

## **2007 HGLC Respect Award**

Presented to Kevin Jennings, AB '85, founder and executive director of GLSEN, the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network

Kevin's Acceptance Speech - June 7, 2007

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you very much. I'm very aware that the audio is not the best, so I want to make sure you can hear me okay. All right? First of all, I'm honored to receive this award from the Harvard Gay & Lesbian Caucus, who over the last twenty-five years has done incredible work to make this a more LGBT friendly place. I'm incredibly honored to be sitting with Dorothy Austin and Diana Eck, who have made history in their own right. I do want to say that Professors Eck and Austin reminded me myself of my own champagne breakfast twenty-two years ago today at Mather House where I had a little bit too much champagne, smuggled some of it into commencement, proceeded to pass out and sit on my diploma, which still has the crinkles to this day. So the champagne breakfast doesn't always go well.

It's very important to me that I receive this award from my friend, George Byers, who was my colleague for many years at GLSEN, and that I am preceding my friend, Andy Tobias, without whose support and guidance, GLSEN would never have made it. And that I am joined tonight by several very close friends, including Michael Huffington, Jim Stork and Philip Lovejoy, who actually controls my medical proxy, so if the plug ever gets pulled too fast, you know where to look.

Now, before I launch into my remarks, which are actually prepared and outlined, one of my former students from Concorde Academy, Liz Pinsky, or as I should now call her, Dr. Elizabeth Pinsky, who is seated right here, is probably like wow, Kevin always just pulled it out of his ass when he taught, but he actually has an outline this time. Before I do that, I want to make an unpaid and unsolicited political advertisement.

This is the Mass. Equality envelope. Pick it up. I don't even live in this state, but I can tell you as a national LGBT leader this: if we lose the right to marry in Massachusetts, we will not have the right to marry anywhere in America in my lifetime. You must fill this out with however much you can put on it. If it's ten, if it's a hundred, if it's \$1,000, if it's \$10,000, fill it out and do what I'm doing and hand it to Robin before you leave.

As George explained to you in the overwhelmingly and far too positive introduction he gave—he should actually tell you what it's like to work for me. In 1981 when I entered Harvard, I became the first person in my family to ever go to college. It was somewhat ironic that I ended up spending my adult life in education because I had such a difficult time in school. But to understand, you have to understand that I grew up in the Southern Baptist Church, which actually did teach me a few good values.

One of them was that you always should think about people that are less fortunate than you, and you should make sure they have it better than they have it now. My mother, who had dropped out of school when she was nine years old in Appalachia, made enormous sacrifices cleaning houses, working at McDonald's, to keep food on our table after my father died, and to make sure that I was able to focus on education and go to college.

Unsurprisingly, my mother imbued me with the value that, as she had sacrificed to make it better for the next generation in our family, it would be my job to sacrifice and make it better for the next generation. I did not have biological children, but I decided early on in my career that every lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender young person in America was my child, and I was going to fight for them in the way that far too often, their own parents didn't.

And I'm very proud of the accomplishments we have made at GLSEN, the improvements we have made from one lonely little gay-straight alliance at Concord Academy in 1988, to over 3,600 registered with GLSEN this year, a twenty percent increase from last year, in all fifty states. If you're curious if your high school has

one, go to [glsen.org](http://glsen.org), click on “students” and you can pull down the bar to your state and figure out if it has one. If your old high school doesn’t have a gay straight alliance, write them and ask why not.

Whereas we had one state that protected LGBT students when we started GLSEN, we now have ten, with the most recent being Iowa in March of 2007. And I am proud to say that the state house in my home state of North Carolina, two weeks ago passed an anti-LGBT bullying protection bill. It has gone to the floor of the state senate, and if we can win in North Carolina, we can win anywhere.

But obviously if you’re good at math, you’re doing the flipside of the statistics I gave you. There are 25,000 high schools in America, which means that 21,000 still lack gay-straight alliances. There are fifty states in America, of which forty still do not protect LGBT students, including, I am embarrassed to admit, my adopted home state of New York. That is why three out of four LGBT students tell us that they are routinely verbally, physically, or sexually harassed while they are at school. This is unacceptable. And we in this room—you can take the boy out of the Baptist Church, you can’t take the Baptist Church out of the boy.

This is our job to change. We must be the ones who say that the next generation will not go through what we went through. That they will be respected. That they will study homophobia in their history class and not experience it in their hallway. That is our job.

For many of us in the room, the idea that there are openly LGBT students at not only high school, but now middle school, is a mind-blowing thought. Because the first place we felt comfortable being who we were was perhaps Harvard University. This morning at about seven-thirty I got an e-mail from a friend of mine who graduated in 2000 and I wanted to read you part of it.

“Like you, Kevin, I come from Appalachia. This paucity of exposure that I had in Appalachia as a kid left me in a precarious situation when I arrived at Harvard, for I was not yet then an individual. Not yet my own self. And thus had to battle newly understood conflicts on this legacy battleground. This all led me literally to my wits end, and thus, it was from a hospital bed in my junior year at Harvard that I was finally born an individual. My own self. A self who would never again accept truth imposed on me by fiat, brutality, or any other coercive measure.”

For so many of us, Harvard was the place where we found our truth, and rejected the hateful lies with which we had been raised. And we think of this as an oasis. This was not always the case. As many of you know from William Wright’s outstanding book, *Harvard’s Secret Court*, the secret 1920 purge of campus homosexuals in 1920, our University’s administration systematically rooted out gay people in the university and expelled them.

One of those young men, a young man named Eugene Cummings, almost exactly eighty-seven years ago, on June 11, 1920, after his administrative board meeting in which he was told he would be expelled for being gay, went back to his room and killed himself. Eugene Cummings was twenty-three years old, one month and twenty-two days old when he died.

I thought of Eugene Cummings, who had been all but forgotten by history when I prepared for this speech, and I wanted some sense of connection to him. This afternoon I went to the Massachusetts state archives and I got his death certificate. Mr. Cummings was the son of Eugene and Bridgett Sullivan-Cummings, who had emigrated from Ireland, undoubtedly hoping, like my mother, that it would be better for the next generation of their family. They lived at 361 Middle Street in Fall River. Their son, Eugene, had been born on April 19, 1897.

Seven weeks later, fifteen miles east of where Mr. Cummings was born, my grandfather, Marlitt Jennings was born on June 7, 1897. And when I looked at Mr. Cummings’s death certificate in the archives today it struck me that Mr. Cummings could have been my grandfather, but he lived in a different time and place. As did my great-uncle, Michael Joseph Carmel, the brother-in-law of my grandfather, Marlitt Jennings, and the brother of my grandmother, Merlida Carmel Jennings.

Uncle Mickey, as he was known, was the “special uncle” in our family, who never married, but who always made sure that my impoverished mill working family had gifts for his nieces and nephews every Christmas, and as my father grew older and had kids of his own, made sure his great-nieces and nephews had gifts. I’m sure many of those special uncles are in this room tonight.

I would never meet my great-uncle Mickey because he died in Allston, five miles from here, in 1968 of cirrhosis of the liver; bought on by a lifetime of alcoholism; brought on by trying to live as a gay man in a time and place which could not accept him, and during which he could not accept himself; dying ten months before the Stonewall Riots.

These stories of Eugene Cummings and Joseph Michael Carmel, my great-uncle Mickey, often get lost to history, and their names get forgotten. I believe that is wrong. So my partner, Jeff Davis and I, who isn’t able to be here tonight, approached the Open Gate two months ago, and we have decided that we will fund a prize, a new prize at Harvard called the Eugene Cummings Prize, that will go to the undergraduate who has done the most outstanding scholarship on LGBT issues in the university that year, and that will forever keep the memory of Mr. Cummings alive at this university.

And that we must, through organizations like Mass. Equality and GLSEN, fight to preserve that freedom. And we believe even more strongly that it is our job to make sure that the next generation has it better than us, and that each of us in this room must never quit demanding equality for the next generation, so that we can say thank you to Eugene Cummings and the Uncle Mickeys of the past, and make sure that their descendents today know that legacy, know they have a history to be proud of, and know that that is part of history and not part of the America in which they live, which will once and for all be a land where there is liberty and justice for all citizens. Thank you.