

Lawsuit 20 years became powerful win for LGBT rights in Utah

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SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — Two women who faced intense backlash when they sued to form the state's first gay-straight alliance club 20 years ago are looking back at the landmark decision. The Salt Lake City School District went as far as banning all 46 extracurricular clubs so that it wouldn't lose \$100 million in federal funding for discrimination under the Equal Access Act of 1984 when it didn't approve the alliance club's application in 1995, the Salt Lake Tribune reported last week.

Ivy Fox and Leah Farrell were part of the group of plaintiffs that pushed back against the school district 20 years ago.

At the time, Farrell didn't realize what a big landmark the case would be, she said. "It took a lot of bravery," Fox said to a room of supporters at the Utah Pride Center last Friday. Fox remembers the retaliation she and others received after they submitted the application for their club. Her tires were slashed, her locker was broken into and she received a threat. "A number of students were targeted. There were teachers who would not engage with us," Fox said.

Five years and \$175,000 in court fees later, all of the nonacademic clubs were reinstated. East High School students were allowed to form their gay-straight alliance club. "We set a legal precedent, and you can't take that away," Fox said, who had graduated from the school by the time the club was allowed.

Other gay-straight alliance clubs have been formed in other Utah schools since. Farrell, now a lawyer with the American Civil Liberties Union, is always ready to help students who want to start their own gay-straight alliances at their schools. Other achievements in the LGBT community since that decision include the legalization of gay marriage in the United States and the dramatic increase in attendance at the Salt Lake City Pride Festival.

"It's just been such an incredible amount of progress that's been made around LGBT rights," Farrell said.

This story corrects the spelling of Leah Farrell's surname. It's Farrell, not Ferrell.