

## **The Ethics of Unintentional Wrongs**

Cedar View Middle School, a liberal private school in San Francisco, holds strong to its support of DEI even in the rapidly changing political situation. They hold several affinity spaces and have a strict policy against anything that could be offensive. If anyone says something discriminatory regarding marginalized groups, they will be suspended or possibly expelled. The result is an inclusive environment, but also an environment hostile to even the slightest mistakes.

Sarah, a 6<sup>th</sup> grader at Cedar View, strongly supports the school's policies, although she isn't part of any of those groups herself. Yesterday at lunch, she witnessed classmate Jamie make a homophobic "joke" to his friends, which was also heard by Oliver, who's gay. Sarah knows that Jamie has struggled socially in the past. She also suspects Oliver will not feel comfortable telling an adult what Jamie said. Sarah faces a choice between telling on Jamie and risking the school potentially suspending him, or saying nothing and letting this incident go unnoticed.

Jamie lives in a financially struggling family with parents who work multiple jobs and are rarely at home. With little guidance, he's floundered socially and feels deeply lonely. On TikTok, Jamie saw a homophobic message disguised as an innocent joke. Hoping to raise his popularity, Jamie repeated the 'joke' to a friend group he wanted to join, which Sarah overheard. Jamie was unaware of the harmful nature of the TikTok video, and also didn't know that Oliver was gay. If Jamie has a suspension on his record at Cedar View, it would harm his chances of getting into college and damage his already precarious future.

Oliver recently moved to Cedar View and found it dramatically different from his old school. There, he was viciously bullied for being gay, and whenever he tried to report this to the teachers, he received no support. Oliver is still adjusting to the Cedar View environment, so when Jamie made a homophobic joke and nobody directly stopped him, Oliver felt that this school might just be a repetition of his previous school. He feels resigned that harmful jokes like this are the status quo, and has decided to stop putting any effort into his social life.

Sarah must decide what to do.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Should Sarah tell the teachers about what Jamie said?

2. Should Jamie be punished for saying something homophobic even if his intent wasn't homophobic?
3. How do you balance obligations to speak out with protecting people from potentially unjust or disproportionate consequences?
4. Do we always have the responsibility to stand up for others, even when they could stand up for themselves?

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