Severe Bullying Should Be Criminal (or Why We Need National Gay Men's HIV/AIDS Awareness Day)

September 29, 2010 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

Mercifully, I was never bullied as a child. That's not to say that I was never afraid of being bullied or that I never encountered physical and mental threats once in a while.

I worked hard at being overlooked by those who would do me harm if they knew I was gay. And for whatever the reasons, I was mostly successful at it.

I'm not proud that I could hide. Actually, I realize now that my ability to hide fueled the high level of internalized homophobia that I partially blame for my being HIV positive.

Thankfully, I have had time and space to accept and even embrace my sexual orientation. So many fellow lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender folks have not been as lucky.

Which brings me to why I'm writing about this subject. I was brought to tears this morning when I read that another gay teenager had killed himself as a result of bullying.

The old phrase "deaths come in threes" started to rattle around in my brain. Such a horrible confluence of events should make us all reflect on this subject.

Billy Lucas, a high school freshman in Indiana, hung himself dead three weeks ago. Asher Brown, an eighth-grader in Texas, shot himself dead in the head last week.

And last but not least, Seth Walsh, a 13-year-old in California, died yesterday after more than a week on life support after he hung himself.

I hope Billy, Asher and Seth rest in peace, the peace that they could not find in life.

We could think that these are isolated incidents with no connection whatsoever to each other or to us, but we would be wrong. I'm not suggesting they knew each other, but I am suggesting that their stories are just the tip of an iceberg.

The more progress LGBT people make in securing our rights, the more push back we receive from people who do not want us to succeed. It should not surprise us that as our inevitable victories happen that we suffer casualties along the way.

So I’m not surprised that gay teenagers are killing themselves, but I am sad and I am angry.

There’s no doubt in my mind that severe bullying should be criminal, but that’s only part of the solution. Education and outreach are critical. Groups like GLSEN (the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network) and others are working hard to make life better for all students.

We also need support to help us help ourselves. That is why we need things like National Gay Men’s HIV/AIDS Awareness Day, commemorated every year on September 27.

LGBT people need help and we need it now. If anyone needs proof, all I have to say are three names: Billy, Asher and Seth.

UPDATE: Yet another gay teenager has killed himself as a result of bullying. Tyler Clementi, an 18-year-old college freshman, jumped off the George Washington Bridge last week after two classmates used a hidden camera to stream live on the Internet him having sex with a man. This incident may not fit the more traditional forms of bullying, but it deserves no less attention. Tyler, rest in peace.

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