

Views: Whose Safe Zone?

I'm in the sixth grade, standing in the unmoving cafeteria line, when out of the blue a boy I don't know looks directly at me and says, loud enough for everyone in the vicinity to hear: "Did you know you're a fucking pansy flower?"

How do I respond?

Nowadays I could think up a few snappy retorts, but at the time — nearly 30 years ago — I stood paralyzed and speechless. For one thing, I *did* know, even if I didn't want to. Worse, I suddenly realized that if a stranger could know this about me and so easily select me as a target, then I wasn't really safe anywhere. So I said and did nothing.

As it turned out, I was relatively lucky. While this wasn't the only verbal assault I endured during my years in the

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Barre City school system, I — unlike many kids who are perceived to be gay — was never subjected to relentless harassment or physical abuse. Still, the fact that this cafeteria moment has stayed with me all these years speaks to the extreme vulnerability I felt at the time. Because I instinctively understood that anytime I was targeted as a faggot, there was nowhere to turn.

Reading about the recent "SafeZone" card controversy in my hometown school system (covered in *OITM's* December issue), it struck me how far we've come in recent years, and how far we've yet to go.

To briefly recap what happened, Rachael Erickson, a middle school art teacher, asked the school board for permission to replace a SafeZone card that was removed from her classroom door by a community member, David Ayer. After a discussion of the matter — with input from people on both sides of the controversy — the school board decided

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not to take immediate action but rather to "study this issue."

On the positive side, it's reassuring to know that the "issue" of student safety is one that can be discussed now. And that when it is discussed, sexuality isn't completely off the radar screen, as it surely would have been back in my day.

Opponents of Erickson's SafeZone card cited its connection to Outright Vermont (Outright's phone number and website address appeared in small print on the card) as the main reason for their disapproval. But one has to wonder if they'd be any more supportive of a card without Outright's name on it.

David Ayer, the man who "removed" the card from Erickson's door, and Steve Cable, who spoke out against its replacement at the school board meeting, are familiar anti-gay faces on the Vermont scene. Both actively fought against civil unions and were among the first to scapegoat Outright Vermont when the civil union battle failed to go their way.

Because people like Ayer and Cable are personally opposed to homosexuality, they believe homosexuality has no place in the schools. In essence, they want to make schools "safe" from any reference to sexuality.

"It's unfortunate and sad that schools are placed in the middle of controversial issues that can only detract from education," Cable was quoted as saying at the school board meeting.

However, the reality is that homosexuality has an undeniably big place in the schools, and it's not gay or questioning kids or supportive teachers who make this so. It's the kids who call other kids "faggot" in the hallways or who otherwise harass kids they perceive to be different. And it's the adults who turn the other way when these things happen. If there weren't stigmas attached to being anything other than straight, then there would be no need for designated safe spaces, because every space would be safe.

It's interesting that when anti-gay spokespeople talk about how issues of sexual identity "detract from education," they never seem to take into

account how fear of daily ridicule might "detract" from a gay child's education. How negotiating anti-gay land mines day after day in an unwelcoming environment might negatively affect a child's ability to concentrate on his or her studies. How repeatedly being the victim of hatefulness might eventually make suicide seem a better option than school.

I personally can't understand how anyone could object to a teacher's request to make her classroom a safe zone for any student. The Barre City school board's indecision on the matter was a cop-out, particularly since this teacher was merely seeking to replace something that was already on school property — presumably with at least tacit approval — and was clearly wrongfully removed.

Of course, David Ayer has every right to object to the message Rachael Erickson was trying to send to students with her SafeZone card, just as he has the right to make accusations (however baseless) against Outright Vermont. He doesn't have the right to arrogantly rid the world of things he finds personally offensive.

"As a taxpayer in this community I would take it down again," Mr. Ayer was quoted as saying to the school board.

By this logic I could walk into a classroom and remove chalk from a teacher's hand if I disagreed with what she was writing on the blackboard. Or I could weed through the books in my local school library, tossing any that failed to meet my approval.

What people who seek to inflict their righteousness on the rest of us tend to forget is that we're all family and community members, we're all taxpayers. And, by the way, stealing from public property has never been, as far as I know, a taxpayer privilege.

It's nice to imagine a time when every kid will be free of harassment at school and free to work through his or her identity without fear of being victimized for it. But until that time arrives I'm thankful that there are people like Rachael Erickson willing to say enough is enough, willing to listen to a student who doesn't know where else to turn, willing to let kids know there's another option besides struggling alone. The question is why aren't there more people willing? ▼

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