

# Atheists launch campaign to get unbelievers to 'come out'

by [Kimberly Winston](#)

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(RNS) The young man in the video pulls in close to his computer camera with the trappings of a typical college dorm room -- a loft bed and the clutter of cast-off clothes -- piled behind him.

Alex Fiorentini isn't talking about girls, beer or football. Instead, it's a coming-out moment of sorts.

"Is it acceptable to the majority of the population to be an atheist?" he asks the camera. "Nope. Are all of your friends going to accept you as an atheist? Probably not all of them. And yeah, those things are gonna suck. But the real question is, 'Is it OK to be me?' That is the real question if you are an atheist."

For Fiorentini, a student at the University of Illinois, the answer is yes. He and scores of other atheists, young and old, have made similar videos for a new campaign designed to build community and support among nontheists around the world.

Dubbed "We Are Atheism," the campaign was launched this fall by three students at the University of Kansas.

"It's time for us to all stand up, speak out and be counted," said Amanda Brown, 25, one of the co-founders. "It is time for us to put up our videos and change the face of atheism. We want people to see we are normal people who have children and lives and do good in the community."

Brown was inspired to start the campaign with her husband and a friend when she attended a talk by Jessica Ahlquist, a teenage atheist who was taunted and bullied after she objected to a "school prayer" banner hung in her Rhode Island high school.

Brown, who had founded a gay-straight club in her high school, patterned We Are Atheism on the gay community's "It Gets Better" video project, launched in 2010 after a string of suicides by bullied gay teens. It Gets Better features self-made videos by gay, lesbian, transgendered and bisexual people who share their coming-out experiences and offer encouragement to those who remain closeted.

"The whole point of the website is to let younger atheists know you will face persecution," Brown said. "But through us knowing each other we can all help."

Brown's project also piggybacks on the gay community's experience that familiarity breeds acceptance: Knowing actual gay people tends to break down homophobia, ignorance and prejudice.

About one or two videos come in each day, and daily traffic to the We Are Atheism website has climbed as high as 6,600. Brown has heard from atheists ranging in age from 15 to 75 who say watching the videos has made them feel less isolated and, in some cases, given them courage to come out as atheists to family and friends.

The first video was posted in August, and was quickly joined by 70 more along with 21 personal essays. Some, like Fiorentini, are college students. Others are from older, prominent atheists including Hemant Mehta, a popular atheist blogger, and Greta Christina, an atheist activist.

"To those of you who are watching this video, you should know that you are not alone," says David Silverman, president of American Atheists, in his self-made video. "You should be an out atheist because it feels great. To be a closeted atheist is to tell a lie to your loved ones."

Reaction in the atheist community has been encouraging. The Richard Dawkins Foundation, which has its own campaign encouraging atheists to go public, is supporting We Are Atheism on its website; Atheist Nexus, the largest Internet gathering site for nontheists, has partnered with We Are Atheism to give it a wider online reach.

"If the polls are correct, there are literally millions of nonbelievers in America," said Richard Haynes, president of Atheist Nexus. "However, many atheists feel all alone. This is the primary reason we must come out of the closet. Coming out is the only way to change the public perception of nontheism."