

## Campaign Offers Help to Gay Youths

**By Brian Stelter**

Oct. 18, 2010

“Middle school was the worst,” Calvin Stowell says in a YouTube video he uploaded on Oct. 1.

Homophobia was rampant. Bullies were “pretty relentless,” he says, recalling that on his first day there, a girl walked up to him and asked, “Are you a faggot? No offense.” Eventually his parents pulled him out of the school.

Looking directly at the camera, Mr. Stowell, now 22, then says three words that he wants isolated gay, lesbian and transgender teenagers to hear: “It got better.”

Thousands of people like Mr. Stowell have posted personal testimonies to YouTube in an online campaign titled “It Gets Better” that has, in Internet parlance, “gone viral” in the four weeks since it started. The campaign is intended to help gay teenagers who feel isolated and who may be contemplating suicide, and it coincides with a rash of recent news stories about bullying and the suicides of gay teenagers and young adults.

The highly personal videos have caused some teenagers to ask for help. Mr. Stowell now spends hours each day replying to messages from viewers.



Calvin Stowell contributed videos on YouTube that help make up the “It Gets Better” online campaign.

“Growing up, I never had someone to confide in,” he said. Now these teenagers do. “I can’t even articulate how much this has ended up meaning to me,” he said.

Mr. Stowell says he has received 23 e-mails from teenagers who said they had felt suicidal. He has referred them to the Trevor Project, a toll-free telephone line and online chat site for gay youths at risk. The YouTube channel for “It Gets Better” is the third largest source of traffic to the Trevor Project, and there has been a “great increase” in calls in the last month, a spokeswoman for the project said.

The videos are “a new way of using the technology at hand to save lives,” said Stephen Sprinkle, a professor at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, who posted a video to YouTube about the loneliness he felt before identifying as gay.

Some say the videos also represent an important moment for the gay rights movement. The sharing of coming-out stories has long been a tool of solidarity among gays as “a way to say that we understand each other because we had to come out under fire or because we struggled with it,” Mr. Sprinkle said.

The “It Gets Better” videos are different, he said, because they are both more public and more positive. “We’re able to look back on our stories and say, it really has gotten better,” he said.

“Growing up, I never had someone to confide in,” he said. Now these teenagers do. “I can’t even articulate how much this has ended up meaning to me,” he said.

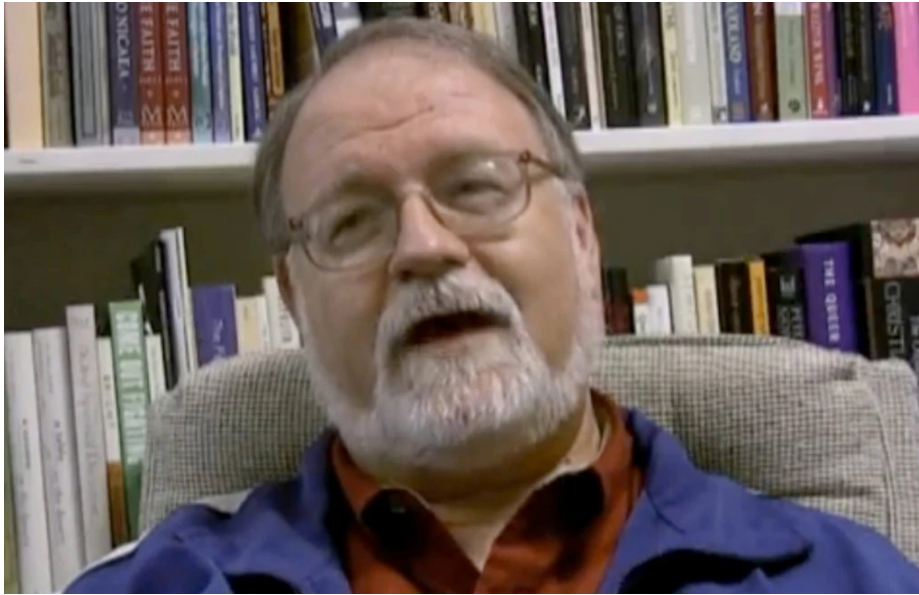
Mr. Stowell says he has received 23 e-mails from teenagers who said they had felt suicidal. He has referred them to the Trevor Project, a toll-free telephone line and online chat site for gay youths at risk. The YouTube channel for “It Gets Better” is the third largest source of traffic to the Trevor Project, and there has been a “great increase” in calls in the last month, a spokeswoman for the project said.

The videos are “a new way of using the technology at hand to save lives,” said Stephen Sprinkle, a professor at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, who posted a video to YouTube about the loneliness he felt before identifying as gay.

Some say the videos also represent an important moment for the gay rights movement. The sharing of coming-out stories has long been a tool of solidarity among gays as “a way to say that we understand each other

because we had to come out under fire or because we struggled with it,” Mr. Sprinkle said.

The “It Gets Better” videos are different, he said, because they are both more public and more positive. “We’re able to look back on our stories and say, it really has gotten better,” he said.



Stephen Sprinkle also contributed a video to the “It Gets Better” project.

Dan Savage, the sex columnist who started the project, concurred, saying in an interview that the videos were “helping gay adults realize that it’s gotten better for us,” but that “for teens, it’s been getting worse out in the boonies, in the exurbs.”

The “It Gets Better” idea came to Mr. Savage, 46, while he was riding the AirTrain shuttle to Kennedy International Airport last month and thinking about Billy Lucas, a 15-year-old from Indiana who committed suicide Sept. 9. The local news media reported that Mr. Lucas was bullied regularly.

Days earlier, Mr. Savage had blogged about the suicide, and a reader had written: “My heart breaks for the pain and torment you went through, Billy Lucas. I wish I could have told you that things get better.”

Mr. Savage said he felt the same way. But how to tell them? He gives talks at colleges regularly, but not at middle schools or high schools. “I would never get permission,” he said, blaming a system of “parents, preachers and

teachers” who “believe they can terrorize gay children out of being gay as they grow up.”

His realization was this: “I was waiting for permission that in the era of YouTube, Twitter, Facebook I didn’t need anymore.”

Mr. Savage and his husband put the YouTube page online on Sept. 21, and he promoted it in his syndicated column. The column quoted the politician Harvey Milk: “You gotta give ’em hope.”

For Mr. Savage, the responses have been “really overwhelming” far too many for one person to watch. He is now preparing a permanent home for the videos.

Most are by ordinary people. Some are by celebrities, like Tim Gunn, a mentor on the hit show “Project Runway,” who revealed in his video that he tried to kill himself at 17.

The most popular video features Joel Burns, a Fort Worth city councilman, who read his testimony at a Council meeting. Choking back tears, he recalled being roughed up one day in high school by older children who told him that “I should die and go to hell where I belonged.”

Mr. Burns’s message to gay teenagers was succinct: “The attitudes of society will change. Please live long enough to be here to see it.”



Dan Savage, a syndicated columnist, started the project.

Brad Barket/Getty Images