



## GLBT Youth Fight for the Right to Party at Prom

By Sue Katz, AlterNet

Posted on June 11, 2008, Printed on August 18, 2008

<http://www.alternet.org/story/87698/>

When I was in high school in the mid-'60s, it never occurred to lesbians and gays to go to their proms with a same-sex partner. Usually they went with their "beards" -- that is, their guy/girl-pals, their heterosexual accessories. The necessity to lug around a closet under one's taffeta prom gown was challenged in 1980 by a Rhode Island high school senior named Aaron Fricke who was determined, despite administrative refusal, to swirl around under the glitter ball in the arms of his date, Paul Guilbert.

Usually kids have to get permission from their parents to go to a late-night event, but in Aaron's case, he had to get a court order. According to the ACLU, the federal court not only agreed with Aaron's case, but warned the school that it needed to provide sufficient security for the lads.

The law remains, although so does the struggle. In March this year the Scottsboro, Ala., school board tried to keep two young lesbians from attending the junior-senior prom, but luckily Jackson County Circuit Judge John Graham nullified the ban just hours before the event. The parents and lawyers talked to the press and ran interference while a 17-year-old donned a fetching gown and was escorted by a 16-year-old in her handsome tuxedo. As one of the lawyers said, with more sense than hope, "This is just a dance. Adults need not get involved."

I had a long talk with a 17-year-old Seattle lad named Kyle Rapinan. As a kid who was homeless for a few years (he's with a foster family now), who is out in school and who is a leader in his school's Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), he has been the target of a lot of scary bullying, he told me. This has involved everything from obscenities on the school's bathroom walls to mean and threatening postings on social networking sites like YouTube, MySpace and Facebook.

The cyber brutality has been particularly difficult, as Kyle sees academic achievement as his one route out of a difficult life. He's worried about the impact of all this online junk on his professional life in the future. "Getting bullied," he said, "was really depressing. If it wasn't for the GSA at my school, I'd go crazy."

He took his boyfriend to his prom a couple of weeks ago, despite the harassment. In fact, as soon as they descended from the limo at the venue, someone yelled "Faggot!" I asked him why he decided to make himself so vulnerable:

I had to show that even though they hated me and told me I didn't

belong there, I am still a student in my school. I'm a senior, and this is my prom, too. I didn't have a lot of fun, but I felt I would regret missing this rite of passage if I didn't go.

But this week he made up for his discomfort at the school event by attending the Pink Prom he helped to organize with support from the adult community. He told me:

We got a grant for \$700 from King County Community Organizing for our inclusive event because it was anti-violence and anti-drug. About 160 kids attended for free and we had 21 chaperones, including people from PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), Safe Schools Coalition, teachers from school and other supportive adults.

From the West to the East, kids are standing up for inclusiveness. Recently, some Massachusetts gender-bending made the prom news. Last month a senior at Peabody Veterans Memorial High School, Deborah Lawson, invited her close friend -- a gay guy who enjoys dressing in drag -- to her prom as a substitute for her out-of-town boyfriend. The school principal said no, but when Deborah asked Fox News, of all people, to get involved, they called the superintendent. Since the handbook says that "everyone must wear appropriate dress," and a dress is considered appropriate for a prom, the superintendent gave them the go-ahead. Deborah concluded: "I think what I've learned is that if you scream loudly enough, you'll get what you want."

They're heroic in the Midwest too. In May, Matthew Pope realized his lifelong dream of being elected homecoming king. Openly gay since his freshman year, he had been aware of his sexuality since eighth grade. Matthew clearly refuses to let the very conservative atmosphere at Shawnee Mission East High School in Kansas shrivel his exuberance. He's the only guy on the cheerleading squad, where he has been picked to be one of three co-captains. His victory against 11 other homecoming king candidates the night of the prom was important to this sexual outsider. "It was the ultimate feeling of being accepted," he said. "I'll be going on now for the rest of my life having that experience. Everyone accepted me, so it's really cool."

Fresno, Calif., has its own prom history. Last month the city's unified school district changed its policies when Cinthia (formerly Cynthia) Covarrubias wanted to run for prom king in a tux. He didn't win, but building on the regulation adjustments, Crystal (Johnny) Vera, a former homecoming prince and yet another popular cheerleader, became the first openly transgendered student to win the title of Roosevelt High Prom Queen.

So while some things, like homophobic harassment, have not changed over the decades, at least today, young gays have a bevy of organizations out there offering help and support in navigating both school and alternative proms. For example, articles are posted on sites ranging from Lambda Legal to About.com to GLSEN

(Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network).

BAGLY is a Boston-based organization working to support GLBT youth. It is renowned for the gay proms it has been holding for 28 years. This year on May 10, the evening of the Youth Pride march, the group hosted 1,500 young people at Boston City Hall.

Grace Sterling Stowell, the executive director of BAGLY, feels its prom especially serves transgender kids. "It's not very common," she told me, "for trans kids to go to their own prom in the gender identity and dress they choose."

One of the other prominent national organizations supporting GLBT youth is the Safe Schools Coalition (SSC). Co-chair Beth Reis tells me that SSC has provided intervention specialists to work with individual gay kids who become targets of attacks. She recalls the shock jock who called for his listeners to picket the graduation ceremony of Krystal Bennett, a lesbian who was elected homecoming king.

Krystal, however, countered with her far more sophisticated understanding of the intersections of gender and sexuality. Although she is an out lesbian, that's not why she ran to be prom king, she said in an interview. She did it "because prom king is the title I'm most comfortable under. Tiaras and roses don't suit me. I have a problem with people being forced into gender categories, and to assume that every girl wants to wear a dress and have roses makes me mad."

The proms organized especially for gay kids are an essential alternative, Reis believes. "We have an obligation as an adult community to bridge the gap until such time as every high school prom feels totally safe and every same-sex date situation there seems totally unremarkable."

However, she admires the kids who stand up to the opposition and attend traditional proms with same-sex partners. "It's incredible that some young people have what it takes to endure sometimes brutal harassment from peers and from the community."

What we don't hear about, she says, are the "cases where it is absolutely no big deal, where it's taken for granted that every child has the same access to the prom." So now the question remains: How many GLBT kids have been able to grab their honey, wear their sparkles or cuff-links and reclaim the Village People and Donna Summers with gay abandon?

*Sue Katz has published journalism on the three continents where she has lived; her topics range from Middle East peace movements to the impact of aging on sexuality. Visit her blog at [www.suekatz.com](http://www.suekatz.com)*

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