

## Aurora High student creates an Alliance

**By Chris McGowan**

Aurora High School student Sarah Shields has made a difference at Aurora High. She has taken the initiative to organize a group called the GSA (Gay Straight Alliance).

The group was assembled in the fall of 2013 and works closely with the Equity Council which has been in place at Aurora High for approximately 8 years.

The Equity council has had fundraising events in the school to raise money for transgender awareness. It is only through education that all students will understand the need to treat everyone with respect.

Aurora High's GSA is made of about 10 members and when asked what the GSA was all about, Shields gladly said "the purpose of it is to build alliance between queer and straight students to make people feel safe from a social perspective". The group meets regularly and has an open door policy with no publicity to their attendance. The Day of Pink at Aurora High has posters supporting the LGBTQ students and the GSA group, and tech hallway has a "rainbow wall" painted with students' handprints.

Two Aurora High teachers that have provided a great deal of support to the GSA group with admin work, and providing escalation for specific issues are, Miss Charney, and Mr. Nicolai.

GSA has been in Canada for a while, but in 2012, it was made mandatory to permit students to form GSA groups if they wanted to. As the groups are relatively new to Canadian schools, there is little research so far to determine the impact, however American schools have been permitting such groups for a longer period of time and research states that GSA groups have brought a positive impact to schools regarding bullying and safety issues.

Shields, is in her final year at Aurora High, is Gay herself, but feels the need to have a place in the school where people can speak their mind openly. She came out in grade 8 through Facebook, but not everyone who is Gay feels that comfortable with themselves at such a young age. She always did have strong support from family and friends, but some students are not that lucky.

She is a spokesperson for Get Real, a student driven initiative aimed at eliminating homophobia in a positive way. Shields states "Get Real has taught us how to relate to others by teaching us how to be politically correct in language so no one is offended".

Shields is also attending a "Speak Out Conference" at the York Region District School Board, where five students from every school in York Region are asked to attend. "It's a unity thing" said Shields, "mostly to do with Gay issues, where everyone is learning how to grow up in this society".

New leaders have been assigned to the GSA and Equity Council at Aurora High for next year, and they will undoubtedly carry on as Shields moves to University, but many will remember that she had the motivation to start the program, not just for herself, but for everyone.