



# 'OPERATION WIN'

**Sports, C1:** Joker Phillips praises predecessor, signs five-year contract to be UK football head coach  
**John Clay, C1:** The good news: Program is in good shape. The bad news: New coach won't get a honeymoon.

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## Teens' deaths leave a legacy in life and on film

DOCUMENTARY BRINGS THEM TOGETHER AGAIN TO TEACH ACCEPTANCE



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HERALD-LEADER  
COLUMNIST

On the surface, there wouldn't appear to be anything good that could come from the deaths of three Lexington teenagers. But when the layers of grief are pulled back, the

shortened lives of Josh Shipman, Jesse Higginbotham and Hannah Landers have had — and continue to have — a positive impact.

On Saturday, several organizations are hosting the first local screening of *Straightlaced: How Gender's Got Us All Tied Up*, a documentary that explores the pressures teens endure to conform to

accepted gender boundaries.

That film is dedicated to Hannah, who was one of the 50 young people producers interviewed to gauge the restrictions society puts on teens in defining their masculinity or femininity.

Hannah was a good friend of Josh, an openly gay student at Paul Laurence Dunbar High School who

See DAVIS, A14



Before her death in 2008, Hannah Landers, left, wore bracelets in honor of fellow Dunbar High School students Jesse Higginbotham, above left, and Josh Shipman, above right, who died in 2007 and 2006, respectively.

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FROM THE FRONT PAGE

LEXINGTON HERALD-LEADER | KENTUCKY.CO

### DAVIS | Teens set example we all should follow

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committed suicide in October 2006. He was 15.

Josh's death greatly affected Jesse as well, even though Jesse barely knew Josh. In fact, to honor Josh and other deceased Dunbar students, Jesse, who was gifted with computers, spearheaded the creation of a memorial garden on the school grounds.

In 2007, however, Jesse, 17, was killed in a car accident. Family and friends, including Hannah, continued working on the memorial garden, spending many weekends there amending the soil and planting.

In May 2008, Hannah died in an automobile accident, the third Dunbar student to die in less than two years.

Before she died, Hannah had been interviewed about Josh at the garden by a film crew from Groundspark, a non-profit California film company that uses that medium to bring about social change.

Hannah spoke of her loving friendship with Josh and of the negativity he endured because of his flamboyant personality.

A producer arranged for Hannah and her mother to fly to San Francisco for a second interview, but Hannah died days before that trip.

"We finished the film without that extra interview and all knew immediately that we would dedicate *Straightlaced* to Hannah's memory, and by extension, to the spirit of her activism," Debra Chasnoff, president and senior producer at Groundspark, wrote in a blog post Dec. 30.

Jesse's mother, Rebecca Woloch, said Hannah was deserving of the honor. "She is probably one of the most compassionate people I ever met.

IF YOU GO

'Straightlaced: How Gender's Got Us All Tied Up'

When: 11 a.m. Jan. 9.

Where: The State Theatre, inside The Kentucky Theatre, 214 E. Main St.

Admission: Free, but donations accepted.

Learn more: (859) 231-6997.

Reception: 10:15 a.m.; refreshments served.

"I hadn't known her that long, a little over a year," Woloch said. "She was an incredible support system for me. She wasn't afraid to grieve out loud."

The message of the film is one of acceptance of others regardless of their dress, sexual orientation or desire to wear a particular color, said Woloch. That epitomizes what Hannah stood for.

"In the movie she said people ask her why she was friends with Josh, and she said, 'Why not?'" Woloch said.

"These are stories of kids who identify as gay, straight, bisexual or whatever," she said. "It's about the biases we have and the determinations we make based on nothing. Hers was just acceptance and love. Acceptance for who they are."

Hannah's father, the Rev. Richard Landers, a retired Baptist minister, said the documentary is well-done.

"Most of the kids were straight like Hannah," he said. "But there were teenagers who had more flamboyant lifestyles. There is enough room for all of us here."

Through the teens, the film explores how peer pressure influenced the choice of clothing, classes and friends. For example, one boy talks about how his purple shirt could result in teasing about his sexuality.

"Hannah at 17, and leading up to 17, was a

master of unconditional love," her father said. "I was fearful of her sticking her neck out, but in looking back on it, the teacher became the student. She was teaching us all what to do."

Groundspark has produced several films through its The Respect for All Project that focuses on making schools and communities safe for children. The films are used by teachers and other adults to start conversations about differences, alleviating prejudice and creating a caring society.

Some of the social issues the program confronts are bullying and name-calling, the diverse family life in America, gender and gay issues, and the environment.

In *Straightlaced*, teens from all spectrums of life talk about the restraints placed on them to stay within the boundaries of what is deemed masculine or feminine. The film is intended as a starting point for discussions.

Woloch wanted the film shown in Lexington because of Hannah's role in it and in the lives of Jesse and Josh.

The Kentucky Fairness Alliance; Lexington Gay and Lesbian Services Organization; Gay Straight Alliance; Voices of Change, a suicide prevention organization; and Dunbar's No Day But Today support group helped to sponsor the premiere. Fred Mills, manager of The Kentucky Theatre, agreed to show it.

The Central Kentucky Council for Peace and Justice will host a reception before the film. Admission is free, but donations will be split among Groundspark, the Hannah Landers Scholarship Fund and a suicide prevention program in Josh's name.

"We are bringing the film to Lexington to continue Hannah's work and tell Josh's story," Woloch said.

And that's true. Bringing *Straightlaced* here pays homage to Josh, Jesse and Hannah, who had hearts big enough to accept differences.

But it is also an opportunity for the rest of us to follow their lead. There is a lot to be learned from our children. We

can start if we allow people around us to be themselves because we accept them for who they are.

Reach Merlene Davis at (859) 231-3218 or 1-800-950-6397, Ext. 3218, or [mdavis1@herald-leader.com](mailto:mdavis1@herald-leader.com).

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