



“KILL YOURSELF.”

Photo series by Mackai Sharp.

An introduction

Hello,

This is an open letter to my community, the people in my life and a past version of myself. I am finally at a place in my life where I feel ready to clarify *who I am* and how that has severely affected my life in the Comox Valley.

This community has been very vocal with me about how they felt and continue to feel. And these feelings have been expressed *verbally in passing on the street or shouted from the window of a car*. I have received phone calls and digital messages filled with *slurs and threats*. Now why might people be telling me to *kill myself*? Because of *ignorance* and because of *bigotry*. This wasn't some misunderstanding, I have been intentionally followed and harassed by people who know who I am and have explicitly told me that I *shouldn't exist*. This perpetuated ignorance, I don't want to blame it on the individual, I don't want to blame it on my peers. However these intentional acts were meant to cause me direct harm. I originally downplayed how I wanted to get this across, however to put it simply there are some whose intention was entirely malicious.

It is the educators, leaders and parents responsibility to eradicate this ignorance. It is the responsibility of our education system to ensure every student leaves understanding that *bigotry is wrong*. That *racism is wrong*. That *homophobia is wrong*. And yet I left highschool because the teachers wanted to pretend I wasn't getting called a **faggot** everyday. Nobody wanted to take the initiative to tell these students that what *they've been raised to believe is okay, is not*. So here I am, and there they are, waiting to terrorize the next queer kid that comes around.

And why do I care so much about this? Because I was that queer kid and I am that queer kid. And to clarify what has been so previously misinformed, **I am bisexual**. And I don't label myself, really at all but for sake of confusion that is the best word to describe me.

That leads me to now. Since leaving public school in 2017 - *on a month to month basis* - I've been followed, threatened and constantly reminded of *my place in society*.

In school, on the street, in the mall, at the grocery store, on public transportation. I've been called a **queer, faggot, homo**, and I've been told to **kill myself because who I am**. That my personality, my character, my ambition, has *no place in their world*. This string of consistent events has left me *emotionally and mentally exhausted*. This has placed me in a situation where I have to put on a front everytime I leave my house because I *don't know that I will be safe*, or that I won't be *publicly degraded for being a certain way*. I have done my best to record these situations, but the majority of the time things play out too quickly so I *physically don't have time* to pull out my phone.

When these incidents became the most severe, I went to the police and reported two separate vehicles that had been following me and yelling slurs out the window. Because of my choice to report, I *lost the opportunity to come out to my parents*. I was forced to verify on record that I was in fact a *sexual minority*, because it impacted the severity of the crime being committed. I was *forced to come out* to my friends because I *felt unsafe*. I was forced to put myself in a box that I wasn't even sure I was in yet simply because it had to "*make sense*" to these officers. And being put in a box is how I ended up at the station in the first place.

See, people spread rumours about my sexuality before I could speak up, which gave these strangers the fuel to find me and tell me how they felt. These actions are not only extremely selfish but also *dangerous* to all queer youth. I am lucky and grateful to have a family that supports me. To have friends that accept me. I was given that opportunity.

However, of the thousands of youth that go homeless every year, a *disproportionate amount are LGBTQ+*. These kids have been abandoned because of who they might love. They have been left in the cold. This is also why on average LGBTQ+ youth are 4 more times likely to attempt suicide or that they are also 3 to 4 more times likely to suffer from a substance use disorder. For youth of colour who are also LGBTQ+ this risk can be as much as 32% higher. And just for reference, I wish I could say this was unfamiliar. However just in Canada, we can recall several young people who have died by suicide directly due to harassment. Look at Jamie Huebly, 15 and the only gay kid at his school, he was degraded and tossed to the side and now he's gone, *forever*. Though we are often perceived warm and welcoming, these numbers tell you it is *unsafe to be different* in our community and in our country.

Now that I've shared the context, I have a few things I want to get across. Firstly, **I don't care how close we are or what kind of relationship** we have - if you continue to use *derogatory language* in front of me, or continue to *associate with bigoted people* you will have *significantly disappointed me* because you can no longer say you didn't know better, and I cannot be myself around you. I may not vocalize it but I am hyper aware of the *difference in the ways that you might treat me versus someone who isn't like me*. It is clear that I am perceived as less competent as a man and thus I feel less respected. These subtle differences aren't ruining my life or my relationships, but it proves that stigma in some forms is still ever present even within some of my circles. And this stigma is isolating, I always feel like I have one foot in the door. That only the "*straight*" *half of myself is accepted*. While it may not all be conscious behaviour, we all have an individual responsibility to educate ourselves and become aware of our biases and discriminatory beliefs. I am not expecting perfection, but it is our duty to **try**.

The *reason* I wanted to share all of this publicly, is that I never want this to happen again. **School District 71 has not adequately dealt with instances of harassment far beyond my own**, *that is fact*. Situation after situation from students across the district have been made aware to teachers, counselors and principals to no resolution.

This is a call to action because there is potential in this community, but the negligence towards so many in the student body has allowed for the near complete **tolerance of bigotry**. The fact of the matter is, the future of this community is being taught and socialized within the standards that our schools set. And the current standard is out-dated and far too low. Our sex-ed fails to address *the vastness of sexuality and gender* and the *severity of rape culture*. It fails to uphold unconditional acceptance and safety within the walls of their schools. This needs to change.

I have female friends who had to endure authority figures approaching them in hallways and exclaiming “Boobs, belly, butt!” As a means of enforcing a sexist dress code. It’s been widely talked and publicly talked about that a high school educator repeatedly spews *transphobic remarks* to students and colleagues without ever being reprimanded. Furthermore this same educator is openly known to make inappropriate remarks to female students - This is *currently* taking place within the Comox Valley. In regards to transphobia, transgender students have been allegedly separated from other students of their gender as a rule enforced by the district. They have had pronouns disrespected and their identities outed without any consent. This needs to change.

If I could ask one question directly to the school district, it's that why do you hang rainbow flags, only to allow your students to **rip them down**? How can you claim not to tolerate discrimination of race or gender, when you **tolerate a lack of adequate education** regarding North America’s history of slavery? What does that teach the next generation about *inclusivity*? About *acceptance*?

And talking directly to the community, how do you think it makes us look when our rainbow crosswalks always have **skid marks**? Or that our elected officials, including our MLA Ronna Rae Leonard have **dismissed incidents of racism within our valley**? Do you really think that makes this community feel *accepting*?

If we as a country and as a community, want to continue with the narrative that we are a place where *being yourself is what unites us all*, that we find *strength within diversity*; **We need better resources, education and representation**. And to make it very clear, this should not have to be coming from those experiencing your negligence - this should have been considered and dealt with before.

So finally, what is my suggestion? *Conversation*. Let's talk about it non-defensively. Clearly living in denial has only caused harm, so let's acknowledge the gravity of the situation. What does this mean? How are we really *practicing tolerance*? Everything from school board meetings to surveys to calling out bad behaviour; as long as the pathway of communication is open, *we are capable of change*. Let's exchange perspectives, understand why these issues are so prevalent and what needs to be changed.

I hope you resonated with what I had to say.

Thank you very much,

Mackai Sharp

Sources:

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MACKAI SHARP

Kill Yourself

2020

PROJECT STATEMENT

Kill Yourself brings the casualness of harassment to the foreground, reminding our community of the ever-present threat of intolerance. Highlighting the complicity, that we as a community tend to hold when bigotry plays out in public spaces. This piece allows for time to reflect on the present situation within the Comox Valley and searches for a way to evolve our collective ideologies to encompass inclusivity.

MACKAI SHARP

Visual arts quickly made its way to the forefront of my life as a way of expressing myself and showcasing my perspective. As an artist I strive to capture authenticity and vulnerability in my work. Slowly over time I discovered the value that is found within connecting images to a greater narrative. What I hope to manifest for the future, is the opportunity to highlight the people, places and stories that have gone unrepresented, without an audience. These hopes and manifestations have taken over the importance of my life and have become the reason I wake up in the morning; to share stories.

Photographs by Nula Jewel Power + Mackai Sharp