



## RAISING *healthy* children BY LISA JOYNER

Educators from Carolina Friends School in Durham explore  
the relationship between health and education

# let it GLOW: six years with a middle school gay/straight alliance

**B***ut that's not fair!*" is a phrase that many of us uttered as young adults, and often we were rebuffed with a smile and a head shake. "Life's not fair," some well-meaning adult would remind us. And so we learn to trust adults—even if we see and intuit that the system they built is unfair.

After 22 years of middle school teaching, I've started to see that it is in these formative interactions around fairness that budding instincts for equality are either honored or discouraged. Fairness is one of the fundamental rules of law in an adolescent's cosmology, and it is from this start that notions of equity, selfishness, difference, and ally-ship are first tentatively explored. Our responses to them matter, deeply.

In the spring of 2012, the Carolina Friends School Middle School community was abuzz with confusion and fear about Amendment One, a referendum to our state constitution that would ban gay marriages and civil unions, among other indignities. Our students responded to this with their instincts toward fairness: *Anyone should be able to love who they want to love, right? Right?*

A group of students got together and asked me to help them start a Gay/Straight Alliance in our Middle School, one of the first of its kind in the state. I agreed. They crafted a mission statement, held a flash mob, hosted a bake sale, designed a banner, and gathered at some well-attended lunch meetings. They wanted to shout their message from the rooftop and asked me to take them on a field trip. We decided to go to the

pit at UNC-Chapel Hill. They made "Vote Against Amendment One" signs and planned to talk to voters about their concerns before the upcoming voting day. *"We can't vote yet, but they can. Let's go talk to people! This isn't right!"*

Adolescents have a keen, almost-visceral awareness of right and wrong. They want the world to be kinder, fairer, and more sensible. *"Because I said so,"* is seen as a cop-out, or surefire evidence of an adult's absent logic. They live in what feels like an authoritarian world that more often tells them what they can't do than what they can. On our best days, we hear them and help them understand why injustice and inequality exist. On their best days, they return the favor by inspiring us to justify our standards.

As a Quaker school, we encourage students to see that all people possess a divine spark. On this premise, our students remind us that we are all entitled to be treated with unwavering dignity, respect, and love. Over the last six years, GLOW has been a group that has come together to honor this instinct and clear logic—from value to action, from theory to practice. At the middle school level, this is and has always been about fairness, love, holding up your friends, and being who you are.

For me, some of my wisest teachers on the issue of equity have been middle schoolers. With their fresh eyes, they see that our societal values and our actions can be wildly incongruent. So, here's to them: voters of the future. I'm excited about getting out their way and letting them lead with their hearts. **hkh**

---

Lisa Joyner teaches language arts in the Middle School at Carolina Friends School. Since joining CFS in 2010, she has also served as an advisor, staff sponsor to the Gay/Straight Alliance, a tutor, and an elective teacher. Her family moved to Durham in 1977 and Lisa has lived in the Triangle ever since. She earned a B.A. in English from UNC-Chapel Hill, a M.Ed. from North Carolina State University in Middle Grades Education, and AIG licensure from UNC-Charlotte. When not at school, Lisa is busy working on her farm in Efland (Fireside Farm) and tending to a menagerie of goats and chickens with her husband. She also serves as the Market Manager for the Saturdays in Saxapahaw Music Series and other events at the Haw River Ballroom.

Carolina Friends School is an independent Quaker school serving students aged 3-18. Contact the school at: 4809 Friends School Road, Durham, NC 27705; Telephone: 919-383-6602; [www.cfsnc.org](http://www.cfsnc.org).