress. Even when pre-service or practicing teachers have a stated goal to address homophobic statements, they do not necessarily take direct responsibility for creating change: citing external barriers, including fear of parental reaction (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003; Larrabee & Morehead, 2010), distancing themselves or depersonalizing a situation (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009; Larrabee & Morehead, 2010), or stating that they simply do not know how to include the material due to content or the age of students (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003; Ngo, 2003; Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009; Larrabee & Morehead, 2010; Zack, Mannheim, & Alfano, 2010; Puchner & Klein, 2011). It appears that teachers are becoming more comfortable addressing name-calling specifically (Athanases & Larrabee, 2003; Anagnostopoulos et al., 2009; Puchner & Klein, 2011), which may have led to the finding of Kosciw et al. (2012) that there were declines in the frequency of homophobic statements heard in schools (down to 70% from 80% in 2001). Still, the frequency of intervention found by Kosciw et al. is troubling: school staff were reported as *never* intervening when biased remarks were made 42.5% of the time when the remarks were homophobic and 48.9% of the time when they were about gender expression.

Hackford-Peer (2010), presents a model of systemic exclusion and systemic inclusion as a lens through which to view how the lives of LGBTQ people are silenced in schools. Positive role models, messages, and depictions of LGBTQ people are suppressed, while discussions focused on negative connotations or disease are highlighted. This environment is on display most poignantly in two studies. Zack et al.

(2010) identified four types of reactions student teachers used to deal with homophobic speech in their classrooms: there were avoiders, hesitators, confrontors, and integrators. Hesitators were the largest group, these were people who wanted to do *something* but were afraid of being accused of being gay by students, facing religious opposition, and feeling pressure to just focus on subject matter. This highlights the fact that fear, inertia, and lack of training are drivers of the status quo. Those with religious beliefs that are hostile to LGBTQ people are considered first—not the LGBTQ youth who are also sitting in the classroom, and the logical fallacy that subject matter and LGBTQ inclusion are incompatible is merely a cover for fear of reprisal or personal bias (hence not trying to fill gaps in training and knowledge to remedy the situation). The middle school language arts teachers in Puchner & Klein (2011) were mostly aware that they probably had LGBTQ students in their classes, but delineated safe and unsafe teaching behaviors in relation to the students' needs. Safe behavior was telling them not to use homophobic words. Unsafe behavior was essentially anything else. Even those faculty who included books with LGB characters would not discuss the orientation of those characters in class. They shut down student-initiated discussion in numerous ways: telling them that this should be discussed in health class, that their parents would not approve of the topic, or that other students did not want to hear about the topic. Another way to shut down conversation appears in the response of a pre-service teacher to the idea of a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA): “middle school might not be a good idea because the students are not at an age where sexuality and orientation is explored,” (Larrabee & Morehead, 2010, p. 43) even while saying that their particular school could stand to benefit from a club that could help students.

The caveat: You've got to give 'em (and us) hope

Incremental, positive change is still change for the better. The work done by LGBTQ activists and organizations, including the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) and the Trevor Project, have created positive change in what was an abyss. Students may still hear homophobic remarks with frequency in school, but a drop from 80% to 70% in 10 years is significant; the percentage of LGBTQ students who report having positive representations of LGBTQ people, history, or events in their curriculum may only be 16.8%, but that is still significantly higher than in previous years (Kosciw et al., 2012). The reality of the current situation should not be glossed over, but there are areas of success, including the detailed and research-based recommendations GLSEN makes for schools every two years and the proliferation of GSAs in high schools.

Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) are student organizations in schools that are intended to provide a safe space for LGBTQ students and their allies that started in the late 1980s in Los Angeles and Boston and currently number over 4,000 in U.S. high schools (Hackford-Peer, 2010; Currie et al., 2012). The effect GSAs have on schools are demonstrable: combined with counseling and anti-bullying policies, they are associated with lower rates of victimization and suicide attempts (Goodenow & Szalacha, 2006); along with inclusive policies and teacher education programs (separately or together) they are associated with students being more likely to see their school environment as safe, tolerant, and respectful (Szalacha, 2003); schools with programs like GSAs reported less frequent and less tolerance of anti-LGB harassment, more so than those schools with policies alone (Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2008); and members of GSAs report increased social cohesion, with membership becoming a reason to attend school (Currie et al.,

2012). GSAs do have protective effects—not only are students in schools with GSAs less likely to feel unsafe, they are more likely to report lower levels of victimization and homophobic remarks, as well as higher likelihood that school personnel will intervene when hearing homophobic remarks (Kosciw et al., 2012). Despite attempts to fight the presence of GSAs by some school districts, case law supporting students’ rights to have the groups is fairly well set at this point (Mercier, 2009).

Additionally, not all districts turn a blind eye to LGBTQ issues. For instance, the St. Paul Public Schools in Minnesota is currently expanding their 18-year-old district-level LGBT program, “Out for Equity,” (Brown, 2012); however, there are fewer than ten such programs in the nation. California passed a law in 2011, the first and only in the nation, that requires schools to teach about LGBT people in their social studies curriculum (Lin, 2011), though the materials will not be in place until 2015 due to budget cuts that have affected state textbook funds (CBS San Francisco, 2013). Similarly, education researchers who focus on LGBTQ youth needs in the classroom are identifying ways of including representation into curricula and ways to position the content that does not assume or privilege homophobia on the part of students (Blackburn & Clark, 2009). It is important when chronicling the failures of the larger system to still recognize that without finding joy in victories for justice—large and small—overcoming the challenges of the systemic failure and righting the wrongs that continue to endure will be oppressively difficult.

CHAPTER 2: THE IT GETS BETTER PROJECT AND PUBLIC PEDAGOGY

I walked among the angry and sad gay sisters and brothers last night at City Hall and late last night as they lit candles and stood in silence on Castro Street reaching out for some symbolic thing that would give them hope.

These were strong people...people whose faces I knew from the shops, the streets, the meetings, and people whom I never saw before, but who I knew. They were strong and even they needed hope...and those young gays in Des Moines who are “coming out” and hear the Anita Bryant story—to them the only thing that they have to look forward to is hope. And *YOU* have to give them hope. (Milk, 2013, p. 155, from his June 24, 1977, campaign speech for the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, italics in original).

Dan Savage’s column launching the It Gets Better Project was titled “Give ‘em hope,” invoking part of the resonant cultural legacy of Harvey Milk, whose speeches repeatedly called for LGBTQ people to “come out” and provide hope to others, and that message is part of our common heritage and has been a powerful strategy for both personal and political transformation. When Milk spoke about giving people hope, he was talking about providing hope for the youth who did not otherwise know what awaits them as adults, but also for the frustrated people who had already built adult lives for themselves—they still needed hope to hold onto the belief that things could change for the better. In this respect, even across generations, the desire and need for hope remains. This chapter will trace the trajectory of the media stories about the suicides in 2010 through the launch and outcomes of the It Gets Better Project. I will also situate the IGBP as a project of public pedagogy.

2010 Youth Suicides and the It Gets Better Project

As the first chapter demonstrated, LGBTQ youth have faced a difficult environment in schools for many decades and too many have suffered the consequences of that environment. However, the lack of mainstream visibility of these issues changed in the summer of 2010, facilitated by what Lev Manovich (2013) calls “software culture,” in that technology permeates our social contexts, informing most aspects of contemporary life and culture. The affordances of the architecture of the Internet and the changing number of devices that connect us through this “architecture of participation” (O’Reilly, 2005) allow us increasing ease of access to information and diaspora communities. The networked public sphere is key to the persistence of this culture: the social practices of sharing and the speed with which any genre or topic of news reaches people outside physical communities was not possible before at this scale and level of relatively unmediated connection.

It is difficult to pinpoint where people first heard about the suicides or the It Gets Better Project itself—it could have been from Facebook posts or Twitter, the established LGBTQ blogs and online news sites, podcasts, the nightly news, cable news, a local or national paper, etc. Additionally, the multiplicity of formats of media coverage of the suicides and the evolution of the It Gets Better Project are inextricably linked. There are two early reports of Justin Aaberg’s suicide outside of local media in Minnesota: in Dan Savage’s blog at *The Stranger* (Savage, 2010b) and in a post by Alex Blaze on *The Bilerico Project* (Blaze, 2010), both of whom pulled from the now defunct *Minnesota Independent* (Birkey, 2010). The reports of Billy Lucas’s suicide appeared on LGBTQ blogs starting on September 14, 2010. Again, Dan Savage was one of the first to post at

4:57 a.m. (Savage, 2010c), followed by *Queerty*, *Joe.My.God*, and *Towleroad* (Jervis, 2010; Nigel, 2010; Towle, 2010a). In the *Towleroad* comments on the Billy Lucas story, other names of youth who had committed suicide earlier in the summer were posted and *Towleroad* followed up with a post about Justin Aaberg a few hours later (Towle, 2010b).

LGBTQ blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and other social media or community sites were the means through which local stories went national and the It Gets Better Project quickly became a topic of discussion of interest for national news organizations that were not primarily for or about the larger LGBTQ community. Boyd's (2008) work on online networks is relevant here, but will be described in more detail in Chapter 4 as it pertains to the videos themselves. She identified four properties of networks online: *persistence*, or the recorded and archived nature of online interactions; *replicability*, or the ability to duplicate and redistribute content easily; *scalability*, or the potential visibility of actions online; and *searchability*, or the way in which the three previous categories facilitate access to the interactions. Each of these properties contributed to the ability of news to spread in the weeks and months after each of the suicides occurred, as well as in the years since the launch of the It Gets Better Project. Not knowing about Justin Aaberg's suicide in July 2010 in no way inhibited people from easily searching and reposting his story and news of his mother, Tammy, and her growing activism at any point after they were initially reported. Google's ad for their Chrome browser in May 2011 (Google, 2011) featured the It Gets Better Project and videos, and invoked these properties with the tag line "the web is what you make of it."

“Read it and weep”: Summer 2010

Though initial reports listed the facts of the deaths, those stories were immediately recontextualized as news spread. This was done by the choice of headlines: “Read it and weep” (Savage, 2010b); “Yet another gay teen lost to bullying suicide—In Minnesota” (Towle, 2010b); the language of the articles: “are we going to continue to treat gay kids like their lives are less valuable than those of straight kids?” (Savage, 2010c); “School administrators claim to have had no knowledge of the bullying, despite many students saying that they were aware of Billy’s torment” (Jervis, 2010); the comments on the articles in which sometimes hundreds of people added their anger, frustration, sadness, or knowledge of other suicides to the article; and the introductory text people added to Facebook or other social network sites when pasting the link for their friends to read.

The suicides were particularly haunting because of the number reported, the ages, and the methods. The boys whose suicides were most prominent were usually the youngest, but they were not the only ones. As both Jacquie, a 47-year-old black lesbian, and Andrew, a 29-year-old gay white man, noted in their interviews in the study, there were others they knew of that were not widely reported in the press. The confluence of the suicides that happened just before and immediately after the launch of the IGBP had the effect of increasing the desire for some way to intervene in the problem when it felt like there was no way to help.

Justin Aaberg was 15, with a supportive family who he had come out to at 14. A student in the Anoka-Hennepin School District in Minnesota, he was one of nine youth who died by suicide in that district in a two year period. Four of those youth (including

Aaberg) had been out or perceived as LGB and bullied for that prior to their suicides. He hanged himself in his bedroom on July 9, 2010, and his mother, Tammy, had to open his bedroom door by loosening the doorknob with a screwdriver to find him (Rubin Erdely, 2012). Tammy Aaberg became an activist on the topic of bullying in the schools, co-founding Justin's Gift, a non-profit organization dedicated to creating safe environments for LGBTQ/Two Spirit youth (Justin's Gift, n.d.), working diligently to improve conditions in the Anoka-Hennepin school district (Weber, 2010), and making media appearances on national shows like *Larry King Live* (Larry King Live, 2010) to talk about the experience of her son and the problems with the policies in the Anoka-Hennepin district. Teachers in the district had been bound by a "neutrality" policy that made them unable to help LGBTQ students deal with issues pertaining to their sexual orientation or the victimization they experienced without fear of losing their jobs. The district dealt with backlash from both sides: Anti-LGBTQ groups kept pressure on the school to maintain the current policy. Aaberg implored the district, asking the school board, "What about my parental rights to have my gay son go to school and learn without being bullied?" which was met with silence by the school board. The district's own training at the time reminded teachers never to show "personal support for GLBT people" in their classrooms (Rubin Erdely, 2012). The Anoka-Hennepin district's negligence sparked a lawsuit that resulted in an "investigation by the departments of Justice and Education [that] found that the school district violated Title IX and Title IV of the Education Code by permitting a hostile environment against students on the basis of sex, including the failure to conform to sex stereotypes" (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2012).

Billy Lucas was 15 and bullied at his Greensburg, Indiana, high school because other students thought he was gay. He hanged himself in his family's barn on September 9, 2010 (Brooks, 2010). He was told by fellow students that he didn't deserve to live and in a wrongful death lawsuit filed by his parents in September 2012, the former principal, assistant principal, and two staff members were named in the suit because not only did they witness the harassment and do nothing to stop it, but in some cases they participated in the abusive behavior (LGBTQ Nation, 2012).

Seth Walsh was 13, openly gay, and bullied at his Tehachapi, California, middle school. He was found unconscious after attempting to hang himself from a tree in his backyard on September 19, 2010, and died on September 28, 2010, after nine days on life support. Other students at his school said that he had been bullied for a long time and that officials at the school never intervened (Bolcer, 2010).

Tyler Clementi was 18 and his death on September 22, 2010, evoked a strong response because of his youth and the manner of death (jumping from the George Washington Bridge), but also because of the events that preceded his death. His college roommate had secretly used a web cam to livestream him making out with another man in his dorm room in order to humiliate him. This seemed to be a particularly painful detail that reminded LGBTQ adults of the times in their lives when they struggled and might have felt that level of shame (Moylan, 2010).

Asher Brown was 13 and had been bullied for being gay for years at his Harris, Texas, middle school. Like Justin Aaberg, he was out to a supportive family. He shot himself on September 27, 2010. His parents had complained to the school about the

bullying in person and on the phone, but after his death the school district claimed they had never received complaints (O'Hare, 2010).

With the rapid accumulation and intensity of the stories, the term “epidemic” began appearing in the LGBTQ blogs, Steve Pep of *Towleroad* asked Dave Reynolds, Senior Public Policy and Research Manager at The Trevor Project if there had been a sudden outbreak of suicide amongst gay teenagers, who replied that “From what we know and can tell, there has not been an increase in suicide completions among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth over the past few weeks. Sadly, there are likely this many deaths every week, but the media and the general populace are just starting to realize the depth of this public health and social justice issue” (as quoted in Pep, 2010). Reynolds elaborated that two-thirds of the calls that the Trevor Project’s suicide prevention line receives are from areas outside urban centers, with most coming from southern and midwestern states. He also noted what the literature shows, which is that there is a link between being victimized by anti-LGBTQ bullying and attempting suicide.

The It Gets Better Project

As mentioned earlier, Billy Lucas was Dan Savage’s breaking point: moving him to try to intervene in the broader problem beyond using his column, blog, and podcast as a megaphone to inform readers and listeners of the suicides. The name and concept of the It Gets Better Project is not just one of Dan’s invention: the idea that LGBTQ people who are happy and living fulfilling lives can provide hope to other LGBTQ and questioning people who are struggling is built into the mythology surrounding the act of coming out and has been part of LGBTQ political messaging over time, including Harvey Milk’s

1977 speech announcing his campaign for Supervisor of District 5 in San Francisco that I quoted at the beginning of this chapter and from which Dan drew the title for the column (Savage, 2010a). The theme of providing hope and perspective that inspired Dan appeared in the comments on his blog posts in *The Stranger*.

A commenter with the name “despicable me” posted on the Billy Lucas story, “My heart breaks for the pain and torment you went through, Billy Lucas. I wish I could have told you that things would get better and that not everyone in your life would be a jerk. I hope those who harassed you get jail time. Rest in Peace kiddo.” (despicable me, 2010) Later, another commenter added:

So very heartbreaking. I wish I would have known him, to be so desperate to choose ending his life as the means of eliminating his pain. I wish I could have told him that it gets better, from one former bullied (and beaten) child to another. The scars remain, but the best “revenge” is a life well lived. Shit. (kim in portland, 2010)

However, even before that, the sentiment was posted in response to the blog post about Aaberg’s suicide.

HIGHSCHOOLERS: Just wait. It sucks right now, probably whether you’re gay or not. If you’re gay in a small town, it definitely sucks. Be patient, even though it seems impossible. If you can be patient, you will turn 18. Then do whatever it takes to GET THE FUCK OUT OF THERE. Go to the nearest city that has a gay scene, find a queer youth group, and start getting over the hate poison that’s been pumped into you from day one. IT WILL GET BETTER. It will. Don’t let the haters win by offing yourself—live a long, happy life, filled with self acceptance and love. That’s a win for our side. (Squirly, 2010)

When I interviewed Dan for this study, I had planned to use his interview as data for analyzing the research questions. However, it is more important to incorporate what he said into this section as it fills gaps in the narrative about the It Gets Better Project that only he can speak to with accuracy. He talked about wanting to “harness that grief that

was sloshing around,” in particular the grief about Billy Lucas. LGBTQ communities know the power of story—that publicly embracing our identities allows us to live authentic lives, but it serves a dual function in that it increases the visibility of LGBTQ people and breaking the heterosexist and homophobic stereotypes about us makes it a little better for future generations. So at a time of pain, with no identifiable outlet through which most people could make a personal impact, the idea of using story as hope resonated. There are many LGBTQ youth who do not live in areas with support groups or who do not have parents who would take them to one even if they did, but the Internet is pervasive and accessible.

It was a horrible month, you know. It was Tyler [Clementi] and Seth [Walsh], it was just a horrible month. We were ground down that month.

But it was just that—Billy—it was just that one kid, and we could stop the next one if we spoke, if we shared our stories, because that’s what being LGBT is about. It’s about telling the truth, and the truth of gay life—at least adult queer life—is that it’s not what—they’re lied to—it’s not what they’re told. It doesn’t look anything like the lies. (Dan)

The technology is what allowed an avenue for speech. However, it was more than that. It allowed for personal stories to be delivered as broadcast in a way that might feel directed at the individual watching it. There are, as Dan said, some images of “happy, successful, gay adults in the world,” but what he hears from young people who write to him because of his job as an advice columnist is that:

They know that there are happy queer adults out there, but they don’t know how you get to be one. You know, how you get from where they are to where we are, and a lot of them assume that if you are happy, integrated, and reconciled with your family—and successful—that you couldn’t have suffered the way they’re suffering. That you must have had it really easy. The fact is that most of us suffered the way they are suffering.

His intent with the It Gets Better Project was to try to “illuminate that path” for them, and for him it was primarily about bringing LGBTQ role models to geographically isolated kids, because that is what pained him most about Billy’s story. However, he understood that the voices needed to be diverse in order to address the gaps because they were broader than what he could personally speak to. As he worked on figuring out what to do, he ran it past other bloggers and determined what would constitute success for it.

We hoped for 100 videos, which now sounds really disingenuous or lowballing it, but I had run the idea past a few friends who are gay bloggers—Joe Gervais, Pam at Pam’s House Blend—who I don’t know personally, I’ve never met, but I ran it by her too—and John Aravosis. I said “Do you think people will do this if I ask?” I didn’t want to say “Let’s all do this! To the barricades!” and then be there alone. And they thought that people would participate.

So we hoped for 100 videos because we wanted some of everybody. Terry and I are both acutely aware that not all gay people, queer people, lesbian, bi, trans people look like us, have penises like we coincidentally both have, want the same things out of life that we wanted. We were really amused by the rich, gay, white men charge out of the gate: my dad’s a cop, my mom’s a waitress; Terry’s dad was a math teacher on an Indian reservation. Like, oh yeah, we’re the *elite*, you know? I lucked into a stupid job that made me some money, which I’m eternally grateful for, but I was a theater guy and a waiter.

We hoped for 100 videos so there would be some of everybody, that if it got up to 100 there would be, you know, the trans Mormon and the African-American gay guys in Chicago, and all these people, like everybody jumped in.

And I think we got 100 videos in 48 hours or something, and 1,000 in a week. We should have kept track of the numbers, but we didn’t. We were overwhelmed by the response.

The reason Dan says that it seems disingenuous that the original goal was 100 people is because of the cultural force IGBP became: MTV specials, 50,000 individuals and groups who uploaded videos to YouTube for the project, over 50 million views. He laughed about the original idea, because “originally, my idea was ‘email me your video and I will upload it to YouTube’ and the tech guys at *The Stranger* were like ‘no fuckin

way,’ you get 100 and it’s gonna kill our servers to get all those raw video files. You tell people to create their own YouTube accounts, upload their own videos.” That decision wound up having unexpected outcomes, which I will go into more detail on in Chapter 4.

The initial call to action that was printed in *Savage Love* is important to use to situation the message Dan communicated to his readers, as well as what he asked them to do. Dan kicked off the IGBP using an answer to a question from a reader about the suicide of Billy Lucas.

I just read about a gay teenager in Indiana—Billy Lucas—who killed himself after being taunted by his classmates. Now his Facebook memorial page is being defaced by people posting homophobic comments. It’s just heartbreaking and sickening. What the hell can we do?
—*Gay Bullying Victim Who Survived*

Another gay teenager in another small town has killed himself—hope you’re pleased with yourselves, Tony Perkins and all the other “Christians” out there who oppose anti-bullying programs (and give actual Christians a bad name).

Billy Lucas was just 15 when he hanged himself in a barn on his grandmother’s property. He reportedly endured intense bullying at the hands of his classmates—classmates who called him a fag and told him to kill himself. His mother found his body.

Nine out of 10 gay teenagers experience bullying and harassment at school, and gay teens are four times likelier to attempt suicide. Many LGBT kids who do kill themselves live in rural areas, exurbs, and suburban areas, places with no gay organizations or services for queer kids.

“My heart breaks for the pain and torment you went through, Billy Lucas,” a reader wrote after I posted about Billy Lucas to my blog. “I wish I could have told you that things get better.”

I had the same reaction: I wish I could have talked to this kid for five minutes. I wish I could have told Billy that *it gets better*. I wish I could have told him that, however bad things were, however isolated and alone he was, *it gets better*.

But gay adults aren’t allowed to talk to these kids. Schools and churches don’t bring us in to talk to teenagers who are being bullied. Many of these kids have homophobic parents who believe that they can prevent their gay children from

growing up to be gay—or from ever coming out—by depriving them of information, resources, and positive role models.

Why are we waiting for permission to talk to these kids? We have the ability to talk directly to them right now. We don't have to wait for permission to let them know that *it gets better*. We can reach these kids.

So here's what you can do, GBVWS: Make a video. Tell them it gets better.

I've launched a channel on YouTube—www.youtube.com/itgetsbetterproject—to host these videos. My normally camera-shy husband and I already posted one. We both went to Christian schools and we were both bullied—he had it a lot worse than I did—and we are living proof that it gets better. We don't dwell too much on the past. Instead we talk mostly about all the meaningful things in our lives *now*—our families, our friends (gay *and* straight), the places we've gone and things we've experienced—that we would've missed out on if we'd killed ourselves *then*.

“You gotta give ‘em hope,” Harvey Milk said.

Today we have the power to give these kids hope. We have the tools to reach out to them and tell our stories and let them know that it does get better. Online support groups are great, GLSEN does amazing work, and the Trevor Project is invaluable. But many LGBT youth can't picture what their lives might be like as openly gay adults. They can't imagine a future for themselves. So let's show them what our lives are like, let's show them what the future may hold in store for them.

The video my husband and I made is up now—all by itself. I'd like to add submissions from other gay and lesbian adults—singles and couples, with kids or without, established in careers or just starting out, urban and rural, of all races and religious backgrounds. (Go to www.youtube.com/itgetsbetterproject to find instructions for submitting your video.) If you're gay or lesbian or bi or trans and you've ever read about a kid like Billy Lucas and thought, “Fuck, I wish I could've told him that *it gets better*,” this is your chance. We can't help Billy, but there are lots of other Billys out there—other despairing LGBT kids who are being bullied and harassed, kids who don't think they have a future—and *we can help them*.

They need to know that it gets better. Submit a video. Give them hope. (Savage, 2010a, italics in original)

Dan's call to action collapses a number of points that I identified in the research on LGBTQ youth and the school environment in Chapter 1. There has long been a wall,

both geographic and institutional, between LGBTQ adults and the schools, particularly in the regions where LGBTQ youth are at greatest risk and have the lowest access to support services. The Internet allows LGBTQ adults to figuratively destroy the wall society has built between them and LGBTQ youth because they can put the stories of the truth of LGBTQ life online where those stories can be accessed without the approval of schools or communities. As intersectionality and multiple communities exist within the LGBTQ umbrella, as they do everywhere, it is important to ensure that multiple visions of happiness and success are provided by the entire LGBTQ community so that youth can find people whose experiences, stories, or values resonate with them. Finally, the IGBP is grounded in the belief that hope is integral to helping those in difficult situations make it through hard times, especially LGBTQ youth who should be able to see a path to an adulthood they would be happy to have.

In the construction of this call to action, Dan tapped into the experiences he had during the worst parts of the AIDS crisis—positive and negative. His experiences during that time strongly influenced what he asked people to do, as well as also how he perceived the results.

Dan: I was in ACT UP! back in the day, and one of the things that I hate about left wing activism is people who are on the committees or have given their life to it standing with their arms folded, angry at the people who just want to show up for a demo who aren't gonna throw their whole lives into the movement. I was always grateful to those people. And when I was doing ACT UP!, we identified things we called “the small ask and the doable thing”—that if you have a big group of people that you can ask to do one small thing, they'll do it because you're not asking them to stop everything to do everything. That's really empowering and you get people rolling. You identify more people who can be activists if you bring them in with a small ask and the It Gets Better Project was very consciously that from the beginning, the doable thing.

You feel like you wish you could do something about these sorts of suicides and these gay kids: here's a doable thing. Sit in front of your fucking computer for ten minutes and talk. And it's a small thing, and people did it. And I believed people would—I didn't believe that tens of thousands of people would. I didn't think the president of the United States would. And even that was—you know, I'm old and gay, and I remember when I came out in 1980, into the AIDS buzzsaw. I remember everybody dying, one of my first gay friends dying. I remember the president of the United States [Ronald Reagan] not saying a fucking word about it for seven years. The president of the United States couldn't bring himself to say the word AIDS.

Sara: Right, GRID.

Dan: Or “GRID.” Gay cancer. For seven years! As tens of thousands of Americans died, right? But cocksucking Americans, so who gives a fuck. And to go from that president—in my lifetime—to go from that president to a president who, four weeks into the project jumped in and talked to gay kids and did something really subversive that people don't really acknowledge—inserted himself between gay kids and preachers and teachers and parents and said “they're wrong.” The president of the United States [Barack Obama] went on camera and said “there's nothing wrong with you,” and implicitly he is saying there's something wrong with the people who are telling you there's something wrong with you. And the president of the United States linked arms with Buck Angel [an adult film producer and performer who is a trans man], who had already made a video, and drag queens, and me on our terms and our turf and we didn't have to clean up our act. I really think, even just that all by itself is huge.

As I said earlier, adults seek hope too. Even as he set out to inspire LGBTQ youth, he was also inspired in part by reflecting on the change over the course of his lifetime from the horrible early years of AIDS where President Reagan refused to address the crisis, in no small part because one of the major affected groups was gay men, to President Obama very quickly making his own video for the It Gets Better Project without apology for joining forces with everyone else who made one.

The IGBP became immensely popular, but there were critics within the LGBTQ community. They focused on Dan and his husband Terry's video and their interpretations of how life got better for them; that the project was metro-centric, anti-religious, or anti-

small town; that it did not do enough to make things better now or address structural inequalities; or that stories about overcoming adversity belittled pain and falsely guaranteed a happy ending (Doyle, 2010; Eichler, 2010; Melisa, 2010; Minsky, 2010). When the IGBP is written off entirely, it is dishonest as it discounts the diversity of the participants and holds the project solely accountable for solving broad and persistent problems entrenched in schools and society. As research shows, the situations LGBTQ youth find themselves navigating in their environments are complex, with the system stacked against them at many levels. There is no single intervention that can fix the situation and each partial solution—GSAs, the Trevor Project, etc. —address different parts of the larger problem.

Dan said he expected criticism because “I can’t, like, fart in my bathroom without someone criticizing me for it.” There are certainly criticisms that can be made of Dan; he has several decades of pugnacious writing to his name and it is fairly easy to find mistakes, problems with tone or language, or evidence of evolving beliefs or biases in the text of someone who writes from a personal and passionate perspective. All issues and events are complex, and no individual can “get it right,” in part because “right” is not a true/false binary. One of my participants, Gabrielle, a queer 30-year-old Latina woman, said it better than I can: “You cannot continuously just hate people because they’re white and they have white privilege. That is kind of a given—I can’t expect anyone to speak for me, so why am I continuously shocked that someone like Dan Savage doesn’t express everything inside of my heart and mind?”

The It Gets Better Project is unique in that it was not just a moment of outrage that got 100 videos submitted and quickly faded into the farther reaches of the Internet

without being noticed. It was unknowable at the time, but the It Gets Better Project wound up providing a safe space for LGBTQ adults to transform the broader social conversation about youth and the schools. Instead of the predator trying to recruit the innocent, the LGBTQ adults who posted reminded the world that *they had been children*, often isolated or confused or harassed in environments where people would rather pretend their sexuality or gender identity didn't exist instead of providing them the support they needed as they figured out their identities. Each video from someone who had suffered, but saw their adult life as fulfilling, was an indictment of their previous environment and a celebration of how much life changes as you become more in control of which people you spend your days with. The video creators were both commiserators and models of possible futures.

From the beginning, it was not only LGBTQ adults who participated. Straight allies spoke up as well, as voices of support. Less than a month after the project began, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and President Barack Obama had both recorded videos. President Obama spoke of an obligation to ensure that schools are safe for all youth: he empathized with them and spoke directly to them, telling them that there was nothing wrong with who they were and that there “is a whole world for you, filled with possibilities. There are people out there that love you and care about you just the way you are” (Obama, 2010). I know that people at the time were frustrated with President Obama—how could he say it gets better and still not support marriage equality? Things have changed dramatically in the short time since that video was posted, but there is an important qualification to make about the participation of President Obama, other political figures, and all the companies and sports teams and other organizations that have

contributed videos in support of LGBTQ youth: as Dan said in the interview, they came to the project on our turf and with *our people*—not aligning only with those of us most palatable to the largest audiences, but uncritically joining all of the cross sections of LGBTQ life without simultaneously telling us to clean up our act.

Within two weeks of the initial launch of the It Gets Better Project, there were so many videos had been submitted that Dan had maxed out the 650 video limit for a YouTube playlist and Blue State Digital had created a website as a portal through which to view the growing number of It Gets Better videos (Hartlaub, 2010). The rapid growth of the number of videos and views was influenced by a number of factors: though Tyler Clementi's death was not an impetus for the project, his suicide occurred the day after Dan and Terry posted their video and the day before the *Savage Love* column launching the project was published. The public had been traumatized by yet another suicide and the It Gets Better Project was an outlet for the growing anger about the young LGBTQ people who had died. Brian Moylan at *Gawker* wrote an impassioned piece regarding Clementi's death in which he talked about the It Gets Better Project, saying

For each one of us survivors—gay men and women who made it through the torture alive—we feel the blow of Tyler Clementi's shame. Having to relive the indignity of what happened to him makes it feel for all of us like it will never get better, like there is no escape. If we can't save these kids' lives, then all of our struggles for civil rights and marriage equality aren't worth anything. Naturally it will get better. Each time a gay kid is voted class president, it gets better. Each time a Gay Straight Alliance is formed at a high school, it gets better. Each time a parent hugs their gay teen it gets better and better until one day, it's completely fine and all of our struggles will feel like they meant something. Yes, it will definitely get better. But on days like this, it's a little hard to believe. (Moylan, 2010)

Another aspect of the IGBP's impact and high profile was the nearly immediate participation by high profile individuals (Hartlaub, 2010) and coverage by major media

outlets. *Project Runway*'s Tim Gunn talked openly about his own suicide attempt as a youth in his video (Read, 2010). The *New York Times* wrote about it the day that it launched (Parker-Pope, 2010), and it was discussed on *Larry King Live* (Larry King Live, 2010), *World News with Diane Sawyer* (World News with Diane Sawyer, 2010), and National Public Radio (Martin, 2010) (which tied the project to Clementi's suicide). Later, it was featured as a cover story in *Newsweek* (Bennett, 2011) and the Anoka-Hennepin school district was featured in an exposé in *Rolling Stone* (Rubin Erdely, 2012). The It Gets Better Project has also been repeatedly invoked in policy discussions: the White House has an "it gets better" page on its website (The White House, n.d.) and held a conference on bullying prevention (Lee, 2011); an It Gets Better video was made as part of the outreach efforts of the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice (Samuels, 2011); and Attorney General Eric Holder spoke about the project at the White House LGBT Conference on Safe Schools & Communities, saying their participation in the It Gets Better Project "is more than just a slogan for a popular public awareness campaign. It's a commitment—one we're backing up with robust action" (Holder, 2012), such as their response to the problems in the Anoka-Hennepin school district. There have been attempts to pass legislation protecting LGBTQ students from bullying at the federal level, but they have not yet been passed through the House and Senate (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.), though President Obama endorsed the legislation (Gorenberg, 2012). It is important to notice that even in this series of actions, the focus is on bullying—it is a start, but bullying is a result of homophobic and heterosexist school environments. It is a symptom, not the disease. Still, even at a local level, IGBP had an impact: a city council member in Fort Worth, Texas, gave a speech during a meeting of the council that went

viral—in it, he talked about kids telling him he was a faggot and die and go to hell where he belonged, which left him feeling that something was wrong with him and caused him to become suicidal as a youth. In the video, he was emotional, sometimes choking the words out. He appeared on NPR’s *All Things Considered* (and other media outlets) to talk about the speech and the It Gets Better Project (Block, 2010).

If you can think of a type of organization or person, someone like them has made a video. Over the course of my research, I have seen videos done by professional sports teams, police officers, teachers, politicians, porn stars, latex fetishists, parents of LGBTQ children, LGBTQ parents, elderly people, rural people, Mormons, people of color, international corporations, universities, high schools, religious organizations—every cross section of the LGBTQ community and its allies. There are videos that speak to me and leave me choked up or inspired and there are videos that bore me or seem like they’re valuing what I think is the wrong kind of message: this is a result of the scale of the project. If it had only been 100 videos, those may have only spoken to one or two cross sections. With 50,000, it is hard not to find at least one person like you; and despite its focus on youth, the It Gets Better Project has inspired adults who were closeted or struggling as well. Jason Collins, a basketball player with the Boston Celtics, came out in the spring of 2013. One of his personal trainers was gay and had made an It Gets Better video, and Collins was able to come out to him and get help and advice. “He [the trainer] told me I couldn’t carry this on my own, that I had to tell someone in my family” (Medina, 2013). Collins started coming out to his family and friends, then to the public.

The It Gets Better Project has flourished with the massive amount of sustained publicity, enough to evolve from being a grassroots and viral project to a full-fledged

campaign and organization. The first iteration of the website was simple: the videos embedded from YouTube, some information about the It Gets Better Project, and links to resources. In March 2011, the It Gets Better book was published, which was mostly created from stories in the videos uploaded during the early months of the project and, in addition to being available for purchase, could be directly donated to a public or school library via the It Gets Better website. In 2012, MTV aired two It Gets Better specials (MTV, n.d.). Now, the It Gets Better Project has an International Affiliate Program, with programs around the world, and a BETTERLegal Program, which provides to LGBT legal services organizations videos to help them better advocate for LGBTQ youth in legal briefs or educational materials for their communities. (The It Gets Better Project, n.d.) It is also not simply an archive or an organization, because people still make new videos: like basketball star Brittney Griner's 2013 video that was covered in the *New York Times* (Griner, 2013).

The last few years have seen seismic shifts in how LGBTQ life is discussed in the public sphere. With the rising profile of the problems faced by LGBTQ youth and the focus on marriage and relationships, it has become more challenging for organizations like Focus on the Family to push forward with condemnations of sexual behavior and use the rhetoric of the Anita Bryant era without that rhetoric being questioned or even mocked. While this clearly does not mean homophobia and heterosexism have ceased to exist or that those organizations have stopped trying to dehumanize LGBTQ people, it is progress. Even Exodus International, an "ex-gay" ministry that ran for more than three decades, shut down recently. The news of their closure came in the form of an apology posted to their website that is now archived only in part on *Towleroad*: "For quite some

time we've been imprisoned in a worldview that's neither honoring toward our fellow human beings, nor biblical" (Towle, 2013).

The It Gets Better Project had a role in this shift. Without decades of arduous work by dedicated activists and support from individuals and organizations, there would have been no resources to direct LGBTQ youth to (like GSAs or the Trevor Project), there would have been no research to situate the powerful anecdotal experiences in the videos in a broader context (like GLSEN provides), and there would not have been lobbying, activist, and legal organizations at the ready to push for legislative change and continue to take hostile school administrations to court. The It Gets Better Project brought together people who otherwise may never have realized that sharing their experiences could help someone, and the compelling simplicity of the problem statement and the message allowed anyone to participate. It was media friendly for the same reason and that facilitated its momentum at the outset.

The It Gets Better Project as Public Pedagogy

The It Gets Better Project as a phenomenon can be situated in the work on public pedagogy. It was an intervention into a broad, long-standing problem in education—both in terms of the school environment, but also in access to positive depictions of LGBTQ life and history—and it utilized a platform that any individual could use (YouTube and the Internet) to collect voices, stories, and messages that could join together and have the potential to inspire and heal through that collective representation through story. It is part of a larger collection of efforts to intervene into situations in which LGBTQ people are not necessarily welcome or wanted; it becomes a complement to work within and about schools, such as GLSEN's research and recommendations, or the ongoing expansion of

GSA's. However, it is wholly democratic in nature, with the message morphing based on who interprets it, and is grounded in story. It is iterative, its meaning changing based on who tells what story; and it is reciprocal, affecting both the viewers and the creators of the messages (these groups are not mutually exclusive).

Public pedagogy is a way of conceiving of the kind of learning that happens outside of formal schooling, and much of it emerged in the fields of adult education and cultural studies (see Sandlin, Schultz, & Burdick, 2010), but it has roots extending back into the early 20th century, including in John Dewey's *Democracy and Education*. Schubert (2010) draws attention to Dewey's expansive concept of education, which is "that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience," (as cited in Schubert, 2010, p. 10). The definition Sandlin presents is intended to encompass a broad range of definitions, and therefore public pedagogies are "spaces, sites, and languages of education and learning that exist outside of the walls of the institution of schools," (Sandlin et al., 2010, p. 1) and encompass the orientation that "schools are not the sole sites of teaching, learning, or curricula, and...perhaps they are not even the most influential," (Sandlin et al., 2010, p. 2).

It is the "hidden curriculum" in educational settings that is of particular interest when understanding the situation of LGBTQ youth. The concept was elaborated on in Giroux & Purpel (1983) as the way the dominant culture—via either a teacher's adoption or via the orientation of a curriculum—conveys and instills hegemonic social messages that support and reinforce dominant practices. Apple & King asked "*Whose* meanings are collected and distributed through the overt and hidden curricula in schools?" adding that

“Not all groups’ visions are represented and not all groups’ meanings are responded to” (Apple & N. King, 1983, p. 84). It has been established that the interests of LGBTQ youth and LGBTQ adults are not broadly represented in schools and any reflection of their lives in the curriculum are often intentionally or unintentionally suppressed. This may change over the coming decades, but as a diverse group that is a small percentage of the larger population, it is unlikely that there will be *enough* representation to fulfill the needs of LGBTQ youth even as the situation improves. It is challenging enough to get the curriculum to reflect the history of black or Hispanic lives in a way that is not reductive to “multiculturalism” or a similar flattening of the experience in order to fit it into a curriculum—there are far fewer LGBTQ people as a percentage of the population so it is likely that we will bear some responsibility for filling ongoing gaps in education for “our” youth.

Illich’s (1971) disdain for professionalization in general led him to the concept of deschooling, in which children would learn via educational webs that would provide them the opportunity to make all moments of their lives ones in which they were learning. He called his concept an “opportunity web,” which was essentially a networked system of information sharing. While his observation that the school system performs assimilationist functions—“It is simultaneously the repository of society’s myth, the institutionalization of that myth’s contradiction, and the locus of the ritual which reproduces and veils the disparities between myth and reality” (Illich, 1971, p. 37)—his large-scale solution of deschooling seemed both unrealistic and potentially dangerous. Opportunity webs sound wonderful, but who is expected to coordinate these individualized curricula and experiences for children is unclear (I was left to assume that

it would return women to a life as homemaker) nor does it address the problems that LGBTQ youth would encounter, because home may be as unfriendly and unaffirming as school. However, his identification of computers as having potential for unleashing new paths to learning and networks was prescient. It is also instructive in terms of the It Gets Better Project, which is a model of an opportunity web, and future efforts to subvert dominant narratives about LGBTQ people should look to the ways the IGBP harnessed social and sharing affordances of the Internet. The functionality of databases allow us to taxonomies for and attach metadata to the content in those databases. This opens many possibilities for the future: for instance, shared curricula focused on LGBTQ lives across grade levels (something GLSEN has already started). The It Gets Better Project showed that it is possible to get larger community involvement, and the experiences of Dan and the other participants in my study showed that adults and youth who need the support the videos provide are finding and learning from these videos and the stories they tell.

Public pedagogy is not just about understanding and subverting power structures in institutional settings; it practically allows almost any location to be thought of as a site of learning and the broader concept of public pedagogy is subject to ongoing redefinition and critique in part because of its lack of a concrete definition (Roberts & Steiner, 2010). Most useful in understanding the It Gets Better Project are the works cited above, as well as Dewey's identification of communication's role in education. He said that:

Not only is social life identical with communication, but all communication (and hence all genuine social life) is educative. To be a recipient of a communication is to have an enlarged and changed experience. One shares in what another has thought and felt and in so far, meagerly or amply, has his own attitude modified. Nor is the one who communicates left unaffected. Try the experiment of communicating, with fullness and accuracy, some experience to another, especially if it be somewhat complicated, and you will find your own attitude toward your experience changing; otherwise you resort to expletives and

ejaculations. The experience has to be formulated in order to be communicated. To formulate requires getting outside of it, seeing it as another would see it, considering what points of contact it has with the life of another so that it may be got into such form that he can appreciate its meaning. Except in dealing with commonplaces and catch phrases one has to assimilate, imaginatively, something of another's experience in order to tell him intelligently of one's own experience. All communication is like art. It may fairly be said, therefore, that any social arrangement that remains vitally social, or vitally shared, is educative to those who participate in it. Only when it becomes cast in a mold and runs in a routine way does it lose its educative power. (Dewey, 1916/2012, paragraph 13)

In this quote, Dewey does more than hint at some of what happens in the experience of people who made videos for the It Gets Better Project. He anticipates the research of Pennebaker (1997) on the therapeutic role of turning experience into narrative, and provides the start of a foundation for my analysis of the process video creators went through as they created, posted, and interacted with people about their videos, as well as some of the outcomes of that experience. Situated in this framework, the statement “it gets better” is only a “catch phrase” if there is no thought or story attached, if it is merely spoken—or, as Freire (1970) may term it, if it remains merely “verbalism.” While this may have been the case in some videos, it was not the experience of my participants.

A public pedagogy and is done *intentionally* in order to subvert the hidden curricula of institutional settings may have a performative aspect as part of enacting the large scale effort. Giroux (2000) conceived of the “public intellectual” as an individual who intervenes in a given reality. However, like “public pedagogy,” this concept is amorphous and open to interpretation. Lamont Hill (2010) traced the popularization of the term to Russell Jacoby in the midst of the rise of conservatism in the 1980s which, combined with the rising threat of neoliberalism in the 21st century, is what Giroux is

operating in reaction to. What characterizes public intellectuals in the literature is often affiliation with universities as faculty who have facility with the media; they may also be “politically engaged cultural workers,” (Lamont Hill, 2010).

In the case of the It Gets Better Project, Dan Savage intervened in a broader situation by subverting traditional expectations of how LGBTQ youth should be accessed, yet I feel nervous identifying him as a “public intellectual.” This is not even because I feel that he *isn't* using his platform to do that work at different points in time, including 2010, but because it holds such implications of how speech should be performed. The word “intellectual” gets in the way of seeing what a person *does*, focusing on their identity instead of actions. It is Noam Chomsky’s discussion of terminology versus responsibility that captures this issue.

If a person chooses not to be a writer, or speaker, then (by definition) the person is choosing not to be engaged in an effort, as you quote me, “to bring the truth about matters of human significance to an audience that can do something about them,” apart, perhaps, from some circle of immediate associates. Whether the person should then be called “an intellectual” seems to reduce the issue to a question of terminology. As for academics, I do not see why their responsibilities as moral agents should differ in principle from the responsibilities of others: in particular, *others who also enjoy a degree of privilege and power, and therefore have the responsibilities that are conferred by those advantages.*” (Chomsky & Borofsky, 2010, p. 576, italics added for emphasis)

Over time, Dan has gone after many people for hurting LGBTQ people with actions or words; everyone from Pope John Paul II to Rick Santorum. However, the speed with which he reacts, notably the same speed that allowed him to harness the grief people felt about the suicides, can result in problems when an event potentially intersects with unexamined bias or unquestioned data. His anger towards black voters in the wake of the Proposition 8 vote in California resulted in accusations of racism: it held black

voters responsible for the success of Proposition 8 when they were a minority population in the state, and simultaneously relieved the majority of people who had voted for the proposition of their accountability. The numbers from the exit polls his blog posts in the immediate wake of the election cited were incorrect: CNN had identified black support for Proposition 8 was 70%; later analysis showed that figure to likely be closer to 58%, less than exit polls showed for Catholics (64%) or Protestants (65%) (Wildermuth, 2009; CNN, 2008). His reactivity and the consequences of too little reflection is not to be discounted, but the same could be said for the immediate critics of the It Gets Better Project: one of the problems with the Internet is that it facilitates those who would have immediate responses to situations to have those responses publicly and with less accurate information. This is why people, even my participants, refer to him as “controversial.” However, they also tended to view him as authentic, honest, and trustworthy. As Carolyn, a 25-year-old queer white woman, said in her interview, “Even if I totally disagree with his relationship advice almost all the time... I know he’s totally being honest about what he thinks. Like, he’s not putting on airs or trying to tell [the person he gives advice to] what he thinks they want to hear, it’s all totally genuine. So I respect him as somebody who I believe would tell the truth.”

It is instructive to consider Chomsky’s response when Robert Borofsky asked him to list people who would be “model intellectuals.”

The people I find most impressive are generally unknown at the time of their actions and forgotten in history. I know of people whose actions and words I admire and respect. Some are called “intellectuals,” some are not.

I do not feel that we should set up PEOPLE as “models”; rather actions, thoughts, principles. I have never heard of anyone who was a “model person” in all aspects

of his or her life, *intellectual life or other aspects*, nor do I see why anyone should care. We are not engaged in idol worship, after all. (Chomsky & Borofsky, 2010), p. 578, italics added for emphasis)

With celebrity, and Dan is a celebrity in a certain sphere, it can be hard to separate the person from the action—or even the action from *other* actions. For instance, while his response to the Proposition 8 results, poor data or not, blamed black voters for the result when other, much larger demographics were more influential; he has also come out strongly about the police shootings of young black men, tweeting on the night that Darren Wilson was not indicted for the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, that “I’m the son of a cop, the brother of a cop, the nephew of a cop. And I am so disgusted and angry tonight. This is a travesty. #MichaelBrown” (Savage, 2014). In the context of the It Gets Better Project, he took advantage of his privilege and power to ensure that his perspective was not *the* authoritative one. Situated in this way, I think it is fair to characterize Dan as the public intellectual *of this project*. His intervention into the situation of LGBTQ youth turned into such an influential cultural force that to underplay his intellectual relevance to that outcome would be an act of politically-motivated dishonesty on my part.

Dan and I talked about the effect of being the person who launched the IGBP on his own life, and this helps to separate the man from what he came to be expected to embody. He understood the fact that he is seen as controversial, but was frustrated that others did not take the action he did.

I feel like I’m a shit-kicker and a jokester and a monkey-wrencher. I’m not—if I’m a role model, it’s by accident. If I’m a “spokesgay,” it’s because the national gay organizations suck, that they don’t have people who are soundbite machines the way they should. Hopefully, that’s gonna change with the change in leadership at HRC and GLAAD. I don’t, ugh, I don’t feel like a role model. I just

tell the truth and write what I think, which itself is a kind of modeling of a behavior that I think everybody should be engaged in. I'm a sucker and a weepy bag of slop. That's really what I am, and I ache for these kids. I empathize.

I asked him what happened to him as a result of being the public face of the launch of the IGBP, even as all of the individual video creators joined him.

If anything, the It Gets Better Project has complicated my life as a writer, because now everything I do and say is viewed through the prism of "what if he'd said it to a 12-year-old?" You know, is it bullying? Basically, I'm not allowed to have a strong opinion anymore about anything. It has changed my life in positive ways and weird ways. I'm, you know, I went to the University of Kentucky or Kentucky University, I forget which, to give a speech and the woman who was doing sound came up to me—she was a college sophomore or freshman—and this was a year and some months into the project and the project had hit when she was in the middle of her senior year in high school—and she came up to me and just looked at me and burst into tears because the project saved her life. This happened at Tulane University when Terry and I were at a bar and this Asian kid came up to us and just burst into tears. And that's weird to get that—and tremendously gratifying—but it's weird to make people cry by standing there.

You know, there are times I regret starting the project because of the ways in which it's complicated my life professionally. It's complicated the kind of writing I do, the kind of opinions I like to toss around, because people seek to discredit the project by now attacking me, you know?—and which the right wing has done, which Breitbart has done, Drudge has done. And that's, you know, I've stepped way the fuck back. I try not to be the public face of it anymore, because I don't wanna be, I'm not qualified to be.

I've always conceded to people who scraped something out of *Savage Love* from 15 years ago and say "oh, you're the anti-bullying guy and you wrote this"—like, yeah, I'm totally the imperfect messenger. Somebody else should have fucking thought of it, but nobody else did, so suck my dick, you know what I mean? I get that I'm not the ideal guy to lead something like this or to have come up with something like this because I'm an Irish Catholic brawler. But, you know, the nice hand-wringing person who would have been ideal—gay Gandhi—didn't think of this. Where the fuck's gay Gandhi?

I had a platform. You know, I have *Savage Love* to thank and what people lose sight of when they say "oh you're the wrong guy and you're an asshole" is that the project is an act of aggression and always has been, and there's this like up with people, feel good project of the summer crap that's kind of gelled around it. People view it now through this vaseline-smearred lens that annoys me because from the inception it was about kicking down doors and marching in peoples' living rooms and talking to the kids whether they wanted us to or not. It was about

saying to homophobic parents, “well, fuck you, we’re gonna make an end run around your bigotry and talk to your queer kid whether you want us to or not. Fuck you, homophobic school administrators and teachers and preachers, we’re gonna reach out to these kids whether you want us to or not. We’re gonna talk to them.”

Of course, Gandhi wasn’t nice or hand-wringing in the sense that Dan implies—but that is the way he has been flattened in popular culture. The people who create change are always more complex than history shows them to be. In some ways, the way the IGBP’s initial aggressiveness—which emerged because of how Dan is engaged in the world—has been flattened into the “Vaseline-smear lens” of a “feel good project” is a sign of its success. His stepping away from it as the public face of it is probably also a way to salvage his own identity as a writer and “Irish Catholic brawler,” which is not the kind of person who can be the public face of something that has had its activist origins publicly softened by its success. Part of my goal as a researcher was to cut through the simplification of the project by the media and the superficial critiques I read or heard and understand the experience from the perspective of those who participated. They often spoke passionately about what they had done, and many noted that while what they did was not something they would consider activism, they perceived Dan as the person “kicking down the door.” He empowered them to provide more personal and individualized messages of hope and possible futures for LGBTQ youth without needing to identify what they did as activism or even something political.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The It Gets Better Project as a phenomenon exists at the nexus of networked technology and storytelling, which facilitated its iterative nature and expanded its scope and scale over time. However, in the early hours and days after Dan Savage launched the IGBP, there was no way of knowing that it would last longer than a week or two—if it would be another minor blip of Internet activity that faded almost as quickly as it appeared. I wrote to Dan soon after it started when I sent him a link to the video of my friends that I had filmed and edited for the IGBP and used that moment to tell him that I was going to research the It Gets Better Project. I did not know exactly what I was going to do, but I had a gut feeling that I needed to connect with him early on. That laid the groundwork for when I came back to him months later with requests for participation and publicity at a time when the It Gets Better Project was affecting his life and available time greatly.

As a researcher, I was not interested in if there were objective measures by which the It Gets Better Project had “succeeded.” It transformed my research interests, diverting me away from work that would have been much simpler to incorporate into my dual life as a full-time instructional designer and a PhD student. My work and academic lives at the time had little to do with LGBTQ youth or LGBTQ adults, though I have always incorporated activism and advocacy around LGBTQ issues into my everyday life. Like many of my participants and friends, I left my pre-college school experience and had no desire to look back. Because I have lived in urban areas with significant LGBTQ populations for nearly 20 years and worked in fields in which I did not feel in danger for

being out, I was insulated from the challenges faced by teachers and students in U.S. schools to a point where I had forgotten about my own experiences in non-university teaching settings. After posting the video, I also received messages to my YouTube account from people living in areas of the U.S. that are unfriendly or even hostile to LGBTQ people who said that the video had given them hope, and not all of those messages were from young people. Almost five thousand people watched the video we made and heard the story I crafted from a 35 minute conversation with my friends about love, creating community, and what we wish we had known in high school. After experiencing these events, even if I wanted to explore some kind of metric of success, I was far too biased to even consider it.

The initial call made by Dan when he launched the It Gets Better Project was for LGBTQ adults to tell youth how it got better for them, and my curiosity in the early stages was focused on the IGBP as a systemic process of activism and influence in the context of acts of public pedagogy. This was with the idea in mind that there may be a process happening that could be instructive for other grassroots campaigns. However, it was in the process of developing and asking some very broad questions about participation and meaning that the participants fundamentally altered some of the assumptions I had invested in. It is the fate of the researcher, no matter how objective the intentions, to create a study in which the focus reflects something about their values, beliefs, and biases. This is true in both quantitative and qualitative research. Recruitment, which research questions are pursued, which literature the work is grounded in, which questions the researcher(s) believe will lead to those questions being answered, and any other number of steps in the decision-making process guide us toward a certain scope of

knowledge as a result. I embrace the ethos of the post-structuralist researchers in openly reflecting on my methodology, but there is a tension in my orientation based on the vast difference between my work and academic lives that prevents me from fully investing in a particular theoretical orientation towards a specific research epistemology. In my career, I work with researchers and faculty in public health, primarily developing courses in subjects like biostatistics and epidemiology—areas in which it is a priority to find generalizable answers to population-based problems or questions. There is value in searching for causal links and correlations between behavior, environment, etc. and how they influence disease or health; similarly, ensuring that studies evaluating new medications are structured in such a way that we can trust that we understand the risks and benefits of what we use to treat and prevent disease is clearly important. The value orientation that allows these researchers to fulfill their goals can also result in them undervaluing the elusive, personal aspects of the subjects under study. They may be unaware of questions they should have asked or how to recruit people for studies from populations that are underrepresented in research. We cannot address or understand major problems without acknowledging that the ways in which we live life are messy, experiential, and intersectional.

My experience with the It Gets Better Project was, quite simply, *my experience*. I saw it as another form of activism in my life, an unmediated intervention opportunity in which I could tell a positive, hopeful story to LGBTQQ people whose physical communities wanted to render my experience unspeakable. In developing this study, I designed both survey and interview questions. The survey, though it helped me gather data that would help guide me in the final design of the qualitative study and recruitment

and served as a tool for reflection along the way, suffered from issues of scope and an initial focus on concepts of influence and networks. It was in the interviews with my participants that I was able to break away from superimposing a pre-determined structure on their experiences. This break exposed layers: stories of their pasts; decisions about coming out or increasing their outness by recording a video; explicit intentions about who they were speaking to and the message they hoped to send in their videos; the effects that telling their stories, interacting with viewers, or other unanticipated experiences had on their lives; and the ways technology situated and mediated the experience and results. There was an overarching process, but it was not a process about the It Gets Better Project, it was a personal process that my participants went through as they engaged in reflection and action.

Study Design

The data presented in the following chapters are drawn from a case study focused on LGBTQ adults who made videos for the It Gets Better Project. Because the IGBP is relatively new and has been influential in unpredictable ways, I chose to step back from critical analysis and embark on a methodology that would allow me to focus on exploration and description of the individual experiences of those who participated in the phenomenon. A case study is ideal when studying a contemporary phenomenon over which the researcher has little or no control (Yin, 2009) and based on the predominant conversations and research happening in academic circles, which focused on analyzing the IGBP from a critical theory perspective, I identified that there was a gap in the conversation and research in that no one seemed to be trying to understand what the It Gets Better Project *was* before analyzing it. Jack Halberstam's quickly penned critique stands

out as representative of the conversations: he said that the IGBP was “a sad lie about what it means to be an adult,” and that it was embodied by “impossibly good looking and successful people smugly recounting the highlights of their fabulous lives,” (Halberstam, 2010). Because of the preponderance of elements of this perspective in academic circles, I designed a study that was aggressive in its recruitment scope, hoping to draw a more complete picture of the participants in the IGBP and their approaches to their videos. This choice led me to an epistemological orientation that was aligned with social constructionism and constructivism as defined by Crotty (see Patton, 2001, p. 97). The participant interviews led me to engage with the way my participants made sense of the world; how they shaped the meaning of what they were doing and what happened as a result. In this, I attempted to find a middle ground to the extent that I could and embody the ethos of “empathic neutrality,” (Patton, 2001), trying to avoid becoming too involved with my participants and simultaneously avoiding remaining too distant. It was much easier to avoid the latter than the former.

This case study was designed as a descriptive and primarily interview-based study, with a goal of developing deeper understanding the experiences and motivations of those individuals who created videos for the IGBP. For this, I utilized an embedded single case design: each individual is an embedded unit of analysis within the larger case of the It Gets Better Project and the context of LGBTQ participation. This design allowed me to be adaptable and flexible in regard to the data I gathered (Yin, 2009), moving towards the meaning of these experiences and away from more abstract ideas of influence and performance that I began with. Because the experiences of individuals are not inherently generalizable to the IGBP as a whole, viewing them as both single cases and as

connected via the larger case of the It Gets Better Project me to engage with each individual and theorize commonalities across their experiences as part of the IGBP. Mixed, purposeful sampling was used to find information-rich cases (Yin, 2009) and I sampled to the point of redundancy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Recruitment

The initial call to action of the It Gets Better Project was targeted specifically to LGBTQ adults and because these individuals were the only ones who had experience being LGBTQ as youth, I limited recruitment to LGBTQ adults who had participated in videos created for the IGBP. Recruitment happened in two stages: initially, for a survey examining their self-perceptions of self-efficacy and opinion leadership; specific experiences as LGBTQ people as adults and youth; civic engagement; technology usage; and demographics.

One important note about recruitment is that I felt that a text-based mode of recruitment was not enough, I also wanted to be transparent and responsive to questions about the study. So before I sent the recruitment messages out, I set up a website and recorded several videos that the people I was recruiting could watch and use to inform their decision of whether or not they wanted to participate. The two primary videos were the “about me” video, which included a link to my LinkedIn page where potential participants could look at my work and school history as a means of increasing my credibility with them; and the “about this study” video, which explained why I was asking them to participate.

Recruitment took two primary avenues: direct contact of YouTube accounts and a blurb in *Savage Love* on December 9, 2011. Contacting tens of thousands of individual

YouTube accounts would have been impossible for reasons that were primarily technological in nature: not all people who created videos tagged them in a way that was easily searched, search results in YouTube are capped, and because YouTube is not set up for the specific needs of researchers like me, there was no way to accurately sort or define what kind of sample I was actually getting. Fortunately, my work in the Web community gave me access to networks of people with connections and suggestions for gaining access to more accurate data. I knew that the It Gets Better Project pulled from a YouTube playlist to populate their website and that they accessed via the Google Data API. Blue State Digital was responsible for developing the site, so I wrote to them explaining who I was and what I was doing and asked for the link they were using for the data. They were very helpful, providing not only the link, but also some notes about pagination and other querystring parameters that might help me gain access to the data most efficiently.

A challenge arose when I discovered YouTube limited the number of results I could pull to 1,000. After putting a call out via Twitter for help, Christian Heilmann of Mozilla connected me to Jeff Posnick, an engineer at Google. He referred me back to Blue State Digital, who told me they had the same issues that I did with the API limit. However, they did give me the actual number of videos in the playlist at the time, approximately 1,900. They also explained why there was such a disparity in the total videos (20,000 at the time) and the number on the site: they had begun viewing all the videos to screen them to make sure they met the guidelines from the American Association for Suicide Prevention. They gave me the direct link to the YouTube playlist, which I would not have been able to identify on my own, and said that I would have to

work off the feed.

A second, larger challenge arose once I had the list. YouTube blocks you from sending more than three emails from your account every 15 minutes, largely for protection for its users against spam. As a workaround, I set up three YouTube accounts, uploading the “about this study” video to each one. As often as I could, every fifteen minutes for the month of November, I sent three emails from each account to the people included on the playlist. The final recruitment push came on December 11, 2012, when a link to the study appeared in *Savage Love*.

A total of 406 individuals participated in the survey, and 313 volunteered to be considered for participation in the interviews. I had a great deal of information from the survey itself, particularly demographics, but in order to identify potentially information-rich cases, I viewed and loosely coded the 313 videos for more descriptive information. These categories were: original environment (how they talked about their hometown, school, or family); youth experience (bullying, depression, coming out, etc.); interpretations of personal success (community, relationships, jobs); what kinds of promises or advice they provided the people they thought would be watching their videos and how they related to the youth; and recording decisions they made (group or individual videos, how emotional the video was). In doing this, I was able to experience a wide selection of videos in depth and developed a sense of what commonalities individuals or narratives exhibited and whether there were special cases that could contribute depth to the study.

During 2012, I emailed 82 individuals requests to participate. Recruitment was done in waves, with the goal of recruiting 35 total interview participants. Individuals

were emailed three times and if they were non-responsive or could not participate, I moved on to the next set of potential participants. I wanted to ensure that I had individuals of diverse ages, video popularity (number of views), sexual orientations, gender identities, classes, and racial and ethnic backgrounds. To do this, I sorted the survey respondents by age, using that as a guidepost: I did not want to over- or under-recruit from any given age bracket. I paid particular attention to trying to recruit transgender and genderqueer participants, as well as people of color.

Research Context

The pervasiveness of video chat-enabled phones and laptops with built-in cameras when I conducted my research in 2012 provided an opportunity to deviate from what has traditionally been conceived of when doing online interviews. In general, online interviews are thought of as text chat or email-based endeavors (see Patton 2001, Hine, 2005), but Internet connectivity and multiple devices capable of video chat have changed what is possible. In order to fully engage with my participants, interviewing them via video chat was the best option. This decision influenced the comfort and context of the research site in unpredictable ways. One participant admitted she wore a nice shirt for the interview, but was also wearing pajama pants because it was off-camera. People were interrupted by roommates or dogs and cats; they talked to me from their living rooms, offices, and bedrooms; they used their phones, balanced laptops on their knees, and sat at desks. It was a much more intimate and casual interaction than it would have been had I had people in my office or had we corresponded via email.

Data Sources and Collection

During 2012, 35 participants were interviewed for between 1.5-2.25 hours via

Skype, GChat, or FaceTime. Dan Savage was interviewed in person (as I noted earlier, his interview was used in Chapter 2 and not in the final analysis), and one of the other 35 individuals was interviewed using GChat's Google Voice function only (audio) because of technological issues with video. All interviews were screen-recorded using Camtasia, except for Dan, who was recorded using the computer's built-in camera and Photo Booth. The videos were then transcribed and coded for an inductive analysis of themes and patterns in the data.

Using video chat allowed me to interview people from around the country, including rural, suburban, and urban areas. Screen recording allowed me to go back and relive the interview, providing much more depth and validity to what I had initially noted about our interactions and their perspectives. I had viewed their It Gets Better videos before talking with them, so I knew varying amounts about their individual stories and how I thought they had interpreted the call to action of the IGBP.

As the interviews went on I added notes to my semi-structured interview guide: dropping questions that were not leading to meaningful responses and keeping track of both commonalities and unique moments across the interviews. I used Scrivener software for writing, which allowed me to create short notes in a non-linear way—the equivalent of writing impressions and thoughts on note cards and storing them for later reflection.

Demographics

The 35 participants had the option of selecting pseudonyms or using their real first names, with most selecting their actual names. I asked each to provide a descriptive paragraph about themselves (see Appendix A), which I combined with their responses on the survey to build a compressed image of who participated in the interviews (Table 1).

As the power to identify oneself is important across LGBTQ communities, the descriptive paragraph helped me ensure that I was representing individuals in the ways that they wanted to be represented.

Participants ranged in age from 20 to 60, with 15 in the 18-30 age bracket, 9 in the 31-40 bracket, 8 in the 41-50 bracket, and 3 in the 50+ bracket. Self-identification led to a variety of racial and gender identities being used. Twenty-three participants identified as white, three as multiracial, three as either Latin@ or Hispanic, four as either Asian, Asian-American, or Filipina; and two as either African-American or black. Twelve participants identified as either woman or female; 19 as man or male; one as genderqueer; two as transwomen; and one as person. Ten of the participants identified as lesbian, nineteen as gay, five as queer, and one as omnisexual.

While most participants had attended some college (8) or held associate (1), bachelor's (10), master's (10), or PhD (4) degrees (one had not graduated from high school and one had not gone to college after high school), the economy's impact was pervasive. Nine of the participants had experienced recent problems with employment: getting laid off, having difficulty finding a new job, or having difficulty finding consistent work.

As may be expected, many participants had moved away from their original environments. Fifteen originally lived in a large or small city, versus 25 currently living in one; 11 originally lived in a small town or rural area, as opposed to five now; and nine originally lived in a suburb, versus three now. A less pronounced shift also happened in region: more people lived in the Northeast (10 current / 7 originally), the Mountain West, West Coast or Hawaii (10 / 7), and the Southeast, including Washington, D.C. (8 / 5).

Fewer people currently lived in the Midwest (6 / 11) and the South and Southwest (1 / 6).

Table 1. Table of Participants.

Name	Age	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Race	Original Location	Current Location	Highest Degree Attained	Video Views (ranges)	Video Comments (ranges)
Adrian	28	man	gay	Multiracial (Black/White)	Suburban Midwest	Suburban Midwest	JD	10-20k	10-20
Alanna	37	woman	lesbian	White	Small City Northeast	Large City East	Some MD	1-5k	0-10
Alexis	23	woman	lesbian	White	Suburban Southwest	Large City East	Some MD	1-5k	0-10
Andrew	29	man	gay	White	Rural West	Suburban West	Masters	1-5k	0-10
Brinae	20	person	queer	White	Suburban Midwest	Small City Midwest	Some college	30-40k	100+
Carolyn	25	woman	queer	White	Small City West	Large City Northeast	Bachelors	5-10k	30-50
Chase	27	man	gay	White	Small City South	Rural Southwest	Associates	1-5k	10-20
Dan Savage	47	man	gay	White	Large City Midwest	Large City Northwest	Bachelors	2,000,000	Disabled
Dave	35	man	gay	White	Rural Midwest	Large City West	Masters	500-1k	0-10
Erin	35	woman	lesbian	Multi-racial (Scottish/Mexican)	Small Town West	Large City West	Masters	0-500	0-10
Gabrielle	30	woman	queer	Latina	Large City Northeast	Large City Northeast	Bachelors	30-40k	100+
Greg M.	37	man	gay	African-American	Large City Midwest	Large City Midwest	Some college	0-500	0-10
Greg O.	43	man	gay	White	Rural Midwest	Large City Midwest	Bachelors	0-500	0-10
Hank	27	man	gay	Asian	Suburban East	Large City Northeast	Some Masters	20-30k	100+
Harry	60	man	gay	White	Rural South	Small Town Midwest	Unknown	40k+	100+
Jacquie	47	woman	lesbian	Black	Large City Northeast	Large City Northeast	Masters	1-5k	0-10
Jason	29	man	gay	Multiracial Hispanic	Suburban West	Small City South	Some high school	0-500	0-10
Jay	23	man	gay	Asian American	Small City Northeast	Large City Northeast	Bachelors	1-5k	0-10

JD	44	man	gay	White	Small Town South	Rural South	Doctorate	40k+	100+
Jim	57	man	gay	White	Large City Midwest	Large City West	Bachelors	500-1k	0-10
Jino	21	woman	queer	Filipina	Suburban Northeast	?	Bachelors	1-5k	0-10
Joan	50+	woman	lesbian	White	Large City Midwest	Large City Northeast	Doctorate	10-20k	0-10
John	23	man	gay	White	Small City South	Small City South	Some college	1-5k	0-10
Joshua	20	man	gay	White	Rural West	Large City Northwest	High School	1-5k	30-50
Kristel	28	woman	lesbian	Asian	Suburban Pacific	Large City West	Bachelors	5-10k	20-30
Krissy	45	woman	lesbian	White	Small City Northeast	Rural Northeast	Some College	20-30k	50-100
Lauren	31	woman	lesbian	White	Rural Midwest	Large City Midwest	Masters	1-5k	20-30
Lisa	46	transwoman	lesbian	White	Suburban Midwest	Suburban West	Doctorate	1-5k	10-20
Luis	23	man	gay	Latino	Large City Southwest	Suburban Southwest	Masters	1k-5k	0-10
Pat	49	man	gay	White	Rural Southwest	Large City Northeast	Some college	10-20k	100+
Patrick	30	man	gay	White	Suburban Northeast	Large City Northeast	Bachelors	10-20k	0-10
Sage	30	woman	lesbian	White	Rural South	Small City South	Doctorate	20-30k	50-100
Scout	33	genderqueer	queer	White	Large City Southwest	Rural West	Bachelors	1-5k	10-20
Sera	25	transwoman	omnisexual	Multi-Racial Cherokee/German	Suburban Midwest	Large City West	Some College	1-5k	20-30
Ted	44	man	gay	White	Large City Southwest	Large City East	MD	30-40k	50-100

Analysis

As I interviewed participants, I transcribed the interviews in full using F5 transcription software. This allowed me to watch the expressions and gestures of my interview participants as I was typing and remember whether there was special emphasis or emotion associated with what was said. I was able to immerse myself in the actual conversations twice: once when I conducted the interviews and another time as I transcribed them. Once interviews were fully transcribed, I printed them out and read through them, making notes in margins and developing the codes I would use for analysis. The codes emerged over multiple iterations of this process and it became clear that there were distinct patterns to the process of deciding to make and making the videos, as well as interacting with others about the videos and reflecting on the results of that experience. These larger patterns served as an entrance to investigating participants' self-perception and experience as the primary data source for this study. For instance, discussions of why they chose to make videos usually evolved into a conversation on who they were making the videos for. There were specific audiences identified (black youth, future doctors, Christians, "myself at 15," etc.) and this reoriented my analysis from my own perspective and interpretation to trying to truly understand theirs. Instead of looking at the IGBP broadly, my approach became more emic in nature—understanding that the context the participants were embodying in their decision to contribute to the It Gets Better Project was not the IGBP itself, but the parts of their life stories, experiences, or communities that they most closely identified with the goals the IGBP was trying to fulfill.

Verstehen: Values and Limitations of the Study

The focus of this study is on the participants: how they construct the meaning of their motivations, intentions, and the results of being a part of the It Gets Better Project. This is both a limitation and a strength of the study. I discovered early on in interviews that I was an inappropriate judge of a video's "goodness," or whether or not the message created was successful. It was a sign that I did not necessarily understand the social context in which a particular video was situated and I was not the right audience to interpret the success or importance of its message. Relying on certain modes of triangulation, like data triangulation or methodological triangulation, became problematic in this context. This means that issues endemic to qualitative research, like generalizability of the results, are more pronounced.

My primary methods of triangulating were member checking, drawing from a heterogeneous population, and using multiple theoretical perspectives in my analysis. When I write an interpretation or analysis that involves one or more participants, I email them any quotes I use from them in context, as well as anything I say about them in context, and give them an opportunity to write back and contribute their voices to the project. Authenticity and transparency were integral throughout the research process, and participants were made aware of exactly what I was doing with their stories before I published or presented their stories.

CHAPTER 4: PUBLIC PEDAGOGY & COLLATERAL BENEFITS

Paulo Freire said that “Human beings *are* because they *are in* a situation. And they *will be more* the more they not only critically reflect upon their existence but critically act upon it” (Freire, 1970, p. 109). As people, we occupy times, places, and histories that are unique, but interwoven with one another. When we realize this “situationality,” reflect on it, and identify that others are also a part of it, this experience stops just being about us and our attention turns outward; “only then,” Freire says, “can commitment exist” (Freire, 1970, p. 109).

Essentially, we cannot intervene in problems that we either see as only our own or that we do not reflect on and situate in a broader narrative. There is no singular intervention that would cure what ails our schools in regard to the heterosexism and homophobia—and addressing heterosexism and homophobia alone is not enough, because LGBTQ youth come from all races, all classes: their lives are intersectional. If we address problems as purists, however, we enact what Freire termed “verbalism,” speaking words that are “alienated and alienating ‘blah’” (Freire, 1970, p. 87) and abandoning dialogue and communication. It can result in a kind of intellectual paralysis in which there is only critique—hope and possibility are not acceptable.

Freire’s alternative to verbalism is “praxis,” which is “the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it,” (Freire, 1970, p. 79). It may be hard for some to reconcile Freire with something like the It Gets Better Project that makes such effective use of the propaganda function of media, but it is critical that we examine what the IGBP is composed of: stories and messages from actual individuals,

unmediated by existing power structures, creating multiple definitions and perspectives of hope for others who find themselves in similar situations. The videos of the IGBP became sites of dialogue for their creators and viewers, and there were multiple locations of dialogue for each person: virtual spaces such as Facebook and YouTube, as well as the physical spaces of family, friends, and work. It should be noted that these spaces are not mutually exclusive. Freire said that:

Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men and women transform the world. To exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new *naming*. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection.

But while to say a true word—which is work, which is praxis—is to transform the world, saying that word is not the privilege of some few persons, but the right of everyone. Consequently, no one can say a true word alone—nor can she say it *for* another, in a prescriptive act which robs others of their words. (Freire, 1970, p. 88, italics in original)

The act of opening the interpretation of hope to *anyone* who wanted to engage in it had effects on those who participated. Not everyone's sense of their commitment to effecting change for LGBTQ youth was revolutionized, but that was because some were already engaged and for others, merely having a voice was a new experience. However, all participants engaged in a collective documentation of the lives and experiences, and therefore the history, of LGBTQ people, and reflected on their responsibilities to LGBTQ youth. JD, a 44-year-old white gay man, summed up this orientation:

When children are suffering, it is the responsibility of an adult to come in and offer love, support, understanding, you know, to put our arms around them and take care of them. Even though most LGBTQ people aren't famous, it allowed us, this awoke within us this desire to take care of children and it's just such a no brainer. It made people realize that it could be their children and it's important to

watch out for the kids.

The reflections of video creators are connected to culture—the culture we share and the culture we want to transform. As a society, we are connected to culture by both the meanings we participate in creating (meaning-making) and the meanings we adopt (meaning-using) (Bruner, 1990). Bruner elaborated on that overarching description to add that “By virtue of participation in culture, meaning is rendered *public* and *shared*. Our culturally adapted way of life depends upon shared meanings and shared concepts and depends as well upon shared modes of discourse for negotiating differences in meaning and interpretation,” (Bruner, 1990, p. 12-13). We are not islands. We have cultural frameworks that we adopt and apply to the stories of our lives, and in doing so we are engaged in an iterative process of creating and evolving meaning. As I described earlier, the idea of “coming out” holds a particularly strong cultural meaning for people who identify as LGBTQ and it is not a coincidence that Dan Savage’s call to action cited Harvey Milk’s words and therefore the legacy of LGBTQ activists of his era. You do not only come out for yourself, you come out to create a world in which it is not as hard to live authentically for the LGBTQ people who come after you.

The public and shared cultural significance of coming out may be somewhat unique to the LGBTQ population, but the idea of the “redemptive self,” which is another component of the cultural construction of the It Gets Better Project, holds meaning to the broader culture of the United States (though it is must be recognized that there was significant global participation in the IGBP as well). McAdams discussed the identities that highly generative adults create through story in this way: “In the prototypical life story told by the highly generative American adult, the protagonist encounters many

setbacks and experiences a great deal of pain in life, but over time these negative scenes lead to especially positive outcomes, outcomes that might not have occurred had the suffering never happened in the first place. Thus, redemption helps to move the life story forward. “ (McAdams, 2006, p. 8). People who participated in the It Gets Better Project would not all necessarily be classified as “highly generative” by McAdams. However, even if they still struggled as individuals, they were able to embody a redemptive story as part of the collective group. It is part of the cultural story of LGBTQ people that life gets better after periods of suffering, often seen as times during middle or high school or surviving a hostile home environment. That larger narrative has a strong cultural foothold and there is indication in the interviews that some participants who were struggling when they made videos were moving towards seeing their lives as redemptive. While generativity itself can be defined as a focus on “establishing and guiding the next generation” (Erikson, 1963), McAdams finds that the life stories of Americans in general are often tied to a conception of generativity that is linked to redemption—overcoming tragedy or hardship and finding a better future.

The power of personal narrative is at the heart of the It Gets Better Project by design and that links it to this kind of work on life stories: “When people talk about their lives, they tell *stories*. It is through stories that we often learn the greatest lessons for our lives—lessons about success and failure, good and evil, what makes life worth living, and what makes a society good. It is through stories, furthermore, that we define who we are. Stories provide us with our identities” (McAdams, 2006, p. 13, italics in original).

The It Gets Better Project invokes both individualism and redemption, as well as something collective and dialogic. There is no resonance to the idea that “it gets better”

without interpretation and reinterpretation; had people only replicated the framework of Dan and Terry's initial video, the IGBP would have fizzled because video creators would not have engaged in reflecting on their individual experiences and therefore contributed to the morphing collective narrative of what it means to overcome difficult times in search of a better future as LGBTQ individuals.

The role of networked technologies in facilitating the creation, distribution, and interactions that allowed the It Gets Better Project to evolve and take shape as a broad scale intervention with multiple purposes. It is not that any community requires social media or the Internet to intervene in a situation, but the affordances of this kind of technology facilitates different and distributed possibilities. What is relevant to the It Gets Better Project specifically is the facilitation of networked publics, which boyd (2008) identified the properties and dynamics of as follows: the properties are *persistence, searchability, replicability, and scalability*; the dynamics are *invisible audiences, collapsed contexts, and the blurring of public and private*. The way in which these affected the IGBP video creators was that uploading the videos to YouTube allowed them to be part of a large archive of material (persistence) which can be easily duplicated because of the flexibility afforded by the simple fact that the video content is in a database (replicability) and can be repurposed and linked to from a variety of sources both in and out of the control of the video creator (scalability) and associated with other data, such as titles or descriptions, that allow the video to be searched within the YouTube site or on external search engines (searchability). The latter property was intentionally utilized from the start of the It Gets Better Project, with part of the call to action asking people to include the name of the project in the title of their video so it

could be easily searched.

The three dynamics boyd (2008) identified that build on the properties are of particular importance in regard to how the video creators conceived of their individual videos and how to distribute them once they were made. Whether or not video creators were contacted by anyone on YouTube after they posted their videos, people who made videos had audiences for their videos in mind. There was a range of what this specifically meant, but at the core, most people posted videos that they thought of as for people “like me” or “that I know” in some way—whether that meant a young person making a video for someone they felt was a peer; someone in their 30s speaking to their memory of what the 15-year-old version of themselves would need; or someone who thought an LGBTQ youth shared their religion or racial background would need to see someone like them who could represent a possible future for them. Invisible (and envisioned) audiences were at the forefront of the minds of video creators. The collapsed contexts were not necessarily core to the process of thinking of what to say and how, but video creators often posted the video to Facebook; some sent out emails if they wanted to reach a certain audience of people they already knew; and some of them wondered about how people in those contexts would experience the stories they told. They were aware of these collapsed contexts and for some it influenced how they spoke of certain things, especially if family were part of the problem when they were young. This extends to the blurring of public and private, which is a reality that video creators were conscious of and grappled with in different ways. The It Gets Better Project exploited this blur, facilitating the ability of people to take private experiences and make them public for the benefit of the invisible audience. Video creators further collapsed the context by posting content that could have

been isolated within LGBTQ and ally circles onto personal networks for other people in their lives to see, people who may otherwise never have occasion to learn about these particular stories.

In this chapter, I identify the process that participants engaged in, following the trajectory from before they knew about the It Gets Better Project (or before it existed) through their reflection and to the outcomes of their experience. There were certain aspects of this process that every participant experienced or enacted in some way, and other parts of the process that they experienced in different ways based on individual factors. In framing this, I am scavanging from Dewey's term "collateral learning," and considering the collateral benefits that emerge from the process of engaging in a public pedagogy project in which personal experience and narrative interpretation are part of the involvement.

The Collateral Benefits of Engaging in Public Pedagogy

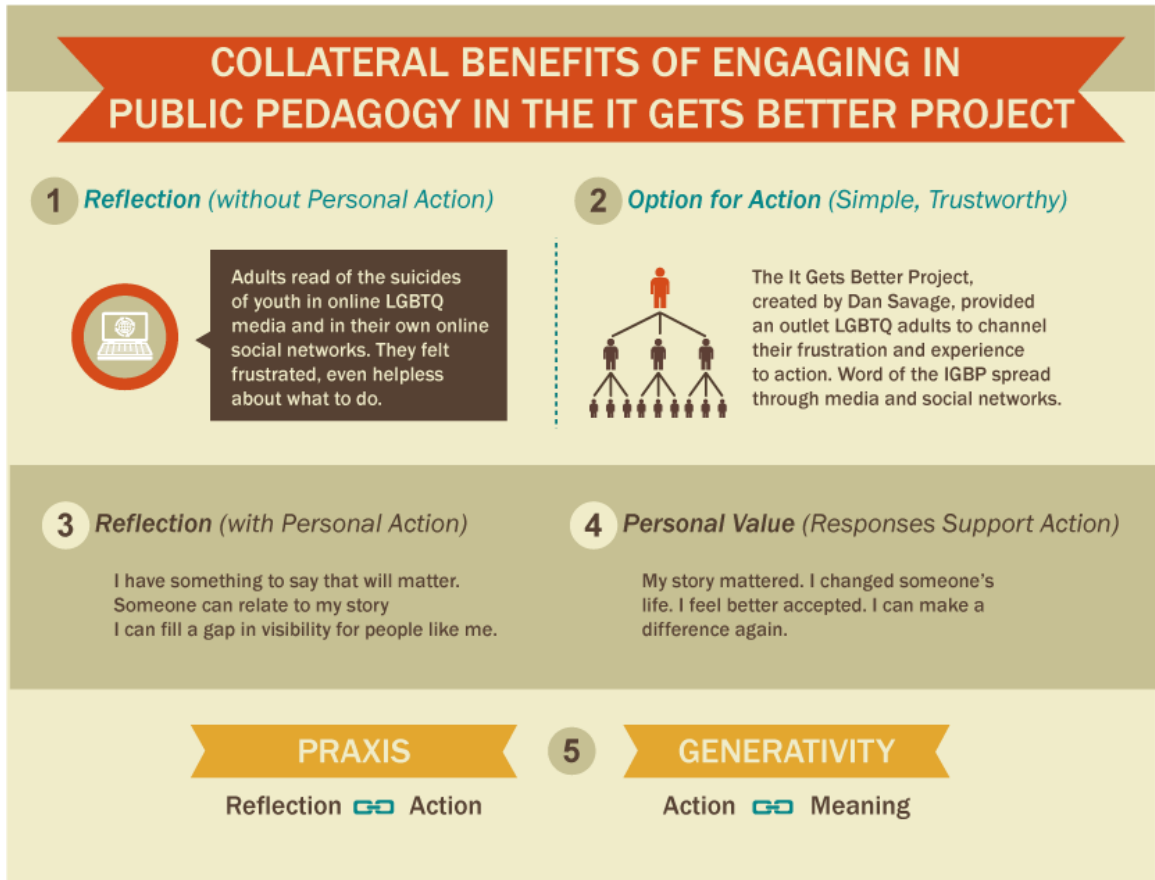


Figure 1: Collateral Benefits of Engaging in Public Pedagogy in the It Gets Better Project

1. Reflection (without personal action) (N=34 of 34).

Most participants were aware of the news of the youth suicides in 2010. Some of them, like Jacquie, were aware of others that were only reported locally or not highlighted on the more mainstream LGBTQ blogs. This was frustrating to Jacquie, who addressed the lack of “black and brown” representation in LGBTQ media as a contributing factor to this lack of reporting. Participants talked about feeling “distracted” (Scout), “heartbroken” (Jim), “frustrated” and “hopeless” (Andrew), “really upset” (Gabrielle), “helpless” (Jacquie), etc.

The impetus for the It Gets Better Project and this process of reflection happened because people *did not have an identifiable and emotionally fulfilling outlet* for their frustrations about the suicides, nor did they know what to do for kids who were most alienated in their lives. They spent this time reflecting, to various extents, about their feelings about the suicides or experiences they had in their own lives, as well as paying attention to the news as the suicides were discussed (and accumulating). However, it was a churn—the desire to reach out to the youth who were in pain was strong and they had no access to the youth who needed help. Some made connections to other upsetting events, Pat, a 49-year-old gay white man, talked about Matthew Shepard’s murder: “You know, we were greatly disturbed. First and foremost, it goes all the way back to the murder of Matthew Shepard. So any time that we came across news of young people being injured or injuring themselves or killing themselves, it was really, we took it very personally.”

In the reflective process at this stage, it was the feeling “like you couldn’t do anything” (Dan) that stood out explicitly and implicitly in how people talked about *why* they participated in the Project. It is not that organizations to help LGBTQ youth do not exist, it is that the experience of being LGBTQ is complex in a way that is not analogous to the experience of most non-dominant populations. There is no predicting to whom or where an LGBTQ person will be born, nor how supportive their family or community will be, nor whether they will have any local peers who they can talk to about their emerging identities or experiences. This means that getting the message out to youth who, for whatever reason, do not have adequate support resources is difficult not only in terms of access, but in terms of predictability.

Though most participants started their process of reflection with the news stories, there was one atypical case. Joshua, a 20-year-old gay white man who was a “YouTuber” with an active presence on the site, had seen “a lot of other YouTubers were making videos related to the It Gets Better Project.” This didn’t cause him to just make a video, however. He watched other videos and reflected on his own experience: “I sort of related to some of the experiences that those other people had shared and I thought I would share my own experiences since I’d grown up in a really, really small town in a very conservative state.” This is to say that everyone reflected on their experiences or relationship to LGBTQQ youth, even if some of them did so in slightly differently ways.

2. Option for action: simple, trustworthy (N=34 of 34)

I argued earlier that Dan Savage was the public intellectual of this project. However, what was most important about him is that he created an *option for taking personal action*. Most participants shunned the mantle of “activist” in regard to their own role in this project. It was more personal. People simply needed an outlet to feel like they could matter in a situation in which they felt unable to do anything that mattered. The option for action that Dan provided was interpreted by video creators as being simple for them to do, but potentially useful for their imagined audience. They also felt that that they were contributing to an effort to which they were willing to entrust their stories and visual representations of themselves. For some, this was based on their knowledge of and confidence in Dan himself, for others it was the number of videos that had already been made or even the fact that high profile companies and individuals were making videos. Overall, very few questioned whether or not this was something they ought to be concerned about at all; it felt like something they *should* do.

The veneer of simplicity to the It Gets Better Project motivated individuals to participate. The perception of simplicity was important, because it made the decision to participate very low stakes in terms of perceived effort. It was also seen as open to anyone, so there was no level of expertise preventing someone from adding their voice and perspective. This was important to all participants, but it also specifically empowered people to fill gaps they perceived in the other videos by adding their voice to the project. The barrier for entry was low and people did not feel they needed to be experts to make a difference—they were not overly intimidated by the idea of participating. It was also perceived to be uncontroversial by those who did not see themselves as particularly political. All of these factors allowed people who were not accustomed to speaking up about issues to position themselves alongside those who were, which affected the kinds of messages presented and how individuals who made videos felt about their participation.

As part of the reflective process of deciding to make a video, one choice participants had to make was “is this something I *can do*?” To be able to answer *yes* to that question was a motivating factor. It was seen as “a really easy way to put something positive out into the world” (Dave), that “every little bit helps or every individual person who can make a comment should” (Jason), and that “if the video could help one kid somewhere in Oklahoma, I should do it. Because I really, if I had had that as a teenager, I wouldn’t have felt so alone” (Erin). Additionally, because of the possibility of making a video as a group or with an organization, someone who was intimidated by the technology or did not want to do it alone could be a part of something someone else led. Joan, a 50+-year-old white lesbian, made a video with her employer, and would not have

been as likely to make one without that help. “I’d been thinking about doing it for a very long time and I just hadn’t gotten around to figuring out—how do I do this? What’s the mechanics like? I suppose I could have gotten my 17-year-old nieces to do it for me, but they don’t live close to me. I think that’s the main reason [I recorded with my employer], because I’m not sure enough of the technology” (Joan).

Many participants who made videos had technology challenges: sometimes it was because of the upload process to get the video on YouTube’s site, other times it was because they needed the best take and didn’t know how to edit video, so the single take had to be entirely to their satisfaction. Participants found ways around limited access when that affected them. For instance, Scout, a 33-year-old white genderqueer and queer person, borrowed a computer to record their video because they did not have one at the time.

These technology issues and how participants overcame them are important because they demonstrate that even when there were challenges in the process of getting the video recorded or published, they found creative ways to get their voices added to the project. It also shows that assumptions about common technological tasks being “easy” are not true across the board.

Simplicity was also a part of the message. The request did not make video creators feel that they had to have particularly special stories; in fact, relatability was desirable. Luis, a 23-year-old, Hispanic gay man, said “I think I have a story that’s maybe easy to relate to and not overly dramatic made-for-tv, so I just thought, you know, why not?”

3. Reflection (with personal action) (N=34 of 34).

Reflection began as participants considered whether or not they would engage in the option for action, but once they made that decision, they had to decide what to say. In doing this, participants reflected on their own youth experiences and/or the experiences of LGBTQQ youth they knew. The lack of role models, or examples of possible futures, that they experienced in the contexts of their own youths or saw in the lives of the youth they knew was seen as a problem and that perception framed who they envisioned their audience as and what message would resonate.

This part of the larger process is integral to any kind of value or transformation participants experienced from being part of the IGBP. While making a video was probably a completely different experience for straight video creators who saw themselves as extending supportive messages to youth, for LGBTQ adults it was personal. Individuals had something to say because of what they had experienced—but this necessitated that they think through what it was that they had experienced, to verbalize this to themselves in ways they may never have before. When they thought through their message, they determined ways of performing that ranged from ensuring certain visual messages were communicated, like JD’s focus on butch gender expression for gay men or coming up with a certain production strategy, like how Brinae, a 20-year-old white queer person, and Hank, a 27-year-old, Asian gay man, used multiple takes to produce more edited videos that they thought would be engaging. Participants were conscious of attention spans and viewers’ time (something they paid attention to ahead of time or with some regret later, saying the equivalent of “mine was too long”).

One of the underlying factors in this reflection is the relation of participants to the

feeling of isolation. Whether self-imposed or explicitly done by others, there can be a loneliness to being an LGBTQ youth that is unlike most other experiences. It is unlikely that LGBTQ people were born into families with LGBTQ parents, and therefore there was no understanding of what they endured. I think of it, in some ways, like the stories I have heard from transracially adopted friends who were adopted into white families who did not understand what their children would endure in the predominantly white communities we lived in. For LGBTQ youth, it is not a mere isolation from peers, but an isolation from family. This isolation translated, when given the option to participate in the IGBP into a drive towards representation and a motivation for reflection. It did not matter if the isolation was accompanied by abuse or if it was just a displacement or feeling like you should not talk about the things you experienced. The It Gets Better Project provided people who have felt isolated with a way to try to mediate that isolation in others and that tapped into strong emotions.

The people I interviewed were very good at defining what “better” meant for themselves, and felt that they *could* redefine the concept as they chose in order for the message to be understood by people like them or the youth they knew. They felt empowered to define what “better” meant; this undercuts some of the criticism that the IGBP has gotten, which is that better was defined as financial or professional success. In fact, as I mentioned earlier, the struggling economy affected nine of the 35 participants. This did not affect their perception of their life as being better than it was before, which speaks to the fact that participants did not solely define economic success as the core of what it meant for things to be “better.”

Video creators painted pictures of possible futures as they reflected and put into

words what they felt would be most helpful. In Chapter 5, I will examine stories of participants who tried to fill gaps they identified, but those selections are not the only individuals who thought through their messages in that way. Each person spoke to an envisioned audience and by defining the audience they also identified why that audience needed to hear what they had to say. Additionally, some who sought to fill a gap, like Sera, a 25-year-old multiracial, omniseual trans woman, or Harry, a 60-year-old gay white man, wanted to get in as early as possible so that they could be part of communicating a message for trans people (in Sera's case) and Christians (in Harry's case). It is important to note that even if individuals identified a gap that they wanted to address, they spoke of other audiences or issues that they cared about. This should be obvious, but I want to make sure that no one's experience is oversimplified. Everyone came together as complex individuals with certain perspectives and experiences and they wanted to help others; Andrew spoke to this desire for providing perspective:

For a kid like me, who's growing up and doesn't know any other gay people and the only conversation I ever heard about the LGBT community was, you know, *Will and Grace*, or *Ellen*, that was the extent to which I was exposed to the LGBT community outside of my own self-awareness. And so when you're operating in the dark like that, when you live in a place where there's no information, there's no access, there's no exposure—you know, it's hard to envision ever being happy as an openly LGBT person and being able to be fully present with other people. At that point in my life, I never would have imagined that I would ever in the future be comfortable talking about being gay on the Internet with a complete stranger or posting on a website, you know, my experience with being gay.

As he thought about how to communicate in his video, one of the things Andrew wanted to do was prove to his envisioned younger self that he "turned out okay." Luis commented along the same lines, saying:

For me, at least, the experience [of coming out] was more like a war with myself.

I was never really, like, battling my parents or my friends who would leave me. It was more about me and that's what the whole theme of my video was and that's what I wanted to get across. I think I say it a couple times, you know, "you're a badass, everything else is irrelevant," and I just wanted to get that across because for me in making the video, it was about—I finally have come to know the man who I am and who I want to be and once you realize the person you want to be, everything else just falls to the wayside. For a long time I was trying to prove something, prove people wrong somehow that I wasn't defective or whatever. And I just wanted to get that across, I think that was the goal. I guess I realized while I was making the video: holy shit, this is not the It Gets Better theme, like I was not saying like your life is going to be roses or anything like that, it was more about a self-worth.

JD reflected on what he wanted his envisioned audience to feel, as well as how to go about that to ensure that the message was accessible for the largest number of people. He understood the situation of youth in rural and conservative areas and wanted to be a voice of affirmation and support for them in a way that felt authentic to him.

I wanted the kids across the U.S. to know that in spite of any kind of rhetoric that they might have heard to date, that they were perfect and wonderful exactly as they were. I could have used lots of heady PhD words in that, but I didn't want to do that. I wanted to deliver a very simple message and it was a very passionate message. It wasn't rehearsed, it was just, it was enunciated from the heart.

Many people who were from small towns and had left spent time reflecting on the differences in their lives between then and now. They felt a particularly strong pull towards youth who were growing up in the same sorts of towns they grew up in, with a similar lack of supportive resources. For someone like Lauren, a 31-year-old white lesbian, this came with some guilt. She wanted to show someone like her how you could have a broad community of people who love you, but felt guilty about not actually being in a location to do anything directly for rural or small town LGBTQ youth.

I felt like I had to struggle as a young adult, you know, "What am I gonna do with my life?" I feel like I have to go to the city and make this life that I want and I'll

be really happy, but I feel like I'm also betraying anyone different in my small town by not going back and fighting for them there. You know, like really trying to make my life there and to make people more understanding there, but I just felt like I couldn't do it because it was too soul crushing for me.

Across demographics, participants talked about not wanting youth to feel limited by perceptions that you could only be out in certain professions. Dave, a 35-year-old gay white man, summed it up well when he said that he “thought being gay was going to limit my career choices,” and that he made decisions based on what he knew growing up in the Midwest that could be reconcilable with his gay identity. Greg O. was out and owned his own company, but felt that he might be risking something with his clients who may not know. However, he was compelled to address not only youth, but also parents in order to speak about the way adults marginalize youth and so he recorded the video.

The reflections people had were so similar, and yet so individual in that their stories were situated in their experiences. The process itself was relatively stable across participants' stories: no one heard the call to action, then merely picked up a camera and said “it gets better.” They all engaged in a process of reflection and made decisions about who they would speak to.

4. Experience of personal value (responses or reflection support action) (N=34)

One of the most striking things about the expectations of participants prior to adding a video to the IGBP was how many expected a negative response. There was an expectation among about a third of the participants that putting the video on YouTube would garner the same kinds of responses often seen on YouTube: hostile and homophobic. Some, especially those whose videos garnered more views, did experience this kind of response at times. Others, especially those who had fewer than ~2,000 views,

had minimal or no responses like this. For them, sometimes the sheer absence of this kind of response, potentially coupled with people simply “liking” their videos, was enough to make them feel empowered or accepted. Chase, a 27-year-old white gay man, felt like the positive outcome he experienced meant that the people who needed or wanted to see the videos were getting to them, and I think he is right in that it was likely the intended audience who was able to view the videos. There is no way to know the effect a video had on every person who viewed it, but the data I collected from participants led me to focus on two aspects of the response to the videos. A little over half of the participants said that they had received messages or communicated with people that their video had helped in some way. Almost all participants reported feeling more accepted or empowered in some way as a result of their participation in the IGBP. Those who did not explicitly speak to acceptance or empowerment had videos that helped someone and either felt confident in themselves across their communities and so this was not relevant to them or simply did not talk about it in the context of the interview.

4.a. I know the video helped someone (N=18). The properties and dynamics of networked publics that boyd (2008) identified were integral to the multiple ways in which people found that their videos helped others. Adrian, a 28-year-old multiracial gay man, got many messages from LGBTQ youth who found inspiration in the video he made to represent his law school, but one of the unexpected outcomes from his experience was when his father, a teacher, showed his video to his middle school classroom. A student of his father’s, who he had not been able to connect with and who wasn’t paying attention or doing his work, came up to him after class and said ““Thank you, Mr. O. My brother’s gay and like everyone always says fag and all this stuff and it just really pisses me off.””

The way the videos could be repurposed and used in different locations to launch other conversations means that even my participants do not know the extent of the effect they had.

Participants were contacted by both youth and adults in search of support and advice, from both within the U.S. and abroad. Several mentioned that they would talk to youth who seemed to be struggling over email, but get them to contact the Trevor Project for support because they knew there were situations a sympathetic ear was not enough for. Brinae had people contact her on YouTube who told her that “I was contemplating suicide and your video changed my mind.” Others had individuals contact them who shared a location or affiliation. One of the people who contacted Carolyn was at the Christian college she attended and she tried to connect him to resources that existed in that conservative environment.

Participants were also contacted by individuals with connections to children or workplace equity training groups to ask if they could show their videos in classes or trainings. Joshua received a message from a youth counselor who was helping a 14-year-old who had not come out to his parents yet and wanted to show it to the person he was counseling. Even via friends on Facebook, people saw they were making a difference. Greg O., a 43-year-old white gay man, had a friend contact him through Facebook. She said, “My daughter totally needs to see this, would you just be her friend on Facebook so she can see your positive influence?” So I did, I friended her and we had a few interactions back and forth.” That was in addition to teachers he went to high school with contacting him through Facebook asking to show his video in their classes.

John’s perspective was that the experience of watching the videos did not even

have to be a huge awakening for the youth he talked to for it to be important for them:

There was a handful of people that corresponded briefly—a couple days, a few exchanges of stuff, pretty much just “thanks for what you said, it’s nice to know that someone gives a shit.” You know. And I think—I think that there are a lot of kids that that’s really all they need! They don’t need some life-changing, mind-altering video about how wonderful the future’s going to be and oh how could I not see it. But maybe they wanna know that somebody actually does care because maybe they have parents that don’t care and a family that doesn’t care and friends that don’t care and teachers that don’t care and just like there’s so much of that. Especially depending on where you are, I mean, I feel for the poor kids in Alabama, because I think Virginia’s bad and then I look at places where you know—the South is exhausting.

These individuals came away from their experience with the IGBP knowing that their video had made a difference—whether that difference was large or small.

4.b. I feel better accepted/empowered in some way (N=31). Affecting others was not the only result of participating in the IGBP and engaging in the reflective process. Even for people who were already out and comfortable in their lives, the experience of getting positive feedback from friends and strangers or messages from people who said they helped them was an affirming experience.

Many of those who posted to Facebook felt validated by the response within the various communities that come together in that space. While this may not seem significant, it is important to remember that Facebook friends are often composed of high school acquaintances, aunts and uncles, work acquaintances, and others who are not in a person’s core social circles. When video creators posted videos to their Facebook feeds, acquaintances who may not know a great deal of personal information about them, certainly not about the challenges of their youths or identities, to learn about what life was like for someone they know and respect. One of Dave’s friends posted that they had children in elementary school and wanted to be able to teach their kids not to treat people

badly. He also noted that Facebook allowed a broader view of LGBTQ lives for straight people, who otherwise may not have any access to a non-flattened and stereotypical image of people who left the small towns they were from.

My mom's a really good example, I think. When I first came out, my mom's image of what it was to be gay was based on her cousin's son. So I guess it would be her second cousin, who she viewed as a very sad character. And she would describe him as "the hairdresser" when I was younger. And I think he was HIV+, I think he may have died—he's not someone I even knew, her cousin wasn't really someone that I really knew, her son was somebody that I've never met.

But this sense that he had a very small life—and who knows if that was actually true or if that was just the perception that she had, but that was her image of what it meant to be gay, that it was a tragic tale. That ended in loneliness and sadness and death. And she—when I came out, I told her that that was not the case and for the first time, her perception was challenged because she knew me and knew some things about my life and knew my life was not small, was far from small.

The posting of videos on Facebook was not unintentional, and it was part of the political and personal value of "coming out," even if friends and acquaintances already knew the video creators identified as LGBTQ. The videos expanded the experience that people who were not LGBTQ had access to and reminded them of the richness of individual people—that a gay man is not defined by an HIV status, nor did that gay man likely have the sad life that was envisioned by his somewhat estranged relatives.

Overall, the experiences were affirming for people, even if they had hoped for more views or more conversations about the topic that they did not get. This is even true for those who had mixed (positive and negative) responses, like Krissy, whose case will be discussed more fully in the next chapter.

5. Translation to future actions

The experience of going through the reflective process and taking action led a number of the participants to identify other ways of creating change or helped them begin

or continue a process of personal catharsis. Deciding whether an experience was transformative *enough* was difficult. For instance, I did not include Jason, a 29-year-old, multiracial Hispanic gay man, but I still question that—does the experience have to be *big* to be transformative? He talked about never feeling that he should befriend other gay people just because they're gay, but doing the video made him feel like he should be more involved and he volunteered at a Pride booth that summer. He said: "If I can do that in a video, I can probably do so much more in person." I am trying to not *overstate* the effect of the IGBP, but identifying a "cut off" for praxis or peoples' growing generativity feels somewhat arbitrary and this is an issue with any analysis of that experience.

In Chapter 6, I examine cases that highlight the personal transformations that led to increased generativity or praxis that some individuals experienced in the wake of participating in the IGBP, and this section provides the foundation for that discussion.

5.a. Praxis (N=24). What constitutes praxis in this context is the linking of the reflective process to action that intervenes in the situationality that the video creators identified. In this, two primary themes emerged from the data, and they overlapped in seven of the cases.

5.a.1. *This is one of many things I already do to help others (N=18).* Over half of the participants were already volunteering or doing work that either directly affected LGBTQQ people or other marginalized populations. Brinae, as an exceptional example, was president of the GSA in her high school—which wasn't officially recognized by her high school until after she had graduated. She experienced the same issues I highlighted in Chapter 1: the school did not want to let them become a club and rewrote school policies to prevent it.

These individuals have been activists, mentors, youth group leaders, ally educators, volunteers with organizations like the Trevor Project, clergy, teachers, and researchers. The videos they made for the It Gets Better Project were not unique moments of reflection *or* action, but rather part of an ongoing practice in which they spend time and energy trying to make things better for others in the LGBTQQ community or for other marginalized populations.

5.a.2. This reignited/lignited my interest in creating change (N=13). What was particularly surprising to me was the magnitude of how some participants followed through on the reignition or ignition in their interest in creating change. Several of these individuals will be discussed in the upcoming chapters.

The efforts ranged from radical transformations, as in Gabrielle's case, to smaller, but concrete steps and changes in orientation towards youth. Jay, a 23-year-old, first generation Asian-American gay man, for instance, got a book from a friend who went to China for school, called "Love is the most Beautiful Rainbow," which written by a woman in China who had a gay son. "A woman who has a gay son in China and she was completely okay with it, which is like—wow, really? That's very cool." The book wasn't available in stores in China anymore, so Jay found a way to get copies and distribute them at his school because he felt like others like him at his college would want an affirming resource like that. Jim, a 57-year-old, white gay man, applied to be a mentor for LGBTQQ youth in the city he lives in, Joan developed a workshop at her job on transgender issues, and Pat developed an idea for a feature-length documentary on marriage equality that is now completed and at film festivals that he said was directly inspired by his participation in the IGBP—"if we hadn't done the video, that seed would

not have been planted.”

The concept of “skill sets” came up again and again in the interviews, and the ability people had to identify what they felt they were good at in the context of making the video translated to how they felt they could continue to make an impact beyond that. People do work that they *feel they are able to do*, as well as work they *feel welcomed to do*.

5.b. Generativity. It is important to note that I am not arguing that creating a video for the It Gets Better Project, for those who experienced some kind of catharsis, was an instant avenue towards the kind of generativity and redemptive story that McAdams (2006) identified. In some cases, it did push individuals like Alanna, a 37-year-old white lesbian, or Gabrielle towards increased amounts of generativity in their lives, but for others the empowerment they gained from their process of reflection and the totality of the experience pushed them towards a place where generativity was more possible. The connection of the reflective process to a developing (or continuing) sense of meaning for participants often led them to identify different paths forward, even if they did not take action on those yet.

5.b.1. This was a personal catharsis or transformation for me (N=12). The catharsis that participants experienced was often tied to the decision to engage in praxis in some ways, but much of this depended on the situation people were in *before* making the video. Someone like Alanna was in an excellent position to translate her experience to praxis. She had a history of working with LGBTQQ youth, was a little older, and was in the relatively privileged position of being in medical school. Others were still sorting out their identities, however, or dealing with past traumas. Jino, a 21-year-old queer Filipina,

was struggling with her sexual identity at the time and she said, “The project did give me a little bit of alleviation toward how I felt. Like a weight had been lifted off my chest and it felt—enlightening would be the word. I was starting to be okay with myself.” She also said that this effect continued:

I am definitely in a much better position than I was back then and, you know, the positivity from a whole big thing like that. All those people who were making It Gets Better videos. Anyone from nobodies to big time companies. I remember Pixar made a whole thing about it and it was really inspiring and it was like, you know, I wanna get better and I have some belief that it gets better. And now I’m in a position where everything—most everything—is really well right now. And, you know, I believe that that did play a part in it.

Jino added that she is more involved in the LGBTQ community now. The description of a weight being lifted was common among participants who experienced some kind of catharsis as part of the process. Often, this was in the translation of a traumatic or confusing story into a redemptive one in which the old experiences could become ones in which the individuals overcame that time and became examples of happy, successful adults in whatever way they defined those traits. That process was integral to the development of these individuals’ identity and engagement in the LGBTQ community. Without feeling that there would be a community where people like them had a place, there was resistance to embracing identity and that continued the experience of isolation, as was the case with Greg M. during the years in which he denied his sexuality because he could not yet handle that aspect of his identity. Even Greg O., who did not go into the process of recording his video expecting anything, said that:

It was really cleansing when I was done. I remember sort of turning off the lights in the studio and thinking “I don’t know if that was as big as what it felt, but it felt really big.” And it was like a, I don’t know, a weight was lifted although I didn’t recognize there ever was a weight there. It just felt so refreshing. And then the

outpouring that came from it, I mean, people from my high school—it was unbelievable.

Concluding Thoughts on the Process

The It Gets Better Project is unique in a variety of cultural and experiential ways that are situated in LGBTQ life and mythology. However, the fact that there is a reflective process that people engaged in and that this process led to action and/or personal change in many of the participants is instructive for anyone working with populations in which people may not feel that they have a voice. In this instance, LGBTQ adults felt they did not have a way to speak to youth, and that initial frustration was part of why the reflective process progressed as it did. I was excited that participants like Gabrielle or Alanna became so engaged, but the experiences of those who started taking steps towards praxis or who were able to come to a better understanding of their own identities as a result had equally important stories. Their stories show us that even when a person does not feel empowered or that the difference they can make is not significant, when they are provided with the possibility of participating in something unthreatening that they see as allowing them to personally affect someone who might identify with their experience, the potential for transformation may be unlocked. Bringing these individuals into the work of creating change adds their experiences and perspectives into the broader LGBTQ community and provides them with opportunities and inspiration to do more.

CHAPTER 5: IDENTIFYING AND SPEAKING TO THE GAPS

As I outlined in the description of the overarching process participants went through as part of the It Gets Better Project, video creators identified who the envisioned audiences would be for their videos. For most people, this audience was imagined as someone like them and participants identified what kind of message would resonate with those people. This emerged in different ways: some identified specific groups as people like them, whether that was based on race, gender identity, gender performance, religion, profession, etc.; others did not identify a specific group, but rather envisioned what they personally would have needed as a teenager. The remaining participants thought of their envisioned audience as the kind of LGBTQ youth they knew in their own lives.

Regardless of *who* the intended audience was for a video, what I realized as I spoke to my participants is that you would not necessarily get the full effect of watching the video *unless you were part of the audience it was intended for*. This is why talking to people who made videos was so important: the videos were situated in a larger narrative for each individual and were contextualized in a way that was supposed to mean something to the audience it was for. I noted earlier that Dan talked about the response of the technical support people at *The Stranger*, but that was part of a broader reflection on the project and how the doable thing that video creators did became an ongoing commitment for some:

We tricked everybody into being more involved than they thought they would be. Because we—originally, my idea was “email me your video and I will upload it to YouTube” and the tech guys at *The Stranger* were like “no fuckin way, you get a hundred and it’s gonna kill our servers to get all those raw video files, so you tell people to create their own YouTube accounts, upload their own videos.” When people did that, anyone who left a comment or sent an email would write to that

person and so people thought they were gonna make a video and walk away and they were suddenly getting these messages from LGBT kids that their videos really resonated with and they suddenly had to jump in and be that shoulder to cry on, provide advice, referrals...so we kind of tricked a lot of people into doing more for these kids than they thought they—than they asked to do or volunteered to do, and that was completely an accident.

The cases highlighted in this section are grouped by one of the audiences the video creator was attempting to speak to in hopes of filling a gap in representation for that group, either in the It Gets Better Project or generally. The individuals who made these videos often had multiple audiences, as each of us are unique in our lives and perspectives. When I reflect on my own video and the audience I intended it for, I know that I had little desire to actually be in the video myself, and just wanted to show my younger self the fun and caring community I got to be a part of as an adult. I would not have cared that I was getting a PhD or that I was married or any of that—I would have wanted to know that I had strong friendships and laughter. The people who wrote to me in the messages I received via YouTube were looking for the same message. Listening to the way each of my participants framed how and what they wanted to communicate, as well as that they reached the intended audience, revealed the similarities and differences about what we valued and prioritized based on our experiences and how important diversity was for the success of the It Gets Better Project.

Speaking to Create Visibility in a Profession: Ted & Alexis

One of my participants was a medical doctor and two were in medical school. Ted is in his mid-40s, and went to medical school in an era marked by the HIV/AIDS crisis. His experience as a gay medical student during that time affected his perspective on his responsibility to future doctors and what kind of support they need. Alexis is a white 23-

year old first year medical student, the kind of person Ted thought of when he recorded his video. Laurel is a non-traditional medical student in her late 30s who has a different experience and history than Alexis, and I will focus on her story in the next chapter. I pair Ted and Alexis because the reasons Ted had for how he framed his video were in many ways validated by Alexis's experience and concerns as she worked towards admission to medical school.

The profession of teaching is not the only one that has a tradition of conservatism that affects the ability of LGBTQ people to live openly. Laurel recounted the difficulty of finding out doctors in her medical school in our interview and Alexis thought that she was the only LB woman of the 100 women in her entering class. It is unlikely that the actual number of LGBTQ people in either of these cases is so low. When I emphasize the theme of video creators as identifying and speaking to a gap in the educations and experiences of LGBTQ kids, this takes many forms. One of those is breaking open professions in which people are often closeted or there is a lingering history of feeling pressure to be closeted.

Ted's video had a great deal of positive response, but people also questioned why he and his friends made the decision to focus only on their professional affiliations in the video. He is white and professionally successful in an elite field, as are the friends he made the video with, and this was critiqued. However, he had audience-specific reasons for the construction of his message and it is important to remember that the IGBP is a *collection* of voices that embody the range of possibilities for LGBTQ youth.

When I was in high school, I really believed—and I think it was almost true, there's data to support this—that if I was out I would actually not get a career. I might be killed, actually. There really was that fear. And in the medical world,

there is some data around the time I matched for residence that around 25% of residency directors would actively blacklist a gay or lesbian candidate to their residency, which is your whole life. And so, I just sort of—so the goal was to say, look, there are doctors, lawyers, people in these positions that have not been held back by who they are. And that’s the goal. So anyone thinking about—you know, there’s many occupations you can be, but you’re not limited. And you know, in my era and when I trained, people felt limited. They thought “I can be in the service industry,” which is great, but I couldn’t be a doctor.

His intent was grounded in his life experiences and, to a large extent, his professional identity as a doctor and what that entails in terms of how you present yourself and how you frame your opinions. Alexis is a new generation, just graduated from college, with a different message in her video. Like many younger video creators, she wanted to relate to people as a peer, or at least someone closer to the age of her envisioned audience.

I wanted teenagers to see someone that looked young and I know sometimes that I look a little young for my age and I wanted them to see somebody who looked kind of a lot like they did. You know, not like 40 or something. Like it gets better by the time you’re 40, but it gets better by the time you’re an undergrad, and I wanted them to know that, for me, just the change between high school and college made all the difference. And just the environment was completely different. I went from feeling completely not okay to at the end of college completely okay and I just want them to know that if they just hang on a little more, things can get better fairly soon.

The It Gets Better Project is powerful because it is a creation of the collective: a multiplicity of examples and role models and messages of hope across populations. In this, participants were consistently aware of how they portrayed themselves; the performative aspect is always present. Video allows you to craft an image and story in unique ways, and people adapt that as a hook for others to resonate with. The appearance of “peer” is not Alexis’s sole hook: she is a high achiever in school, and has the posture and slender physique that show the years of her ballet training. There are girls who would

see themselves in Alexis, and see her life as a possible future they could have.

As she is about 20 years younger than Ted, one might assume that she was not affected by concerns of discrimination in her medical school applications, but Alexis's experiences show the similarities and differences that linger across generations. As I noted, one of the shared experiences between Ted and Alexis is a lack of out physicians that medical students can look to as examples of what their futures could be like. Ted is an exception to this, and he feels strongly about this responsibility. Though he has sometimes been critical about Dan's work and tone:

I really looked at it [the It Gets Better Project] and I realized, you know, he really does at this level really promote what he's talking about and he's put himself on the line a lot. In my own medical training, I've always felt it really important to be that model for the next generation because there weren't models for me and it was kind of consistent with that thing of "I'm gonna do a video, I'm gonna put it on my blog, it's got my name on it, and I'm gonna say I'm a doctor and that it's okay to be me."

This is still an important message for future doctors. While Alexis was moved by the It Gets Better Project early on and wanted to make a video, she held off because she was applying to medical school and worried about someone on the admissions committee seeing the video and being biased against her as a result. While her concerns were not at the level of what Ted experienced when he started, they were still there and the lack of people like her who were out was a problem. This was the case in her time in high school as well, "I lacked role models when I was younger and, like I said, in high school pretty much if you were an out gay person, people classified you automatically as a shadow kid." The concept of "shadow kids" was extremely troubling, especially considering Alexis's age. These were marginalized youth in school, and while they were not all LGBTQ, almost all of the out LGBTQ youth fell into that grouping. She described them

as being unhappy, with their grades affected by their status. Entering college, she assumed that if she came out, she would have to find new friends—that the studious, “nerdy” people she spent time with wouldn’t like her anymore. This was not the case and she was able to engage more in social justice, come out more, and wanted to help teenagers who might have thought like she did, that “I have no idea how I’m going to just live a life on the track that I’m going to” if they were out.

What Alexis wanted to see when she was younger was someone who could be a role model.

I’m glad they got a lot of videos because I think a lot of the problems I had when I was younger was trying to find a role model, and I didn’t find anyone I could look up to until I was about 21 years old and then one of my teachers—she had her life together and she reminded me a lot of myself—she was 16 years older than me. It just takes really one person to be able to look up to and say “oh, they have their life together, they have a child”—I’ve always been interested in having children.

The importance of multiple videos is illustrated across these stories. Someone like Alexis could watch a video like Ted’s and see an out doctor, but she could also seek out one of lesbian parents who lived the kind of life she might aspire to personally.

Ted’s experience was embedded in the context of the AIDS crisis and a larger cultural environment in which homophobia was more acceptable and overt. He searched the videos in the It Gets Better Project for others of physicians and did not find any. The impetus to do the video synced with his philosophy of how to live openly as a gay man and physician because he did not see that modeled for him and the level of shame closeted doctors exhibited was difficult to witness from his perspective as a student at the time.

I’ve had a long history—I mean I had this thing where when I came out in

residency, and I actually remembered just today getting ready for this, thinking about this, I remembered a story of when I was an intern, like my first year, and I was in Seattle, I went out to the Neighbors, which was a gay bar, and there was a nurse there from the hospital I was working at. I remember this because I decided once I had arrived, once I had got my MD, they weren't gonna take it away, and so forever more I was never gonna lie about it. And so the next day the nurse comes up to me in the hallway and he said 'I just want you to know I won't tell anyone that I saw you there last night.' And I still remember to this day saying 'you can tell whoever you want, I don't care.' And so from that moment on, it's always been like—I'm never going to be that doctor that everyone knows is in the closet that is afraid of who they are.

It tracks back, like actually in medical school there was this—the other thing that I did was in medical school we had that one lecture on being gay and it was taught by a faculty member who was clearly uncomfortable with himself—and this is Arizona and it was really awful because my classmates were attacking him. I actually became that faculty member for the University of Washington and taught that same class, except I was who I was and so it was a much different experience because I walked in saying there's nothing abnormal about this, so let's talk about how you actually take care of these people who are just as valuable as anyone else. And so in the video is that reflection of: I am a doctor, I am gay, it's part of who I am, they're not separable, you're not gonna take my MD away from me or who I am and if you choose to be this way, no one will do that to you either... I did it as a professional video, basically. To say a professional person who actually works and is this person all day long—I don't go home and then become gay.

I noted that embedded in the process that people collectively went through, there were iterations of the message of “it gets better” as it was defined and redefined based on individual video creators' messages and concerns and experiences, and that there were collateral benefits to participants. This includes Ted and Alexis. Alexis's engagement with the It Gets Better Project didn't end with her video. She noted that there were criticisms of the IGBP and that people would say we should make it better now, so at her medical school, she and some others made an It Gets Better video where “people who were there wanted to talk about how we're making it better as health care professionals” and that it could be more than just waiting for college, even though that was how she managed things. In this, you can see Alexis at an early stage in her career, in much the

same way as Ted did, figuring out what her responsibilities are as a future doctor who is also a lesbian and cares about the LGBTQ population.

All participants navigated identity in different ways and valued different ways of presenting themselves, Ted talked about a kind of evolution of control in terms of the project: “We own this piece of media, right? We can delete the comments, we can write back. It’s our little space so I think that’s kind of huge.” That sense of having a say in how we’re represented and what the tone is, is extremely important when you consider the lack of empowerment that many, including people who are doctors, have endured. Ted and I talked about what it was like during the AIDS crisis, and it is almost unfathomable what was done to patients:

During that time, if you had HIV, if you had AIDS, you would be put in a hospital room and no one would talk to you. And actually, I was on a rotation with a resident and he was *the* gay resident in the hospital and he’s the only one that would round on that patient. You can’t even imagine that today, that there would be a patient that no one would talk to, not even the nurses or the doctors. And they would just be left to die is what would happen.

It is important to have people like Ted and Alexis making videos, because we need more out physicians. The culture of a discipline cannot change without people who are part of that culture being a part of changing it. They identified the ways to use their skills and positions to figure out how to make things better in that field, which looks different than it would for people in a different field or with a different life experience. Ted sums it up in how he can create change in the context of his role as a physician.

It’s easy to be a health activist. And so that’s what I can be. And my employer is totally supportive of health, so no one is gonna come and say ‘oh my goodness, I can’t believe you wanted to support gay marriage.’ I’m like—the data is clear. This study last year showed that people in Massachusetts that are gay are much

healthier now than before the marriage law passed.

What was implicit in how participants spoke about who their audiences were was how they contextualized their role in relation to the imagined audience. They either understood or had an increasing understanding of how to communicate their messages in a way that would fit their perceptions of themselves, but also the contexts in which they lived.

Speaking to Rural Kids Where They Are: Krissy & Sage

Krissy and Sage, a 30-year-old white lesbian, were not the only people whose goal was to speak to LGBTQ youth isolated in rural areas, nor were they the only participants who lived in rural or more conservative areas, but they both had messages that were about staying in their town of origin or of resources LGBTQ youth in those areas had that they may not realize.

In her video, Krissy was in front of a haystack, dressed in flannel. Her friends joked with her about her video, teasing her about the performance: “Are you sure you don’t wanna have, like, your butch girlfriend with a tractor driving in the background? You know, like, so it wasn’t like ‘oh, that’s really super,’ a bunch of it was like ‘OMG LOL, flannel exclamation point smiley emoticon.’” Even though there’s an earnestness to the It Gets Better Project and how many participants spoke to their audiences, humorous self-deprecation was not unusual in the interviews. Krissy could have made a video in her house, but she wanted to communicate with the visual of her in a rural area, not just with her words. When she was young, her conception of where gay people lived was that they were either in San Francisco or Greenwich Village in New York City. As she saw the number of videos that had similar messages—you need to leave the small town for the

big city—she wanted to make sure that young people who didn't want to leave knew that was an option as well.

A 45-year-old white “working class butch dyke” who lives on a farm in the Northeast and makes media about working class issues in addition to her other job, Krissy is thoughtful about representations of class, gender, and sexual orientation. Her impression of videos at the time she made hers was that a lot of them were “white, you know, 20-something, very attractive gay men who were living in urban areas...with this siren song of ‘come to the big city’ and, you know, come clubbing with me.” There is a commonality across the IGBP videos in terms of a theme of relocation, partly because it's part of the common experience of LGBTQ life: most people move, most of my participants moved. The hubs of major LGBTQ organizations are in cities like New York, Washington, D.C., San Francisco, etc., and the narrative of adulthood tends to be of shedding a negative and small town or rural past for the positive, urban present where LGBTQ people congregate. The openness of the IGBP was important in bringing voices and stories from outside these regions into the conversation.

Krissy had a few goals for her video, the first being to empower her envisioned audience in the location and situation they were in:

I'm very out about being very working class and, um, I'm also not an urban person and so I kind of felt bad that there were probably lots of little dykes in non-urban areas and I also wanted them to know that whatever they chose, like, there were other options besides becoming a gay male in an urban area. I just wanted—at the time it just looked like there wasn't a big range of voices. I mean, I guess there are now, I guess there's like 10,000—but at the time it seemed like a very particular group of people that had answered—or the ones I saw, at least. There wasn't anyone that was talking to the young dykes, there wasn't anyone that was saying that where you are is fine. At that time it seemed like you had to do something to make it get better and I'm, you know, I think that I find, you know, people from rural communities, not the gay communities, but poor

communities are really very resourceful. I also wanted to say you can figure it out. You can figure out what you need to do to make it work and it will get better because you did, not because you ran from anything.

Her message of “you’ve got this” is part of a larger, iterative pattern that happened with the It Gets Better message over time. Adapting the concept of “it gets better,” she communicated the message that she knows from her own life experience that “you,” the youth audience of rural dykes who may be poor or working class, have the tools to figure out what you need to do. The gaps in representation, and therefore knowledge and experience, that exist within the LGBTQ urban hubs are ones that people in rural environments could adequately fill on their own because of the affordances of the Internet. The IGBP facilitated Krissy’s ability to specifically target a group that is not often heard, while simultaneously offering others the ability to understand that experience more and see if it resonated with their own lives.

Reflecting on what she meant by resourcefulness, Krissy spoke not only about everyday life, but about access to the IGBP. People can use the Internet to get information about injustices or to find allies, and information can be consumed from multiple locations. To identify people who may not have much positive support in their direct environment as resourceful is key to thinking of the youth and adults watching the videos as empowered and having agency—that they have the skills to find ways around the restrictions in their lives. She brought up the challenge of being a young person who is afraid of repercussions at home being able to access videos in safer locations: “If you’re a 12-year-old little dyke going online at the library where they clear the browser history afterwards, it’s a way to check that out...If [your parents] walk in and there you are watching the video about a butch dyke, you know, in a flannel shirt, that’s more

dangerous.”

Danger was in the background of about a quarter of my interviews. It emerged in the form of identifying danger in a situation that young people may be in, having been in danger as a young person, or endangering themselves in the making of the video. It was a kind of specter that would emerge at unexpected moments in interviews. Of my interview participants, Krissy received the most violent feedback (though most of her feedback was still positive—people said she had helped them or thanked her for the video). We talked about the fact that she didn’t know whether to leave the negative messages up or not, but they got really bad about four months after she posted, along the lines of “die fuckin dyke” or “you need to be raped” or “did your father rape you?” She even asked Dan what to do about it, and decided to take the comments down—he said to her that he takes those comments down and that he gets death threats every day. She said her decision to delete the comments was because if there was “some dykelet in some small area, she knows that that’s the reality; she doesn’t need to have that reflected back when she was trying to feel good.”

I asked Krissy why she thought her video was targeted for that level of violent speech. After joking about how it was because she was such a threatening person, she said she asked her friends about it. “Someone, I took this as a real compliment, someone said that because I was like ‘you’re fine, you’re good, don’t change anything, you’re good,’ that that pissed people off. For someone with short hair and, you know, in a non-heteronormatively attractive outfit—would be inviting someone to say ‘you need to change that.’”

It would be easy to overemphasize the danger in different environments and the

risks certain demographics took in being publicly out and supportive of youth. I do not want to do that, because most LGBTQ people have experienced or had friends who experienced gaybashing, queerbashing, transbashing, etc. at some point. Being out and living authentically does not guarantee safety, and every time we come out or make our physical presences visible as out people, we make a decision about our safety. In my interview with Dan, he said that “[T]he message that the gay community sends gay people is coming out is the solution to all your troubles, when coming out is the beginning of new ones. Particularly when you first come out, coming out brings you nothing but grief. It takes years for the good stuff to start to stack up that made it worth it, really.” I think that the difficulty of life after coming out for many people results in the perspective that Krissy brings to her video and her experience, which is a certain toughness and resilience that allowed her to focus on the bigger picture.

Krissy: I didn’t know if anyone would see it, but if people did see it, I wanted to be available and stand by what I said. Like, I wanted to be—if it so happened that people would come back to me or if it would be more public, I did want to be not so much a role model, but I wanted to be someone who was really visible about being a big dyke in a rural area?

Sara: So, raising visibility?

Krissy: Yeah, and as someone who was really happy and who, like I was saying earlier, I wanted to be visible as someone who wasn’t gonna move. That was gonna make the situation have to figure it out.

Krissy’s positioning of “the situation” as a being that has to figure out what to do with her or people like her is actually resonant with what Dan said about the difficulties and consequences of coming out. In this conversation, Krissy is talking about a specific kind of community, but it could be extended to a family situation or any other situation where you could face risks or be ostracized. Again, this is the decision to put your body

in the way and force others to figure out how to understand you and hope that the understanding will evolve over time.

The challenge of this is determining which environments you have a chance of successfully forcing to understand you. It can be difficult with family or a community that is not accepting, but in a state with no employment protections for LGBTQ people in an industry that is notoriously unfriendly to LGBTQ people, it can be difficult in ways that threaten your livelihood. Still, people are resilient and are continually in search of ways to get around those restrictions.

When she made her video, Sage was a teacher in a school in the rural South in a state with no employment protections for LGBTQ people. Her experience there echoes many of the problems with school administration and the school environment that I outlined in Chapter 1. She navigated an out-*ish* life in her role as teacher (she went to school in an urban area in the Pacific Northwest, and said “gay is all over my resume”). So while the staff knew or assumed that she was a lesbian, it wasn’t something she could talk about safely.

Sage conceived of her message as for her students or students in situations like them. She wanted them to see that she was happy and know that even in schools and communities where there were no GSAs or “safe space” stickers, they had people they could go to for support—it would just be more challenging to find them.

The video that Sage and her colleague made is complicated from a message perspective, and highlights the importance of context in the project. The video broke my heart. They didn’t show their faces or use their voices, and if I had not started reading the literature about the experience of teachers, I don’t know that I would have been able to

understand their decisions. But, as Krissy noted, youth in rural areas know the reality of their situation. As Freire (1970) wrote, people who are in a situation understand that situationality. They understand it far better than someone like me who lives in an urban and LGBTQ-friendly bubble. Someone like me cannot prescribe a message that works for people in an environment I have no experience in.

When we spoke, Sage had just started a doctoral program in education and was able to reflect on her previous situation. Her decision to make the video in the way that she did was directly tied to events going on in her school at the time and, as I mentioned, she conceived of the audience of her video as being her students.

Each of us had some gay students who we supported, but we couldn't be publicly very out in our jobs and then we saw the project and I think we decided to participate after the first couple of days after it had started. It was very timely because there was all this other insanity happening at my school around gay issues specifically, so it was just kind of a way for us to help when we couldn't <be open in person>. We made the choice to have our faces covered because—well, in the state [we lived in], it's not protected status, and we were in a school district where everything ran by gossip in a very small community: very conservative, very rural. So we knew that on the off chance someone recognized us from the video that it would be really bad for us real fast and so in that environment we just didn't want to risk anyone being able to say, like “hey, I saw you in this thing” and take it to the parents or principals or whatever. If they had seen it, that would have happened.

I think that the interesting thing about Sage and her video is that it never would have been made by a major organization—it is too fraught: the hidden faces, the reflection of a reality that is more difficult for kids and adults than we're comfortable admitting. It shines a light on what is wrong with schools. And yet, it also shows that in the reality on the ground, people within that environment still try to intervene. Sage reflected on the fluctuating closet around her, she wanted to “show students that even if you can't be out in that way that we're still there for them” but her situation in the rural

area was different from when she was in college, and that:

I would have had similar comments about, like, why are they—it makes it look like it gets worse, not better. But I mean, that’s just not realistic for everybody and not everybody’s in a situation where they can be [out] and I had to <figure out what I could do>. It was a way to try to show that you can try to find advocates even if they can’t have a “safe zone” or a symbol on their door.

This comment reminded me of my interview with John, a 23-year-old white gay man, who lives and grew up in a conservative area of the South. He compared a GSA to a “hit list” and referred to himself as naïve for thinking it would be a good idea to try to start one. Sage was dealing with the reality of that situation and the reality was that the most important thing she and her friend could do, knowing the situation as they did, was to find relatively covert ways of supporting students.

It was cathartic for she and her colleague to put the video up. Sage said that “I guess because we had both been pretty vocal before—neither of us had ever had to be so closeted before, really, and so it was kind of a way for us not to—obviously, we weren’t breaking out of the closet—but it was kind of a way to be out or put out that message.”

In the end, Sage was “reaching out to kids like ours, we’re in a conservative area, just to let them know they weren’t the only ones out there.” This was important for her because just before the It Gets Better Project started and they recorded their video, their principal went on what she called a “lesbian witch hunt” with three of the students at school and called their parents to report on them. Sage was scared for them and even though no physically serious consequences occurred for the teens, the parents had a range of reactions. One parent “didn’t want anyone telling her kid it was okay to be gay,” another already knew and was mad the school called about it as something that was wrong, and the other didn’t know and came and picked up her daughter from school and

wound up actually having a beneficial conversation with her daughter. In looking at the parental responses, I think it's important to see that even in rural areas, home life situations have a great range even when school administrators do not handle LGBTQQ students in supportive ways.

Sage also spoke about criticism of the project, but from her perspective as a teacher. She said that you cannot just either say it gets better or make it better, "it has to be both at the same time," and that one of the successes of the project was to bring awareness of the situation of youth into focus for the LGBTQ community.

I think a lot of the gay rights movement right now is around marriage, which is a valid and good cause that I support too, but I think that it's important to have youth-focused things too and to bring it back to youth because a lot of them, even if they have supportive environments, they still might not have the resources they need: how to keep themselves safe and all those things, so I think that was the good of the project.

Both Krissy and Sage identify that youth in these areas need to have access to resources to help them get the information or support they may not be able to get in their physical environments. In their interviews, they identify that these youth have resilience and ways of accessing support (even if it takes more effort than would have to be spent by someone in a friendlier situation), including via libraries or by identifying likely supportive adults and trusting their guts about who they can go to. By making videos, Krissy and Sage show that there are ways of existing in these areas and attempt to fill some of the gaps for young people who want to see a potential future in their small communities or a potential teacher ally who cannot directly show them that they will support them.

**Speaking to Youth of Color: Race and Diversity: Kristel, Greg M., Jacquie &
Adrian**

The four cases in this section encapsulate the different ways individuals tried to construct their videos to fill gaps in representation for people of color in the LGBTQ community and the It Gets Better Project specifically. Kristel and Greg M. made individual videos, Jacquie and Adrian coordinated group videos with multiple goals in mind—but one of the reasons they made group videos was to bring together a diverse group of people so that they were able to demonstrate diversity beyond being physically present in the video themselves.

As I have discussed, the It Gets Better Project was crafted with an eye to a low barrier for entry, that it should be “doable,” but also with Dan knowing that his story was not representative of the stories of everyone. He built a level of flexibility to the message as well, which led to various interpretations of the meaning of “it gets better.” That low barrier to entry allowed someone like Kristel, a 28-year-old Asian-American lesbian, to participate; like many others, she didn’t think of herself as an activist at all. In fact, that was something she saw herself not having the skills or desire to do. Her prioritization of the experience of small scale or one-to-one change was not unusual among participants, and she broke down one of the major appeals of the project to the widest demographic: the lack of focus on experts as the voice of the people, which opened it up for her.

[I]t’s like a movement for everybody, you know? I think that you don’t need to have all the same tools as the people you see in the media who are talking about bullying in schools and stuff like that. This is really just a platform for anybody to tell their story. So, I mean, maybe a lot of people who made these videos, they’re kind of in the same boat as me—that they didn’t really think as to how far things would go or that they have really no way to anticipate the kind of attention that we’d get. But I think if it was more of a politicized movement, I probably would

feel ill-equipped to make a video, that I probably should have left it to people who were better prepared, probably more eloquent, and maybe more intelligent than me.

Kristel did experience what Dan talked about as an inadvertent effect of the way the It Gets Better Project started in that because people were using personal YouTube accounts instead of something official, they were the ones getting the comments and messages and they had to decide what to do with that. That was not on peoples' minds when they made the videos, however. For people who did not see people who looked like or reminded them of themselves or their lives in some way in the videos, they had to decide if they wanted to fill that gap. In some ways, the lack of representation of people of color who are LGBTQ in media, organizations, etc., as well as in the IGBP was a motivating force for people of color who felt like this was a situation in which they could fill the gap in representation themselves.

I think it was towards the beginning of the project, so I saw a lot of videos, but none that really spoke to me. Like, I really felt for these people and there's sort of a shared experience, but nobody looked really familiar. You know, I didn't really see any Asian people and I certainly didn't see anybody from Hawaii. So I decided, well, you know what? I have a story. I have 10 minutes or whatever. And I just sat down and decided to do it. Just so that, if anything, I would feel better. I would probably make my friends watch it because that's what I would do and, you know, maybe it could be something that we could discuss together. But I don't think that I anticipated anything else after that, you know? So it's been kind of interesting. Definitely unexpected.

I asked Kristel what about her experience was unexpected, what had happened to her that she didn't anticipate.

It's been kind of crazy, because at the end of my video, I put, you know, "if you wanna talk, you can email me." I really thought that my friends would just screw with me a little bit and whatever and that would be it, but I started to get all these emails from really random people. It would be straight allies who would be like "thank you for sharing your story," and it would be people from 'the mainland' as we call it in Hawaii, and I started to get emails from teenagers and people in their

mid-20s who are from Hawaii, who were either in the closet or out and were having a really hard time in school.

She also got emails from people who wanted to interview her, which she thought was “really strange because my video’s not very eloquent.” Later, she was invited to speak as part of a panel on bullying for an Asian-Pacific Islander PFLAG chapter in her city, which she did.

Kristel had multiple audiences in mind for her video, and the ability to post in multiple spaces made this possible. In addition to wanting to be a familiar face for someone like her, she used the blurred contexts of social media to share the video with her classmates from the school where she had such a terrible experience.

Maybe it was selfish in some part, but I thought it would be very therapeutic, you know, because the school I went to was really, really small and, you know, with social media now people will add you from high school, right? That’s the big thing to do. And they seem to have selective memory as to what had happened in high school, so they feel it’s appropriate to add you, you know, how many years later even though, pardon my language, they were assholes. So I mean, I think part of it was so that I could tell my story and say—”well, you know, I don’t know if you were aware of this or your part of it, but this is part of who I am and this is what’s happened, and if you’re gonna interact with me on social media, take it or leave it.”

So in one context, YouTube, she was able to be that familiar face, and in another context, Facebook, she was able to put her story up and be the authority on her high school experience and make anyone who was watching to listen to that version. She said that some people were sorry it had happened, especially old teachers who were not surprised at the behavior of the counselor who had been a source of problems for her. A strange outcome was that the selective memory of people she went to school with continued and they perceived themselves as allies now, but she was still able to put her

story out there and reclaim that her story and voice in front of them.

Her goals in making the video intertwined: on the one hand, she was putting herself in the public sphere as an Asian-American for youth (and adults) who did not see people like them represented and as a result responded to further calls for engagement, but she also helped herself feel better by getting to tell her story to her former peers and ask them to reflect on their school environment.

Kristel had a bad time in high school, but she had been out for a long time and was comfortable in her identity. Her identification of the IGBP as a “movement for everyone” points to one of the strengths of the project for those who were in the process of growing into their identity. These voices may otherwise have been silenced in an environment in which they did not feel like anyone could step up and tell their story. If the larger population is reflective of the participants in my study, to ask anything more of them may have decreased the participation of people of color. Over a third of my participants of color were in the process of developing their identities and becoming more sure of themselves as they made their videos, and while they may not have felt able to be an activist, they were authorities on their own stories and what they thought would have helped them. Greg M.’s story is an example of that. He spent years trying to come to terms with his sexuality and he would not have felt comfortable with an activist moniker because “I don’t have time to do it correctly.” The idea that you could do something that felt right to you, but not have it be “correct” was very important for people like Greg M., Kristel, and others who participated. It also allowed people to simultaneously help themselves while trying to help others. In Greg M.’s case, though he knew he was gay since he was 16, he didn’t actually accept it until he was 33: “When 33 came around and

I'm lonely and I'm like—what is this? I gotta deal with this, this is ridiculous. I can't be by myself anymore, I gotta work this out.” Part of that process was making an It Gets Better video.

Growing up, the only representations of gay black men in his life were effeminate. As someone who identified on the masculine end of the spectrum and was in denial, this lack of an example of someone like him led him to feel like he must not be gay because he did not fit the image of gay that was presented as an option in his life. “If you don't think you fit somewhere, you're in constant denial.” He felt responsible for providing representation with the opportunity that the IGBP facilitated: “I wanted to represent my subsector: black, gay, male, masculine. I wanted to represent that.”

Greg M. gained perspective about coming out from Dan, just as Patrick (a 30-year-old gay white man whose case will come up later) did as he was struggling with his sexuality, and the learning process he was going through contributed to his decision to participate as well.

You know, something else Dan said once—when gay people come out, they almost become teenagers again. You're growing up all over again, you're going through this whole process because nobody taught you how to be gay. And it's like I just wanted other—I guess other young black kids or other young kids who were going through the same thing I was—hey, listen, don't make your life a lie.

This process of coming out so publicly did feel like a risk to him, though he felt that it has been very freeing to not hide anymore. It is hard for someone who has not had examples in their life that show them they can be the person they are and gay, which put pressure on Greg M. to take the steps to make the video that he did.

At the point I made the video, I didn't care if anybody—I can't say I didn't care, but the fear was gone. The fear—that's not right, rewind that. How can I say this?

It was time for me to take a risk. The time was right. I said, I gotta get in front of this, and what's more important than me hiding are the other kids that are dealing with this that are in small towns—what's more important than me hiding are the other kids that are dealing with this that don't have somebody there to talk to. If I had somebody to tell me at 18 that it was okay to like dudes, I'd have had a lot more relationships. I probably would have been hurt, I probably would have been jaded a little bit, but I would have had that experience and my life would be different. I don't want to change my life because, as I think about it, every single, solitary thing that I went through up to now made me who I am. And I love that, but those nights of loneliness and thinkin about who you are and you're like—don't know. I felt like, okay, I gotta say somethin. It made me confident enough to put myself out there. I said, okay—if I make this video, people are gonna see it. YouTube is a very highly, very visual medium, everything's out there. I think some things that people want out there, they need to do faceless necessarily, I mean, whatever, I feel like, I said okay, I can put my face out there, why not? I'll do it. You know, I need to represent this.

The collateral benefit that Greg M. experienced from this was that in the process of putting himself forward for others as gay black man who was proud of who he was, he also continued his process of becoming more confident in himself. Several people noted that the passivity of the video format—it is revealing, but you don't have to directly talk to someone, so it is less intimidating, helped people who were stepping into a more representative role than they had been in to take that step. It sometimes still felt like a risk to fill that gap, but it felt doable.

As there was a broad range of people making videos in general, the same was obviously true for people of color. Jacquie is a long-time activist who has done major work on the East Coast and nationally, and she had a vision about the gaps she wanted to fill and the message she wanted to communicate. This was specific to the It Gets Better Project, but it was informed by her history and ongoing attention to issues within LGBTQ organizations and media. Her feeling that it was important to speak *as a community* to the community of people she wanted to speak to led her to bring together different voices and

produce a group video. This was not an unusual act for her, she mentioned that she “like[s] putting together projects, I don’t need to be the focus of them.” Like Adrian, she had a vision of the overall package that she wanted to present: “one of the things that sort of continues to drive me in some ways is the lack of diversity in ‘mainstram’ gay activism or lobbying or education efforts, whether we’re talking about AIDS or policy or whatever.”

She wanted to focus specifically on creating representation for youth of color: “I felt that it was necessary that we as people of color speak to our children. A lot of the suicides that were happening and the bullying stuff that was happening that we were becoming aware of were not getting media attention, were not getting a lot of media attention, and a lot of them concerned kids of color.”

The videos that people made as part of groups required more production effort than solo videos did (although some of those were highly edited as well) and so more time and involvement by people not necessarily in the video were enlisted on both sides of the project. Jacquie laughed about their technical difficulties on the day of filming, where she got a group of people to do this with her as a birthday gift—some were friends, but one of them was someone she had never met before. Her niece helped her with editing the different pieces of the video together, because while they did the shoot themselves, the friend that did the shoot realized that she did not know how to edit. The group videos presented this kind of challenge for everyone, and people invested extra time or coordinating energy to overcome it so they could put the video up.

Still, having a group video was important to the message Jacquie wanted to present, and she went into the project with that vision.

I wanted to educate through entertainment and to reach a diverse community and to specifically speak to people of color who feel alone and isolated in their gayness or queerness or homosexuality or whatever term they use to identify themselves. And to let them know there is community, there is opportunity, and I think one of the things that I heard Dan say about this project after I submitted my video that I thought really resonated was that we no longer have to ask for permission to talk to young people. We don't have to go to the Board of Education and then to the principal and then to the school council—with the Internet, we can get to people directly, so that was just really important to me, was the goal was to be able to say to another person of color—you're not alone, there's community here for you, reach out, you know? We gave some really good and some really silly suggestions in our video, but all of the suggestions can lead you to a place of meeting other people who are like-minded or similar.

Jacquie's mention of silliness in her video resonated with my own experience making a video. Even though the topic of LGBTQ youth suicide is so tragic and serious, part of showing a community that provides hope is also to show the humor and joy of the various communities these youth can enter into as adults—that even as we know they can be isolated, there is an opposite to that, which is a place of friendship and all that comes with it. She noted that her friend said in the video “We're waiting for you.” Showing youth that what is waiting for them is not a collection of very earnest and serious communities is inspiring.

Race and ethnicity were overriding concerns in terms of representation for Jacquie, but she was also thinking of diversity in a holistic way, including representation of gender expression in the form of butch and femme self-identification. “I wanted diversity. You know, to a large extent. That I wanted women with different backgrounds and education, different complexions, I wanted people who work with kids.” For her, it was part of a larger commitment to “building a healthy community and healthy, positive images of people of color and LGBTs.” Others have talked about being “normal,” which could be construed (inappropriately, I think) as a kind of homonormativity. However, I

think Jacquie's interpretation of it is more accurate: boring.

It was about creating visibility and creating what we call "positive role models," and that included an extreme of presentations, an extreme spectrum of presentations, but ultimately we wanted people to know they could live happy, healthy lives. That the bar scene, it's usually for many of us our first introduction and I don't have a problem with the bar scene existing—I think it's a safe place for folks to meet folks and drink and watch a game or play pool or dance, but I also think that historically it can be a very problematic place for a lot of us as well and I don't think it should be our only entre into the gay community or even our primary place of living. And so yeah, I do see myself as a role model.

My life is really boring, though. People talk about lifestyles, it's like—I was just sitting down to eat when I got your text message. We just grilled some chicken, I had a salad, my wife had two ears of corn, we're sitting on the porch, we're reading the *New York Times*, we just watered the plants. My life is pretty boring—but it's a healthy life and it's fairly well-balanced and we have fun. We spent a day at the beach yesterday, along with 3,000 other people so, you know, you can do that, you can be single, you can do this, you can do that. I have wonderfully fabulous kinky friends who also either have planned to or have participated in this. One friend's partner who spoke to a Southerner, I thought she did a—a black woman out of Oakland did a very moving video. I think for all of us, whether we come from an activist background or not, that this project was really important in large part because, again, at the time the bullying and suicide things were happening, people were not speaking directly to kids of color. They were speaking to a gay community, which is code for a lot of folks for white, so it was up to us to do something.

What was implied in Jacquie's quote is that the image that is presented of LGBTQ people may or may not be positive, but that there isn't enough "boring." Boring is good: it may seem ridiculous that we would have to prove that our lives are not particularly exciting because most of life is not particularly exciting, and yet if you return to what Greg M. said in his interview, you can identify the need for representation that shows that the being gay is not something that obscures all other aspects of life. Being out and authentic is part of having a healthy life and requires that the bar scene is not the only location people feel safe. This can only come with representation of the diversity of the

LGBTQQ community, because it is that real, lived experience and representation that changes the idea of what the possible futures for LGBTQQ youth are.

Jacquie's desire to be part of showing youth of color possible futures had success. There was the direct audience for the video, but she was also contacted by a teacher who wanted to use the video in class.

She was straight but progressive and she worked at a school with mostly blacks and Latinos and wanted to play that, I think it was a health class or something. And we gave permission for people to use the video, that was one of the things that was really important to each of us who participated was that we wanted the video to be used by anybody—hopefully with a positive message attached to it as opposed to some right wing or supremacist group or something.

As I mentioned, the concept of danger emerges in the interviews because it is a reality, and Jacquie is a pragmatist when it comes to youth making decisions based on their own safety and ensuring that the message her video gave represented realistic goals for youth, as well as an acknowledgement of their experience. She did not want the sole message to be just “come out:”

We don't necessarily encourage people to come out while they're still living at home and that was something that was really important to us. I have a gay male friend who used to say “if your mother's gonna throw a VCR at you, you might want to wait until you're out of the house.” That's really important. So, you look at homeless rates and drug use rates and things like that, we're disproportionately that community. So we wanted to just let someone know that they weren't alone, they can have a fabulous life, they can have a partner, three of the five of us are partnered—two of us are married, one's in a relationship, and the other two are dating at various levels and it's not easy, but neither is living period. So it's not your gayness that makes your life hard, but rather life itself that is a challenge. So we wanted to let folks know that it's not about you being gay, it's about life and so if you can just hold on, get yourself out of high school, and get yourself someplace safe, then the rest of it will come together.

Multiple audiences came into play in Jacquie's case, as they did with others. She

posted the video to Facebook and was able to use that environment to communicate and discuss the message and challenges with friends. She also noted some regrets about not being able to do enough and some of the challenges of having Dan as the original face when it came to getting some people of color involved.

Each of us who participated posted [to Facebook]. We got incredible conversation about it. Everybody loved it. Everybody was really thankful to see, again, colored faces and colored girls and speaking directly to our segment of the community and that was not to exclude anybody else, and I did reach out to a diversity of friends. I wanted Asian friends to participate and, again, just the timing for a lot of people was really bad. I think we did it right around Thanksgiving. It's just a really, really bad time for folks.

People were really thankful that there was a colored people video in this project and I was always quick to say, you know, if you actually go through the videos that are there, there are lots of folks of the rainbow have posted, and many with their parents even. But I think we are fighting against the image of the media storm around it and Dan as an individual, as a figure in the gay community and stuff, and as clearly he and his husband as being white, attractive, thin gay men.

I cited some ways in which the criticisms of the project were framed in Chapter 2, and what Jacquie brought up shows some of the challenges that do come with Dan as the original face of the project; but it also demonstrates a problem that the Internet seems to encourage through the nature of how people scan websites and make judgments based on headlines. As Jacquie said, if people looked at the videos, they would see there was diversity—but not everyone looked. In many critiques of the project, people seemed to only have watched Dan and Terry's or made judgments without seeing any videos and applying their dislike of Dan to the whole project. This is a real challenge because bringing a wildly diverse community together is incredibly hard, as there are always internal conflicts, prioritization of the goals of those with privilege, and misunderstandings of one another's experiences and needs (Dan was not the only white

LGBTQ person to focus on the black vote in the wake of Proposition 8, it was a larger problem). This is all true, but when people move immediately to critique, especially in this case, they make invisible the voices of people like Jacquie, Jino, Hank, Adrian, Greg M., Erin, Luis, Gabrielle, Kristel, Jay, Jason, and Sera within some of the same communities who want to promote social justice and better situations for LGBTQ youth. In fact, I believe the extreme policing of language and behavior causes people feel like they need to be “correct” in order to be an activist. That is tremendously intimidating and elitist as it makes certain people the keepers of correct speech—if that kind of discourse had been part of how the project started, it would have resulted in many of my participants not making videos, particularly those who were members of underrepresented groups.

This may seem like a strange segue to Adrian’s case, but it is relevant. Like Jacquie, Adrian is a natural organizer and the ability to decide how to go about making a video fit what he saw as his “skill set” as he settled into a new city for law school. He felt that the IGBP was “uncontroversial,” which made him feel like it was something he could participate in. In constructing his video, Adrian approached diversity broadly and intentionally, including diversity of sexual orientation because he would have wanted to see a large community of accepting people when he was young. He included a straight woman, as well as two lesbians, and he noted that at the time “I felt like that voice was being muted in the overall conversation when I was putting that video out. It tended to be a lot of gay male-heavy video.” He thought carefully about representation and what he wanted to do and elaborated on the theme of representation later in our conversation. “I was like, oh yeah, it’s mostly white. But like so is being gay, so it’s kind of like part and

parcel. For me, it was just like it represents exactly what I know. Right? My way of correcting for that was—I very intentionally thought through every single face in that video.” He wanted to find a gay man that had a more compelling story to tell, since he felt like he “didn’t go through a lot” but the one person he knew at law school would have taken on too much risk by going on video because of the risk to his family in his country of origin. Adrian joked that his own parents kept trying to get him to come out before he was ready. “They were dropping the hints that ‘you know, if you’re different it’s okay,’ and I was like, yeah, I’m already biracial in this fuckin white town, like I’m different.”

In his reflective process, he tried to put himself back in his shoes at 14 or 15 years old and what would have helped him. He came out young and did not have a bad reaction from his family or the sports teams he was on, but he said that even though he was lucky, “going through the process didn’t change—the process of coming out. Kind of the depression and the ‘Will they support me, will they—?’ or ‘Does this actually get better?’” For him, the videos he saw were “so depressing”—the single person in a room against the white wall in their bedroom. He felt like he needed to make a video that would have inspired him as a highly social person.

The last thing I want to hear is from—you know, at that time a lot of 42-year-old gay guys that may or may not be in a successful relationship, may or may not have children, may or may not be married—you know, and those were the things that were important to me: having a lot of friends, being married, and those were the things I worried about. Would I have those things if I came out? If me saying that I’m gay—do I risk the ability of getting married and having kids and having friends? I made a very early decision myself—if I’m gonna do something like this, it’s gonna include a lot of people to show that there are so many people there for you and it’s like you’re gonna have friends and yeah this really sucks right now, but it could be the littlest thing in the world later, right? And so that, I knew if I was gonna do a video, it couldn’t be solitary; it had to intertwine the kind of

personal, like yeah this is hard and this sucks and we dealt with some serious shit—but we have a ton of friends and they are gonna come out and support you and they’re gonna be around you and I know it feels lonely right now, but it’s gonna be awesome. So that was what I wanted to do, so for me it wasn’t a question of whether—it had to be a group project, and once I understood that I wanted to do that, it was how do I execute a group project well?

The diversity in his video was also intended for a specific professional purpose—he wanted a 14-year-old to be able to see it and say, “Oh, I get it. I can go to a top law school, I can do well in my working life, I can see all these different people in my life and they’ll be my friends.” Dan and Terry’s video resonated with him, especially their family. “[T]hey talked about the oppression, they talked about all these bad things, but then they showed their kid, you know? They had the image of the two of them skiing with their son and they talked about that and they brought it all together and it made me feel good.”

In this, Adrian’s experience shows that there is no single perspective of LGBTQ people of color about what messages they would want to hear; certainly, there is no “correct” way of speaking to and about their experiences. We talked at length about some of the challenges he has faced when dealing with the pressure to be a certain way.

The hard part—and this is a kind of very personal thing for me—but I think a lot of people, or a lot of my close gay friends, we’ve had this experience where I think especially in undergrad I had this experience, being gay meant something very specific. It meant something, it mostly meant white gay men, it meant being extremely progressive, like protesting the Iraq war and protesting all these other things. And it meant being up in arms about everything, right? Like it was very defined what that meant.

There is some irony to Adrian tying being extremely progressive to white gay men, as that is not the perspective that people criticizing the IGBP for being all white gay men would consider—or possibly even accept. However, he did not feel in college that there was space in the discussion within LGBTQ circles for anything other than those

interests. He noted that he didn't advocate for that space, but "I didn't feel welcome into that discussion for someone who wasn't white, you know, or just all white; or wasn't interested in a lot of political leftist things." It wasn't until he went to work at the investment banking firm that he felt like he had found a community of people who were interested in business, but also very smart, openly gay, and some married with children—all of which were very important to him in thinking about his future. He was also able to do volunteer work that felt important to him and was a fit for his skills through his company. He did "resume reviews for you know inner city, mostly mothers—who were prisoners who were now getting back to work—and how to make a good resume. Just skills that you don't think about or I never thought about and are very useful." For Adrian, having the ability to determine his message and participate in a truly open space for LGBTQ voices was important.

It Gets Better was the first time where I felt like, in the larger LGBT conversation, I could actually do something. I could take my skill set, which was very distinct in terms of organizing people and putting together a good spreadsheet and getting people things on time and making sure everyone's talking to each other and like kind of facilitating as the manager of that, and I felt like I could take that and do something with it that contributed to the larger conversation and that was the first time I ever felt that way by far. And I felt empowered to do it and I did it and because of doing it, you know, it wasn't so much that I got involved with [the LGBTQ group at his law school] for it. I never have been on the board with them in my time at law school. I go to meetings or whatever, but I've been more motivated now to find where I can make my impact because I realize there are places for that now.

I will admit that I do not know that I ever would have predicted that someone with the kind of professional and economic success and privilege Adrian had in his career would feel disempowered in the LGBTQ community. However, I understand his perspective, as it shows that intersectionality is not always constructed in similar ways; it

can be communities and desires that are difficult to reconcile without losing yourself in the mix even if one of those communities has power. Part of disrupting the construction of “gay” is seeing that there is not agreement about that definition and that is also part of helping LGBTQ youth identify that there are possible futures for people like them.

Adrian got many messages from kids, including those in rural Michigan, who identified with it because they could pinpoint Ann Arbor as a realizable place they could go to. He wanted to reach a broad audience and he did.

Those were the messages that, for me, made all the difference in the world. That they felt that they could reach out, right? And that I could—you know, and there was one situation where I did—you know, based on what the comment said—I was just like, oh I’d like to, I need to do something but I don’t have the tools to address what’s going on here and so I reached out to a friend at [my former company] who volunteers at the Trevor Project kind of on the financial side there and he got me the resource I needed.

Earlier, I noted that Adrian’s video also helped his father reach one of his students that he had not connected with before, and these experiences combined to form his feelings about his participation in the project.

I could care less what the overall social phenomenon was. It reached certain people and I did my job, right? I paid back what little I could pay back and I hope other people do too, you know? I hope that’s, that’s what I got out of it and that’s kind of all I really wanted to get out of it, right? Like everything else was just icing on top. Great.

When we talked about values and judgments, Adrian pointed out the way communication gets stifled and his irritation over immediate critical frameworks—which he also admits makes him reactive to those critiques. He echoes what many people said in their interviews, particularly those from underrepresented groups in the LGBTQ community. My white interview participants, when they brought up or discussed the criticisms, were more deferential to it, but Adrian’s take on it was shared by several other

people of color.

I've read a lot of the stuff that's come out since, kind of the news articles on HuffPo or whatever about kind of a lot of that social critique of the It Gets Better Project, kind of who's represented on it. And I just, that's a point at which I depart. That's kind the point at which I'm like, okay, now people are thinking with their activism hat. You know, kind of the way I make a value judgement that's probably mostly incorrect on the activist or "activism," that's where I depart from the conversation. That's where I'm like "you know what, if you didn't feel like there were enough black voices in it, then you should have made your own." Right? Like, you do something about it. You put yourself out there. Instead of making a social critique on it. These are people who are actually trying to spend some time to make things a little bit better. Just shut up. You know, like, actually physically do something. You have the power to do it. That is where I kind of depart from that literature. Put yourself out there and if there's just one black voice, at least it's a black voice, you know? If it's a lipstick lesbian voice, fine. Put yourself—we need at least one of those out there, you know, like—you bring that diversity you feel isn't being represented out there and you bring it to the table and you have it.

It would be one thing if they brought it to the table and it was ignored, or it was shut down, or it was not allowed to be posted to the website, or if it was rejected. That's a whole separate argument. But to not come to the table at all, and this is probably my parents' own philosophy on a lot of race stuff that's embroiled kind of into the family, you know, you gotta do your own part and then let's have a conversation about it. So, I found it as the first kind of movement that empowered everyone else out there. This wasn't about Terry and Dan. This wasn't about Lady Gaga doing one, right? This was about picking up a camera and you finding your place in it, right? If you wanted it to be a come to Jesus talk on a white wall, great. I appreciated the kind of variety there and the differences between them all that I thought was represented.

Speaking to Youth's Gender Identities: Scout, Sera & Lisa

Gender identity and gender expression are two different things, but they can be easy to conflate because most people do not think of their gender in these terms. Within the LGBTQQ community, however, these are concepts people speak of—and I would contend that even this community is in the nascent stages of developing conversations about the complex ways biological sex, gender identity, and gender expression interrelate

and the pressures put on the performance of these various aspects of identity by homophobia and sexism in society, as well as gendered constructions of race, class, etc. As is the case with everyone else, the experiences and messages of transgender and genderqueer people in this study varied, and I wanted to highlight those experiences.

Scout was distraught over the suicides, they felt for their families and the entire thing was overwhelming at the time. They knew how hard it could be to find resources in a school without a GSA or other kinds of support and the ease of access the Internet allows appealed a lot in that context. They wished something like the It Gets Better Project had existed for them.

[I was] so moved at this huge effort of people; and a lot of people I think that probably never would have put themselves out there just to say, like, look, this isn't easy; we're not telling you "oh, get over it, it's easy, oh it's just people saying mean stuff—sticks and stones." It's like, no, no, no, sticks and stones hurt. So do words and here are some words that aren't hurtful that are gonna help you just like remember that it's worth waking up tomorrow. And more than anything, I'm just super honored to be part of that.

Scout has used their physical presence as an example of difference in this and other environments, such as in their other work with youth. They felt they could be "an example of like, 'yeah, this person's kind of weird, they're a little outside the box and maybe not exactly what I thought my leader was gonna look like, but they're doing alright. So maybe I can, you know, explore this other piece of myself—whether it's that I like drawing or fishing or whatever.'"

With their video, they just wanted to "make one person feel like they weren't completely isolated and completely alone, and just without any hope;" that would have been enough for them to feel it had served its purpose. The video wound up getting several thousand views, which surprised Scout, as did the positive response.

I was afraid I was gonna get a lot of really negative responses. You know, honestly, like, I was a little terrified. And I certainly initially didn't tell everybody. I, you know, I didn't have a computer, so I had to borrow a friend's to make the video and all this stuff, but it was so important that it be done that I made it happen. But I was definitely worried, and then after that like and even still, people will be like "wait, didn't you have that video?" and I'm just like yeah.

It's a little, it's a little embarrassing because I mean, I put myself out there. Like, I was honest about, you know, things not always being easy, but I was, I don't know, there was so much passion behind it that I was just kind of—well, people are either gonna just blast me for this one and be like, you know, start calling me all the names that I had already been called, that I was telling people don't worry about it so much when people call you these names because they'll eventually stop. But instead I think I got like three negative messages, honestly, I think I got about three. And the rest of them were just people thanking me for putting it up and, you know, positive responses.

Scout's experience as a genderqueer person informed the message they wanted to send. There was an ideal that "my preschool taught us: that we were unique and unrepeatable" and that was something Scout held onto throughout their life, especially in the harder times. "My parents and I fought about it when I was in high school, like they, you know, they'd be like 'why can't you just be like everybody else?' and I'm like, 'but I'm unique and unrepeatable!'" The message resonated with people and Scout got over 50 private messages that thanked them for putting the video up and said that "you know, I did feel really different and I didn't look at it as being unique—like, I just looked at it as, like, wrong, and so I really appreciate that piece of the message." Scout responded to every one of the messages.

Like others, the low barrier to contributing something to the It Gets Better Project was important to Scout. They still felt there was some risk of being hurt in the ways they had been hurt before, but the possible assistance and support they could provide to others and the doability of the task led them to make a video even though they didn't have a

computer immediately available. Scout also experienced benefit on a personal level in that it opened conversations about what they called the “giant elephant in the room of childhood, and adulthood for that matter.” They still experience things that could be classified as bullying, but Scout is better equipped to handle it now. The project got conversations going with their family, and their parents sent the videos to other people they knew. In this, Scout did see the IGBP as a whole as an important way of claiming a collective voice.

But you know, so I think that’s the best thing it could do. It got it to where we couldn’t just be quiet about it and I, always, from a very young age, I remember seeing Keith Herrings’ work—and that was before I knew that he was a gay man, and like before I knew about ACT UP! and all of that stuff. I just was fascinated by his art, and I remember seeing that piece that Silence=Death and I think there’s so much truth to that across the board in any marginalized community: the silence or just the not knowing what’s going on there or not talking about what’s going on there is their biggest danger because they don’t have a voice, they can’t represent themselves. Or they don’t feel like they can represent themselves or have a voice because it’s constantly being suppressed or ignored or, you know, whatever is happening with it that’s just not allowing it to come out and speak for itself.

Voice is something that all participants cared about as they envisioned their audiences, but one of the things Scout was uniquely positioned to speak to was that ability to claim “uniqueness” and exist on your own terms. It can be hard, even in the LGBTQ community to maintain identity on your own terms, which is something Scout encountered because of their identity as genderqueer; they have been asked by trans friends “don’t you just wanna take T [testosterone] and get it over with?” which disempowers their ability to live with the gender identity and expression they have. So in the context of the IGBP, Scout can claim their own voice and communicate the kind of message that would resonate with someone like them.

Scout also reflected on their engagement with doing work to support others in the LGBTQ community. They said that participating in the IGBP made them question why they weren't involved in community projects the way they used to be, and wound up asking to put a "safe space" sticker on their door when they were working with the Conservation Corps.

I was like, maybe this can be a catalyst for me to get back out there because I know that since I'm willing to put my experience kind of on the table for other people to dissect and think about and I'm willing to be the one to take the pot shots, I was like, why have I not been doing that in like the last three or so years? And so for me it was a catalyst to jump back into it because it is so important to have a community that—you know, we're asking everybody to be open and accepting, but we close ourselves off because we don't wanna get hurt or feel vulnerable or whatever.

The idea that making a video was a risk in some way, even in just opening yourself up to experiencing the same hurts that you encountered before, came up repeatedly in interviews. However, Scout's comments highlight a difficult situation LGBTQ people are put in, particularly those who do not fit the media representation that exists. The desire is that others are open and accepting of you as you are, but the fear of being hurt or vulnerable causes you to close yourself off—which could come in the form of avoiding conversations with family or friends that might run the risk of hurting you in the short run, but could lead to better understanding over time.

Sera's experience builds on that. She wanted to make her video as early as possible so that there would be trans visibility from the start. This was a way in which she could correct for the lack of visibility of people like her that she thought had the potential to happen in the IGBP.

I was familiar with Dan having a good, strong, pro-LGB message, but not having

the best pro-trans message, so I wanted to be one of the first to record a video that included not just trans, but bisexual as well, because not everyone thinks about the overlap either. So I figured I was gonna do that. So I recorded mine right away, I got it up as soon as I could and that was pretty much my entire reason behind it—was because I did not want that project to go on—I didn't realize it would be as big as it was because it was so early on—but I also didn't want to get excluded because I knew that if not enough voices were there right away, it would exclude itself by design.

She thought about herself in junior high or high school, or someone like her wife at that age, who is also a transwoman. They “knew that there was something different, [but] we had no idea what the wording or the language was.” She wanted to make sure that she worded her video “in such a way that someone who was younger could understand if they were feeling that way that they would understand that I was talking to them.”

Like others who were from less represented parts of the LGBTQ community, she was still dealing with elements of her identity herself. She focused more in the video on gender because she was still figuring out her sexual orientation, and made the choice to focus on the identity she felt more confident about. As I have mentioned, one of the challenges people who are in the minority based on their gender identity face is that even within the umbrella LGBTQ, their sexualities are often overshadowed because they fall into the category of “T”—this is a serious problem because transgender people are every sexuality, including heterosexual, and those two components of their identity should be seen as coexisting.

One thing Sera liked about the IGBP, which echoed sentiments of others, was that while she was married and in favor of marriage equality, it turned the conversation away from marriage, which she felt dominated too much. “I feel that what It Gets Better did

was turn the conversation to our next generation and helped us highlight a few things...it helped us talk about reaching out to youth and other people struggling with issues in such a way that was actually acceptable for once.”

Sera experienced multiple collateral benefits of engaging in the reflective process and opening herself up online. She has been able to use the frame she developed in speaking about her experience in the video and apply that when having other conversations in her life about her gender identity.

It did make me stop and think in a way I hadn't thought before about how do I describe this to someone? I basically put it to myself this way, how do I describe what I'm feeling now to my 14-year-old self? You know, that's how I thought about it and if I had been able to and I came up with something that I thought would have worked for me. Hindsight's always 20/20, it's hard to say, but hopefully that's the kind of message that I got out there.

And there are still times to this day where I think about the way I worded that video and I use it to describe it to people who don't understand. Actually, I did that very recently. I've gone back to college for the first time myself and you know, I just kind of, three or four weeks into my classes is when I kind of made it a point to come out because one was a philosophy class and one was an English class that covered discrimination, so I decided to come out to both of those classes and when I was asked “what does it all mean” by other students, I thought about how I described it in the video. It seemed to work.

She also reconnected with some family via Facebook since the video; she had refriended a lot of her family and others from where she was originally from and had positive experiences with that.

I have one cousin who was back home. He recently got engaged, we're happy for him, right around the time I got married, he started bragging about me, he was bragging about me at work, and ended up finding out which of his coworkers were complete homophobes as they started bashing California's liberal activism—I'm like I did that?!

In Chapter 4, I noted that there were people who experienced no effect on

developing generativity or engaging in renewed or new praxis as a result of their experience with the IGBP. Some of those individuals fell into that group because they were already highly engaged and doing work, so nothing changed for them; for others, they were able to do something positive and go back to their lives. Lisa, a 46-year-old white lesbian trans woman, said her engagement is minimal, usually the trans march during Pride, but she felt a responsibility as someone whose life was good and stable, personally and financially, to make a video because others would not be able to. She identifies herself as a person with a certain amount of privilege because of that, and therefore doing something that could help but is also fairly simple was something she felt she should do.

I feel like I'm in a place where I can help out where maybe not everybody can or lots of people can't and so this put me in a situation where it's like, yeah, making a video is something I can do. My life is stable enough that—and I'm out to basically everybody—so my life is stable enough that this is not going to come back and hit me with any serious consequences and I'm also in a position where I can say my life is pretty good, which is something I noticed a lot of the videos—a lot of the videos are very young people, they're just sort of recently having gotten through a lot of troubles or hoping their troubles are over now or something. And I'm in a fairly privileged position for a trans person particularly, where I've got, you know, a stable life and a stable job and a nice home and whatever. And so I can just put myself out there, just sort of by showing that and it's the sort of thing that could have helped me a lot if I had found it at the right moment.

Lisa's goal in the IGBP was to actually present someone to trans youth who was happy, which is something she felt there wasn't enough of.

Something I didn't understand when I was younger and thinking of coming out—I heard a ton of stories about how trans people were so, they were terribly unhappy, transitioning was their only alternative to suicide and that sort of thing. And what I—I think that one of the things that I did want to do was be an example of somebody who was actually happy about it, which I got very little of—"very little"—none—before my transition.

While the actual production of the video was harder than she'd thought and it took time to do the lighting and several takes to get the video she wanted, it was still a really easy thing she could do to hopefully help some people. She reflected on what could have helped her when she was younger, and felt like hers was yet another drop in the bucket in a positive way—the collective message. Based on her prior knowledge of YouTube, she expected to get negative feedback. Instead, she got a few people letting her know they enjoyed the video or asking for advice.

I expected some people would see my video, some people would like it, I did expect to get more—you know, I've seen YouTube videos, there's a lot of nasty transphobic, queerphobic content in the comments on YouTube. I expected some of that, didn't get any of it. So far, everything about my video's been positive. Not that there have been a heck of a lot of comments. It looks like it's helped a few people.

She has also heard from others who were able to watch the videos when things were bad or were able to show the videos to their own children to help them. She emphasized that the individual impact was what was important for her.

One thing that Dan asked people to do, and Lisa focused on, was to include text in the title or description that would help people searching for a video of someone like them to find what they were looking for. She spent time figuring out how to get her video to come up in results when someone was searching for a video like hers. “It took me a couple times retitling it and putting key words in it so that it would at least come up then.” Having that ability, to control the access to some extent, is important because it could allow someone easier access to the kinds of videos they wanted to see. Lisa felt that visual portrayals of trans people were lacking, particularly in movies where “happy trans people more or less don't exist;” though the situation is better in the handful of young

adult novels she has seen. She pointed to the Internet as important for demonstrating that a community is out there and for providing access to information that did not exist as readily when she was younger.

Speaking Across Generations: Harry

Harry was my oldest participant, which is an unfair way to start a characterization of him. However, he was an activist who was out before Stonewall and in our discussion he was able to situate the It Gets Better Project into the history of LGBTQ activism. This is not to say that he felt like his role in the project was that of an activist, but that he was part of something much more expansive than his specific video. He had a feeling the IGBP would be big and was highly motivated to get a video up early because opportunities like this don't often emerge.

I saw that it was out there very early on and the idea of being able to talk to young people was really compelling because we so often feel constrained about doing it for fear that we'll be implicated in conversion or persuasion or subversion of some kind, so I was thrilled. I knew that Wayne and I would be funny and I knew that it was going to be huge. I have a background in marketing and I'm really good at tracking things and I said "Wayne we have to do this right now," and he said "Do what?" We have to get on and do this thing and I explained it to him and he was like "Really?" And I was like "It's gonna be huge, it's gonna really matter."

Also I wanted to get on there first from a Christian perspective before somber people got on and talked about Jesus loves you just the way you are—it's tedious to me, it's really tedious to hear that. And I also knew—there are Catholic clerics who've gotten on with an agenda [later in the project] and if you trace them down and write to them, they will not write anything supportive about gay people, so...there's some moles out there. So I wanted to be the first and to make it funny and real and I also thought it's really good for them to see old people. I was also very clear from the start that we had to kiss. It's like "God loves you just the way you are"—well how are you? This is how we are and it's funny.

Of course, there is "big" in the LGBTQ community and there is "big." "I didn't

know that Obama would do one, but I knew that, and I said this to Wayne before we did it, I said this is gonna be really big and if we do what I think we can do, which we did just really fast, it can help set a tone and it will be shown to people who might want to do it or might not, but might persuade some people to do it.” Still, even if it was not big, “What are we doing? We have a few hours free, let’s do something with those few hours. It will be fun and it might make a difference.” This returns us to the call to action being doable—Harry was highly motivated to make the video and the stakes were low. If it didn’t go anywhere, they just lost a few hours of time.

I did not get a lot of participants over 60, which was also reflective of the videos overall. Harry wanted to make sure that he and Wayne kissed, but also to entertain people and show happiness over time and counteract some of the messages that young LGBTQ people are sent, specifically gay men.

I thought people would find it quite amusing, which they did. Some people really got touched by it. And I wanted kids to see it’s not just that you are going to be active sexually and socially and happily now, but you’ve got a whole life to look at and it’s not a life where you become defunct. There’s this myth with gay men that your life is over, I don’t know, at 26.

One of the things that Jim mentioned in our interview is that if you look at youth, you might think that they’re fine. Harry also spoke of that, he said that “it’s so easy to get older and just lose the connection” to young people and to take what they say less seriously, but that is a problem and he said that it is important to really hear them and their perspectives.

Harry joked that “I like to fantasize that I helped President Obama do one,” as he situated the IGBP in the context of how powerful people from outside the LGBTQ community juxtaposed themselves alongside everyone else involved and how different

this was from everything he had experienced in the past.

Harry: When you have the president of the United States participating in a video media event that includes drag queens, transgender people, Yale, Microsoft, the Secretary of State—I think it's huge. I'm not certain that the biggest effect is on kids, but I think there's a huge trans-social effect on all kinds of people that may eventually help kids. I don't know, because I don't track it and study it. I was just like we had to do this, it's gonna be huge. I think it was probably, I think it's contributed hugely to shifts in people thinking about equality for gay people. So many people. It's the first place—for people of power it's the first place that they made really focused, cogent statements of support because it did involve kids, it did involve these terrible, regretful suicides, which when you're my age you've watched them happen your whole life and felt impotent to do anything about it. So I'm certain that there are kids that didn't kill themselves because of it, how many I don't know. If it's three, what a major success.

Sara: It's hard to quantify what didn't happen.

Harry: Right. It's really hard.

The drag group I was in, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, one of the things we did besides the Rainbow Flag—Gilbert was Sister Chanel 2001—we wrote the first safe sex information in response to AIDS, which wasn't called AIDS, it was called GRID (gay-related immune disease) and we'd been watching friends die for a couple of years before the article came out in the *Times*. We said we just have to pass this out. We'll make it outrageous so that everyone will read it, and it was a huge success. It was requested by all 50 states' health departments. So we're sending out this stuff and it did get brought up in Congress—how graphic some of it was, it was comically graphic. But you do what you think you can do and hopefully people like you can help make sense of its effectiveness afterwards. But I know that we saved lives. We started the process of talking about safe sex and we did actions about it in the community.

It makes sense that Harry would draw parallels between the catchiness of the IGBP and the way people doing AIDS prevention work has sometimes focused on trying to figure out just how to capture peoples' attention. Since Dan drew inspiration from his time in ACT UP!, that cultural legacy is part of the IGBP.

Though he expected the project to be big, Harry had no way to definitively know what would happen with his video. He expected his friends to watch the video, and

wanted youth to. “I expected pretty much what I got. One, I knew that our friends would look at it and they would really laugh a lot. I wanted kids to see it and respond or get in touch with the Trevor Project. I mean, exactly what’s happened is what I expected to happen.”

Harry has seen a lot over the years and, like Sage, when he made the video, he was thinking of the youth he knew in his own life and those who might be in similar situations as he had been. He considered his role to be like an “elder” or the tradition of gay “family” in the LGBTQ community: “When I was in my 20s in San Francisco, I really did have this experience of family—supportive, dysfunctional, all kinds of things that family are.”

Harry was still receiving emails from LGBTQ youth when we spoke. He reflected on the ways in which we have been silenced in trying to speak to or about youth over time and how the IGBP changed that, at least in this setting.

Harry: I have a whole history of looking at how these things unfold, of looking at kids coming into it. Nobody my age who’s been out as long as I have—and I was out before Stonewall—has not experienced lots of kids being abused by their families. The dean of my college who took me on for being gay—Catholic guy, eight children—his oldest son was gay and killed himself his senior year of high school. And we’re not allowed to talk about it, but we all know that that’s what happened.

We know from knowing him, we know from reports from his friends, but we’re not even allowed to talk about it, so one thing that really grabbed me about this is that I can talk about it and I can talk about it to kids. I do get emails from kids, a lot of them are, you know, other people who’ve made videos. It’s kind of a “club” of “we made videos too, we like yours,” you know, and it’s like okay that’s fun, but that’s not the point. But I do get really tortured emails from kids.

Sara: What kind of communication have you been getting and are you still getting it?

Harry: I still get them. I still get them. I get about five a week still. They usually

start out sort of sweet little notes like “I wish you were my grandparents” or “I wish I had parents like you,” and I just write back and say “I wish so too, but I am someone you can write to.” That’s as far as I’m willing to go. I don’t want to go to phone calls or anything, I just try to send them to the Trevor Project, but I’m happy to write to kids who write me.

Harry’s perspective as someone who had seen the LGBTQ rights movement evolve over the last 40+ years and the way he used his age and physical presence in the video to communicate that elders like him exist and are happy and funny, that the possible future is beyond professional success at age 35, but an actually long life that continues to be good, is something that we miss out on in representations of LGBTQ people.

All of the cases in this chapter, taken together, show that there was a broad range of people trying to make sure that young people could see possible futures for themselves, that there were people like them or people who cared about and understood them out there in the LGBTQ community, and that there was actually a community to go to and ways to be LGBTQ in whatever way they felt was authentic to themselves. This is something that is often missing, that my participants identified as missing, and they found ways to be part of filling those gaps in representation and speaking to the youth who needed to see them and hear what they had to say.

CHAPTER 6: TRANSFORMATION & HOPE

In Chapter 4, I concluded on the concepts of praxis and generativity, which are a bit artificially separated. There was a continuum, and these cases run from being about catharsis and personal development to significant life changes and interventions that resulted from the combination of reflection and response that participants engaged in. The experience of increased hope, a sense that what they say and do matters, was consistent in these cases regardless of the popularity of their videos or the response that those videos garnered. The transformative effect of the IGBP was individually situated: for instance, John's experience in school was extremely negative, like Chase's. However, the opportunity that John had already had that Chase hadn't was the chance to tell (and retell) his story as part of the LGBT ally education he volunteered for in college. Pennebaker's research shows that "[T]he act of talking can change the ways we think and feel about traumatic events and about ourselves," (Pennebaker, 1990/1997, p. 27). Transforming what was an emotionally painful experience into a story can moderate its negative effects on a person. John's experience constructing the events that happened to him into story was protective for him.

In this chapter, I will detail the cases of Chase, Hank, Gabrielle, Patrick, and Alanna as their processes and stories pertain to this theme. They show the range of ways in which the transformation and sense of hope the IGBP facilitated translated to their situations.

Chase

Chase had a consistently terrible experience in the schools he attended while

growing up in the rural South. Looking back, he realized that there were a couple of teachers who provided a safer space to hide from his peers—he specifically cited his drama teacher, and that “she probably saved my life by offering her space up to me.” He was a target of his peers, but the administration of the school also egregiously mishandled his situation, targeting him and isolating him further instead of dealing with the people who tormented him.

Chase didn’t tell anyone the full story of what had happened to him for a decade. He internalized it and returned to it in his mind, and it haunted him when he was already feeling bad about something going on in his life. The first person Chase told was his boyfriend, but the second was the invisible audience of the It Gets Better Project. The ease of the act helped him make the decision to record the video, but he also intuited that there was a potential therapeutic benefit for himself in telling the story as he tried to help someone else.

Part of this process was reflective, he felt that if he had “some sort of indication that other people were going through the same thing that I was, maybe on different levels, I probably would not have fallen into as deep a depression as I did.” He thought of his video as a kind of reference that someone could pull up if they needed, along with all of the others who made videos.

His video was about overcoming that painful time, but he fully expected a negative response from the Internet; part of the validation of his view that telling his story was worthwhile came from the lack of negative response. “I was actually expecting to be harassed and bombarded the second I uploaded something, and to that end, I have not had one single solitary rude word left on the comments under my video. That really surprises

me, but that goes to show that what I'm doing is making an impact." He added that the fact that people were taking the IGBP seriously enough that they were not trolling everyone's account filled him with "a little bit more hope for humanity."

Making this video, likely combined with the lack of negative response, changed the effect that Chase's memory of his negative school experiences had on the way he thought of himself. The process helped him transform what was a contamination sequence into a redemptive one (McAdams, 2006).

The biggest thing personally is that it's gotten a huge weight off my shoulders. I'd been carrying that around for the better part of 10 years because there hadn't been a reason to tell anybody. It was in the past, I survived it, I was moving on as far as I was concerned. I still believe that's pretty much as much of an activism type of role as I'm ever going to do—if something hits me like this did, I put myself in these kids situation and I was like, gosh, I wish I'd had somebody to tell me and now that the tools are available, I might as well get it out there.

So it's kind of been mutually therapeutic, I'm all but certain someone has watched my video and said "okay, I can deal with what's going on" and on the second thing, I don't have the mental strain of having to relive this over and over and over again—which I had been doing. Any time something went wrong, any time I was depressed, one of the first things that would happen was that I'd think back to that day that I got pulled into the office and play that out over and over again and that has stopped since the day that I posted that video. I've never thought of it again.

The effect of participation on Chase's ability to change the way he thought of himself in regard to what happened to him was stunning. In the process of thinking about it, of thinking of how he could take a negative experience and use it in a way that helped others, and taking action to do that, he stopped a practice that he had engaged in for a decade.

Hank

Hank's It Gets Better Project video is sincere and earnest, but he is actually

incredibly funny. In the other videos on his YouTube channel, he cuts to the core of issues like racism and homophobia with humor. You would not know it from his apparent confidence in his video, but his *It Gets Better* video was the first time he had come out publicly online. His experience with the IGBP overall—of publicly coming out, getting the response he did, and existing in the world differently as a result—resulted in the personal transformation of living more authentically in his public and professional life, as well as considering how to ensure his career had meaning for himself and others.

His process started with his anger about the suicide of Tyler Clementi and that caused him to reflect on how difficult things were for him at his Christian college and how he was still not living authentically outside of his personal life.

Hank: I decided to record a video because I heard about—because the story of Tyler Clemente specifically really moved me. I know that the string of suicides had happened, but to hear him as like a freshman, you know, it just brought me back to—and I talked about this in the video—I went to a very religious college and I just remember as an 18-year-old feeling so scared and so alone and having moments where I wanted to kill myself but never following through, and of course I'm very glad that I didn't. And the thing is I have been—that video was my—it made me very upset to hear first of all.

I was like, this is so unfair that he has to do this and that he did this to himself because of his lack of support within the community. And it was also the first time I had ever come out publicly. I had, I mean publicly like online. Like for the longest time I had always lived a pretty, like—like on my Facebook I would never talk about my sexuality or anything like that. Just in my private life, you know. I've been open for a few years. But then, I came out with the video. I was like, if there was ever a time to do it, I would do it now. I'm going to take a stand and I'm going to say something. And I knew that something like that would—it was just like the only way to really do it.

And that video opened up so many things. It was just like, it was just like, I just felt like I needed to take a stand. For once, I'm not gonna stand by and just let people die and let people suffer. And I blasted in, and at that point maybe I had, what, maybe two or three youtube videos? I had barely any subscribers, it was just some comedy videos that I had and not much traction whatsoever, but I emailed that video out to a lot of people on my email list. Like several hundred people and

I was just like “hey guys, this is what’s been going on,” and also the news was relevant so I just figured like people knew. I attached the ABC news report with Diana Sawyer about it and I attached my video and then I started to see the views climb and at that point like I could barely get a few hundred views on any of my videos, but this one climbed to 700, 1,000—I was like Jesus Christ—and it just started going up and up and up. And like, the response was amazing, you know? All these people that affirmed it, it was like, this was great. And for the first time I really felt like I was being embraced for who I was, and I was like this is what I’ve been missing out on. And yeah, and that was, essentially it’s the first time I “came out” came out. And doing that, I would say, pretty much changed everything.

Sara: So talk about that changing everything, what does that mean for you now?

Hank: Well, it was, for the first time I really had nothing to hide. Like, I, you know, I have a lot of friends—I was raised religious, I went to Christian college, so I would say more than 50% of my Facebook friends all came from that community. So, me putting that video up was taking the final, like—was taking a stance against that, and I was literally—because up until that point I really sacrificed myself.

The audience of youth in Christian homes or colleges who were being harmed by their environment were the primary ones in Hank’s mind as motivation for the video. However, it is clear that he had personal and political motives for the video as well—he wanted to use the video to fully come out, and to do so in front of people who had made his youth difficult because of the conservative religious orientation of their environment. The decision to stop sacrificing himself and his ability to be out in order to make his family and community of origin comfortable came up throughout our interview: he was not willing to sacrifice his happiness as a gay man, which meant that he was going to live openly and authentically.

This had unexpected results for him in his profession. As an actor, being closeted had caused him to not be able to bring his full self to his auditions, and the kind of self-policing and monitoring of behavior to not seem “too gay” that people do when they are

not fully out was affecting his ability to book parts—which he had not realized.

When I'm auditioning [now], I can give myself fully to an audition. Like, before, I wasn't—I would be booking and I would be like, “ugh, I didn't really give all of myself” and now I really am confident in who I am and I know what roles that I'm right for and so when I go in I give my all and I come out with no regrets. And, ironically, you know, right in the beginning of that year—January—I booked *Law and Order*, then a few months and I booked *Blue Bloods*, then I booked a few commercials, then I did a Verizon campaign and now—you know what I'm saying? So like I am living my life truly to the fullest and I'm not taking disrespect from people.

At the time of our interview, he was also still getting emails from youth. They often related to him because he also came from a conservative Christian background or because he was Asian-American. One of the ways that the It Gets Better Project supported video creators and viewers was by not forcing them to choose between the ways in which their identities were intersectional. Hank could talk about his experience at a Christian college and focus on getting away from that environment, but he was also visible as a gay Asian man, and viewers could relate to him in whatever way was most relevant to them. He continued to feel a large amount of responsibility for helping the people who reached out to him.

Hank: I still probably—once or twice a week I get emails from kids telling me that—you know, coming out to me, and I want to be to them what I wish I had when I was their age. So I reply to almost every single one. I get kids that they come out to me, definitely tell me about suicidal thoughts, definitely are like—they're lonely and they're scared and I reach out to them. And a few of them find me on Facebook, they follow me on Twitter, there's been a handful of kids that I've Skyped with—you know, just like “how are you doin'?” because you probably need a friend. And like I've said, I remember how lonely and isolated I was at that time. And it was very difficult.

Sara: That's great that they're reaching out to you. How often is that happening?

Hank: Once or twice a week. Sometimes four times, sometimes you get none, but

usually about once or twice a week I get a comment or a message.

Sara: And that's still happening?

Hank: There's, yeah, there's been a lot. Just, people will send me pages and pages and pages, you know? "I'm a 17-year-old gay Asian male, and I'm closeted and I'm afraid my parents will kick me out if they find out." You know, guys and girls, girls who are bisexual, gay older men—you've inspired me, when I was growing up in the 70s, never would I have ever had the courage to do what you do.

And I think I've realized, I was like, me being an entertainer, I think I'm of a different breed. I don't know. I think that entertainers by nature are just more willing to put themselves out there, whatever the hunger is or the drive is, and more than the average human. The average human is actually very private and I've crossed that threshold. So I feel like since I have crossed that threshold, I have to realize that I can give a lot of people a voice that normally would not express themselves any other way. So that's the person that I want to be.

Hank said that it gave his career a bigger purpose than the other parts of it that he already loves. He felt responsible for being visible in a way that extended to race and the underrepresentation of Asians in media, but he also realized that being comfortable with himself could help him find his place as an actor: "I'm gonna corner my niche of funny gay Asian males, because there's just not many of us and that can be me." One sentiment that Hank shared, along with several other participants of color in this study was a desire to help others even though they were not feeling entirely as confident when they recorded the video, and that the video was part of the process to getting them to feel good about themselves as LGBTQ people. Hank's experience suggests that stepping into the role of example or role model, even when you are unsure of yourself, has positive benefits for the individual.

For myself, I wanted to—I wanted to not be afraid anymore. I mean, like part of it also was, honestly, I wanted to feel like I was part of a community. I wanted to feel like I was part of something that was—I wanted to feel like I was part of a movement, I feel like I am now.

So part of that was a little bit selfish. However, I felt like I was in a position where I could actually do a lot of good and I have been doing a lot of good. The response that I have had has actually been overwhelming because I didn't expect much of a response, especially from kids that reach out to me, you know? And it's like, I haven't figured it all out. You know, I've figured a lot of it out, but regardless, I guess I am further along in the process than a lot of other people and so if I can help in that way and be resourceful, or if they feel that they can gain confidence in their own lives by vicariously living through mine, then I've done something.

The idea of using your own story to help others while using your participation in a larger community to help yourself as selfish is one that others mentioned. It is an interesting perspective, that doing something that could simultaneously help you or make you feel good about yourself is selfish—that one of the collateral benefits of engaging in the process is a selfish one. However, it is likely a response to the seriousness of the problem—for you to personally emotionally benefit from engaging in a project to try to intervene in the problem of LGBTQQ youth suffering may seem like you're doing something wrong. In my opinion, it is not selfish at all. Rather, it speaks to the power of telling your story in an effort to help others and live more authentically yourself. Becoming a more confident person in order to help others is courageous, not selfish. Hank's experience was characterized by the decision to put himself out there in order to help LGBTQQ youth and to solidify his own ability to live authentically, and he benefitted as a result.

Gabrielle

Gabrielle's video was a memorable one for me when I watched videos in the early days of the It Gets Better Project. Her interpretation of the message, that part of "it getting better" was that you get stronger was such an important aspect of the overall message to communicate—beyond being able to choose your community and having

some level of determination over your life, you indeed learn to cope with situations that might have been crushing at a younger age. The video resonated with a lot of people, and the experience of participating was transformative for Gabrielle.

She was incredibly upset about the suicides, especially that a 13-year-old would be at that point, and had been thinking about it and talking about it a lot. Her decision to make a video was “a combination of just feeling helpless in a lot of different situations. Like, that I couldn’t in any way have been there for that boy and stopped that from happening and that, you know, just kind of killed me inside because I have a little brother. And feeling helpless in my own life and really wanting that message to be true, and at least true for myself.” In this, Gabrielle is similar to others like Hank who were not entirely sure of themselves at the time they made the video, but taking action helped them feel more empowered in their lives.

The IGBP empowered its video creators—but not in a vacuum. Gabrielle made the video not only because of her desire to help LGBTQQ youth, but also because she worried that some messages she saw were sending what she thought was the wrong message. Her decision to make a video was, in part, a reaction to celebrity videos and making sure the right message was out there for people like her or people who could resonate with her interpretation.

Well, one of the goals was that—oh, oh, oh! Also—fucking, Kim Kardashian I think or Ciara or some ridiculous celebrity put out an It Gets Better video and I remember being like “What do you even know about it getting better?! You pretty, skinny, straight, rich, fancy, popular person. What do you even know about it being bad?” I mean, maybe they know in their lives, I don’t know, whatever, but in that moment it just felt so, it felt like “oh no, is this gonna get adopted by this sick celebrity culture that wants to jump on everything and really is meaningless and I refuse to let that happen.” So one of my goals was like—no, it can’t just be that, it has to be all of us and I’m part of that. So, that’s like number

1.

Number 2, I also felt like, it gets better wasn't saying enough. Like, you know, like that's part of my video, like it might not necessarily "get better" ever. You just—but you have to like change your perception, you have to kind of move with it; and so that was another goal, to talk about the fact that you have to evolve with this life that you have and I don't think that that message was getting across. I think it was more like the life will change around you if you leave school or if you do this or like if you fall in love it will change for you and I didn't think that that was enough. And also, just representation, like, I am all the things, right? I'm Puerto Rican, I'm from the Bronx, at the time I don't even know that I had a steady job. Like, you know, looks-wise, I wear glasses, I'm this like chubby <incomprehensible> lookin kid, you know what I mean?

There's gotta be others, so that was also a thing like "hey kids that look like me, I'm here too. I'm alive and I'm happy, you know?" Or, at least strong enough to like be here still, you know? So, so yeah. That was it and like, again, to reiterate that I just wanted to believe that it was true and to be part of—and to be part of something that I thought was really amazing and fresh and important, like a documentation of queers on their own. Not some fucked up government-enforced thing or something negative, but something where we are like compiling who we are into this like, Internet library or whatever, you know? And I felt like that was something I totally should be a part of.

The archival nature of the Internet, and therefore of the It Gets Better Project was noted by others that I interviewed. The ability to search videos or post them in locations other than YouTube was part of what provided the IGBP its broad reach. Gabrielle's video was immediately popular for a number of reasons. First, Dan had gotten criticism for the idea that he was advocating waiting as a solution, even though sometimes that is the only viable solution for youth, but he specifically mentioned Gabrielle's video as one that had done a good job of getting at what his video was missing: "One of the ways it gets better is you get fuckin stronger. And the, one of the, the only criticism that I've acknowledged and taken to heart as true is that our video sucks. Our video is passive—just sit there, sit back, and betterness will come to you" (Dan). However, because Gabrielle had a different spin on the message, the results of her participation were

unexpected for her.

I didn't know! I didn't think Dan Savage would put it up because I was like "No, it doesn't get better." So I just thought that he wasn't gonna put it up, number one. And I guess when it got approved, I just thought okay cool it will be another one of the videos, my friends will watch it, whatever. That was it. And maybe some kid will watch it. A little part of me was like maybe some kid will watch it and not...not do that and not hurt themselves and give it at least another day or another hour or whatever, you know, to think it over.

I told her that I knew about her video before she had done the survey and volunteered for an interview and asked her about the experience of it becoming very high profile.

That's just so crazy. I mean, like I said. Like, I have a relatively—I have a queer community so like I would just hope they would pass it around and they did and it just kept going—and it kept going and it kept going, and like Dan loved it and he wrote me about it and I was floored that he wrote me about it and so we got into contact with each other that way. And then it just kept going and spiraling and then people that I didn't know were putting it up places and my friends were like "oh my god, I'm in Texas and this person put it up" and like it just spiraled and more people were watching it and it was kind of insane.

You know, for nerdy people that are on the Internet it was kind of awesome, right? Like, but then what surprised me was that I started getting messages from people being like "well I used your video in my classroom today" to showcase kind of what I was hoping people would notice, you know, like the different perspective: urban, Latina, like, that you know, it doesn't get better, that you get stronger, and I used your video for that. Or kids being like, "I used your video in my paper or my project," or "I showed your video to my friends in my classroom" and like—that I wasn't expecting, to be part of some, like, broader educational response to these tragedies.

And like the outpouring of the people from YouTube was kind of intense because that's where more of the kids were telling me that the video was giving them strength and that what I had intended was coming to fruition: that they were taking care of themselves and they respected me and that they felt like they could love themselves and I was like not expecting to be like weepy eyed at random moments of my day, you know? And writing to these kids for a while, I tried to write everybody back, you know? And I wasn't—I just wasn't expecting all that. You know, you put things on the Internet and they go away and I felt like this wasn't going away, it had a little bit of staying power and people were appreciating it; moved by it.

For about a year, she got regular comments and messages, but it started to wane after that. There was a delayed response from anti-gay people, who started commenting about her going to hell, but she deleted those comments and was bewildered about them starting so long after the video was posted, “I’m like, really? That was two years ago, you people are late. Like, what the—crankin up your AOL to catch me on YouTube.”

By virtue of her message, which was seized on by some as a way to show that “it gets better” was not accurate and therefore could be used as a critique of Dan, Gabrielle stood out. However, this put her in the line of fire as a person of color who participated in the It Gets Better Project, and she got negative feedback for it online. It caught her off guard and exposes a problem with how topics can be reduced to binary right/wrong scenarios on the Internet.

Man, it was so harsh! People were like “oh, he’s using you as his token Latina” and “he’s using you to spread his white message through your mouth,” “he’s tokenizing what you say and like not really listening to you,” “he’s just trying to mesh your voice into his voice,” and like just really harsh—oh and “are you gonna let yourself be a puppet?” And like “you should combat against what he’s doing” and it’s like—I just—one, I’m not a fool.

And I’ve been in college, I went to college, and every time there was a people of color, minority situation, all of a sudden my email was blowing up and my phone and I was an RA so all of this stuff—so I know that. I know that. I know that there are times when white influences need you to back them up or want you to be that face and be that voice. There is a part of me that is okay with it when I choose to participate in it. Like, when I was an RA— this is a little off subject—but when I was an RA the resident housing people called me to do an education and <incomprehensible> student program. They called me to do a person of color program, and so I did both because they respected me enough to include me into education. But when the dean of students just called me it was always like minority this and minority that, so I never was a part of any of her panels, you know? Like, fuck you.

You know, so like I get it and I think it’s important because I think that it’s unfair to then remove yourself from the dialogue completely. So, so, so that. So I

understand the purpose of it and I understand that it's a thing that exists. And I don't know. I've never talked to Dan about it and I don't know if I would. Maybe if we had a minute, maybe I would talk to him about it, but it's not my judgement call. It's not my place because I respect this whole entire situation too much to pick it apart because of petty issues with someone's personal politics and the way that they express themselves.

And I felt like instead of wasting your time doing that, why don't you—one, make your own video. Two, um, like, combat what you're saying with the positive elements of this—like any idiot that writes a paper knows that you can't just completely con something all the way down. You have to like provide like the merits of it. If you're gonna con it all the way, you have to really back yourself up and I felt like people were just using his podcasts and other things, like—I don't know, I just felt like it was a lot of pettiness. And do I think that maybe at times I was specifically pointed out because of all my intersectionalities? Of course. But if I also wasn't like purposefully articulate in my video and like said what I said with feeling and was just some chick like “Yo, fuck that blah blah blah,” I don't think it would have been the same thing at all! If I wasn't able to express myself, then I don't think that it would have gotten noticed, so you're kind of also disrespecting me by saying that I'm being used for my race or my ethnicity, you know?

And as far as him trying to malign what I said to match what he was saying—one, just like, from TV film marketing perspective, you kind of want to do that if you're branding something as a movement, you wanna do that, so I got it. But I also felt in a grander scheme of things it wasn't completely off. Because if you get stronger, then the “it” can get better. So it's just saying the same thing in a different way and like that's the pettiness of it too—it's like okay, so now you're busting his balls for semantics? He has been nothing but sweet and gentle and kind and personable with me and never in any way anything but those things so—I was really upset about that and I just didn't respond to it. Sometimes I feel like, I'm not gonna give your pettiness more publicity by responding to you.

Even with some of the hurtful responses, the overall experience Gabrielle had was so meaningful that it had a real effect on her conception of herself and caused her to reflect on what she was doing in her life, personally and professionally in terms of her obligation to others. She said that she had always had a kind of snarky, New York, flippant attitude towards politics or agendas or movements, but the response helped her “feel that it was worth it, that I was worth it too, and that it was important, that these

things are important.” The responses from the youth and the teachers thanking her or telling her they showed her video in class made her feel like she was able to do important work.

It stuck in my brain, you know? It made me want to change my life. Like all those people reaching out and all those kids and stuff, and being part of this educational tool, made me feel like maybe that the life that I was living in the current moment wasn't enough. Like, it wasn't where I should be or what I need to do, you know?

The accumulated events resulted in a real taking stock and coincided with the death of a friend of hers who was an activist who fought for women's health and LGBTQ rights. Gabrielle reevaluated the choices she was making in her own life—looking at ways she wasn't giving herself the best care. She has written for a queer women's blog for a few years, and the topics of her articles changed—she used to write sillier or funnier pieces, but she started to feel compelled to write different stories and document things differently.

I'm gonna go research these 17 murders in Puerto Rico or I'm gonna go interview the cast and crew of Pariah so I can get their faces on, you know? It changed a little, my writing, and even my blogging—my blogging got more political and I started writing about the DREAM Act and I started finding myself, because I do spoken word poetry, I started finding myself involved in more social justice platforms.

Before her friend's death, they had been connecting more and her friend was proud of her for the ways she was changing in her life. When she died, Gabrielle's desire for meaning increased.

I had to carry on something from her. Like I had to stop doing TV/film and stop working on stupid fucking [network TV] pilots that were spending like ten millions of dollars on things, like literally 8 million dollars on a pilot that nobody would ever even watch, okay? And transform what I was doing like with visual media arts into something that had to do with helping other people and giving back and with the connection that I had to the It Gets Better Project, I knew that I

could do that with kids. And I knew what I had to do and so that just, through my grief just like bubbled inside of me. And so I've busted my ass in the last like seven months and I'm now a media mentor at the Dream Arts Center in the Bronx. And we are a creative arts organization that does, that teaches and builds all of those in the urban youth. So we do poetry, we do theater, we do dance, and I do visual media arts with teenagers and middle schoolers.

She realized throughout this process that though she still wanted to work in media, she really wanted to do work with kids, which she gets to do now. That decision had stabilizing effects on her life too.

This is the first job that I've ever had with benefits and like under 100 hour weeks. And I just cannot believe that this is my life now. That I have a calm life, that I'm not dating someone that is abusive, that I'm using my creative arts and I'm using—I feel like I do have an ability to connect with people and so I can use that like on a daily basis and work in the Bronx, in my community, with kids that need it and it's like, it's a whole—it's so corny, but it's like it's this whole other thing. It's this whole other beautiful life that I have right now.

The experience that Gabrielle had throughout the IGBP and in the years after she made the video is truly incredible. Her story is one that demonstrates the power that transforming the image you have of yourself can have on your actions.

Patrick

Patrick's story is unique even among people who engaged with the It Gets Better Project. The video he was in is essentially a footnote to his overall experience, in part because of where he was in his journey of coming out; but also because he quickly identified what he was interested in doing and adapted the call to action to something he was more comfortable with. This actually led to a major extension of the It Gets Better Project, and resulted in him becoming more empowered as a gay man. It was, as he said, a kind of "book end" to his process of coming out.

Instead of recording a video on the fly, or even recording multiple takes and editing those together, he started to write a script for a video. In part, this was because he felt like if he just recorded a video he was “pretty sure I just would have sobbed for about five hours rather than actually recording anything.” He was upset about the suicides and he identified with the youth. Even though he hadn’t attempted suicide, he was in deep denial for many years, in a long-term relationship with a woman, and his level of self-loathing was high throughout that period. At that time, he comforted himself in unhealthy ways with food, what he called “chocolate-chipping myself to death,” because he knew he was gay and could not deal with it. Still, he’d been reading Dan Savage’s columns and used them as a source of support.

When I was a closet case, that was like—that was what was helping me. Really, the reason that I wanted to get involved in this is that I was a sort of proto-It Gets Better person, I had been reading *Savage Love* for years and even though I was swimming in a massive sea of denial, somewhere in the back of my mind I knew that when I got my shit together and figured it out that I could have a happy life and be a happy, snarky asshole like Dan Savage is.

This experience of putting off dealing with your sexual orientation and by extension putting off your happiness is an echo of Greg M.’s experience waiting to accept himself until he couldn’t handle the level of loneliness he was experiencing anymore. Patrick felt indebted to Dan for the years where he was using *Savage Love* as a kind of lifeline, “I was paying Dan Savage back, I was paying him back because he did this for me and he asked people to do it and he kind of—for me, he earned it, so I had to.” However, as he was writing, he realized he was never going to shoot what he wrote. “I was like, this is never going to happen—and it sucks and I wish I could do something; and I know myself and this is just not the way it’s going to go and I had this realization

that there must be lots of creative people with lots of good perspectives that just weren't going to have anything to do with it [recording videos].”

This could have been the end of things for him—an exercise in journaling what he wished he could say, but just couldn't put on video. Instead, he wrote to Dan.

So I wrote Dan Savage an email saying “This should be a book,” it should be a book with Penguin, which publishes his other books, because that's where I work and I want to work on it.

And so the next day I got a phone call at my desk from his literary agent—“How do we make this happen?—and I was like “Uhhh, I don't know. I make keychains for finished books, I don't make books happen,” but it was really important to me, so I talked to one of the VPs and sent the agent back to [Dan's] original editor who ended up being the main editor of the book.

I think the conversation had started about the book, but they—so I just kind of wormed my way into it and I submitted an essay after I'd gotten a chance to—I guess I just kept on top of them. So I submitted an essay and they picked it and edited it and then they put it in the book.

He did eventually appear in a video as well, a group one that was organized by his employer, but he still felt “really nervous doing the video and it kind of shows.” In a way, and Patrick is self-deprecating and funny about this, the *It Gets Better Project* book got published when it did because Patrick really wanted to be a part of the Project, but didn't want to make a video. One of the unintended outcomes of Dan striking the nerve that he did, and opening the public forum to anyone who wanted to speak and be included, was that he didn't have to come up with or push for an idea like the book himself—people were already interpreting the message for their own videos, and Patrick took the mode of outreach and tried to add a new one because it was a mode in which he felt more comfortable and he figured he wasn't alone in that.

Patrick came away from his entire experience of the *It Gets Better Project* feeling

happy because he had the realization that he didn't need the support the videos provide anymore. It felt good to be able "to help someone else to not have to have the same struggles that I did, that was really what struck me the most about it," and it wasn't just his own story that mattered, because "no matter how much it hurts and how much it feels like this is only happening to you and you'll never get through it, like—you can ignore someone's advice, but if it's a crowd of people yelling at you, it's much harder to ignore than someone that's talking directly to you." He also cited the videos that featured a community of people, that the message is really a collective one.

The resolution of the hardest parts of his experience of coming out and the ability to kickstart something like the book seems to have led him towards other activities. The day before our interview, he had put in an application to volunteer with the Ali Fornay Center, which is a New York City-based organization that works with LGBTQ homeless youth.

These kids come out and then they get thrown out of their house and what are you going to do? Where are you going to go? You go to NYC. You go to where Stonewall is. You go to Broadway and blah blah blah, but there's not really services for them. So hopefully, knock on wood, they'll, I'll be able to help because—and that's what I remember reading too, Dan Savage was talking about inspiring people to do more.

The It Gets Better Project was an easy message, "pretty much no one can get faulted for saying 'I think kids shouldn't kill themselves,' which is one of the reasons why so many people supported it so quickly," but it was also an easy entry point for Patrick to see he could do more now that he had worked through his own issues with his identity. He had kicked open the closet door of his own life, advocated for the book successfully, and published as part of it. After all of that, he felt like he was "not trying to

be something, just be normal, not having to monitor my behavior anymore.”

Alanna

In most of the cases in which people experienced some form of transformation as a result of their experience with the It Gets Better Project, there was a level of disempowerment in their life that taking action, in combination with anything else that happened to them because of the Project, allowed them to change. In Alanna’s case, this was not entirely the case. She was a second year medical student when we spoke, so her video was recorded shortly after her relocation to the city her school was in and that corresponded with a certain amount of disconnection with the local queer community and everything that comes with moving to start a new program. It was a combination of her prior work with LGBTQ youth and her own extremely difficult youth that motivated her to record the video. She was aware of one of the issues that the Internet-based nature of the It Gets Better Project was intended to address—the lack of resources in conservative or rural areas available for LGBTQ youth—and felt frustration that even though she had worked with youth, she still missed out on being available to youth who may have needed someone like her more.

I was working with this group of kids and felt really defensive of them. I felt very much like if there’s absolutely anything I can possibly do to make their lives easier and whatever, mostly their parents were dropping them off. These weren’t the kids who were necessarily having the problems. The other kids, the kids who couldn’t be there, the kids who couldn’t tell their parents—that was a big part of my experience. It worked out, I was older, I don’t think I was quite as vulnerable because I came out when I was 19 and I was living at home, but I was a legal adult. I had friends who would have been there for me if I needed them to, you know? Who would have given me a place to stay, who—like I had options and a lot of kids don’t. I don’t know, I felt really defensive of these kids and I just thought maybe if there’s anything I can say to make a difference and it’s really the whole idea of kids who feel like they have no option and that death is better—I got that. I mean, at a really visceral level, I’ve been there. And if there was

anything at all about my story that could strike a chord for kids, I wanted to say it.

Even though her video wasn't highly edited, she made a lot of "trial and error" videos before she was happy. She tried to balance the message she gave: if she focused too much on the bad things that happened in her life, she felt that was too negative. In others, she would realize there were specific things she wanted to say that she forgot to. The resonance of the It Gets Better Project was powerful for her and she wanted to get her message in line with her interpretation of that message.

That felt to me like a message of hope. Dude, this sucks and nobody's gonna say it doesn't. And you shouldn't have to live it, I wish you didn't have to live it, but if you can get past it you're gonna have a life you like and you're gonna be happy with yourself and with the world. I don't know. It was mostly that the project struck a chord for me. And I wanted to be a part of it.

She also prioritized speaking directly to youth struggling because of their sexual orientation specifically, and this was in response to some critiques of the IGBP that troubled her in terms of what she saw as the needs of LGBTQ youth. The critiques that bothered her were what she called "derailing arguments" that focused on the fact that no kids should be bullied and this shouldn't just be limited to sexual orientation. She responded: "Okay, then don't criticize the project for not being something it doesn't intend to be. Like, I agree, kids shouldn't be bullied and it's bad for any kid who is bullied and it's bad if they want to commit suicide—yes. So go support that. Make that a project." She also cited the high rate of suicide among LGBT youth and said "this is qualitatively different" in terms of the experience and needs of these youth.

The concept of skill sets has come up across different interviews, and the meaning and change Alanna derived from her participation was less about contact by others or

positive response to the video, but about how she could translate her renewed passion for change to action. This was in part because she had to leave the youth group for medical school, but also because just recording the video didn't feel like enough in the face of how the suicides felt to her and the callousness of a politician like Michele Bachmann, whose district included a school district like Anoka-Hennepin that was failing LGBTQ students in the most basic ways.

Alanna: I moved to DC after grad school, after my masters degree, and weirdly have not really hooked into a queer community or didn't feel like it—I mean I had plenty of friends who identified as queer, but sort of our connection to each other was not queer community per se and that's been a source of frustration and isolation in some ways and also, Jesus, sometimes the town felt like the desert of dykedom.

It was just like, you know, and there was something about that project that really lit a fire under me. And I was already involved with the youth group and felt like it was a big deal for me. It was important to me and I wanted to keep doing it. I was only able to do it for two years. Like, the med school schedule did not allow for me to keep going after my first year. So we found somebody to take it over. We made sure that we had good people, but you know, regardless—derailed my own self. But the project really fired me up all over again. Every day there was another gay kid who'd been bullied and killed themselves. And there was that, crap, what's her name—the crazy fundamentalist...

Sara: Which one?

Alanna: I know, right? Not Sarah Palin.

Sara: The one from Minnesota?

Alanna: Yes

Sara: That's Michele Bachmann

Alanna: Thank you, yeah! So there was that whatever article about her district that had effectively banned talking about queerness and the sheer number of suicides specifically in her district that people were definitely drawing a connection to that—which makes sense to me, I don't know how in depth the research was, but the connection seems like an obvious one.

Alanna was able to translate that feeling of wanting to “light a fire” to concrete actions in the context of the problems in her medical school specifically, but many of those problems are endemic to medical school in general. She spent time really analyzing the problems and engaging in multiple actions. The question of what the fire did for her revealed an immense amount of work accomplished in the two years after making the video.

Sara: What did this fire do for you?

Alanna: I took over the LGBT health interest group at my school. If you look, in the past year there have been a number of news articles about LGBT coverage in medical schools, medical education. On average, there’s fewer than five hours devoted to the subject at all across, I think, gosh I can’t remember the exact statistics—absurdly high, over 50% of the schools have less than 5 hours devoted total in four years of school, of which most of them have to do with AIDS and that’s about it. And that was true of ours.

In year one, and it was just the two of us, the group was very small. The other problem with medical school being continuity, I think, that when you try to push for change, you’re unlikely to be active in a group in the first year. You’ll be participating, but not running. You take it over in your second year, and then third and fourth year you’re in clinicals—you don’t see anybody from the first or second year. And we were fortunate through the group to know third and fourth years who do—we talked ideas out with, but my friend and I were like “it” for running the group [the only two leaders] and we reached out to all the other professional schools on the campus, which there’s very little contact between, and found the other active LGBT groups on campus and together with them we went to the administration and asked for:

- a change to the non-discrimination policy to include gender expression and identity for one
- number two the health insurance policy is discriminatory so there’s partnership benefits offered to heterosexual married couples, but not to homosexual married couples, including those whose marriages are legal which in this state—even though it’s not yet legal to perform them here is recognized from outside. So legal marriages, it didn’t matter. I think the wording was something terrible, like “regardless of the law of the land” it was specifically excluded.
- The policy covered (thinking) infertility benefits for straight couples predominantly because of the way infertility was defined—so specifically defined a male-female couple having unprotected intercourse for a year without getting pregnant—and may have also excluded in another way, but predominantly I think

it was the wording of infertility, like the definition of infertility, that excluded homosexual couples from that benefit.

- And then we were asking that they cover trans health -- full stop. No like, not any one thing, we were just like all of it should be covered.

And we kind of figured it was better to ask for everything because if we asked for one thing and they gave it to us, it would be a hell of a lot easier for them to say no to everything else. Whereas if we did it all at once, let them tell us no, and we'll fight that. So far they have changed the nondiscrimination policy, they've given us health coverage for partners, including civil partners—it does not just have to be marriage from another state—which is nice. They are investigating trans health. They did not give us a no on that, actually, but they'll have to change the type of policy that they have, so it would be something they buy on block from the insurance company, the insurance company administrates it, to something that the school has to administrate, and they're not saying no, but they are saying we're not sure what's involved in that, let's figure it out, which I think is fair. So that's been cool.

We also took on the school about, specifically the medical school, for curriculum coverage and lack thereof. So we met with every blessed person. Actually, we took on everything, we took on—we've been meeting with admissions and explaining to them how there's a big deal about wondering whether or not you come out in an interview, and if you do, wondering if that will be able to keep you out of medical school. So we wanted admissions to make it more obvious that they're discrimination-free and if they don't know if they're discrimination-free to please deal with that. So they have. We created a website specifically so they could link to it on their main page, which is pretty cool, and they include information in their packets going out making it very clear—like, they have our email addresses included so people can directly contact us and ask questions about what it's like to be queer here—which, the answer is complicated. It's so strange to me that it's 2012 and I'm having this conversation, you know what I mean? It is really weird. So, I mean, it's not fully positive. If you're that concerned about having gay peers, go to New York, because they ain't here. But for a school that's actually willing to have a conversation with us, it's not bad.

We ended up writing the school's first curriculum covering LGBT content and then teaching it.

Sara: Wow.

Alanna: Yeah, it was pretty fuckin cool actually that they let us do it. We did it in a small group format as opposed to lecture style and so there were ten groups of maybe 16 students and we put out a call for volunteers from our classmates and we trained them first. And a couple days later we went in in pairs—we figured it gave us an opportunity to try to balance peoples' weaknesses, you know? Make sure there was always somebody in the room that was knowledgeable on some

issues and whatever.

But anyway, we've now taught the school's first LGBT curriculum that we wrote, which is awesome. And we agreed to be on a panel for incoming first years about what it's like to be queer patients, I guess. So maybe literally it's just like 'what's it like to be queer' and I don't know, like, living a life—it's weird that way. But still, I think I would have been invested in all of that anyway, at least theoretically, but there was something—there was something very immediate about the isolation that the It Gets Better Project is trying to explicitly fight against. The lack of available information that it's trying to fight against, that I felt that in medical school in sort of two ways. Both personally—it felt very strange to be one of three really out people, five if you include the people who aren't really out in my class, like, of 160. Like, what? There's fewer than 10 of us out of four years?

Sara: So there's lots of closeted people.

Alanna: Clearly. And I'm not kidding when I say this—in the entire hospital, we have been able to actually identify and speak to three out people, all of whom are in the field of psychiatry, only one of whom's an MD. And so trying to find mentors, I mean my friend and I, we would go to meetings, we would go to anything that sounded remotely possible and split up at the end, work the crowd, and seriously be like 'are you my gay mentor? would you be my gay mentor?' To find people to do lunch talks, whatever, so one of our goals for this coming year actually is to come up with an "out list." So future students don't have to do that, because we know they're out there. There's only three? Come on now, we all know that's not true.

So, and then on the other side of things, not so personally, was the realization like these are the professionals that parents are gonna go to. Or for that matter, I had a classmate who told me the story of—so our first year of contact with patients is just learning how to talk to them. You know, it's like, how do you do an interview? How do you not be an asshole, kind of. And this one classmate of mine—and he was horrified at himself, I mean he was not telling this story because he thought it was funny, he was telling this story because he was like "Oh my God, I can't believe this happened to me and that I did this." He had a patient, a woman, who—I don't know, she said something about not menstruating. I don't know, maybe he asked about her menstrual history and so he latched onto that like "okay, that's a clue, maybe this has something—" and he goes "Well why not?" and she says, "well, I was born a man." And it completely caught him off guard, he did not see that coming, he actually left the room to laugh. He was so discombobulated.

Sara: (Speechless)

Alanna: Exactly! Exactly! He's horrified! I'm like, maybe we need to talk about

this stuff before we see real patients and possibly—

Sara: Hurt them!

Alanna: Yes, yes exactly! Really, let's not be assholes, let's not be taken by surprise, and that was my goal for and my friend's goal for working on the curriculum. And I think that in a very indirect way, the timing of the It Gets Better Project did a lot to fire me up about something that technically has nothing to do with it, you know? But felt very important, like a very important way to change for the better the experience the queer community has with the medical profession.

There are many actions to highlight in this conversation: there is the pressure on the administration to change, which involved allying with LGBTQ groups from other parts of the university; the problem of clarity in recruitment and whether applicants risk overt bias in their admissions materials; the identification of the invisibility of out doctors, which creates a problem for future doctors seeking support and mentoring, and contributes to the lack of out students; the extreme gaps in student education, the consequences of which she illustrates with the story of one of her student colleagues, which she and her friend in the LGBT health interest group worked to intervene in by writing the curriculum and collaborating with people who had knowledge about different needs of LGBTQ patients.

The transformative nature of Alanna's story is not about catharsis or healing, it's about identifying what kind of power you have to effect change and using it. It is easy to be frustrated by the gaps in medical education, but most of us are not in an ideal position to intervene in that—and when you consider the age at which most people enter medical school, most medical students may not be in a position to feel confident intervening in the problem to the level Alanna did. Alanna had the benefit of experience—she was able to be comfortable and confident with herself as an out lesbian, and had developed herself

in a leadership and mentoring role with LGBTQQ youth. This history is not to be discounted in explaining her actions in medical school, but she saw the intensity of her drive as tied to her participation in and the timing of the It Gets Better Project. She was able to translate that fire to specific actions she could take to intervene in the serious problems she saw in the medical school environment.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

The lack of visibility of the lives of LGBTQ people in the schools, communities, churches, and homes of LGBTQ youth is a significant problem, with consequences that affect their health and education. The research shows us that if we want to improve the conditions of LGBTQ youth in our schools, we need to continue the work of changing policies of school districts to be inclusive of sexual orientation, gender expression, and gender identity in their non-discrimination policies; to support the expansion of GSAs, especially at the middle school level; and to ensure that current and future teachers have the knowledge and skills to be allies of LGBTQ students—in terms of both curricula and their own education—and that they have the support of their administrators in that work. In this, we need to acknowledge that all solutions are partial and the achievements that do gain footholds are the products of years of trial and error, research, experience, and discussion.

Technology has thrown a wrench into the traditional ways in which these interventions and conversations have happened. There is no guarantee of expert, scholarly, or professional control over what gains visibility, and the Internet facilitates a decentralization of authority in a case like the It Gets Better Project: a teacher like Sage can identify that there will be other schools like hers and other students like hers and try to create a message that communicates directly to these students. In her case, it was that even in the most difficult environments, LGBTQ students can still seek allies in their schools. Her message was unmediated and unapproved, but it resonated with the many

people who contacted her and saw some part of their lives validated or supported in what she created.

I met Sage at AERA in 2013 after she had started her PhD program in education. She knew I would be presenting about my in-progress research and that her case would be highlighted, but she had a conflict and could not attend. The experience was unpleasant, with a professor at the roundtable specifically citing her video as the reason the It Gets Better Project was sending the wrong message. When Sage and I had a quick dinner later that night, I told her about it and said that I was glad she had not been there to endure it.

She said that she wished she had been because she wanted to defend herself; that people simply did not understand the context she and the youth she taught were in. I felt similarly frustrated. I was irritated that someone who lived in a major urban epicenter of LGBTQ life and was employed by an elite university felt it was acceptable to reflexively verbally attack someone living in a state with no employment protections, who was actually in the trenches trying to keep her students safe. Not only that, but the professor had no personal knowledge of what effect Sage's video had, and therefore any judgment of inherent "goodness" was personal or theoretical. My research established that applying a single theoretical framework to the videos removes the context of the video creator's intentions and the audience they focus on speaking to. In doing this, scholars lose sight of the limitations of their own theoretical orientations, academic training, and personal experiences.

In my own experience, my choice to not disclose stories of my past was interpreted by one scholar at my talk as evidence that I was too privileged to view the

project “correctly,” that I did not apply a critical framework because I fell into certain demographic categories—which, in several cases, she was wrong about. However, that also frustrated me: why should anyone have to treat their professional work as confessional, letting others gawk at and judge whether or not they are worthy to tell the story they do? There is a great deal of privilege in having a story to tell has no potential professional or social impact on one’s own life.

I came away from the experience of the roundtable and my dinner with Sage with the motivation to let my participants speak for themselves as much as possible, to try to understand their outcomes and their perspectives first. As I noted throughout my analysis and discussion, my participants had insight into the conditions of the people they created videos for that I could not have. This caused me to be deeply troubled by the discussions about the IGBP in academic circles. The critiques of the It Gets Better Project that I encountered were often inextricably tangled with critiques of Dan Savage and his economic class or gender or whiteness, but Dan specifically designed the IGBP so that it would not be LGBTQ experiences filtered through his own voice. Alternatively, critiques relied on the judgment of videos like Sage’s: that the constraints of her situation that led her to make the choices she did in the video were evidence that it did not get better.

These critiques are problematic. The former overestimates Dan’s power over the project and underestimates the ability of people to speak their own truth in the interest of empowering people like them. Whether intentionally or not, that stance promotes the idea that individuals who have experienced oppression should not feel that their lives have gotten better, that they do not have the agency or ability to interpret a concept in relation to their own life stories. The second critique reveals an assertion that hope is only

relevant in the most ideal situations, and that in order for any message to be appropriate, even from within dangerous or constraining environments, the individual must communicate in the same way someone in a more protected position could.

This is not to say that critiques are unimportant, but there seems to be little interest in this instance in understanding the phenomenon in its complexity. I believe that LGBTQQ youth must be served in multiple ways, that we cannot wait for conservative areas to decide to acknowledge that LGBTQ people exist and are important or that LGBTQQ youth need education that affirms their lives, sexualities, and gender identities. If we only go through the schools we will be waiting for decades. If we do not open up communication and messaging to everyone, we will not speak to the experiences of all youth.

The passion my participants felt about what they did as part of the It Gets Better Project and the motivation it provided to many of them was important to try to make sense of in a meaningful way, which I did by identifying the process they went through and the framework for the decisions they made along the way, as well as delving into their unique, yet overlapping personal experiences with the IGBP. As I outlined in Chapter 4, the process was cyclical, with video creators engaging in reflection at various stages in the process of deciding to make, making, and experiencing the effects of making their videos. The combination of that reflection with their actions was powerful and fulfilled the desire for a personal impact that many of my participants described. They did not want to (or could not) just write checks or sign petitions—they wanted to know they helped someone. When they knew that they did, many of them saw themselves as being able to do more. They were not only affirming youth or struggling adults, they were

affirmed in return and this affected them in various ways. Additionally, a number of my participants still endured LGBTQ bullying as adults and some needed to hear the message they were giving as much as those who watched their videos.

Dan said that he was the “imperfect messenger” for this project, which is probably true. However, what constitutes a perfect messenger? The way a number of my participants talked of not having the skills to be an activist or not being able to do that work correctly demonstrates that the way creating change is often talked about may be an impediment to getting our whole community involved. If the data I collected is extendible, the consequence of asking for perfection is silence. The irony of Dan as the imperfect messenger is that his tactics empowered many of the people of color I interviewed for this study. White people largely did not worry about being criticized by friends or peers for participating—embarrassed for their earnestness or worried about being harassed by homophobes, yes, but not by other LGBTQ people. Gabrielle’s experience stands out to me because she was attacked not for her participation per se, but *because her video became popular* it became a target of people who would consider themselves social justice-minded. It concerns me that so many people have been intent upon not only tearing down a project intended to empower the voices of the LGBTQ community in the service of helping LGBTQ youth, but also the people who made the videos. Social justice is not a competition; our level of engagement in it is not correlated with the number of other people we can prove have flaws. This is a practice that I think needs to be reflected on—are some of the ways activists or academics communicate interfering with broad engagement and discouraging future activists?

My participants identified and spoke to the gaps they saw, whether those were gaps in the populations or experiences represented in It Gets Better Project videos they had seen or the pre-existing knowledge that people like them were not often publicly represented in the LGBTQ community or media, and they did so via reflection on their experiences and intentional decision about their messages. This was a strong commonality, and it was clear in their stories: Ted spoke to trying to take responsibility for portraying a possible future for someone worrying about how to be out and a doctor; Krissy knew she had a unique perspective on rural life; Adrian felt he could actually use his skills and engage in an LGBTQ project that would help someone like him at 15; Sera immediately took responsibility for being part of trans visibility; and Harry knew there were not many representations of older LGBTQ people and that this was an important gap to fill. That these acts would be part of something transformative for participants, sometimes in dramatic ways, was an unexpected benefit. The fire that Alanna spoke of being lit before she listed the numerous actions she took at medical school, the changes Gabrielle made in her life, the relief Chase experienced from sharing his traumatic story in hopes that it could help someone else make it through a difficult time, these are evidence of ways we already know our lives work. Small acts and reflection can change how we see ourselves and what we think we are capable of. Not every small act leads to something more, just as not every video creator experienced change or was motivated to do more after making a video for the It Gets Better Project. However, based on this research, there were clearly scenarios in which taking these steps led to more change-oriented behaviors and that is exactly what activists and academics who care about LGBTQ youth and the larger social environment for LGBTQ people say is important.

The significance of this research in particular is that we now know that engaging in the public pedagogy of the It Gets Better Project, going through the reflective process, and getting positive feedback compelled some individuals to look for other opportunities to make an impact. However, the scope of the research was limited specifically to video creators engaged in this particular phenomenon. That introduces new questions, including whether this experience is replicable and what kinds of strategies are most useful for engaging LGBTQ adults who want to try to affect the situations LGBTQ youth are in. I strongly encourage future research that expands beyond critical perspectives of the It Gets Better Project, especially since there is a cohort of young people on the cusp of adulthood who may have watched videos and have important reflections on whether the IGBP videos were useful or important for them, in what ways, and why. As they enter college, trade school, or workplaces, their reflections on the project will be unique and important in the context of how they developed their identities and negotiated their school environments.

Based on the responses my participants received from the young people and teachers who watched or used their videos and the current research base on teacher education and LGBTQ presence in the curriculum, it is clear that an important area of future research is to identify how to expand the conversation about LGBTQ issues in schools beyond bullying. Research on successful implementations of curricular change in the K-12 classrooms and in teacher education settings is necessary. Rural or regionally conservative areas remain difficult areas for intervention, and even though the IGBP videos were able to reach youth in those areas, there must be research into other strategies to improve the environments of LGBTQ youth in rural or regionally conservative areas.

Technology was integral to the successful dispersion of knowledge of the project and scalability in terms of the number of videos added and the ability for millions of people to view them, and the opportunities for interdisciplinary research are vast as a result. Education researchers could work with researchers in computer science and media studies to examine the viral nature of the project, among other aspects, or with psychology or communications researchers to identify ways LGBTQ adults can successfully be called to take action in regards to LGBTQ youth. These are important avenues to pursue because there are no simple answers to the problems facing LGBTQ youth in schools as the environments are variable and the political contexts differ from state to state and city to city.

The importance of talking to people directly involved in the It Gets Better Project, or any phenomenon, cannot be overstated. As the research on schools shows, the environments LGBTQ youth spend their days can still be very difficult for them to endure. The environments most in need of change will not change quickly, and finding ways to provide hope and information to LGBTQ youth is just one possible way to help. I call on education researchers, especially those with the privilege of faculty positions and tenure, to consider how to identify and research paths for successful and systemic change.

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Chapter 2

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Why did you decide to record a video for the It Gets Better Project?
2. Describe the goals you were trying to achieve by recording your video.
3. Would you consider your role in the It Gets Better Project to be an activist role, an educational role, a civic role, something I have not mentioned, and why?
4. What kind of impact do you think your video or the It Gets Better Project as a whole has had?
5. What impact has participating in this project had on your life, interests, or community engagement in the LGBT community?
6. Describe a typical day: how do you use technology to connect with people?
7. Speak to me as if I don't understand Facebook, Twitter, or other social networks:
 - a. Describe your identity online. If it changes depending on what social network you're using, explain why and how.
8. If all social networks stopped working tomorrow, what would change in your life?
9. It has been argued that the time people spend on social network sites isolates them from each other and that communities are weaker as a result. What are your thoughts about that argument?

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT SELF-DESCRIPTIONS

Adrian (he) is a 28-year-old, multi-racial male who identifies as gay. He is originally from a medium-sized, middle class suburb of Indianapolis, Indiana, and presently lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan finishing his JD degree. He has a BSFS from a national university in Washington, DC. He worked in the financial industry prior to law school in New York City and plans to return to New York upon graduation after law school. He is upper-middle class, single, has no children and currently attends school full-time.

In the time since our interview, Adrian completed his JD. He turned down his corporate law job offer in NYC and stayed in Ann Arbor to work at a venture capital fund that aligns with his goal of creating actual value on the ground.

Alanna (she) is a 37-year-old white woman who identifies as a lesbian. She grew up in a small mill city in New England and presently lives in Baltimore, MD. She is middle class, single, and has no children. She has an AS, BA, and MA and is currently in medical school full time.

In the time since our interview, Alanna started her internship in family medicine.

Alexis (she) is a 23-year-old, white woman who identifies as a lesbian. She is originally from a medium-sized, upper-middle class suburb of Tucson, Arizona, and presently lives in Washington, DC. She is dating but not married, has no children, has a BA and BS, and goes to school full-time at Georgetown University School of Medicine. She also intends to pursue a Masters in Public Health.

Andrew (he) is a 29-year-old white man who identifies as gay. He is originally from a small, rural, almost-exclusively white mountain town in the central Sierra Nevada

region of California. After leaving the region at 18 to attend college and then graduate school, he is now back in a large urban part of the northern Central Valley of California, working full-time at a major research university. He is single with no children/dependents.

In the time since our interview, Andrew started a PhD in Counseling and Human Development.

Brinae (they) is a 20-year-old, white person who identifies as queer. Brinae is originally from moderate-sized city in southeastern Wisconsin, and presently lives in Madison, WI. Brinae is middle class, in a long-term relationship (with a female-bodied person), has no children, will graduate with a BA in May 2013, works part-time and goes to school full-time.

In the time since our interview, Brinae graduated from college and moved to Korea to teach English.

Carolyn (she) is a 25-year-old, white woman who identifies as queer. She is originally from a middle-class neighborhood in the medium-sized city of Colorado Springs, CO, and presently lives in Cambridge, MA. She is middle class, in a long-term relationship with another woman, has no children, has a BA, and works full-time.

Chase (he) is a 27-year-old, White male who identifies as gay. He is originally from a rural township outside of Austin, TX and currently resides with his partner of two and a half years near Huntsville, Alabama. He is middle class, has no children, has an AA degree in communications and works on completing a BS in the same field while working part-time at a local television station.

Dave (he) is a 35-year-old, white man who identifies as gay. He is originally from a small farming community outside Madison, WI, and presently lives in Los Angeles, CA. He is middle class, single, has no children, has a BA and MFA, and works in a creative field that includes a good deal of LGBT activism. He also teaches part-time at two universities.

Erin (she) is a 35-year-old, mixed race (Scottish/Mexican) woman who identifies as a lesbian. She is originally from small towns in Colorado and Idaho, and presently lives in Los Angeles, CA. She is middle class, unmarried, has no children, has a BA and MFA, and works in the entertainment industry.

Gabrielle (she) is a 30-year-old, Latin@ who identifies as a queer. She was born and raised in a large urban borough of New York, the Bronx and currently resides/works there. She is probably considered low-income at this point but has a solid paying job that may boost her up to lower-middle class. She is currently single, has no children, has a BA in Communications and Theology, and works for a non-profit creative arts center in the Bronx.

Greg M. (he) is a 37-year-old, African-American gay male. He is originally from Detroit, Michigan and presently lives in Chicago, Illinois. He is a High School graduate who is currently in a relationship, has no children and is employed full-time through temp agencies.

In the time since our interview, Greg M. moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and became employed part-time in the retail sector.

Greg O. (he) is a 43-year-old, white gay man from a family of 6 children. He is originally from a rural blue collar town in Ohio, population roughly 1,000. He presently lives in Chicago with his partner of 17 years. They own their home, have two cats, and no children. Together they operate a boutique corporate training firm and both are considered to be thought leaders in their industry.

Hank (he) is a 27-year-old, Asian man who identifies as gay. He is originally from a large, upper-middle class suburb of Washington DC in Silver spring, MD and presently lives in Brooklyn, NY. He is middle class, single, has no children, has a BA, attended an MFA for two years, and works as an actor in film, television, and online digital media.

Harry (he) is a 60-year-old gay male who grew up in rural West Virginia and now lives in central Michigan with his husband. He is middle-class. He is retired. He has no children.

JD (he) is a 44-year-old white male who identifies as a gay man. He is originally from a small, upper-middle-class town in North Carolina and presently lives in Georgia. He is middle-class, partnered, has no children, has a B.A., an M.A., a Ph.D., and works full-time.

Jacquie (she) is a 47 year old black lesbian originally from NYC who lives in Boston, MA. She has a MPH and is married to a woman, who is a cultural anthropologist, professor and administrator at a local university.

Jason (he) is a 29-year-old man of Hispanic and mixed ethnicity who identifies as homosexual. He is originally from a smaller urban, lower class city in the lower desert of California and presently lives in Sarasota, FL. He is lower middle class, single, has no

children, only a partially completed high school education, and works full-time in Customer Service.

Jay (he) is originally from New York City. Born in Manhattan and grew up in Queens from the age of 7. He is a first generation Asian American citizen in a lower middle class family of four. Has an older brother 10 years older. He is currently living in Albany NY working as an intern with a B.Arch from RPI. No kids.

In the time since our interview, Jay started a photography business and hopes to specialize in same sex weddings and weddings/families in general.

Jim (he) is a 57-year-old white man who identifies as gay. He is originally from a major metropolitan area in the Midwest, and presently lives in Los Angeles, CA. He is middle class, single, has no children, has a BA, and currently works part time.

Jino (she) is a 21-year old biological female who identifies as queer. Her parents came from the Philippines and spent some time in New York City where she and her brother were born. The whole family later settled down in a small, upper-middle-class suburb in the Greater Hudson Valley region of New York. She is currently middle class, sharing an apartment with her partner, and is a recent graduate with a BA in Information Technology. Jino currently works full time and has plans to return to school for an MBA in the near future.

In the time since our interview, Jesse began working on her MBA.

Joan (she) is a 50+ year old, white woman who identifies as a lesbian. She is originally from a metropolitan area in the Midwest, and presently lives in Greater Boston, MA. She is middle class, married (to a woman), has no children, has a PhD and a doctorate in ministry, has a part-time job, and is otherwise self-employed.

John (he) is a 23-year-old, white male who identifies as gay man. He is originally from a small, upper-middle class suburb of Lynchburg, VA and has recently moved back to his hometown after living out of town for four years. He is middle class, in a committed relationship, has no children, is completing his BA, and is currently working to continue to pay for school.

Joshua (he) is a 20-year-old, white man who identifies as gay. He is originally from a small, rural area of Idaho (Wendell to be specific), and presently lives in Portland, Oregon. He is part of the lower (working) class, in a monogamous relationship (with a man), has no children, and works part time.

Krissy (she) is a 45-year-old, white woman who identifies as a lesbian. She is originally from a small working class city on the mid-Atlantic coast, and presently lives on a farm in the Northeast. She is working class, unmarried, has no children, and has attended community college. She does manual labor for a living.

Kristel (she) is a 28-year-old Asian-American woman who identifies as a lesbian. She is originally from a medium-sized, middle-class suburb in Pearl City, Hawaii, on the island Oahu. She presently lives in Los Angeles, CA. She is middle-class, single, has no children, has a BA in Religion, and works full-time as a Promotions Manager for a web design company.

Lauren is a 31-year-old white lesbian who is originally from a rural area of the Midwest and currently lives in an urban area of the Midwest. She is married, has no children, and works full-time at a university.

Lisa (she) is a 46-year-old white woman who identifies both as a lesbian and as a trans woman. She is originally from a middle-class suburb of Chicago, IL, and presently

lives in a similar suburb of San Francisco. She is well off, unmarried, has no children, has a Ph.D., and works full time.

Luis (he) is a 23-year-old Hispanic man who identifies as gay. He is originally from Laredo, a medium-sized city in South Texas, Laredo, and presently lives in the small city of Victoria, Texas. He is middle class, recently single, has no children, has a BA and MA, and works full time at a newspaper.

In the time since our interview, Luis moved to San Francisco.

Pat (he) is a 49-year-old, white man who identifies as gay. He was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, but grew up from the age of three in a small, middle class rural town 45 miles northwest of Dallas, TX, and presently lives in New York City, NY. He is middle class, married (to a man). His spouse works in hospitality. They have no children. Pat attended college but did not graduate, and is presently on unemployment.

In the time since our interview: Pat's spouse is now working as a photographer and personal trainer in addition to his other work and Pat is working freelance as an actor.

Patrick (he) is a 30-year-old, white male who identifies as a gay man. He is originally from a large, upper-middle class suburb of New York City and currently lives in Brooklyn, NY. He is middle class, single, has no children, has a BFA, and works full-time.

Sage (she) is a 30-year-old, white cisgendered woman who identifies as a lesbian. She was born in the rural mountains of NC, then grew up in a small town in central NC and later in a large suburb in Washington state. She presently lives in Chapel Hill, NC. She is middle class, has a female partner, has no children, no religious affiliation, has a

BA in English and visual art, an MA in folklore, and is a current doctoral student in education at UNC-Chapel Hill.

Scout (they) is 33-years-old and grew up in a middle-class, 4 person family in Phoenix, Arizona. Scout was born female and identifies as genderqueer/non-conformant. Scout's high school had a student body of approximately 1500 students. Scout has lived in densely populated urban areas, and also many very remote locations through being a part of the outdoor/wilderness and conservation corps community. Scout holds a BA from Oregon State University, and would currently be classified as just above the poverty line. Scout is single, has one (non-biological) child through a past relationship (with the biological mother), and currently splits hir time between San Francisco and very remote areas of California where ze is working on wilderness trail design and construction.

Sera (she) is a 25-year-old, Cherokee & German-American mixed trans woman who identifies as omnisexual. She is originally from a small, upper-middle class suburb of St. Louis, Missouri, and presently lives in Long Beach, California. She is in a low-income neighborhood, married (to a trans woman), has no children, a high school graduate currently attending community college full time, and presently unemployed.

Ted (he) is 44 years old and identifies as a gay man. He is originally from Phoenix Arizona, and presently lives in Washington, DC. He is a family physician, has no children, and works for Kaiser Permanente, the largest non-profit health system in the United States.