

Legacy in the Making

IT GETS BETTER
PROJECT

In 2010, in response to the suicide of a teenager who was bullied in high school, the It Gets Better Project was born. Its ambition was to impart life wisdom from LGBT adults who survived bullying of their own to young LGBT kids who didn't yet have their own positive perspective on how things can change for the better. In a world inundated by cause and social movement-related organizations with high awareness, this unique initiative is not just getting noticed but is really making a difference. This year, It Gets Better celebrated a major milestone: its five-year anniversary. And The Legacy Lab was privileged to speak with project co-founder **Dan Savage** and his production partner **Brian Pines**, not only about their initiative's impact so far, but about its ongoing legacy in the making.



Billy's Facebook memorial page, a page set up by his family, and called him a faggot one more time. They said they were glad that he was dead. They said it in front of his parents. I was furious about it. So I wrote this rageful post. In response, many added comments where they said they were furious too. One particular commenter said, 'I wish I had known you, Billy, and had been able to tell you that things get better. Rest in peace.' That comment just stuck in my head because things do get better.

Things have gotten better at the micro level for individual LGBT people, and also at the macro level for the LGBT community at large. But at that time, a kid growing up in a place like Greensburg, Indiana, got bullied because he was perceived to be queer. And the genesis for the Project was this desire to speak to someone like Billy Lucas. There was a sense that if you could have talked to him for just five minutes, you could have made a difference; you could have given the perspective needed to weather the storm, to get through it. And there was, at the same time,

Can you share a little about the inspiration for and origin of the It Gets Better Project?

DAN SAVAGE: It started with the suicide of Billy Lucas, who was this 15-year-old kid in Greensburg, Indiana. I read about him when the

news first broke, and again when there was a follow-up story about the kids who bullied him in middle school and high school. These kids told him he was a faggot. They embarrassed him. And they successfully encouraged him to kill himself. These same kids went to

this frustration knowing that you would never get an invitation to speak at a middle school or high school where you might find the Billy Lucases of the world. You would never get permission from the parents of the queer kids who need to hear from queer adults.

I went to a bullying seminar at the White House. They talked about what parents, teachers and preachers could do to end bullying. But nobody was really talking about what to do when the parents, teachers and preachers are also the bullies, which is sometimes the case for queer kids. Queer kids need LGBT adults to help put this period of their lives into perspective; they are in need of the sort of strategies, tools, coping mechanisms that we all use to get through this. But we can't talk to them. We never get permission to talk to them. Except we now live in the Twitter/Facebook/YouTube era. We don't need anybody's permission anymore, and we don't need an invitation anymore to talk to these kids. We have social media, and we can reach right into their homes, their schools and their phones and talk directly to them.

And so that was what prompted me to call my partner, Terry Miller, and say, "I think I want to do this thing called the It Gets Better Project. I want to make a video. I want to talk to these kids. I want to talk to the next Billy Lucas before he kills himself and use my column and my podcast to encourage other LGBT adults to do the same." So Terry and

I made that first video and launched the Project. There was a lot of gasoline on the ground, and we had a match. There was this desire to reach out to these kids and to share coping mechanisms. And that's exactly what happened. I'm very proud of it.

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Did you see this as a one-off initiative, a single video and you would be done, or did you always imagine this as a project that was meant to endure?

DS: I didn't imagine, from the outset, that we would be at five years and counting. We gave it a name, the It Gets Better Project, we created a YouTube channel, we invited other LGBT adults to create videos, and we invited LGBT kids to come and watch them. It felt grand

and ambitious. But mostly, when we posted our one video, we just hoped that we wouldn't fall down flat on our faces.

Eventually, Terry and I felt we needed to get all sorts of kinds of queer people with a range of experiences to share their stories to be relevant to the greatest number of queer kids. So the goal we set, to make it a useful repository of knowledge filled with coping mechanisms, was 100. We felt that if we could get 100 videos, we would get a little bit of everybody. And that was our initial mark. But what happened? We had thousands of videos posted in just the first week. It was staggering.

When we created the Project, if someone would have said that the President of the United States would make one of these videos after six or eight weeks, I wouldn't have believed them. I hardly believe it now. But our little project has already had a far bigger and longer-lasting impact than just the one video we made or the 100 videos we hoped to gather.

Beyond the volume of videos gathered, when did you know, or how did you know, that you were successful in making a larger impact?

DS: There was this cultural moment for the It Gets Better Project. Just like the President of the United States made a video, the NBC

sitcom *The Office* did an episode referencing It Gets Better videos. For so long, we had culturally lived in denial of the existence of such a thing as LGBT children. Our culture wanted us to pretend that LGBT adults were fully formed in gay bars at the age of 21. Even when kids were coming out at an increasingly younger age, we had culturally given parents, teachers and preachers the implied right to inflict suffering upon them. But now there was a cultural reckoning. We turned the contemporary culture in our favor, and we really opened people's eyes to the injustice of the suffering of LGBT kids.

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There was also a real human impact. When we started, the goal wasn't to get the President, *The Office* or Pixar to make a video. The goal was to tap into the collective wisdom of LGBT adults—to help light the way for LGBT kids who were stumbling along in the dark. The ultimate goal of the project was to make sure we reached the Billy Lucases and helped to save the Billy Lucases. Even if we had only gotten 10 videos, even if the It Gets Better Project only saved one life, it would have been a tremendous success. That said, I hear from kids and parents all the time, constantly telling me that the Project helped to save a life.

One of the first interactions I remember having around the Project was from a woman who was raising a kid in the boonies in Georgia. Her kid had long hair, didn't like sports, was feminine and was a boy. The woman wrote me and said that she had been using that phrase for the longest time, that she kept telling her kid that it does get better and to hang in there. Meanwhile, he was being brutally bullied. And he was miserable and lonely. She said it didn't have the same impact when she said it as when all these gay men said it—that hearing it from his mother, who wasn't gay, didn't have the same value as hearing it from all of these LGBT people. I recently got an email from her again. Four years after she first reached out, her kid is in college and everything is great. He believed it. It Gets Better forced our culture to face up to

the existence of LGBT kids. In turn, it gives kids the coping mechanisms to make individual progress.

On a personal level, I would add that It Gets Better made a real difference to me when I noticed that it took away the inhibitions of people who wanted to make a difference, and who felt that in the past they did not have the permission to do so. It used to be accepted that queer kids could be emotionally tortured in their communities until they were 18. After that point, if they survived the abuse, they could move away, move out of the closet, with one condition: They couldn't talk to the LGBT kids who were still being tortured. If you did, you would be accused of recruiting and of being a pedophile. And that accusation is so politically explosive that most LGBT people, when they turned 18, got out, got the fuck away and never looked back. They did not reach back out to LGBT kids because they didn't want to be accused of recruiting or being pedophiles. And one of the things we saw happen in the first weeks of the Project was just that inhibition falling away. Suddenly, I had the permission for myself, but I also had the tool where I could talk to LGBT kids, and I am no longer going to be shut down by the accusation of being a recruiter or a pedophile. That was gone. And that was, for me personally, so rewarding that Terry and I were the catalysts for that for so many others: collapsing the old compact.

We wanted to save a life, and we ended up forcing culture to look up to face queer kids. We disinhibited some LGBT adults by giving them permission to now speak directly to LGBT kids. We took the painful memories of LGBT adults and weaponized them in a wonderful way: turning them into a battering ram that they could use to break down a door and save a kid's life.

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Why do you feel that It Gets Better, versus so many other movements, has caught on and made a meaningful difference?

DS: The Project works, it has reach and impact, because so many people besides me did a lot of stuff. Other people made videos. Other people created YouTube accounts. This is an open-source, community-based effort. Like I said earlier, there was a lot of gasoline on the ground, and we just had a match and things

exploded. The project lives on because others continue to be inspired to do something.

Fundamentally, I feel that it comes down to asking people to do a doable thing. Our job as founders was to identify a small thing, and if we could get a lot of people to do that, we could grow it into a big thing. We couldn't stop all bullying and LGBT suicide, but we could get someone to sit in front of their computer for 10 minutes and talk about what it was like for them growing up, how they got through it, and why they are glad that they're still here—comparing their life now to then, or comparing their family now to then, too.

The most important thing is to see how families who rejected their gay/lesbian/bi/transgender kids when they first came out do now love and accept them, because that can change the way their queer kid cares about their future and how that kid views their own family. Even in moments when their families are being so shitty to them, they can now see the potential in hateful, homophobic or transphobic parents to come around because they have seen with their own eyes and heard firsthand about other success stories. For so many LGBT kids, watching the videos is eye-opening. And for most LGBT adults, making the videos is very doable and within reach. We weren't asking people to give a kidney. We were asking only for them to make a video and to upload it.

It Gets Better has achieved meaningful success in such a short period of time. What challenges, if any, did you have to overcome along the way in order to help create your success?

DS: Not unexpectedly, there has been a lot of pushback from the traditional right, from groups like the Family Research Council and One Million Moms, because we found such a democratic way, using social media, to reach out and speak to their queer kids. You know, in my head, the imagined queer kid who was the focus of the project probably has a parent who sends a check to the Research Council—the kid who is dragged to church on Sundays where horrible things are said to him or her, or about him or her, to bully them to change. So it's not surprising that those groups would freak out because we were now talking directly to their kids: We are trying to save their kids from them.

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The more surprising thing was that some queer groups also attacked the It Gets Better Project because of who I was and how I dared to do this without asking anyone's permission. I didn't put together a usual sort of coalition. I just went ahead and did this on my own—as if people aren't allowed to just do things on their own these days. And that is something that drove queer activists and queer organizations crazy.

I am an independent player with independent obligations. I write my column for a paper in Seattle. I have my podcast. I don't work for other queer groups. I never have. I likely never will. I do whatever the fuck I want to do. And there are people out there who believe that they should be the gatekeepers for what is done and said by queer people about queer shit. One of their constant criticisms was that the project was too passive: telling people to wait and not do anything, and things will get better all on their own. That is, in fact, bullshit. If you watch any of the videos, just one video, you'll see that it's people talking about what they did to help their situation get better. There is one video I particularly love that is posted by someone who would have been a senior in high school but was instead a freshman in college. What he said he did was get his GED and skip senior year to get out of his high school where he was getting brutalized. He was sharing how he made things better for himself. The It Gets Better Project, which didn't conform, mobilized

a lot of queer people around its ambition, and it worked. In a short amount of time, and more than many other queer rights activities, it worked. That approach to rule-breaking and change-making, while leading to progress, really bothered some of the others.

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When you consider where It Gets Better began and where it is right now, how is it doing in its journey?

DS: I think the Project has real value doing its current job: helping LGBT youth to better support themselves. It Gets Better reaches out to LGBT kids who may be trapped inside of their communities, and it has created this online repository of hard-won wisdom and perspective on queer adolescence and bullying—on coping mechanisms and strategies for getting through it. And as the project launches in new countries, it forces other cultures in other communities to face up to the

existence of LGBT kids and their suffering when nothing else has been done about it.

At five years into it, I still get emails and calls from young people and parents who just found their way to the Project—who just found their way to videos published week one, year one. So the project continues to act as an archive of testimonies and as a vital place where we have weaponized these otherwise painful memories. There are still LGBT kids out there who feel isolated, feel bullied, lack perspective and feel they have no place else to turn. I think It Gets Better should keep traveling down this path, doing what it has been doing since inception, because there is still a real need, and that still has real value.

A queer kid can't always turn to his or her parents, because we don't often raise the next generation of queer adults. Straight people typically raise them. Some straight people are awesome. Some straight people have even made It Gets Better videos. But a significant percentage of those straight people are not so awesome. Through the Project, we have to jump into the breach and talk to their kids.

Do you foresee a time when It Gets Better will have fully satisfied its ambition? How do you make sure that you persist as relevant?

DS: I think there will always be utility for this project because

queer kids are born to straight parents. And even if the world was a little more of a loving and accepting place, it's not like there aren't going to be any queer kids who couldn't use better coping strategies.

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I speak to queer kids all the time and hear from them all the time. Even in the present, when they feel love and acceptance from those closest to them, including their family, they also feel a sense of estrangement and fear. There will always be a need for queer kids to hear from queer adults who lived through it and came through it, who found a way to stick the dismount. It's a unique experience growing up queer in a straight family, which is how almost all queers grow up.

I do think Billy Lucas will always be with us. Look at the African-American experience in this country. This morning, I've been watching a news story about an African-American

girl in high school who was slammed to the floor by this 300-pound cop. African Americans got into the voting rights act. And yet, racism is still a fucking problem. So, I don't think just because we have marriage equality that it is all over and done, and we can walk away. I think 50 years into the future, or 100 years into the future, there will still be queer kids that are being brutalized.

Earlier, you mentioned the notion of tapping into culture as being important to success. When you reflect upon the journey, were there particular people, organizations and/or channels that helped you to strike a chord with culture? To create even stronger influence?

BRIAN PINES: As Dan said, he didn't start out with the idea of galvanizing popular culture. We started out with a human problem that we were trying to solve, and in so doing, the Project struck a chord with culture. And when we did, lots of talented individuals, media channels and companies started coming to us to ask how they could participate.

There was, for example, a talented group of LGBT people in Washington D.C., mostly digital thinkers who contributed to the Obama campaign in 2008, who were moved to help—not for a profit, but out of passion. It Gets Better was born on YouTube. It was born on the Internet. And other digital brands, like Google, came to us and asked how they could help

to spread the message far and wide. Google Chrome™ contributed an ad campaign that featured Dan and the It Gets Better Project. Over the course of 18 months, after we began, things really started to take off. MTV made a broadcast program with us. We published a bestselling book of essays and stories. And the Project received the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences Governors Award at the 64th Primetime Creative Arts Emmy® Awards for 'strategically, creatively and powerfully utilizing the media to educate and inspire.'

We started out speaking one to one. And in focusing on one, we ended up having the impact of reaching many who helped us to share the story of the Project.

What new channels, if any, are you exploring now to help you further your impact on culture and to impact a larger audience?

BP: We were born on the Internet, but today we do use a combination of traditional and nontraditional channels to help the project connect with more LGBT people. The focus is on finding or developing those channels that allow us to best share our growing collection of stories. A favorite current platform for doing this is the It Got Better Program.

It Got Better is a sort of documentary about the LGBT movement told through the lens of people who survived it and who thrived over the last couple of decades—following the

arc of the LGBT movement via storytelling. The series has featured some notable success stories, including Jane Lynch, Tim Gunn and George Takei. While there's a strong LGBT component, you also get a sense of the whole person, which is, I think, a really important point in terms of growing the audience. Being LGBT is one very important characteristic of who these high-profile people are, but as the Program reveals, it is not all that defines them.

While your project is still youthful in terms of years, having just had its five-year anniversary, It Gets Better is creating a noticeable legacy of vital, successful contribution. What advice do you have for others, particularly cause- or social-movement-based organizations, looking to achieve the same?

DS: Our project didn't create more despair. We created, and continue to create, doable things that people not only wanted to be a part of but could actually take part in. Some situations, some causes, are made to feel so difficult that people are left saying, 'What can I do that will possibly make a difference?' With It Gets Better, we made it possible for lots of people to contribute one small doable thing at a time. We can't repair the world; we can't create a utopia or make things perfect. But we can start to patch things up. I feel the difference between success and failure is in asking people to do something doable that they can take part in, which can actually make a difference.

When you wear a ribbon for a cause, it is beneficial because it raises awareness, but if the money goes

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into perpetual fundraising for awareness alone, people can lose enthusiasm if they feel that they are not a part of making a difference. If people sense that their actions don't help, the risk is that support will wane. So my charge to someone who is trying to get something off the ground, to make not a short-term but a lasting impact, is to identify a doable thing and be clear in asking people to do it. And make sure the thing you identified actually does something. Those are the criteria that you have to think about an awful lot.

For us, the best advocates for the future of It Gets Better are those kids who are 21, 22 and 23 now, but who were 16, 17 and 18 when the Project

got started and gained momentum. We positively impacted them. They are the real success stories of the difference that our community has contributed toward.

After only five years, It Gets Better continues to grow not only in terms of visibility but, more importantly, in terms of its impact. The Project started with a clear problem to solve and took a very personal approach to creating one video to impact one life. And in focusing on one, it wound up mobilizing many who sought to join the Project in its ambition to make a meaningful difference in the lives of young LGBT kids. More than just trying to grow awareness, It Gets Better works because it provokes action. Lots of people are given simple ways to make a doable difference. And the real impact of their input can be seen. In an otherwise helpless situation, people with the ability to help have been given a strong platform to do so. Today, the It Gets Better Project continues to build its library of stories and tools for helping LGBT kids to cope. While it is a historical archive, it is also a living archive with new stories of inspiration being written every day.

BY MARK MILLER

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