

## HANNAH SCHMIDT SCHOLARSHIP FINALIST



### HANNAH SCHMIDT

is a senior at Brush High School in Lyndhurst. She enjoys playing the cello, volunteering for local organizations and spending time with friends and family.

Hannah plans to put her aptitude for introspection towards a major in psychology and cultural studies. She is considering attending DePaul University, Hofstra, NYU or Barnard College.

On a brisk afternoon in late November, I began my chilly trek home from school with one of my closest friends. He transferred to my high school as a freshman, and now, one year later, was finally beginning to feel that he fit in. Yet, as I would soon learn, some things remained unaffected by his time in the district. We chatted happily as we walked together, feeling warm and carefree in our sweaters and jackets. Then, without warning, a speeding sedan veered onto the tree lawn next to us, up over the curb and then down again. We jumped back in surprise and fear, and a passenger rolled down their window to yell, "Get stuffed, Faggot!" as they zoomed away laughing.

I saw the color drain from my friend's face as he decidedly looked at the ground; the light in his eyes, always bright and optimistic, had gone dark. I realized then that we were both shivering, though we had been so cozy in our fall layers only moments before. Yes, John\* was gay. A month ago, John had come out of the closet with the help and support of his friends. Several people had started rumors about John's sexuality from the moment he transferred to our school, but the snide comments and unjust acts multiplied after he came out. As John and I continued walking, I was brimming with unanswered questions. Had that really just happened? Who would do that, and why? How small-minded would a person have to be to judge someone as kind-hearted as John on his sexuality alone? No, I thought to myself...to judge him on his sexuality AT ALL was wrong.

Looking at my dear friend, who suddenly seemed to be carrying a weight much heavier than his backpack, I knew that I could not stand for this injustice. After several minutes of silence, I finally spoke. "John," I said, "All the guys in that car combined could never be half the man you are." John looked up at me with a smile in his eyes, and soon we were both laughing again.

Although John quickly became more comfortable with his sexuality and soon shrugged off these injustices, my frustration only grew. As such, I began to look for ways to speak out against prejudices and to stop the hate. While no prejudiced act should be tolerable, I felt most inspired to stop sexual orientation-based discrimination. I began participating, and later organizing, my school's Day of Silence. The Day of Silence is dedicated to raising awareness about the negative effects of discrimination based on sexual orientation. Every year since this incident, I have remained silent for 24 hours to show my support for this cause. I plan to continue participating in the Day of Silence for the rest of my life, and will be a part of Gay-Straight Alliance in college. Most importantly, I promised myself that from then on I would never allow any act of discrimination I witnessed to go unnoticed.

*\*Name has been changed*

