

Approaching Pride: What it Means to Me and Why it is Important

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What do you think of when you hear the word pride?

Pride is a simple word that conjures up many emotions: pride in a sports team, a national heritage, a home state, a home, a family. When you think of pride, "Gay Pride" is probably not the first idea that comes to mind. Gay pride is a part of my pride spectrum, a part of my identity. As a member of a silenced minority that has suffered discrimination, pride is vital. Pride in myself – my whole self – is the main thing I have. Pride in our community is one of the main strengths we as a LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered) community have in this heterosexual and heterosexist world.

It takes pride to stand up and say, "My relationship is valid," in a society so focused on marriage between a man and a woman.

It takes pride to stand up against people who hate you for being gay and refuse to consider the shoes you walk in each day.

It takes pride to have courage and find the words to speak up against injustice and to support your community and family.

It takes pride to enter the workforce as your complete self while protecting your identity and those you love.

It takes pride to survive.

Before a person can have community pride, one must have pride in her or himself. While we are born gay, we are not all born with pride. We must foster and nurture our inner pride. The seed of self respect must be cultivated in our souls. Courage and support strengthen our pride. Support comes from allies and families. Sometimes, when our own families are not supportive, we must create our own extended families. Pride comes from within and from those who support us.

Our non-LGBT allies are an integral part of the LGBT pride community. Being an ally means supporting those you love and care about. Allies have the power to create a welcoming *Safe Space** atmosphere in their work places, schools, churches, homes, and community. Allies help fight bigotry. Allies stand up in solidarity with the LGBT community. As an ally, you can attend an event sponsored by an LGBT group. Once you are more comfortable, you could even host an event or become a part of a straight-gay alliance. You can also acknowledge same sex partners as parents and support "non-traditional" families. You can acknowledge and support younger LGBT members of your family and invite their partner to a family event. You help their pride grow as you nurture the inner pride of children and adults.

In West Virginia, suicide among younger people is on the rise. Nationally, many suicides of young adults are attributed to fears and insecurities about developing their sexual identity. Creating a "*Safe Space*" for LGBT youth and community members is essential in a society where this minority often feels isolated at school or home. You can display a symbol on your office door, such as a triangle that says, "If a youth or an adult *comes out** to you, assure the person that their process is a normal part of human development, it is ok, and you support them – no matter what their sexual orientation is." You may be the first person they have told; they trust you and are hoping to hear a

message that affirms their being. This interaction builds confidence and fosters a sense of self esteem, self worth, and pride.

Teachers can demonstrate a value for all families by teaching texts that reflect a diversity of family structures, which include LGBT parents. Your bookshelf can be a symbol of valuing diversity as much as your words. Selecting texts that present LGBT characters in a positive light encourages respect for LGBT citizens. When presenting a text by an LGBT author, you can discuss this with the students and show them the positive contributions the LGBT community has provided society.

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Pride starts with each of us, but doesn't end with just one person. Pride is a personal and community effort that creates strong bonds. Pride provides protection. Pride fosters strength. Pride protects us all. Pride is one thing I have. Supportive allies and family play an important role in my life and in my pride. What does pride mean to someone you love? What could your pride and support mean for that person? What could your pride and support mean for your community?

*Safe Spaces: The Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network has created the Safe Space Program that provides training materials for allies who want to display a symbol of a Safe Space in their office or classroom.

*comes out: reveals or discusses their sexual identity