

**TESTIMONY OF ADAM FLANDERS
IN SUPPORT OF LD 1196
TO JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY**

Chairs and the Honorable members of the committee, my name is Adam Flanders, and I appreciate you taking the time to hear my testimony. I am 18 years old and live in Belfast.

I am here today to support the Non-discrimination Bill before you—not only for the legal protection it would provide, but also for the message the law would send to the young people in this state. I think that message is that fairness and equal opportunity—whether in education or employment, and regardless of sexual orientation—are fundamental values in this state. Please do not underestimate the power of this simple message to significantly improve the daily lives of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth just like me. I hope that my experience will help demonstrate this.

High school should be a time for learning and growing. The old saying goes that they are four of the best years of our lives. For me, and others like me, those four years have been among the most difficult of my life.

I entered my freshman year already “out” to my family and friends. The fact that I could count on them made a big difference and in that way I know I am so much luckier than most young gay people.

On a daily basis during my freshman and sophomore years, I was harassed and threatened by fellow students. “Faggot,” “queer,” and plenty of other words I won’t repeat were hurled at me constantly. The hostility of my peers was bad enough, but even

teachers turned their backs to what was happening. Administrators likewise did little, even when I asked for help. I'd like to think that I'm a strong person, but the bullying took a toll on me.

During my junior year, I decided I had to do something. I had to stand up for myself and other kids. Inspired by stories of other students across the nation, I worked to set up a Gay-Straight Alliance at my school. It was a struggle from the beginning—even to get permission to use the word “gay” in the club’s name. I was constantly copying and recopying posters because as soon as one went up, it just as surely was torn down. I went through about 10 posters a day like this. When I got permission to put them up in a glass case, students put posters over the glass. Often, when I submitted notices of upcoming club meetings to be read during school announcements, they wouldn’t even be read.

During my senior year I made posters that said, “It’s Okay To Be Gay. Be Kind and Think For Yourself.” Is that so controversial? Apparently, it was. I had to meet repeatedly with the principal, vice-principal, and superintendent to finally receive permission to post it.

All through this, people felt free to be openly hostile to me because I am gay. Sometimes it was so bad that I didn’t even want to come to school. My absences increased and my normally good grades dropped to the point that I failed two classes. I love learning, but I missed out because I just couldn’t function fully in that environment. When I asked one of my teachers for help, she said to me matter of factly: “Well, they

hate you.” My principal even pointed to the fact that Maine law didn’t protect GLBT students when he tried to ban me from wearing gay-positive t-shirts.

Would the Non-discrimination Bill have stopped that teacher from withholding help? Would it have inspired the principal to take on the students who kept making an issue out of my sexual orientation? Would it have made a difference to my classmates? I hope so. At least with this law, the State would be saying that hate me or not, I have a right to be in that school. I have a right to a safe environment where I can learn. And I am due the basic respect due any human being, no more and no less.

My time in high school is ultimately ending on a happy note, though at another school. Through a superintendent’s agreement, I was able to transfer to Searsport District High School midway through the first semester of my senior year. Finally, after three years, I am able to focus on academics and am able to have a social life. My grades have improved. The fact is, however, that it shouldn’t have to be like this—not for me, not for anyone. In many ways, I was lucky. I had my parents and friends to support me, and ultimately, I had the chance to switch schools. Many kids have neither of these.

I hope you will vote to pass the Non-discrimination Bill.

Thank you.

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