

The Lecture:

**AMERICAN DREAM**

The son of a Southern Baptist evangelist, the nephew of a Klan leader, raised in a trailer park, and the first of over 40 first cousins to graduate from college (Harvard), *Mama's Boy, Preacher's Son* author Jennings is founding Executive Director of GLSEN (Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network), the nation's leading education organization working to end anti-LGBT prejudice in schools. Kevin shares his journey and helps audiences face the challenges of creating a brave new world of inclusion and acceptance.

**BIOGRAPHY**

Kevin Jennings is recognized as a leader in both the education and civil rights communities. He is the founding Executive Director of GLSEN, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network.

Mr. Jennings is best known for his work ensuring safe schools for all students, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. After "coming out" in a chapel talk to the school community at Concord Academy in 1988, Mr. Jennings helped establish the nation's first Gay-Straight Alliance student club and became a well-known spokesperson and writer on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues in schools. In 1990, he founded GLSEN, bringing together teachers, parents and community members to address anti-LGBT bias in K-12 schools. As the head of a then all-volunteer group in Boston, Jennings led GLSEN in its successful effort to make Massachusetts one of the first states to outlaw discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation against public school students.

Mr. Jennings became GLSEN's first Executive Director in 1995, relocated its national headquarters to New York and led it rapid growth to its status today as a national nonprofit with an \$8 million budget, staff in Los Angeles, New York, and Washington, and a network of over 4,100 Gay-Straight Alliance student clubs in junior high and high schools across America.

*Newsweek* recognized Mr. Jennings' leadership by naming him to its "Century Club" as one of "100 people to watch in the new century." He has been honored with awards from the National Education Association, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the National Association of Independent Schools. Mr. Jennings was also chosen by President Clinton to participate in the White House Conference on School Safety and the White House Conference on Hate Crimes. He is a frequent commentator in local and national print and television media, appearing often on ABC's "20/20," "Good Morning America" and "Nightline," NBC's "Dateline," Fox News and the "O'Reilly Factor," and CNN.

Mr. Jennings is the author of several books, most recently, a memoir entitled *Mama's Boy, Preacher's Son*, which was named a 2006 "Book of Honor" by the American Library Association. Mr. Jennings also co-wrote and co-produced the historical documentary "Out of the Past," which won the 1998 Sundance Film Festival Audience Award for Best Documentary.

Mr. Jennings graduated magna cum laude from Harvard College, where he was chosen by his classmates to deliver the Harvard Oration at the 1985 Commencement. He received his M.A. from Columbia University in 1994, and in 1999 received his M.B.A. from the Leonard N. Stern School of Business at New York University. Mr. Jennings' upbringing, however, was far from such elite institutions. The youngest of five children born to a Southern Baptist evangelist, Mr. Jennings grew up largely in the rural South. He



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became the first person in his extended family of 13 aunts and uncles and nearly 50 cousins to attend college. He remains deeply engaged in efforts to create change in his family's historic home as National Chair for the Appalachian Community Fund.

Mr. Jennings spent a decade teaching high school history at the Moses Brown School in Providence, R.I. (1985-87), and at Concord Academy in Concord, Mass. (1987-1994). In 1992, Mr. Jennings was named one of fifty "Terrific Teachers Making a Difference" by the Edward Calesa Foundation, and in 1993 was selected as a Klingenstein Fellow by Columbia University for his outstanding leadership in independent school education.

Mr. Jennings currently lives in New York with his partner Jeff Davis, an investment banker, and their golden retriever Amber and Bernese mountain dog Ben. In his spare time, he serves on several boards and plays left wing for the New York City Gay Hockey Association.

### TRAINING PROGRAMS

#### Education for All: Addressing LGBT Issues in the Workplace

For many companies and organizations, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues are an emerging area of concern—and one which few feel they can address well. This workshop is an introductory session designed to provide basic information for those new to the issue. The goals of the workshop are to:

- Educate participants on the "basics" on sexual orientation, sexual behavior, and sexual identity
- Raise awareness on how anti-LGBT prejudice manifests itself in the workplace and how this inhibits productivity
- Do a preliminary assessment of workplace climate in order to make an action plan to create a more inclusive environment

### THE RESPONSE

"On behalf of **Burger King Corporation**, I wanted to take this opportunity to let you know how pleased we were to host Kevin Jennings at our recent LGBT symposium.

Since this was the first symposium we held to educate our employee population on different dimensions of diversity, specifically the LGBT dimension, we were looking for the perfect presenter—someone who could tell us their personal story, but also be able to tie their story back to the business case—how denying anyone's basic rights can have negative effects on any corporation. Kevin was able to do that, and so much more.

After Kevin's presentation was over, I was constantly stopped in the hallway, cafeteria, credit union, etc. by employees telling me how much they enjoyed his presentation. I received countless e-mails and from employees stating that Kevin's story was truly inspirational and motivating. I actually had one employee crying in my office as she reflected back on Kevin's speech and how much it touched her. Members

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of my executive team personally contacted me to say Kevin was an outstanding speaker, and the perfect choice for our first LGBT symposium.

Kevin was instrumental in helping to educate our employees on basic civil rights for all. His words have had a tremendous impact on others, and I believe he created many future “change agents” as a result of his presentation.

I have a strong feeling that Kevin and my path will continue to cross in many ways, and I look forward to working with him again very soon.

Thank you George, for bringing Kevin to our attention.”

Best,  
Robert L. Perkins  
VP, Inclusion and Talent Mgt.

#### MORE ABOUT

#### *MAMA’S BOY, PREACHER’S SON*

*A Memoir of Growing Up, Coming Out  
and Changing America’s Schools*

by Kevin Jennings

**A moving account of Kevin’s life journey from the trailer parks of North Carolina to meetings in the White House, *Mama’s Boy, Preacher’s Son* weaves humor, drama and insight into the story of one man determined to protect future generations of students from the bullying and harassment all too common in his own life. Andrew Holleran calls it “a moving, extremely readable account of an amazing American life. Halfway between *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *Dead Poets Society*.”**

When he was just a junior high school boy first getting involved in community politics, Kevin Jennings’ local paper, the Winston-Salem Journal, wrote that he could “cause more frothing and fulmination with one letter to the editor than can a rabies epidemic.” Jennings would go on to use his talent for political agitation to lead one of the critical social justice movements of the last decade, ultimately establishing a widely influential education organization focused on creating safe schools for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students.

in his memoir *Mama’s Boy, Preacher’s Son*, Jennings traces his activist roots to his childhood in the conservative South, where he grew up in trailer parks, the son of a fundamentalist evangelist father, who died when Jennings was eight, and an Appalachia-born mother, who managed to raise Jennings and his four older siblings on what she could earn with a sixth grade education. Noting that his family held the typical attitudes of poor white Southerners of their time, Jennings recalls festooning his room and the family car with the Confederate flag, and remembers that his first political heroes were segregationist governor George Wallace and the Klu Klux Klan. “We saw the battle over integration as a replay of the Civil War,” he observes, “of Yankees once again invading our homeland, foisting their alien ideas upon us, using their superior force to compel us to do something profoundly wrong. I hated them for it.”

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Jennings stopped buying into the racial divide after learning to adore his oldest brother's African-American wife, who had initially caused their family so much shame. He recalls starting to recognize society's inequities, observing how sexism affected his mother's ability to make a fair living, while also being both buoyed and dammed by his Southern Baptist upbringing, which extolled suffering for the truth, but excoriated people who are gay.

Jennings found his salvation instead in school. Writing of the unstinting love and support of his mother, he tells how, through her impressive math ability, her shared fascination with the Civil War, and her love of books and reading, she instilled in her son an early love of learning. In school, though, Jennings was relentlessly picked on and bullied. He tells of being called "sissy" and "faggot," being the daily target of spitballs and taunts on the bus, the object of derision in the classroom, and being openly humiliated by teachers. Indeed, none of the teachers or other adults in his school environment ever protected him or offered their support.

Escaping via a scholarship to Harvard (becoming the first member of his extended family to attend college as a result), where he finally came out, and then answering a calling to teach, Jennings relives his bitter struggles—with administrators as well as with himself—over how to be an openly gay high school teacher.

It was as a teacher that Jennings would start making changes for LGBT students—and it was his students, he says, that led him into action. After he came out during a school assembly speech, Jennings was shocked and moved by the support he received from the student body. "In the end," he writes, "I was the one who had the biggest problem with gay people, beginning with myself." Following his coming out, Jennings was approached by one of the most popular girls in school. Her mother was a lesbian, she reported, and she wanted to combat homophobia at the school by starting one of the first school-based Gay-Straight Alliances. The work that began at his school spread, with the state's Governor creating a commission to study the experiences of LGBT youth, which led to public hearings in Massachusetts in which gay students testified about how the adults in their lives—in school, in their families, in the government—failed to keep them safe and led some to attempt suicide. "It wasn't unusual," Jennings remembers of that time, "to see people crying, sometimes having to excuse themselves because they couldn't sit and listen anymore. With each hearing I could also feel a hardening resolve, born of outrage and anger, that we simply were not going to let this continue, that we could use our platform to demand real change."

Having touched a nerve, Jennings left teaching and founded GLSEN, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network. He spent over twelve years building GLSEN into a national organization at the forefront of a bold movement that now works with over 3,000 Gay-Straight Alliances in schools across the country.

Ultimately, he credits his mother for teaching him about the fight for justice. Alice Johnson Jennings went through her own growth process that paralleled that of her son's. Although raised with homophobia, she founded a local chapter of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays in the late Eighties. Raised in segregation, she would become a full-time volunteer helping black men at an AIDS hospice. "When my faith flags," he writes, "when my soul is weary, when I feel I am too tired to go on with the struggle for justice, I picture my seventy-five year old mother holding the hands of a seventy-pound African-American man with AIDS as he passes from this life to the next, and I am restored."

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