

In My Own Words

DONOVAN AND RAMELLI V. POWAY UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

Joey Ramelli and Megan Donovan were forced to drop out of high school and complete their education at home after being harassed by their classmates over the course of their sophomore and junior years. Lambda Legal sued the school district. Recently, the California Court of Appeal, the state's mid-level court, upheld a jury decision that holds Poway High School responsible for failing to protect them. Joey Ramelli tells his story.

I have always thought of myself as a lucky guy. My mother and grandmother always taught me to be myself, and that I could accomplish whatever I wanted. For that reason, coming out to my parents at 13 was the easy part; entering Poway High School that same year was much more difficult.

The trouble began with the hesitation and discomfort I noticed from students, teachers and administrators when I tried to be upfront and honest about my sexual orientation. I was one of the first students to ever be out on campus; and administrators quickly labeled me — and not the hostility I encountered — as the problem. When I was called names like *fag*, *fudge packer* and *queer*, I was told I wasn't welcome on campus; but when I went to teachers for help, they told me to avoid the people and places where the hostility was happening — and to stop bothering them.

By the time I entered junior year, it wasn't just about being called names on campus; it had begun to turn violent.

Students spit on me, threw fruit and other objects, even made death threats. My grades dropped as I began to ditch classes — anything to get myself away from the abuse.

My mother noticed the change in my behavior, and finally I broke down, telling her about what I'd been enduring. She set up a meeting with assistant principals, whose response was a slap in the face: They said that the problem wasn't other students or Poway in general, it was me. They suggested I stay in the classroom during break, or perhaps that homeschooling would be a better fit. In fact, as I began my senior year, they asked me to stay home, and in fear for my safety, I did. That's when I sought legal help.

Lambda Legal's Senior Staff Attorney Brian Chase, along with San Diego attorneys Paula Rosenstein and Bridget Wilson, handled my case against the Poway High School administrators who failed to protect me and my co-plaintiff, Megan Donovan, a friend who was experiencing the same sort

of harassment and neglect. The courts ultimately held that the administrators failed in their duty to take adequate steps to deal with anti-LGBT harassment and bullying. Both Megan and I wanted to make sure that this will never happen to another student and that the people who are supposed to help students grow into well-adjusted adults aren't actually stunting them.

The case is over, and Poway lost. The most important lesson I learned in high school — the hard way — was how important it is for young people to stand up for their rights and to hold educators to the highest possible standards. I'm 22 now. I missed the happy high school experiences people remember for the rest of their lives: no prom, no senior trip, not to mention no college straight out of high school. But thanks to Lambda Legal taking my and Megan's case, other gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students can have those opportunities we missed. **L**