

## JENN NOVAK SCHOLARSHIP FINALIST



### JENN NOVAK

is a junior at Brecksville/  
Broadview Heights High  
School. She is active in  
fencing, drama club,  
environmental club, French  
club and international club at  
school. She is most interested  
in musical theatre and world  
cultures. She plans to study  
international affairs or  
anthropology in college and  
continue on to a career that  
includes world travel.

It's surprising how one act of hatred can cause so much pain, sadness, and fear. I experienced this most blatantly one Friday night a few years ago. I was at a football game with one of my closest friends, Mark\*. The weather was perfect, our school team was up by 12, and we were cheering and laughing and having an all-around great time. Mark is great fun to be around. He is the brightest, happiest, kindest person I know; which is why it was such a blow when another student at our school approached him, shoved him and called him a "faggot", and then ran off to join his gang of laughing friends.

I was stunned. Mark was on the verge of tears. I couldn't understand what satisfaction he possibly could have gotten out of that. So what if Mark was gay? That student had no provocation to be so mean. I toyed with the idea of reproaching that boy, but I did nothing. I tried to distract Mark, and we eventually got back into the game, but it wasn't the same. It was tenser; Mark was always looking over his shoulder. He felt threatened; at any time that student could have come back to further antagonize him. Mark had every right to be frightened. About 64.3% of homosexual students feel unsafe at their schools, and 91.5% of homosexual students report homophobic remarks such as "faggot" said to them.

After reflecting on the event, I realized that I should have said something to that student, but it was too late. I concluded, though, that reproaching homophobic behavior is not the key to reducing homophobic discrimination. Preventative measures would be much more effective to make students feel safer around their peers. Starting the year this incident occurred, I began to organize the National Day of Silence at my school each April at my high school. The National Day of Silence is a day where participating students go an entire day at their school without speaking, to represent all of the homosexual students who don't speak about their feelings because of the fear of violence and bullying it would bring. The point of the silent protest is to bring awareness to students and school staff about the issue of bullying toward homosexual students in schools. Often other students are in denial of the fact that this type of bullying really hurts people. Each year, students tell me that after that day they understand more clearly how this bullying affects students' abilities to feel comfortable at their schools, and they are glad to help stand out against it. The staff, who often don't take this problem seriously, are made aware that it is important that this type of bullying and violence be taken very seriously because it affects the safety of the students so directly. Each year, this day proves to take small steps toward ending this kind of bullying in our school, and we will continue to try each year.

*\* Name has been changed*

