IT GETS BETTER

>> PEREZ: My name is Tom Perez, and I am the Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights at the United States Department of Justice.

Civil rights are a cornerstone of our country's foundation. They ensure that each of us can live our lives and pursue our dreams, without discrimination.

In the Civil Rights Division, we take your safety and well-being very seriously, and we are dedicated to doing everything within our power to make this world a better and safer place for you.

As the father of three children, as an American who believes every individual deserves to live their life in peace, and as the nation's chief enforcer of civil rights laws, I have read about the recent incidents involving students who have been bullied with great sadness and anger.

No person, whether they are straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, deserves to be tormented by bullies because they don't fit some people's stereotypes of how a boy or a girl is supposed to act.

If you have been targeted for harassment or bullying because of your sexual orientation, because of your gender identity or expression, or simply because your classmates see you as different, I am here to tell you that we in the Civil Rights Division will not stand for it.

Every student in this country has the right to go to school without facing threats, intimidation, or harassment.

My colleagues in the Civil Rights Division and I want you to know that you are not alone, and there are people who can help you today, including here at the Justice Department.

We made this video so you can hear some of our stories, and know that a future with endless opportunities awaits you. We also want you to know that you have a right to go to school without being harassed, and there are federal laws that protect that right. You don't have to wait until you graduate for it to get better!

>> When I was in seventh grade, there was a group of boys that would tease me and bully me and they would laugh at me when I would speak because my voice was higher-pitched I guess than theirs was.

>> I didn't act the way that I guess girls acted.

>> I was teased a lot growing up, actually. I felt different, I felt like an outsider, I felt like I didn't belong.

>> The first time I recall being made fun of, or being told I acted like a girl or was a sissy, I was in third grade and I remember talking to family members, I didn't quite understand what that meant, and I remember the question I got was, "Were you walking funny? Or did you say something

differently?” And that question alone told me in my understanding that I had done something wrong.

>> I was called faggot – pretty much every day during eighth grade – homo, gay, queer, told I would never have friends.

>> I was bullied for having an accent, for being from another country, for being gay, I was chased down by a pack of kids.

>> Even though I knew that I wasn’t gay, I knew that my mother meant it as a slur, and that it was supposed to hurt me, and it did for a long time.

>> When I was 12, I found out that I had a condition called Turner Syndrome, which meant that I had a whole assortment of medical conditions that I had to deal with, um, in my case it also meant that I was intersex. It meant that I had a girl’s body, but not a whole set of girl chromosomes. I had a very supportive family, and was able to get good medical care, but everyone decided that the condition should be a secret, and it meant that I was ashamed and scared that other people would find out that I was different than they were and that I didn’t fit in this category that I was supposed to. That made it tough growing up, and living with a secret can be hard.

>> I know that there were times in high school where I would wake up and almost be sad that I had woken up because I had to face another day.

>> I acted straight, I pretended to be straight, I tried my best to be straight.

>> If you’re different growing up, you’re going to get bullied, it doesn’t really matter if you’re bi, if you’re nerdy, if you’re quiet. If you’re different, it can make you a target.

>> For a long time I didn’t tell my parents, and I just kept it inside, until I really couldn’t keep it inside anymore.

>> If you can, confide in someone.

Sometimes you feel comfortable turning to a family member, sometimes you feel comfortable turning to someone in your school.

>> You do have allies, we are here for you, and you have allies in the most unlikely of places.

>> If you can find some hope in the fact that you have a whole community of people out here – people who you’ve never met and we’ve never met you, but we think of you and care about you and want you to be safe and want you to be happy.

>> For ten years I was alone. For ten years, all the way through grade school that I just didn’t want to tell anybody. But I held on. And... now I tell everybody. [laughs]

>> I wish I could have told the younger version of me how things get so much better.

>> Today I would say I'm so much happier than I was then.

>> Being different is cool.

>> I think it's also made me braver.

>> There may be a bit of time when you are alone, but hold on. Just make it through.

>> When I was in grade school and high school, I was bullied. But now I prosecute bullies.

I felt like an outsider, but now I'm part of a community who fights for civil rights.

>> Don't be ashamed of who you are- keep on being yourself.

>> If I knew when I was 8 that the thing that was causing me so much pain and made me feel so alone would actually be the basis of so many people in my life and so many friends and actually define me in a way that makes me very proud, I would get through it. I would make it, just knowing, it gets better. It really does get better.

>> As bad as things may seem now, they do get better.

>> It gets better.

>> It does get better.

>> It will get so much better.

>> It definitely gets better.

>> Hang on, it gets better, se va mejorar.

>> NOSANCHUK: When I need inspiration to forge ahead, I remind myself of what Dr. Martin Luther King used to say:

"The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

Dr. King was making the same point about the struggle for civil rights that my colleagues and I are making today about overcoming the challenges we faced in our own lives.

Namely, that it may not happen right away, and it may not always be easy, but it will get better. Much, much better.

>> BERMAN: Here in the Civil Rights Division, we enforce the federal laws that protect students from discrimination and harassment at school because of their race, sex, national origin, or religion.

For those of you who are LGBT, or questioning your sexual orientation or gender identity, we want you to know that the laws we enforce protect you, too.

Many LGBT students suffer from harassment based on their gender expression or gender identity, including because they don’t fit other kids’ stereotypes of how a boy or girl is supposed to act. Because of this, they might be called names or get threatened or beaten up.

When someone harasses you because that person thinks that you’re not acting male enough or female enough, that’s sex discrimination, and schools are required by federal law to stop it.

When the Department of Justice learns that a school knows this kind of harassment is going on in the school but fails to take any action to make it stop, we will step in to make sure the school is doing its job so that the harassment stops, and so that students don’t have to suffer.

If you’re being bullied or harassed at school, you need to know that help is out there for you, today.

Also, make sure you tell a school administrator about the bullying and harassment, or have a parent or another trusted adult tell them for you. It’s very important that your principal or other administrators know what’s going on so they can respond appropriately.

If you believe your school knows you’re being harassed and isn’t doing anything about it, contact us for more information by calling 877-292-3804 or visit our website at the address on the screen.

We here at the Justice Department care about you. Many of us have been in your shoes and we want you to know it does get better.

And we’re working hard to make sure it will keep getting better – for you and for all young people.