



Jennings, Kevin (b. 1963)

by Victoria Shannon

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Kevin Jennings.
Image courtesy Kevin Jennings.

It has been said that one person can start a revolution and, in the case of Kevin Jennings, founder of the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), that has never been more profoundly true.

With courage born of anger, Jennings drew on his own experience with bullying and gay bashing throughout his school years, and transformed his passion for justice into founding the first national organization to address the lesson gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender young people were hearing in schools: Hate yourself.

For nearly twenty years, Jennings has campaigned all over the country to educate glbtq and straight teachers, parents, students, and community members about ending bias in the nation's K-12 schools. Although Jennings resigned as executive director of GLSEN in August 2008, his legacy will live as the chapters of GLSEN flourish throughout the United States.

Kevin Brett Jennings was born on May 8, 1963 in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. He is the son of Chester Henry, a Baptist preacher, and Alice Verna (Johnson) Jennings. He is the youngest of five children; he has three brothers and a sister. Jennings was born seven years after his nearest sibling, at a time when his mother, at 38, was not anticipating another child.

When he was three years old, Jennings nearly died of whooping cough. Frightened of losing her youngest son, his mother became fiercely protective of him, and he acquired the name "Mama's Boy." As Jennings says, "I can't remember a time when that wasn't my name. So I guess there was never a time when I felt like I was a normal boy."

After attending a seminary in New Orleans, Jennings' father became an itinerant Baptist preacher, and the family moved all over the South as he attempted to find a permanent church. The family was dirt poor. His mother literally swept rattlesnakes out of the house at one posting in Alabama.

By the time Jennings was born, the family was in Florida, enmeshed in the activities of the Southern Baptist Church his father pastored: church on Sunday, prayer meetings on Wednesdays, revival meetings, choir practice, and church athletic leagues.

By Jennings' eighth birthday, the family was living in Lewisville, North Carolina in a trailer park. His father asked him how he wanted to celebrate his birthday. Always aspiring to be as athletic as his older brothers, Jennings said he wanted to go to the Y. After executing a complicated dive into the swimming pool, Jennings' father had a massive heart attack. He died later that day.

At his father's funeral, Jennings learned another life lesson when he began to cry after his mother fainted. One of his brothers said to him, "Don't cry. Be a man. Don't be a faggot." In addition to "Mama's Boy," Jennings now had another moniker that was to follow him throughout his early life.

After his father's death, Jennings' mother found a job at McDonald's to support her and her youngest son. Their economic situation became worse as each of the older boys moved away, taking their financial contribution with them. In addition to poverty, Jennings carried around an immense amount of guilt over his father's death because, after all, it had been his idea to go to the Y in the first place. His brothers would tell him repeatedly that it was his fault his father was dead.

Jennings regards the greatest tragedy of his mother's life her being forced to stop attending school when she was nine years old. She educated herself through reading and watching documentaries on television. During his early childhood, she shared her love of learning with her youngest son, taking him to see Civil War battlefields, watching nature films, and teaching him to love books and reading. Although his family was poor, Jennings' home life stood in stark contrast to what he was experiencing in school.

Because he was bullied constantly in school and called "sissy" and "faggot" all the time, he developed a dread of going to school. He experienced what he calls his "Sunday funny feeling," his name for the "fear-induced nausea" he felt at the prospect of going to school. He began to gain weight in middle school, prompting yet another unflattering nickname from his classmates, "Baloney Boy."

By the time he started junior high school, Jennings experienced abuse and bullying from not only his classmates, but also from his gym teacher whose treatment of Jennings only spurred his classmates to harass him more because the harassment was now "seemingly endorsed and blessed by a teacher."

In ninth grade, Jennings reported the gym teacher to a guidance counselor who did not believe the boy's accusations and did nothing. Jennings learned another lesson: He could not count on the authorities to do the right thing because "they tended to side with those who had power already."

When it came time to return to school for tenth grade, Jennings told his mother he was not going back to school. He told her about the harassment and abuse he had suffered for the past four years, and she--after confronting the guidance counselor--helped him transfer to another school.

Jennings transferred to Paisley High, a school for gifted and talented students. There he joined the debate team and had his first sexual encounter with another boy. He had suspected he was gay but, as he says, because of the Baptist Church, "I wasn't allowed to know. Being gay was unthinkable."

Before Jennings' junior year started, he and his mother moved to Hawaii to live with his sister because his mother was exhausted from trying to support a family by working at McDonald's. There Jennings attended Radford High. When it came time to apply to colleges, his history teacher encouraged him to apply to Harvard, and he was accepted.

At Harvard, Jennings thrived. Not only did he do well academically, but he came out of his closet and told his mother he was gay. For years after his revelation, their relationship was, at best, strained.

After graduating from Harvard in 1985, Jennings accepted a teaching job at Moses Brown School in Providence, Rhode Island where he taught for two years. His next job was at Concord Academy where, on November 10, 1988, Jennings came out to the entire campus in a Chapel Talk.

After his address, his students rushed the pulpit, crying and hugging him. When he got to his classroom, he saw that they had written on the blackboard, "We love you, Kevin, and we're so proud of you."

Soon after his public coming out, one of his students, a heterosexual girl whose mother was a lesbian, asked Jennings to help her start what she called a "Gay-Straight Alliance" at Concord. Jennings was off and

running the first lap of what would become his two-decade fight for glbtq students.

In 1988, Jennings and his student founded the country's first Gay-Straight Alliance. Almost immediately other schools sought him out to speak on their campuses, and he became increasingly convinced that what was needed was a national organization to address the problems of glbtq students.

In 1990, Jennings, with three other people, founded GLISTeN, the Gay and Lesbian Independent School Teacher Network. In May, 1991, the organization held its first conference at Concord Academy; over 100 people attended. Also in 1991, the organization changed its name to GLSTN, Gay and Lesbian School Teachers Network.

In 1992, Massachusetts Governor Bill Weld asked Jennings to serve on the Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth. The Commission's report, released in 1993, was called "Making Schools Safe for Gay and Lesbian Youth." The state board of education voted unanimously to make the Commission's recommendations the official policy of the State of Massachusetts; the program, called Safe Schools for Gay and Lesbian Students, was the first of its kind in the nation.

In 1993, Jennings was awarded a Klingenstein Fellowship at Columbia University's Teachers College. He left Concord Academy that year and moved to New York where, in 1994, after receiving his M.A. from Columbia, he started the process of making GLSTN a national organization. GLSTN received \$25,000 from an anonymous donor and Jennings set to work running the organization.

That same year he published his first book, *One Teacher in Ten: Gay and Lesbian Educators Tell Their Stories*. The book compiles the stories of 40 glbtq educators who discuss what it is like to be gay and teaching.

In his travels to help establish GLSTN chapters in 1994, Jennings met David Mixner, then a confidant of President Clinton, who gave him a list of the twenty biggest donors to gay causes, and GLSTN began to receive the funds necessary to expand.

Jennings also met his life partner, Jeff Davis, a financial consultant, at GLSTN's first event in New York in 1994. Davis advised Jennings about practical matters related to GLSTN, and helped guide the organization towards achieving its goals. Today, Davis is the Global Head of Marketing for Lehman Brothers' Equities group.

Jennings' second book, *Becoming Visible: A Reader in Gay and Lesbian History for High School and College Students*, was published in 1994. The book's 39 readings describe the contributions of gay men and lesbians to cultures around the world. It is organized in a textbook format that allows teachers to examine important events in the history of gay men and lesbians.

In 1996, at East High School in Salt Lake City, Utah, a battle was beginning that would rock the entire country. Kelli Peterson, a lesbian student, was attempting to start a Gay-Straight Alliance at East High School. The school district immediately attempted to ban the group.

Because the group could not legally be singled out for prohibition, the school system voted to ban all school clubs, including the chess club and the Bible club. The national news media had a field day with the story. The students at East High staged a massive walkout led by Peterson. GLSTN members from all over the country flew to Utah to support her.

Peterson's story served as the narrative thread for a documentary called *Out of the Past*, a project conceived by Jennings (who helped write and produce the film) with producer Eliza Byard and director Jeff

Dupre. The film won the Audience Award for Best Documentary in the Sundance Film Festival in 1998.

As the 1996-97 school year ended, GLSTN voted to change its name to Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), to reflect the fact that there were more than teachers involved in the organization, and to include all students, gay and straight.

In 1997, Jennings was invited to the White House at the request of Richard Socarides, senior advisor to President Clinton and his liaison to the glbtq community. The invitation reflected Clinton's attempt to repair his relationship with the glbtq community after his inability to keep his promise to end the ban on gay men and lesbians in the military.

Jennings' third book, *Telling Tales Out of School: Gays, Lesbians, and Bisexuals Revisit Their School Days* (1998), won a Lambda Literary Award. In this book, forty adults recount their experiences as glbtq students.

In 2003, Jennings and Pat Shapiro published *Always My Child: A Parent's Guide to Understanding Your Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered, or Questioning Son or Daughter*. The book counsels parents trying to understand and support children who claim an alternative sexual identity.

In the closing--and most poignant--essay of the book, Jennings recounts his personal story of reconciling with his mother in 2000.

In 2005, Jennings published a second, all-new edition of *One Teacher in Ten* with 39 new essays by glbtq educators. In his preface, "What a difference a decade makes?," he notes that no contributors in the new collection felt compelled to use pseudonyms, as opposed to several in the 1994 edition.

When Jennings started GLSEN in 1990, only one state (Wisconsin) protected gay men and lesbians from being fired from their jobs because of their sexual orientation, and there were no Gay-Straight Alliances. Today, eleven states have laws protecting gay and lesbian students from bullying and harassment, and there are 4,200 GSAs in the United States. Under Jennings' leadership, GLSEN has made safe schools a national issue.

GLSEN programs such as GSA's No Name-Calling Day and Day of Silence are now observed in schools all over the country. GLSEN's National School Climate Survey in 2005 found that "students in schools with GSAs were less likely to feel unsafe at school and less likely to miss school because of a lack of safety."

Jennings was named to *Newsweek* Magazine's "Century Club," as one of 100 people to watch in the new century. He is also the recipient of the Human and Civil Rights Award of the National Education Association.

In 2005, Jennings suffered a near-fatal heart attack after coming off the ice in a game with the New York Gay Hockey Association. In 2006, he published *Mama's Boy, Preacher's Son*, a book about his life and a tribute to his mother. After her death in 2002, Jennings established the Alice Jennings Fund at the Appalachian Community Fund, which provides support to organizations serving low-income and battered women in the South.

Although focused on glbtq youth, Kevin Jennings' work has benefited the entire gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered community in the United States.

Jennings and his partner, Jeff Davis, maintain a home in New York City. During his farewell address at the GLSEN Respect Awards in the spring of 2008, he summed up his philosophy in his closing remarks: "Be impatient. Demand change now. Time is a luxury that children cannot afford."

[In May 2009, Jennings joined the Obama administration as Assistant Deputy Secretary of Education and

director of the Office of Safe & Drug-Free Schools. The appointment, for which he is eminently qualified, sparked a series of hysterical and libelous attacks on him by conservative activists, abetted by irresponsible reporting from the *Washington Times* and the Fox News Network.

Despite the viciousness of the attacks, Jennings was buoyed by the support he received from President Obama and Secretary Arne Duncan.

His partner told him, "You've spent your whole life fighting bullying. You're not going to give in to bullies now." So, rather than resigning in the face of the vicious attacks, Jennings pressed on with ambitious plans to help prevent bullying in the schools.

The urgency of this need was underlined in the fall of 2009 when a number of suicides by gay youth who had been bullied came to light. In response, he helped convene the first White House Conference on Bullying Prevention, headlined by the President and First Lady. He also worked with the national association of school bus drivers to help train drivers to prevent bullying on school buses and with advising local school boards on ways to provide safe schools for all students.

In 2011, he decided to resign his position in the Department of Education in order to head a new non-profit organization, "Be the Change," dedicated to addressing the growing problem of economic inequality in the country.

One of the advantages of the new job is that it will permit him to move back to his home in New York City to spend more time with Davis.

In an interview with Stephanie Mencimer soon after he announced his plans to leave the Department of Education, Jennings explained that he was comfortable leaving since "I felt like we had succeeded in mobilizing the resources of the administration to stop bullying. . . . My contribution was to galvanize [the anti-bullying] movement and now that movement can move on without me," he said.]

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