

KEVIN JENNINGS

b. May 8, 1963

EDUCATOR/ACTIVIST

“We know that students learn best in a school where they feel truly safe. I am here to make that happen for more kids.”

Kevin Jennings founded the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), the nation’s first organization combating discrimination against GLBT students.

A monumental leader and crusader, Kevin Jennings has dedicated his career to ensuring safe schools for all students. In 1990, he founded the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), the nation’s first organization combating discrimination against GLBT students. Jennings currently serves as the assistant deputy secretary for the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools at the U.S. Department of Education.

The youngest of five children, Jennings experienced a childhood deeply rooted in conservative ideology. Poor and in a continual state of transition, his family moved so often that Jennings attended 11 schools in four states. While he displayed impressive academic aptitude, he suffered daily from mental and physical abuse by classmates.

“School was a place I both loved and hated,” recalls Jennings. “I loved it because I loved learning. I hated it because I was targeted at a pretty young age for bullying and harassment.”

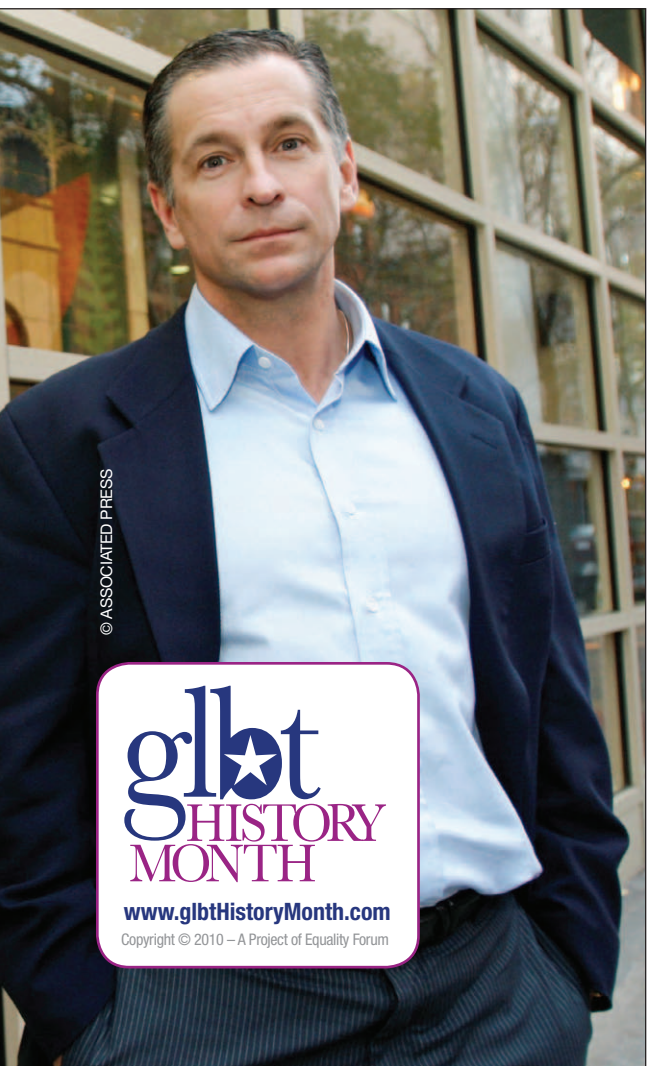
In 1985, Jennings earned a bachelor’s degree magna cum laude from Harvard University, becoming the first member of his family to graduate from college. Later, he earned master’s degrees from both Columbia University and New York University.

Following his graduation from Harvard, Jennings pursued a career in education. In 1988, while he was a history teacher at a Massachusetts high school, he spearheaded the country’s first Gay Straight Alliance (GSA), a coalition of students fighting against harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Two years later, Jennings expanded the movement to encompass parents, teachers and community members, creating GLSEN. Beginning as a grassroots volunteers group, GLSEN has developed into a national organization with more than 40 chapters and over 4,500 schools nationwide.

As co-chair of the Education Committee of the Governor’s Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, Jennings challenged the Massachusetts State Board of Education to adopt new policies protecting GLBT students. In 1993, his efforts led to the country’s first state law prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation in public schools.

Named by Newsweek one of the top 100 people likely to make a difference in the 21st century, Jennings has authored six books and received a Lambda Literary Award for “Telling Tales Out of School.” He co-wrote and produced the documentary “Out of the Past,” which won the 1998 Sundance Film Festival Audience Award for Best Documentary.

“The process of change is like a relay race,” says Jennings. “My job is to ensure that we’re further ahead in the race and, like a good relay team member, ready to pass that baton to the next person with a lead toward the end goal of a safe school for every child.”



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