

## What changes can we bring to Rock Bridge in order to improve the mental health of LGBTQ+ students?

I'm starting to believe that my friends have had a more profound impact on my core beliefs and politics than even my own family. I can distinctly remember a dinner table conversation from a few years ago, where my dad's heteronormative perspective was echoed in my words and my thoughts about the LGBTQ+ community. As I see myself now, there isn't any trace of that ignorant and sheltered little girl. The queer students that have surrounded me for the last five years have taught me that their identity crises are not a result of psychological impairment but are the source of heartbreaking *mental health struggles*. Stories of attempted suicide, drug use, and instability within households because of poor family dynamics have completely changed the way I think about what LGBTQ+ youth are going through, especially my own friends.

This past fall, I met an amazing human being named Kirsten Baines. He became my close confidant over the course of marching band season, and he in turn, shared his experiences with the modern healthcare system. More times than not, he had difficulties speaking to the right doctors and obtaining necessary treatments for his mental health to improve. While he was trying out gender affirming hormone therapy, there were news stories coming out about laws in southern states that restricted those specific types of treatments and criminalized the families that sought them out. I was so shocked by those articles that I burst into tears in front of my mother one night, expressing my fear for Kirsten and all the trans youth that were trying to obtain hormone therapy. Around the same time in February, I stumbled upon an Instagram advertisement from an organization called the It Gets Better Project that was headlined "Win 10,000 for Your School."

Intrigued, I clicked on it, and I spent the next couple of hours scrolling through their website and learning about their efforts to uplift LGBTQ+ youth around the country. The next day, I shared the idea with Kirsten, and he readily agreed that a project funded by an It Gets Better grant would make some much needed changes in our community. We started filling out the application questions by incorporating our personal experiences with the issues that LGBT youth face in our school.

I attended a GSA meeting on a Thursday evening to discuss some of these issues with their members, and the number one concern that they had was the usage of gender-neutral bathrooms. Some of the students complained that teachers would place time limits on bathroom breaks and since the gender-neutral bathrooms were far away from classes downstairs or in the North wing, LGBTQ+ students struggled to meet those time limits. When I asked them if there was anything I could do, they just told me to encourage a conversation about it at the district level.

After running through a lot of the potential projects listed on the It Gets Better site, we decided that a gender affirming closet would be the most helpful and accessible resource for queer students who were struggling to transition. Throughout all of this, I was in communication with my counselor, Ms. Howser, and she gave me access to the results of the Fall School Culture Survey. I was able to create pie graphs that demonstrated trends between the number of queer youths that felt accepted at Rock Bridge, and the percentage of queer students who felt like dress codes and school rules were applied equitably and fairly. I included this in our application, and I also included pictures of the closet after we got access to it and cleaned up the mess of clothes on the floor. Kirsten and I folded the heaps of t-shirts and pants, rearranged the shoe

rack, and we took an inventory of all the things we wanted to add to the closet to make it more welcoming. We carefully determined that the most important materials for our closet were gender affirming chest binders and make up for queer students to experiment with.

This was when our first roadblock appeared. Mr. Sirna sent us an email saying that we couldn't apply for the grant because the deadline to obtain School Board approval had already passed. We had no idea that our grant needed School Board approval, but the CPS Business Services Office confirmed this with us in an email a couple days later. By this time, it was past March 15<sup>th</sup> and we had already submitted the application. We sent a frantic email to the It Gets Better Organization asking if they could wait on reviewing our application until we got School Board approval to proceed, and they said they were going to go ahead and review it but they would pull it if our School Board said "no."

Kirsten and I anxiously waited until the April 11<sup>th</sup> Board meeting, but then our hopes were dashed when the Board tabled the application and completely robbed us of a decision. In the days after, we met with Superintendent Brian Yearwood and the Assistant Superintendent of Secondary Schools, Helen Porter. They flagged specific passages within the application that could have had legal implications and needed to be revised, so they asked us to request for an extension from the It Gets Better Organization. We asked, and luckily, we earned one until April 18<sup>th</sup>. Dr. Porter again disappointed us by saying that the School Board could not come to a decision by then, and we asked for another extension, and this time we were granted one until April 25<sup>th</sup>. This request was accompanied by an angry email from Kirsten and I, detailing how long and tedious the approval process had been and how frustrated we were. Every single deadline, we had a revised application ready to go, but the School Board had its own schedule, and we could not rush the process.

Our project had nearly lost the support of Mr. Sirna and the School Board because of the fiery statements in the email, but Ms. Howser advocated for us to have another extension and then Dr. Porter also explained the situation in a personal email to the It Gets Better Organization, helping us obtain an extension until May 10<sup>th</sup>. As of now, we are waiting for a decision from the School Board as to whether our application can proceed. We'll get this decision on May 9<sup>th</sup>, where the grant can be commented on publicly by members of the community (more specially, the Facebook group for CPS Accountability and Responsibility).

After completing the grant application and experiencing all the hurdles with the school district, I was exhausted and I simply wanted a decision on our application...as I am waiting for a final "verdict," I am running through all of the possible scenarios in my head. If we don't get the grant, we can always host a supply drive to collect gently used clothing and other materials, but I am just hoping for the best. What I have learned is that our project is not like an assignment that has a solid deadline (like school). It is a controversial real-world endeavor that you can approach in whatever way you want to, but you must be willing to get backlash and stand up for yourself when other people in positions of power want to change your ideas to better suit their needs. As Ms. Howser said, we are navigating "complex systems" and we are learning about our community and the divisive opinions that exist within it. I only wish people had more compassion for struggling younger people, especially members of the LGBTQ+ community.

### How is climate volatility in Haiti connected to the food security of the Haitian population?

As a first-generation American and someone who was very interested in the geopolitical climate, I thought that international issues would be a potential career field for me to work in. Earlier in the academic year, the Taliban overthrew the existing Afghan government and assumed control of all the major cities, which sparked national outrage and personally affected me when I saw the militias casually patrolling the streets of Afghanistan. I guess I just assumed that my multicultural and linguistic background would serve me in a career in diplomacy, but my interests have since shifted to focus more on domestic issues than global ones.

I still attended the Missouri Youth Institute and presented my findings to food security experts at the University of Missouri College of Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources, but I realized that it would be incredibly difficult to make long-term changes in a foreign country when I had no interest in learning a new language or traveling constantly. I actually get motion sick on plane rides, which is hilarious to me because I forgot to consider this whenever I thought about becoming a diplomat. I began brainstorming topics and ultimately decided on writing about Haiti's food insecurity so that I could submit the paper to the Missouri Youth Institute (as part of the World Food Prize program).

For the last couple of weeks in February, I researched the country's demographics, wealth disparity, and geography. Part of my essay was supposed to focus on the life of a typical family in the country that I chose, so I mentioned aspects of a typical Haitian's life, such as how they got to school or the facilities that they had access to when they needed to go to the bathroom. What I learned was heartbreaking – the hurricanes, droughts, and floods which frequently occur in the region have destroyed crop yields and agricultural infrastructure of rural farmers. This prompted me to find solutions, and I detailed in my essay a plan that would involve both international NGOs and local organizations.

I focused my recommendations on three case studies: Acceso Haiti, Harvesting4Haiti, and the Smallholder Farmers Alliance. All three organizations have installed climate-resilient technology in rural farms and sourced multiple varieties of produce from local farmers to support them so that they don't go out of business. Protecting their crop yields from hurricanes is especially important because Haiti is extremely vulnerable to destructive weather events such as tropical storms. As I progressed further into my research, it felt more like a task rather than something that I was truly interested in learning about. In fact, I wanted to scratch the agricultural and climate aspects of it entirely and elaborate instead on the political instability in the country that I was researching [Haiti].

Although my essay did shape up to be about the Haitian agricultural system, I attended the Missouri Youth Institute and spoke to a foreign correspondent, and his work scared me more than anything. The worst part was when I talked to CAFNR professors who specialized in soybean research (which is the most important thing in creating larger harvests) and I was *bored out of my mind*. An elderly couple with the last name "Deaton" did say something which struck me as interesting: multiple disciplines can help to solve international problems. I thought back to how the unstable political climate in Haiti has shaped the current food crisis, and I began to apply that to our domestic problems here in the U.S.

The January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection, the former President's claims of a rigged election, and the United States' involvement in the Russo-Ukraine War have taken away time and dedication towards our own problems, which doesn't make them less important, but they demonstrate how

instability within politics have “distracted us” from focusing on immigration reform or the cost of healthcare. On April 5<sup>th</sup>, I volunteered as a poll worker during the municipal elections (which ended up being one of the best experiences *of my life*). One of the election judges let me know that she was running for state office, and I asked her if she was okay with taking on a student volunteer during her campaign. She was so kind as to agree, and she extended her business card to me after promising that she would send an invitation to me for a training session. These experiences with the American government and the delays I have experienced with the grant project have shaped my understanding of our country’s domestic issues and political climate.

Even as a politician, I can assist in international issues without being at the forefront of them. But most importantly, I can tackle the injustices and inequities in my own community and within my own state, using the experiences of my childhood and the support of my peers who have encouraged me to care for these issues and do something about them.