

A point of light for gay and lesbian kids

High school students' hardships overcome with financial aid from the Point Foundation

By Terrence McDonald

Brian Simons was in a quandary. He was in English class at Immaculate Conception high school in Montclair and he had to write a Shakespearean-like sonnet. More specifically, he had to write five lines on the ideal woman.

Though he had just come out to a friend in calculus class earlier in the day, Brian wasn't sure if he was ready yet to tell his entire class and, in turn, his entire school that he was gay. But he did it anyway. When it came time to read his sonnet aloud, he said his fellow pupils weren't shocked much by the first four, gender-neutral lines, but they were certainly surprised by the finale: "And he has to have a nice smile."

This was the story Simons told the Point Foundation, a non-profit organization that provides college scholarships to GLBT students, and it's a story that secured him a free ride at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, where he is nearing the end of his senior year, a double major in Political Science and Journalism.

For the past four years, the Point Foundation has filled what Executive Director Vance Lancaster calls "a tremendous need" created by the marginalization of gay students by their families and by their communities. For kids who have been discarded by their families because of their homosexuality, the prospect of paying for college is not just daunting but, for most, impossible.

"Part of our mission is to support young people that we think will be tomorrow's leaders for the gay and lesbian community," Lancaster says. "Our scholars are young people who've achieved amazing things despite the fact that they've had hardships in their lives."

Point scholar Julie Schell has first-

hand knowledge of these kinds of hardships. Currently a doctoral student at Columbia University, Schell was financially and emotionally abandoned by her family after her first year of college when her mother opened some mail from Schell's girlfriend and realized her daughter was a lesbian.

"I remember coming home and coming through the front door and seeing on the kitchen counter a letter," Schell says. "I found my father sitting on the couch crying and my mom with this extremely angry look on her face."

Forced to fend more or less for herself in what she describes as the "white, homogenous, middle-class town" of Reno, Nevada, Schell ran back into the closet.

She explains, "I didn't have any access to any examples that would confront what I was being told by my parents, which was, 'You'll never be successful, you'll never succeed, no one will hire you, no one will love you.' I just had no examples to negate that."

Fortunately, she soon found the Point Foundation while she was Googling for gay scholarships.

"I thought, wow, here's an organization that's doing exactly what I want to do for the rest of my life," Schell says. "I remember shooting up from my chair and screaming, 'I have to get this!'"

Now Schell is not only working towards a Ph.D.

in higher education, she is also the director of Point's mentoring program. Every Point scholar is matched with a mentor who provides emotional support for the students, as well as helping them with their mandatory community service projects.

Lancaster said this kind of help is essential to Point scholars. "It's a precarious time for most young people, but even more so for gay, lesbian and



Photo courtesy of Point Foundation
Point scholar Julie Schell attends Columbia University

transsexual kids."

In only four years, the number of students the Point Foundation has been able to award free scholarships to has grown at a rapid rate. Their first year, they offered eight scholarships, the next year 12, the year after that 27. This year, they have 47 scholars.

"We'd like to continue that trend," Lancaster says. "The only way we could do that is to increase the number of donations we're receiving."

As for Brian Simons, the Point Foundation's scholarship has given him the ability to concentrate on both his studies and his numerous campus activities. He is a member of

BiGLARU, the Bisexual, Gay and Lesbian Alliance at Rutgers University, as well as Peer Educators on Sexuality and Queer Issues (PESQI). He has given presentations busting myths about homosexuality and has participated in Bridging the Gap, a diversity retreat. All this and he's a double major.

"I think most of my life is no sleep," Simons says. "And I like it that way."

After graduation in May, Simons wants to join Teach for America, a program that helps students who have not studied Education become teachers in urban and rural schools. He plans to teach in his hometown of Newark and, sometime in the future, run for mayor.

"I'd like to go in there and change things around," he says.

Watch your back, Sharpe James. ▼

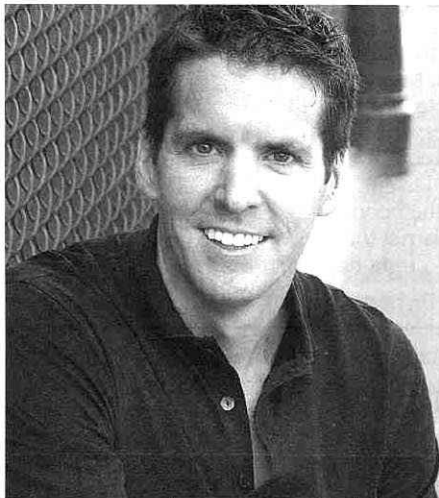


Photo courtesy of Point Foundation
Point Foundation Director Vance Lancaster

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For more information:
www.thepointfoundation.org