

Report from the Closet: Elementary Education

Sage Russell

At the recent hearings on the Gay Rights bill, a number of right-wing fundamentalists opposed it because they wanted to make sure their kids weren't being taught by homosexuals. They feared that if the bill were passed, they wouldn't be able to get rid of these negative influences in the public school system.

Surprise. Gay men and lesbians in large numbers are already in the public school system where they come into contact with children every day, children on whom they exert a positive influence, as they attempt to teach them tolerance and open-mindedness, along with reading, chemistry, or Spanish. The personal price they pay, though, is high.

For many heterosexuals who hate, their hatred is expressed in terms of fears for their children, with the result that the closet becomes an unfortunate reality for many gay and lesbian teachers. *OITM* decided to take a look at gay and lesbian elementary school teachers in Vermont. We chose the elementary level because of the common myths that gay people recruit children into homosexuality and that gay men in particular are child molesters.

We do not lay claim to any sort of statistical validity here. We simply talked to two men and one woman who face this issue every day in their working lives and have found different ways of dealing with it. They have certain things in common. All of them are experienced teachers. All of them like their work, derive meaning from it and feel they are good at it. They all like working with this age group. And they all requested that their real names not be used. (Along with the names, some identifying characteristics have been changed.) These three teachers' stories are strikingly different. Here then, is a report from the closet.

Martin

Martin has taught third and fourth grade for more than 10 years. He does not live in the town where he teaches. He maintains a rigid separation between his personal and his professional life. He doesn't feel that his personal life has any bearing on his work and vice versa, and says that this would be true even if he didn't have a secret. "I don't discuss it with people, any more than I would ask another person about their sex life. I don't think it's anybody's business what I do. And I don't think it's my business what anybody else does — what a heterosexual person does in their private life either. I don't think that has any basis in the workplace."

With two exceptions, Martin is not out to his colleagues. He is out to a woman he has taught with, who is also a good friend. And he didn't exactly tell her. She finally asked him point blank, saying, "I need to know. I want to know." His relationship broke up this year, which affected his job performance, as well as every other aspect of his life, and led him to come out to his principal, who was supportive and understanding. He suspects that many of his colleagues already know, or at least have guessed, and this doesn't bother him.

In fact, he has allowed them to guess. Although he doesn't talk much about his personal life, he doesn't always go to enormous pains to hide it either. He and his former partner once had a Christmas party at their house, to which they invited the staff at Martin's school. On another occasion, they both went to a Halloween party at school.

Martin prefers to be closeted at work. He feels the community he teaches in is relatively tolerant, but he can't predict what would happen if he did come out, and he doesn't want to risk it. "I don't know how big an issue that would be for other people.

I would rather not go through it." He wouldn't want to put the school through an ordeal either. "I don't want to become a problem for the community or for the school. The schools have enough trouble as it is, with all the pressures that are on education today. I don't want to be another issue that's going to create problems."

Discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is prohibited in his union contract. Martin believes that the union would fight hard on his behalf if his job were threatened for that reason. But if he were to lose his job, he doesn't think he would teach again, partly because of his sexual orientation and partly because his years of experience would make it too expensive to hire him.

One reason for Martin's relative comfort in the closet is that "I wouldn't do anything different if everyone did know. I'm just not going to show up at school in chifon and high heels. I wouldn't dress any different, I wouldn't cut my hair any different. I guess for being gay, I'm relatively conservative in a lot of those respects."

The kids he teaches aren't particularly curious about his life outside school. They mostly want to know if he's married or has children, but they don't react much to the news that he isn't. Nine and ten year olds don't really understand what sexual orientation is, and unlike high school students, they are not dealing with it in their own lives.

Martin is content for things to stay the way they are, and he can't foresee any event that would change them. Any disturbance to the equilibrium would have to come from outside. "As long as there's no crisis, then it (his sexual orientation) is a non-issue." As long as it doesn't hit the surface, he's fine.

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