

Kate

Kate is more tightly closeted than Martin and also more conflicted about it. Like Martin she does not live in the town where she teaches, and keeps her private life very private. She has been a first grade teacher for about six years. She is not so concerned about her colleagues, but she doesn't trust the community she works in. There was once a homophobic incident in the town, the details of which are unclear, but which people still refer to years later. She thinks some people at school suspect she's a lesbian and other people know.

"I honestly don't know any gays or lesbians that are out and work in public schools. I can't think of one. I do know gays and lesbians that work in public schools, none of whom are out. And I don't honestly know that they would keep their jobs. Public school almost more than anything else is such a homophobic environment. You have to worry about the community and the parents and the kids, and it is really an enmeshed homophobic system. People are fairly open if you're working with adults. I think people's homophobia just goes through the roof when you're working with little kids. It's more scary to think that the community would as a group say, 'We want her out of here' than the school system itself.

"I really lead two separate lives. There are very few people I work with who have ever been to my house, who I've ever done anything with socially. People don't really ask any personal questions because they're not people that I hang out with." Being closeted at work carries over into her life outside work too. "There are times when you're shopping or you're in a place where you're being yourself, being comfortable, and then all of a sudden you turn around and there's someone you work with. And you go, 'Eeek, what do I do? How do I re-

spond to that?' And that's real uncomfortable at times. You're forced to sort of be on edge because you're always worried that that person that you don't want to know is going to find out. And that's hard."

She goes to parents' meetings, plays, band concerts, baseball games and the like, but in general she doesn't attend social events at school like the holiday party, and she would never consider taking her partner.

Kate doesn't hold out much hope for improvement in the elementary schools. Because the schools are public and everybody goes, she thinks changes will be slow. "People are much more willing to accept someone who's gay or lesbian if they have a choice about their own affiliation, and you don't in public school. I think that's really hard for people to swallow. I think change is going to be really slow in elementary schools. And it certainly is impeded by people like me. I have to take responsibility for that, in that things are going to change even more slowly until I'm willing to come out, and I'm willing to say, 'I'm a lesbian. I'm still really good at my job, and I still want to work here. How can we make that work?'"

She doesn't get a lot of pressure from other gays and lesbians to come out, except in a joking way. They understand the ramifications. But she feels a lot of internal pressure.

"I can be talking to a friend, and they say, 'How do you do that, literally just split your life in half? It must be so hard.' And it is. And a lot of times, I think about wanting to leave and work in a different environment where I could just be totally out. And then, there's that part of me that feels like somewhere, something is getting through to kids that needs to get through. That you can have an alternative lifestyle and really

be a productive adult and not have the typical nuclear family...There are times when I definitely think I want to leave. And then there are other times when I think, no, I need to be here. These kids need to not just have contact with pregnant married women (laughs). They have to know that there is another way."

It is conceivable, but not likely that one day the conflict could become so great that Kate couldn't keep going. "I think that could happen. I think to some degree that there would have to be some catalyst for that to happen. I think I move through my work pretty comfortably. And people work with me pretty comfortably. And I think I've gotten into a space where unless something really traumatic were to happen, unless something were really to blow apart, that the comfort level is OK at this point for me. Something would really have to give way in order for that not to be OK.

"There's definitely a cost. There's always a fear; what if I'm found out? There is a cost because things don't change if people aren't out. Things don't get better. Things aren't going to change in that system unless people say, 'Don't say that because I am one of those people, and you like me for who I am, so let's talk about that.' And that really is hard. You feel like you're selling yourself out."

Ben

Ben has taught fifth grade at the same school for more than ten years. He lives in the community where he works and shares a house with Scott, his partner of many years. Ben is out, at school and in the community, and he is making it work. He says, though, that most of the gay and lesbian teachers he knows are closeted.

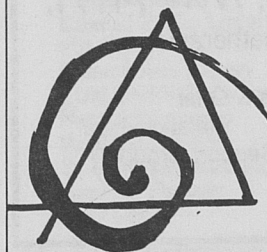
Being out at school is in part the result of luck — the school board that interviewed

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