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Published November 7th, 2012

## Ryan Andresen: A Message of Hope

By Lee Borrowman



Ryan Andresen's Eagle project was a Tolerance Wall at Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School. In September, students and school staff participated voluntarily to create tiles that reflect kindness, tolerance, and respect for all differences. Photo provided

to sign-off on Ryan's Eagle application."

"There are a dozen Councils around the country, representing 200,000 Scouts, who oppose the BSA policy," says Andresen who believes that if enough Councils object, BSA will eventually be forced to change. He is cautiously optimistic that the local Mt. Diablo Silverado Council will decide to formally reject the policy.

Caroline McCormick's two sons are in scouting. "It's a great institution," she says. "But recent actions of BSA aren't in line with today's society."

"I have gay friends and family members," McCormick continues. "They shouldn't be discriminated against. I wouldn't want to watch them spend 12 years in scouting, work hard for their Eagles, and then be denied because of who they are." McCormick says she personally sent the Change.org petition to 600 people. "I hope parents will think about the question, 'If it's my child, how would I feel then?'"

Wendell Baker, Scoutmaster of Moraga Troop 234, agrees. "Personally, I think we need to do everything we can to change this policy at the council and national levels. Other councils have adopted non-discrimination policies and ours should too." Baker stresses that he speaks only for himself, not for his troop, the local council, or BSA.

"Within our Troop we do not discriminate based on sexual orientation or religion, and we do not ask Scouts about either issue. It wouldn't affect my willingness to sign off on an Eagle application, but the ultimate decision on Eagle awards belongs to National," Baker explains, adding, "I'd like to think that the scouts know I would consider it a non-issue; that I wouldn't care one way or the other."

Baker recently spoke to his troop about bullying: "A scout is brave," he reminded them. "Some of you probably think bravery is running into a burning building and saving a life, something you'll get an award for. It's not. Real bravery is something you can do every day." According to Baker real bravery is standing up to a bully knowing that you're making yourself a target, even if it's your friends who are the bullies, or helping out the kid who you may not even like. Real bravery is also making sure bullying is reported to an adult. "Real bravery is doing what you know is right; always."

Troop 234 presented Ryan with a letter of support.

One of Ryan's strongest and most vocal supporters is his mother, Karen Andresen, who admits that it was not easy for her to accept what was happening with her son. "I had my eyes shut," she confesses. But she came face to face with Ryan's pain-after years of being bullied and trying to come to terms with his sexual orientation in a social environment that was not ready to embrace a gay youth, Ryan entered high school a very troubled and unhappy young man.

The Andresens sought help. Ryan is now thriving in the inclusive environment of Maybeck High School in Berkeley, and his parents say they "couldn't be more proud of him for standing up for what is right."

Eric Andresen says they've received messages from all over the world and about 90 percent have been in support of Ryan; but he adds that it's been a little difficult close to home.

Andy Warhol once said, "In the future, everyone will be world-famous for fifteen minutes." From his mother's petition on Change.org to appearances on national television with Ellen DeGeneres and Anderson Cooper, Moraga's Ryan Andresen has had more than his 15 minutes of fame. The former Boy Scout was denied his Eagle award because he is gay, sparking another volley in the battle to persuade Boy Scouts of America to change its policy barring openly gay boys from membership.

That's the national angle. What's happening here at home? "In less than three weeks, Ryan's entire life changed," says his father, Eric Andresen.

Andresen describes a younger Ryan as "a shy kid who didn't know his purpose in life. In middle school, he felt that he was different. He was the boy who sat in the back of the class and kept his head down." And that made him a prime target for bullies. Ryan couldn't escape them - they were at school, at church, and in his Boy Scout troop.

"I decided to get more involved in scouting because of the bullying Ryan endured at a Boy Scout summer camp," Andresen recalls. "(The scoutmaster) and I took over Troop 212 together seven years ago. I started a mentoring program in response to the hazing that was occurring. We conferred almost daily." When the scoutmaster asked to meet with him last month, Andresen thought it was business as usual. "I was shocked when he told me he was not going

"It's hard (for a child) to be gay here," says Karen. "People don't like to talk about these issues. They are shocked at how much I'm talking about it, but I'm going to support my child and stick up for him. It's really hard for the kids who come out." She wants to reach out to other gay kids who may not have the support of their families.

After his whirlwind press tour, Ryan's taking a little time off from the campaign and trying to get his life back to normal. "He couldn't wait to go back to school and get caught up on his work," says Andresen, "but he's very aware that he's been given an opportunity to make a difference and could help thousands of kids, particularly scouts. New doors are opening up for him. He has always been a mentor, a good big brother, and he wants to focus on an anti-bullying message."

At the invitation of Joaquin Moraga Intermediate School principal Joan Danilson, Ryan will be a guest speaker at one of the school's anti-bullying programs, Respect All Differences (RAD) Week, at the end of January. Danilson shared an excerpt from an email that she received from Ryan regarding what he would like to say to the students: "An important message I have been sharing to middle school students is about hope; that things get better. I would share what I overcame and how despite my hopelessness back then, I became a very happy high school senior and am currently loving life."

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[back](#)

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