

Trial for Garden Grove Teen 'Outed' by Principal Concludes

ORANGE, Calif. – The trial of an Orange County teenager who filed a lawsuit last year against the Garden Grove Unified School District in an effort to stop discrimination and harassment of gay and lesbian students on campus concluded Tuesday.

Charlene Nguon, 18, a honor society candidate and straight A student, was on track to attend a competitive 4-year college after graduation this June, when she was singled out and unfairly disciplined by school administrators on her high school campus. She filed the lawsuit along with her mother and the Gay Straight Alliance Network.

"Charlene is the type of child every parent should be proud of," said Christine P. Sun, staff attorney for the ACLU of Southern California. "We've tried to work out this situation with the school district so it's very unfortunate that it has come to this point. Instead of derailing Charlene's academic achievements, school administrators should have done their job to ensure every student thrives regardless of their sexual orientation."

Charlene's academic plans were derailed when school officials began targeting and punishing her and her girlfriend for displaying affection on campus and ultimately forced either Charlene or her girlfriend to transfer schools midway through the second semester of their junior year. Such displays by heterosexual students were common and generally went unpunished.

"Charlene was punished for who she is and that has severe personal ramifications and has a significant long-term impact on her life," said Dan Stormer of the law firm Hadsell and Stormer, counsel in the case.

Sun said: "Not only did the school punish Charlene because she was affectionate with her girlfriend, they referred her to counseling for 'persistent public display of relationship with another girl' as if her sexual orientation was an affliction that could be cured."

Throughout the course of the eight-day trial dozens of witnesses including Charlene's family, friends, classmates and former Santiago High School principal Ben Wolf testified.

Eileen Malm, one of Charlene's sisters, testified about the hardship the school transfer and school officials' treatment of Charlene affected their family.

"I just don't understand why my girlfriend and I were not allowed to be affectionate but other couples are," Nguon said at the time the lawsuit was filed. "Most other students at Santiago are very accepting and tolerant of gay students, but the administration is a different story. We were singled out and disciplined just because we are two girls."

U.S. District Judge James V. Selna is expected to issue a decision in the next several weeks. The lawsuit seeks to create a district wide policy and guidelines to ensure that gay and lesbian students are treated equally.

The case is being tried by Stormer, Jordan Kushner and Shawn McDonald of the law firm Latham and Watkins and Sun of the ACLU/SC.

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