

To the Lead Bully
By Helena Donato-Sapp
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To be clear, my goal is not to get you in trouble. I am not here about punishment or policing your behavior. That is the job of the adults at our school. My goal is something more hopeful — to reach out to you one more time to create understanding and peace. But to do that I need first to speak my truth about the hurt and pain you have caused me.

Many times over the past year, I've wondered about why I've been the target of some very hateful comments from you. I thought, "*What could I have possibly done to deserve your targeted unkindness towards me?*" I'm still asking that question.

All I have ever wanted is to be a friend to you and I have tried over and over again to be just that. I've reached out many times to you this year, and even introduced myself to your parents at the opening school event, which I thought was pretty bold. Yet you continued to be unkind, which left me puzzled. So again I wondered, if it isn't anything I have *done* to deserve hateful treatment from you, then could it be something about *who I am*?

Who I am...

Who am I? I am Black. I am adopted. I have two Queer dads. I have learning disabilities. I am also Strong. Political. Intelligent. Loved. Outspoken. An Advocate. An Activist.

Because I've been nothing but open to your friendship, I am left to wonder if it is *who I am* that makes me the constant target of your hateful words and treatment. Over the last year, you have tried to provoke me with comments about race, ability, family status, and sexual orientation among others. You have spoken demeaning words around me, about me, and too often at me. This is why I believe that *my identities* are the target of your unkindness.

More than once, you have challenged my family-of-choice – from questioning my lifelong bond with my Grandma to dishonoring my adoptive family. Recently, you demeaned my ability to do math, which is an attack on my learning disabilities, something I was born with. Until now, I've tried to confront your comments on my own because I am a capable and strong person, but your latest attacks on my birth mother and my two dads were too much to process alone. That is why I sought help from my parents, who then sought help from the adults at our school.

I consider the stories of my birth and adoption to be sacred. You disrespected both when you used them to make a violent point about abortion, grossly making jokes and suggesting that I was better off aborted than being adopted by my gay dads. You even questioned the truth about my birthmother herself when you suggested that my fathers might have lied to me about her. You made a mockery of my stories and demeaned the most important people in my life.

You diminish lesbians and gays by claiming that the only reason they marry is to have sex. This lie is ugly and hurtful to all Queer people, the kind of lie that gives hateful people permission to keep hating, and to keep hurting. You reduced the loving relationship of my fathers when you viciously started talking to me about "butt sex," and prying about their sexual behavior. That attack is vile and personal. Why did you even start talking to me about "butt sex?" My fathers don't object to talking about sex when discussed in an appropriate manner, but hearing about anal sex from a someone at lunch is not appropriate. Especially in the mocking and gross way you did. Your comments and so-called jokes were indecent and not at all funny. They were violent and they left me devastated.

I have cried for days about the things you have said to me.
And I have lost sleep over them.
And I have lost peace.

And I have lost the feeling of safety because of your unkind words. Let me share the truth about my family and my identities:

I am adopted and my brave and loving birthmother *chose* my two fathers out of hundreds of other parents. *Yes*, I have two queer dads who have loved each other decades before I was even born. They got married as a commitment to that love, and they got married to form a family. They have done nothing but love me, support me, champion me since our family was formed, and I am grateful every day for having such a loving and wonderful home to grow up in. I have learning disabilities like a *lot* of kids at our school and I am open about them because I am not ashamed of any single part of my identities, including how I learn differently. My learning differences are my super powers and I am the excellent student I am today because of them.

My family and I proudly work for justice because society is consistently unkind and unjust to identities that are different from the dominant ones. We are proud activists, because activism is how we fight injustice. We work each day to make the world a better and kinder place not just for people we agree with, or who agree with us, but for all people.

Again, my goal is not payback or revenge. It isn't to make you feel shame. It isn't even to ask for an apology. To be clear, I never asked you for an apology. Although you did say you were sorry in front of the administration, you quickly turned around and insisted to friends that you had done *nothing wrong* in the first place. In fact, when some of our friends asked you to apologize again, you responded by saying that "bridge-building requires no apology." Beyond that, you also continued to tarnish my reputation by telling friends that I'm the one trying to exclude you. For the last time, I never asked you to apologize. But all your words and actions after you said "I'm sorry" tell me that you aren't sorry at all.

My goal is never negative or unkind. Quite the opposite. My goal is to create ***peace at the lunch table***. Because I believe that ***peace at the lunch tables*** trickles to ***peace at school***, and ***peace at school*** trickles to ***peace in our community***. It's actually really simple to me. Building peace is a personal goal and drives my work of justice.

I'm aware that not everyone agrees politically at the lunch table, and my fathers and I have talked about this a lot. They encourage me to cross borders and to have friendships across all political, economic, religious, and social identities. Building peace is about talking to others and getting to know them, and respecting different views.

But to create peace I have to feel safe. And many of the things you say and do make me feel unsafe. When you engage me and others in conversations about race and gender and politics and sexual orientation, I just don't get the feeling that you are interested in learning more about these identities. Instead, you make claims about these identities that I know to be false, and you seem to do so to upset people, which just creates anger, distrust, and fear. You appear to be tuned into the divisions in our society. I am too. And I want you to know that I see what you are trying to do, which is to add to these divisions. Know that I will always choose to build peace.

It's clear to me that we couldn't be more different in many of our beliefs and in ways we see the world. But the thing is, having opposite beliefs doesn't mean that we also have to be enemies. We can disagree on our views and be respectful of our differences, and we can still be friendly. We've already done that this year, so I know it's possible. In the best of times, you've been silly and funny. You even taught me a couple of dance moves at the Middle School dance. I want to stay in that space.

I look at our situation as a chance to try a different way for people who hold different beliefs. In the few days left this school year, you and I have an opportunity to model respect not just for our classmates or friends at the lunch table, but to the bigger community beyond our school. This is why I've given this so much time and effort to my message, to us, to end this school year and our time together on a hopeful note.