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Cedar Falls Transgender Student Wins 2016 ACLU of Iowa Robert Mannheimer Youth Advocacy Award

Cedar Falls, Iowa – Ben Christiason didn't set out to be a pioneer in transgender rights advocacy, but he's become one.

The 18-year-old is the first openly transgender person to graduate from Cedar Falls High School. He is also the first out transgender boy in the history of Cedar Falls High School to participate in boys' sports as a member of the cross-country team.

Ben has become an educator on transgender issues for schools, faith groups, and educators both locally and throughout his part of the state. Because of his pioneering role in transgender equality, he has been named the winner of the ACLU of Iowa's 2016 Robert Mannheimer Youth Advocacy Award.

In ninth grade, Ben shared his story in front of both peers and congregants present for his Lutheran confirmation faith statement. More recently, he spoke to guidance counselors at his region's area education agency, talking about his own experience and the need to educate elementary and middle school students on transgender issues. He has also shared his story with pediatric nursing students at Allen College in Waterloo and was a guest speaker at a health course at his high school.

Ben was chosen for the award because of his obvious passion and talent in reaching out to others to educate about the realities and challenges transgender individuals face. "We were impressed by how students and adults alike look to Ben for information and education who has graciously shared his story, providing both information and inspiration to other young people who are transgender," said Veronica Fowler, ACLU of Iowa Communications Director.

Ben knew from an early age that he was a boy. Starting in his freshman year, with the love and support of family and friends, Ben came out as transgender at school. In addition to using a male name and pronouns and wearing clothes that Ben associated with being a boy, he began to present and live his life in as male. Everyone is different, and not all transgender people want or need any particular medical treatment to treat gender dysphoria. But in Ben's case his hormone therapy and gender confirmation surgery was an important part of his process.

But going through a gender transition as a teenager in high school in front of peers has not always been easy – Ben has been the subject of hateful and offensive comments both to his face and in writing. For Ben, his personal faith as a Christian has been an important source of strength and courage.

"It's important to show the adults in the community that I am no different than the person they knew in Sunday school," Ben says, "I want other to know that I'm transgender, but that I'm also a Christian."

"Ben has held his head high even when his heart was sinking because a classmate had told him he was an abomination and going to hell," said his mother, Jennifer Christiason, who nominated him for the award. "He continued to stay active in our youth group and participated

in numerous mission trips in spite of the hateful comments.”

Ben says that his experience of coming out and being able to live as a boy has quite literally been a lifesaver. When he was younger, “I felt like my life was going to be short...I felt like I wasn’t going to be old ever.” He felt at times like he didn’t have a life to look forward to, one that was worth living. Tragically, Ben’s experience is not unique. Forty-one percent of transgender people attempt suicide at some point in their lifetimes.*

“Now I no longer walk the halls with my head down. I smile at everyone I pass and keep my shoulders back. I have never been so comfortable in my body and this realization has allowed me to begin to reach my full potential,” he says.

Joining the men’s cross-country team “has been one of the greatest challenges of my life. Physically, I am weaker than some of my teammates, but mentally I am just as tough and I compete my hardest, not to prove something to the world, but instead to myself.”

This fall, Ben will be a freshman at St. Olaf College in Minnesota. He wants to become a lawyer “to become a voice not just for transgender people but LGBT minorities and other minorities as well.”

He says that today, he is eager to get started on his career helping others, and hopes to marry and raise children – part of a long, rewarding, and happy life.

The Robert Mannheimer Award is a \$500 cash prize given to a young Iowan aged 14 to 19 who has demonstrated a passion and advocacy for civil liberties. It is named as a memorial to Des Moines attorney and civil liberties advocate Robert Mannheimer.

For more information on the Robert Mannheimer award, go to:

<http://www.aclu-ia.org/mannheimer-youth-advocacy-award/>

* Source: National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and National Center for Transgender Equality,

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