Protesters Against Hershey Company Hit Times Square Store

A growing group of activists are holding the Hershey Company and its affiliated school accountable for condoning HIV-related discrimination.

March 14, 2012 By Cristina Gonzalez and Reed Vreeland

More than 20 demonstrators rallied March 8 outside the Hershey Company's flagship store on Times Square to protest the candy maker for not opposing the Milton Hershey School's decision to reject a 13-year-old student because of his HIV-positive status. A number of young activists expressed outrage and deep concern about the HIV discrimination case, and they joined forces with organizers from the AIDS Healthcare Foundation, the Hispanic AIDS Forum, and Gay Men of African Descent to call for a boycott of Hershey Company products.

The case of HIV-related discrimination received national attention last year when the Philadelphia-based AIDS Law Project of Pennsylvania filed a lawsuit on November 30, 2011, against the Milton Hershey School, a private boarding school for low-income students, for rejecting an HIV-positive honors student even though he met the school's requirements. At the time, school officials commented that the student was not admitted into the school because he could pose a health threat to other boarders.

Months later, the Milton Hershey School has stood by its decision to bar the young man from entry, citing the teen's HIV-positive status as a main factor behind the decision. No public apology has been issued. Despite the school's inaction, a growing group of activists have not let the issue rest and are now holding the Hershey Company accountable for the discrimination case at its affiliated school. Although the school operates independently, it is bankrolled and managed by The Hershey Trust Company, the chocolate company's largest single shareholder and beneficiary. Critics also point out that there is overlap between both organizations' board members.

A handful of young demonstrators said that they stood in solidarity with the young man and sympathized with what he must be going through, realizing that they too could be vulnerable to similar forms of discrimination. Most of them had not yet been born in 1985 when Ryan White fought a very public battle against HIV-related discrimination so he could attend his local Indiana public school. These early victories against HIV-related discrimination added to the group's

message that stigmatization can be overcome with better education about HIV.

At the protest, no one had direct contact with the now 14-year-old student who was turned away from Milton Hershey School, though they said they'd like to hear from him regarding his disappointment and his new hopes. POZ wrote the young man with a series of questions. Below are his responses:

Why did you want to be a part of the Milton Hershey School?

I wanted to attend Milton Hershey after I visited the school in 2009. As we were going around the campus and listening to our tour guide, I couldn't believe all the opportunities available. I was only in the sixth grade at the time, but I was very impressed. Since I want to go to college, I knew I could get into any of the colleges that those employed at Milton Hershey attended—as long as I had the grades.

How did you feel when you weren't admitted?

I was upset. My mother seemed more upset than I was on the surface. I internalized my anger and still am. I used to look at Hershey as if I was already one of them. I just knew I would get in because I take pride in everything I do and I keep good grades. I have nothing wrong with me, and everyone that I know, who knows me, likes me.

What would you like to happen now?

I would really like for this school to learn a lesson, a big lesson. But it doesn't really seem as though anything is going to happen to them for what they did.

I know other kids who are HIV positive, and when they tell who they think are his/her so-called friends, what ends up happening is they get teased or ostracized by their peers out of ignorance. I didn't think I would have to go through that there, with the house parents or medical staff at Hershey. My mother even went as far as to find a specialist in Hershey who would be able to care for me while I was in their care. I am at a point that I try to block this out—but it's kind of hard.

Me attending Hershey, I don't see that in my future. Not because I don't want to go, but because they are going to do everything possible for me not to attend. I have four years of school left before college, and I will do my best wherever I attend. I just want to make sure my education is a good one.

What do you want people to know about HIV?

What people need to know about HIV is that education is the key to all knowledge. The more you know, the less afraid you will be. The better you will be able to protect yourself and future generations.

Go to EndHIVStigma.org to learn more about the boycott.

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Hershey-HIV-TimesSqProtest-22085-6988