

## Elementary Education

Continued from page 17

him knew he was gay, but hired him anyway. There is a tacit understanding between him and the rest of the staff. Ben doesn't actually tell people he's gay. He just makes sure they know. Shortly after a new principal arrived at the school, he invited her over to his house for dinner. She toured the house with its one bedroom and met Scott. Now she routinely asks how Scott is. When a new teacher who didn't know the rules made a mistake once and referred to Ben's gayness too openly, the other teachers became uncomfortable. It violated the unspoken rule that keeps the situation safe. "That's not what we do around here. It was one level too personal."

Ben feels that the rest of the staff protects him. The teachers make up the new classes. If they know they have a real "born-again" in their classroom, Ben won't get that child the next year. In those instances he knows he's been handled, but he thinks he's been protected by other staff members in other ways he doesn't recognize.

Ben doesn't take on a public role as a gay man either. Although he feels restricted by this and would like to test these limits some day, he thinks that being more public now would violate the rules that everybody seems to have agreed upon, and could lead to trouble.

As long as people aren't forced to confront the fact that he is gay, Ben thinks the current arrangement could continue indefinitely. "They've (the Board of Education) never had to deal with it directly. I'm sure most people know, but it's never been made an issue. People have not had to take sides, have an opinion. If it were public; an open secret, rather than a secret that everybody knows, I'm sure there would be repercussions."

Within the restrictions imposed by this tacit agreement, Ben has a remarkable amount of freedom. He has been active in the teachers' union and helped to negotiate the cur-

rent contract, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Because of this, he is not afraid of being fired for being gay, although he thinks that people could still make life quite unpleasant for him if they chose to. With the passage of years, though, he doesn't think this is likely. If it were going to happen, it would have happened a long time ago.

Ben has lived in the town and taught at the school for so long that he's no longer exotic. He meets his neighbors and other townspeople at the grocery store or gas station, at town meeting or Little League games. He has attended many school board and PTO meetings over the years, and he knows the parents. "Because it's a small town, there are families where I'm on their second or third kid." He has never had a problem with a parent that couldn't be fixed. Living in Vermont helps. "I think New England is a tolerant place. I can't imagine being an open gay teacher in the South. I think as far as rural living goes, it's a very easy place to be gay, to be open. They (Vermonters) may talk behind your back, but they're not planting crosses on your lawn or trying to run you out of town."

It's very important to Ben to be open. "We (he and Scott) made the decision a long time ago that we're not going to hide. If the school really hates you that much, then who needs that job?...When you have a secret like that, where you're in fear for your job, that gives people great leverage over you, and that's the kind of leverage I don't want people to have over me...I think if you're closeted that's when you get the hostility, because kids know they can get you on the run."

Being open gives Ben a powerful opportunity to educate. He will not tolerate the use of the word "fag" in his class. "It usually takes only one kid in the room once to use the word "fag" and nobody uses it for the rest of the year. I just make it clear. I say, "that is a word that is not acceptable to use in this class. I don't expect you to use 'fag.' I don't expect you to use

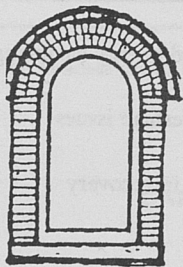
'nigger.' I don't expect you to use 'kike.' just go through the list. I tell them those are labels that are used to put people down and they're not being used in this class. If somebody slips and says it, I get this, 'Oh I'm sorry. I didn't mean it.'"

Ben also feels that he represents gay people to the mainstream world. "Not only are you doing this (being visible) for yourself, but also for your people. You're doing a good job, in a fairly public role...I have a sense that I'm a representative of my people, and I hope I can do right to change some thinking and can open some doors for people."

Ben really enjoys his work. "It's a wonderful way to make a living. You get to spend your time with kids. You get to form relationships with people. I do miss not having more contact with adults, but from the people I've talked to who work in offices or work in factories or whatever, I'd much rather spend my time with 11 year olds."

Martin, Kate and Ben have all reached an equilibrium with their situation, which they don't expect to change, unless some outside force or event moves in to change it for them. Although Martin and Kate in particular feel that such an event would of necessity be some sort of calamity, it could conceivably be a positive change; for example, passage of the gay rights bill. If the bill were to pass, Kate might feel free to take some steps toward coming out, and Ben would be more likely to step forward publicly as a gay teacher.

The point of these stories is not to suggest that all gay and lesbian teachers should be like Ben. Homophobia is real, and everyone's situation is different. Ben himself is not completely out, and he recognizes that living in a tolerant community has helped him to be as open as he is. Still, Ben, with his freedom and confidence, illustrates what living in a more tolerant world would be like and shows that it's possible even in the repressive world of the public elementary school. ▼



*Patricia J. Noll M.A.*  
Psychotherapist

Loss & Grief  
Transitions Relationships  
Lesbian Support Group

66 Main St.  
(Upstairs)  
Middlebury, VT 05753



A MEMBER OF THE  
SEARS FINANCIAL NETWORK  
**COLDWELL  
BANKER**

(802) 878-5600 BUSINESS  
(802) 878-0096 FAX  
(802) 434-3432 RESIDENCE

**GAIL DeBIANCO**  
REALTOR®

**COLDWELL BANKER  
REALTY MART**  
22 MAIN ST.  
ESSEX JUNCTION, VT 05452



An Independently Owned and Operated Member of Coldwell Banker Residential Affiliates, Inc.