

An Ode to Upstanders  
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I love our school, but our school has not always loved me back. I just find our school to have more excluders than includers. Many of my 8 years here have been lonely because of that. But this year something amazing and wonderful happened and part of it was my doing and part of it was your doing. For the first time in my life at our school, when I walked to a lunch table people didn't scoot to keep me out, but scooted to make room for me. You helped do that. You made room for me at the table and for the first time at school I felt like I had really good friends. You might not know what that is like, I don't know, but for me it was new to have smiling faces greet me at school. And being a part of the lunch table with you changed my life. I really can't thank you enough for your friendship and your kindness to me. You know, I remember a couple of you being so kind to me even in kindergarten and all through elementary school. But all of you here have always been kind to me since you have been at our school and that is why I wanted to speak to you today.

A week ago last Tuesday you were not at the lunch table for various reasons and I was left alone with some bully boys. I am going to tell you my own story of what happened because I am afraid that you have heard a version of this story that is not true. I want you to hear the truth from me. I tell my own story. No one has the right to do that for me. Those three made fun of me for being adopted and they made fun of my birthmother and said really unkind things about the woman who gave me life and picked my two dads to be my parents. What I remember is that they laughed and said she should have had an abortion with me and that I should be dead. Everything they said was so mean and so misogynistic. I did stand up for myself and asked them to stop and told them they were insulting my parents, but it was three against one and they didn't stop. When I stood up for myself, one of them then accused me of being aggressive. Then they got really personal and said horrible and homophobic things about my two dads. They talked about gay sex and laughed and it was unspeakably disrespectful to my two loving fathers who have shown me nothing but love my whole life. It was gross and offensive. It was vile and hateful. They attacked me and my family and they took away any safety I felt at school. My family has lost sleep and has lost peace. I have cried and sobbed and been unable to sleep and think. We have tried to bring peace with them, but they do not want peace. Instead of being sorry, they are just mad that they were asked to be accountable. I think at this school they will just get away with it. That has been my experience at our school for eight years.

I really was hurt by one boy especially because this wasn't like him to do this. He has been one of the kindest people to me this year (actually since kindergarten) and I loved having him for the Secret Santa gift and he has been a wonderful friend to me. He broke my trust by participating in this. I am really heartbroken about this. But you know what he did when he was approached about this? He blamed me! He said that I broke **his** trust and should have gone to him first – even though I did do that at the table in that moment. I was really hoping to mend this with him. I am really disappointed in him.

It doesn't seem right that I am the one who did nothing wrong, but I am the one who has been made to feel uncomfortable at our table. It isn't fair that I am the one being driven away at our table. It makes me wonder if that was their intention all along? I am just so angry about all of this.

When I was talking to the adults about the bullying, harassment, and violence there was only one good thing I could name. And so I named each one of you sitting here today. I named you because I know that if you had been sitting at that table that you would have stopped it. You are upstanders, the kind of friends that stand up for me and others when they are being bullied. I named each of you to the adults and told them it would have been different if you had been sitting at the table by my side and I know this is true because throughout this whole year you have done that many times at the table. You have stopped unkind things. You have taken the side of the ones being bullied and stood up for them over and over again. I saw you. I witnessed that. You have been my best friends. I am so grateful for you.

Another reason this horrible event has hurt me so much is that it ruined the last weeks of joy I have with you together. I wanted to play sports and talk and eat together and laugh at all the silly things we laugh at together. Sometimes it felt like I was in a really great movie where I had lots of good friends. It's still fun to be with you, but it isn't as fun because the other guys are there and, honestly, they've just continued their unkindness. I really only have just days together with you all now and I feel like I am ending the year with sadness instead of the joy. It really breaks my heart so much.

Anyway, the main point I want to make is that you matter. You matter to me and you matter to others and you most certainly matter to this school campus. You made me the happiest student ever because of your kindness and friendship and it will always mean a lot to me. Thank you for being such amazing upstanders – someone who does not stand by and watch others get hurt, someone who speaks up for kindness. My wish for you as you leave our school and go to high school is that as you go to your new school next year that you will remember this affirmation I give you today about being the best upstanders and continue to scoot over to make room for others at your new school. Your kindness can change someone's life and I know that because you including me changed my life. You really made a big difference in my life. Keep doing that. Keep being you. Keep being upstanders. Thank you.