

Human and Civil Rights Award Winner

SuAnne Big Crowe Memorial Award

Presented to a K-12 student(s) whose achievements in school have helped enhance all students' sense of worth and dignity.



Graeme Taylor
Non-Member, Michigan

When a teacher in neighboring school district was suspended without pay for disciplining a student in his class who made anti-gay remarks, 14 year-old Graeme Taylor decided to do something about it.

He drove with friends for an hour from his home in Ann Arbor to Howell, Michigan to speak at the school board meeting in support of the teacher Jay McDowell, president of the Howell Education Association. "I've been in classrooms where children have said the worst things—the kind of things that drove me to a suicide attempt when I was only nine years old," Graeme told the board and about 100 others in attendance. "These are the things that hurt a lot."

Graeme's speech was videotaped by news crews and featured on Detroit-area TV. It was posted on YouTube, several popular blogs and social media websites. And Graeme found himself being interviewed on MSNBC, numerous radio stations as well as print and online media outlets.

Then he was invited on the Ellen DeGeneres Show. "I went through some very tough times learning to accept myself, but once I did, I realized just what a beautiful thing that is," he told DeGeneres. "We are all better for having you in the world," DeGeneres replied.

Speaking to the NEA Board of Directors in September, 2011, Graeme said that "GLBT youth need to know that educators are on their side. I am not bullied because my educators have felt free to openly acknowledge there is nothing wrong with my sexual orientation. I am gay and I was born that way." He received a standing ovation from the Board members. Graeme was accompanied by father, Kirk Taylor, an NEA member, whose local affiliate is the Heartland Education Association. Mr. Taylor is in his 35th year as a teacher. "Graeme is the type of young man you get when GLBT youth are not bullied and are free to learn and pursue their own interests," said Mr. Taylor. Graeme's mother, Marianne Taylor, taught school for six years and currently works for a city library. She too is an NEA member.

Graeme has also been a speaker at the White House Anti-Bullying Summit and the Youth Summit in San Francisco. In addition, he returned to his former middle school to speak to the entire faculty to tell them what it was like to be a gay student in that school. His visit inspired the staff to create a Gay-Straight Alliance, the first in a middle school in Michigan, and it has large and enthusiastic student membership.

