

Christopher Johnson

September 26, 2011

Mrs. Michelle Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mrs. Obama:

I write to you today with mixed emotions. On the one hand, I feel very strongly about what needs to be said. On the other, I fear it's not enough. However, given that I need to start somewhere, reaching out to you is an important first step.

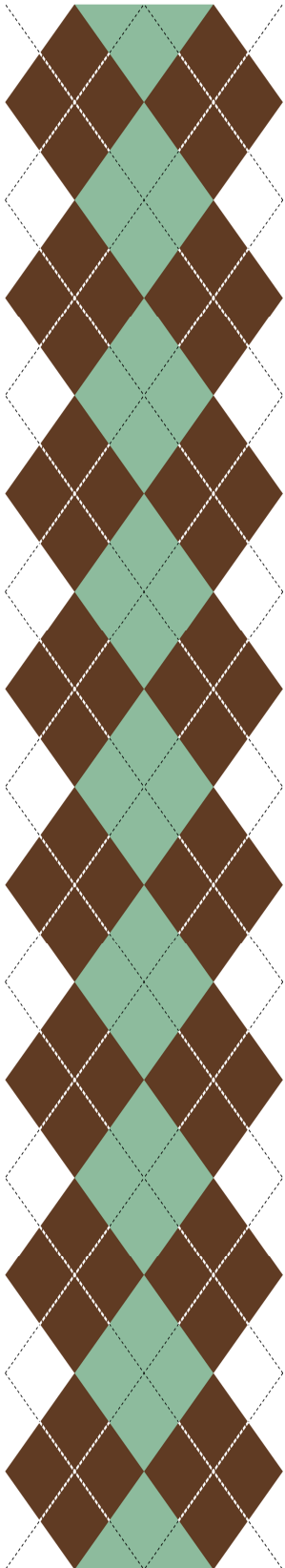
Given your history on the subject, I know that it is not necessary for me to present an extensive background on bullying in our schools. It was important to see The White House take a lead role in the fight against this epidemic this past spring, when you and the President hosted the conference on school bullying.

I thought your statement at the time, "Sometimes we've turned a blind eye to the problem," sent a powerful message to all that this problem, which is always in front us, is one that we tend to look the other way on because kids will be kids.

However, our kids are dying, and we simply cannot afford to continue turning a blind eye.

The suicide of 14-year old Jamey Rodemeyer in Buffalo, NY last week affected me in way that I find difficult to explain. His young age is enough to make you weep at the thought that he will never experience the riches of growing up in a country which while flawed, is still the greatest nation on the planet. But if I had to point to one thing about his death that I just can't seem to reconcile, it would have to be his "It Gets Better" video.

Four months ago, this amazing young man took to the Internet to share his experience with others, joining a movement designed to spread a message of hope to LGBT youth that life does get better. In his "It Gets Better" video, Jamey recalls the taunting he endured in person and online, and at one point admits, "I felt like I could never escape it."



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But he goes on to tell his viewers that it does get better, citing all the support he received from his friends when he came out as a bisexual, and he credits Lady Gaga and her anthem “Born This Way” from which he quotes “hold your head up and you’ll go far” for his happiness.

Now sadly...Jamey is gone.

While the details surrounding his death, just four months after he made his video, have yet to be brought forward, it’s not hard to make the connection that Jamey took his life so soon after the start of a new school year.

To be honest, the last thing I want to do is talk politics, but I believe an incident that took place last Thursday evening during the Republican debate in Florida, is a prime example as to why the effort to curb bullying needs to be intensified.

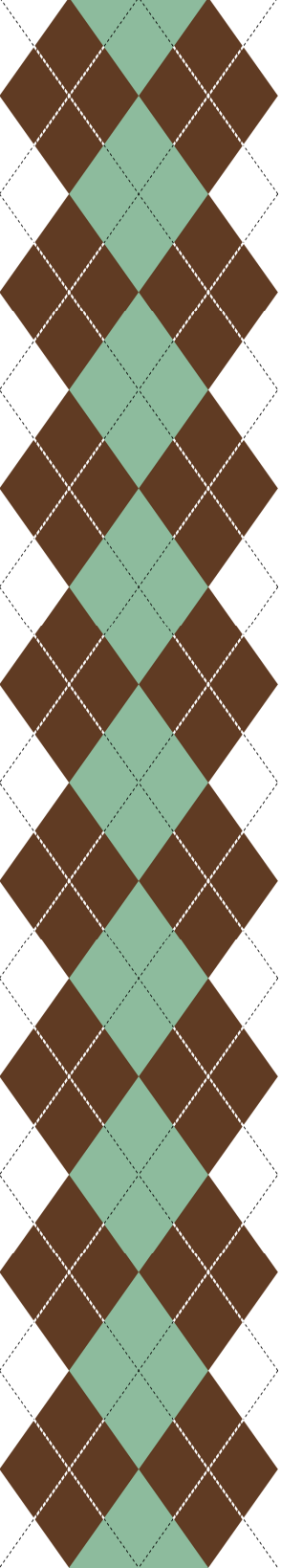
As I’m sure you are aware, the audience booed a soldier who asked the candidates a question regarding the recent elimination of the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy. I found it shocking and appalling that this group of individuals could be so disrespectful of another human being who has taken it upon himself to volunteer and put his life on the line in order to protect their liberties and freedom.

While watching news clips of this unbelievable act of ungratefulness, it suddenly occurred to me—what is a person 13, 14, 19, or any age for matter, who endured a day full of taunts, practical jokes and/or shunning, supposed to think when they get home, turn on the TV and see a soldier, someone we’re supposed to have the highest respect for, booed on national TV? Are they really supposed to believe at that moment that things will “get better” for them in time?

Mrs. Obama, our children need your help.

They need you to take bullying and make it as important an issue as your fight against childhood obesity. They need you to apply pressure on schools across the country to get more involved in recognizing bullies and their targets. The parents of this country need to connect with you, the mother of two amazing daughters—who along with their father serve as a reminder that no matter how busy life gets, parents can and must find the time to be active in the lives of their children. And the rest of us simply need to know what it is we can do to help.

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No one, including myself, is naïve enough to believe that you alone can prevent our children from killing themselves. However, given the stage you have, and the success you have had with the childhood obesity initiative you spearheaded, I cannot think of a better person to take this issue to the next level, because between the people who STILL believe bullying is a made up issue and the people who worry that punishing a bully infringes upon his/her right to free speech, we have a LOT of work to do.

I should mention that while I am an African-American gay male, I wasn't bullied as a child. Was I teased at times? Of course. All kids are at some point. So, I'm not writing to you because I know how these kids feel. I can't comprehend how they feel. I'm writing to you because I feel helpless and because as someone who understands the power of the Internet and social media through my job and general interest in technology, I am also aware of its dangers. Our children no longer have a safe haven. Simply going home after school doesn't protect them like it did in the past, because bullying has gone viral, making it that much harder to protect them.

In closing, I know this is an issue you have committed to in the past and one I'm certain you haven't forgotten about it. I just fear that we're not doing enough and that the clock is ticking for so many others who feel they have no other choice but to take their own life.

I would appreciate any thoughts you have on the matter including suggestions on what everyday citizens – even those without children – can do.

I thank you for your time, look forward to your response and respectfully request that you send my regards to the President.

Sincerely,

Christopher Johnson
New York, NY