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## **ACLU/SC Settles Lawsuit over Orange County High School That Tolerated Homophobia and Sexism**

SANTA ANA, Calif. – The ACLU of Southern California and the law firm of Hadsell, Stormer, Keeny, Richardson and Renick, LLP have settled a lawsuit against Orange County's Newport-Mesa Unified School District and Corona del Mar High School.

The settlement agreement filed today in Orange County Superior Court resolves a lawsuit over a sexist and homophobic atmosphere that school officials permitted to flourish at the school, leading to despicable threats of violence against Hail Ketchum, a senior at the time. Under the agreement, district officials will provide a written apology to Ms. Ketchum.

The district also will provide mandatory training sessions for administrators, teachers and students that will focus on the harmful impact of sexual discrimination and harassment, as well as on federal law and district complaint protocols to be followed whenever anyone experiences discrimination or harassment based on sex, sexual orientation and gender identity.

"The mandated training will make it clear to administrators, teachers and students not only what constitutes sexism and homophobia, but what school officials must do to deal with it – and prevent it from spreading – according to the law," said Hector Villagra, director of the ACLU/SC's Orange County office.

**Ms. Ketchum**, who agreed to be publicly identified for the first time today, said that while the district's apology to her is important, she's been primarily interested in ensuring that district officials do everything they can to prevent other students from being the target of vitriolic comments and threats like those she experienced. Those attacks "were disgusting and very disturbing to me personally," she said. "But what was really disheartening is that when I complained about them, the administrators did little to deal with them. I'm happy that the settlement provides the school with a road map of how to address situations like this more appropriately."

The training mandated by the settlement will be conducted under the direction and guidance of the Orange County/Long Beach regional Office of the Anti-Defamation League. It includes an 8-hour program later this year for all district managers, school-site administrators, principals and assistant principals. Teachers and staff at Corona del Mar will get two two-hour training sessions during the current school year, as will students.

“It’s important for high school students to be educated about bullying and homophobia. It’s crucial for school administrators and teachers not only to be aware of these issues, but how to deal with them,” said Katherine Darmer, a Chapman University law professor who is on the board of the Orange County Equality Coalition, which focuses on LGBT issues. “It’s shameful that **Ms. Ketchum** had to suffer through the threats and comments she did, but I’m hopeful that with this new training, school officials will be better prepared to deal with a situation like this if it comes up again.”

“California law guarantees a safe and bias-free learning environment for all students,” said Anne Richardson, a partner with Hadsell Stormer. “School officials must understand that they have a duty to take affirmative steps to change a school culture that ignores or promotes harassment and discrimination.”

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