...Op-ed: A gay-straight alliance may have saved this teen's life, and all Utah schools should have them

By Paul C. Burke, Brett L. Tolman And John W. Mackay

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...Alex Cooper returns to Utah this week to tell her story of surviving conversion therapy and prevailing in an extended legal battle to establish her right to live under the law's protection as an openly gay teenager. Her testimony bears witness to the evils of conversion therapy and the need for a Gay Straight Alliance in every high school in Utah.

As chronicled in her new book, "Saving Alex," which was co-written with Joanna Brooks, Cooper was living in California when she came out to her Mormon family at age 15. She was kicked out of the family home and then transported to St. George, where her parents signed over legal custody of her to a couple running an unlicensed residential treatment facility in their home.

Over several harrowing months, Cooper was tortured and abused in an effort to change her sexual orientation. She was required to wear a backpack filled with heavy rocks, meant to symbolize her supposed sin of her homosexuality, and forced to stand at attention, facing a wall for long hours. She was told that there was no place for her in God's plan.

Cooper endured this emotional and physical "therapy" for several months before being permitted to enroll at Snow Canyon High School. There she met Jason Osmanski, a brave teenager who had overcome scorn and community opposition to start a gay-straight alliance, a school club meant to provide support and a safe place for LGBT teens.

The gay-straight alliance at Snow Canyon High School may have saved Alex's life. Osmanski and the club's faculty adviser helped Cooper to escape and obtain legal representation. Although the Attorney General's Office initially argued that Cooper's parents supposedly had a constitutional right to determine their daughter's sexual orientation, ultimately the juvenile court entered orders that both forbade further efforts to change her sexual orientation and protected her right to engage in normal teenage activities, including dating girls.

The legal protections won by Cooper through an extended legal battle should be the birthright of every LGBT Utahn. Unfortunately, Utah remains a difficult and even dangerous place for many LGBT teens.

The state's top elected leaders fought against marriage equality, signaling from Capitol Hill to every schoolyard their belief that gay people are lesser and undeserving of same rights and opportunities as their straight peers. The Utah Code remains littered with laws that demean the dignity of LGBT people and denigrate their lives and family relationships.

Many religious communities in this state offer neither hope nor support for gay teens who aspire to fall in love, be married and have a family of their own. Too many families are torn apart forever by the gulf between the doctrines and policies of their faith

versus their desire to love and sustain the real lives of their LGBT brothers and sisters.

Proponents of conversion therapy prey upon this conflict and offer false hope to gay teens and their families. The truth is that conversion therapy is not only futile but fraudulent. It is harmful to LGBT teens. Utah should take rank with other states that have banned the dangerous and fraudulent practice of conversion therapy.

It cannot be a surprise that suicide is the second leading cause of death for Utah teens, at rates above the national average. LGBT teens are three times more likely than their heterosexual peers to attempt suicide. Each year more than 2,000 LGBT teens in Utah suffer from homelessness, many like Cooper kicked out or exiled after coming out to their religious families.

Because so many LGBT teens cannot count on support from their families or faith communities, it is vital that they find safe places at school. Yet current Utah law targets gay-straight alliances to discourage both their existence and the participation of the teens who most need support and affirmation. It should not be harder to start a gay-straight alliance at a public high school than to register a business corporation. It is wrong that Utah law requires closeted teens to obtain parental consent to join a gay-straight alliance.

Alex Cooper survived her ordeal and ultimately reconciled with her family, thanks in large measure to the affirmation she found from her high school's gay-straight alliance. For Cooper and other LGBT teens, gay-straight alliances are places of safety and dignity, places of courage that look to the character of the heart, places where LGBT teens are no longer strangers or foreigners.

Cooper's story shows why a gay-straight alliance is needed at every public high school in Utah.

Paul C. Burke, Brett L. Tolman and John W. Mackay of the law firm of Ray Quinney and Nebeker provided pro bono representation to Alex Cooper....