

LOCAL NEWS

Courageous efforts honoured

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When elementary school teacher Ellen Chambers Picard learned she was being given her union's humanitarian award, her son was the first one she told.

More than two years ago, the then-Hillcrest student went public that he was filing an Ontario Human Rights Commission complaint against his mom's boss, the Lakehead Public School Board. As a gay teen, his school years were marred by name-calling and harassment.

And as a result of Gabriel Chambers Picard's complaint, the public board was required to introduce new measures to stop homophobic harassment in schools.

His mom, who'd helped in the research and went through the mediation process with her son, didn't stop advocating for homosexual youngsters.

It's for that advocacy work that Chambers Picard is in Toronto today, picking up the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario humanitarian award.

Nominated by a co-worker at Agnew H. Johnston School, Chambers Picard found out she'd won in April.

"He was the first one I phoned," she said of her son. "I think he was pretty pleased. Very proud of me.

"I kind of view it as both of us. I'm very proud of him for having had the courage to do what he did. It's not easy."

After the stress of the human rights complaint was over, Chambers Picard continued advocating for children by educating other teachers.

Within her own school, she led workshops for fellow teachers and brought resources into the school and to the diversity committee about the spectrum of sexual identities.

She founded a local group to counter homophobia in the community and is a member of the education committee of Egale Canada, a national organization that works to advance the rights of gays, lesbians and their families.

What her son endured is a very specific form of bullying, and it's in schools across the country, she said.

The process has changed her life, she agreed with a chuckle.

Her son had already graduated from high school before the complaint was dealt with.

"Nothing can change what he experienced, though the hope is no one else has to experience it."

Though she knew her son was having a tough time at school, she didn't realize just how tough until he neared the end of Grade 12.

"Until he came at the very end of his high school career and said, 'That is it, I've simply had enough.' It's like I got hit on the head with a great big hammer . . . I didn't get the picture until then.

"In retrospect, to see the damage that happened to my son is not good," she said. "So hence the desire to open other people's eyes."

When Gabriel and his parents complained to Hillcrest administration, they were told little could be done.

"That didn't feel right," Chambers Picard said. "I'm in the system and I thought, 'No this does not make sense. Our job is that we are educators and we should be educated in what's going on.'"

Chambers Picard began researching the Charter of Rights and Ontario's human rights code and discovered institutions should be putting measures in place to stem harassment.

"It's still ongoing, the work that needs to be done. . . . Education is never over."

In her own classroom, she's slowly edged into using the "wonderful resources" on diversity the board purchased and made available to teachers.

"I know some people view homosexuality as a sensitive subject, but I think we undersell our children on how accepting they really are . . . they aren't mean creatures."

Though there's still work to be done on racism, people check themselves and racial slurs aren't heard much any more, she said. But until that sort of name-calling toward gays is checked, more education is still needed, she said.



Ellen Chambers Picard joined her son Gabriel when he went public about his human rights complaint against the Lakehead Public School Board. An elementary school teacher, Chambers Picard continues to advocate for homosexual youngsters and has been awarded for her efforts.