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TOGETHER, FOR A CHANGE: LESSONS FROM THE ORGANIZING OF THE GAY, LESBIAN,
AND STRAIGHT TEACHERS NETWORK
by Kevin Jennings, Executive Director, GLSTN

BACKGROUND: IN THE BEGINNING, IN A SMALL TOWN IN MASSACHUSETTS

In 1985 I graduated from college and entered my first year of teaching at a private school in Providence, Rhode Island. The change of scenery was dramatic -- I went from being an aggressively out undergraduate activist to being a closeted, traumatized young teacher who lived in dread of being fired by the openly homophobic administration of his school. I knew no other gay teachers, and this started me on a journey to find some kind of community. After two years I decided I had to get out and I got a job teaching at Concord Academy, a private school located in suburban Boston. This time I knew that I had to be out to survive: the daily diminution of my self-esteem, the million white lies and the innumerable bitings-of-the-tongue that being closeted requires, were simply out of the question for me. I was going to be truthful, even if it cost me my job.

It didn't.

In the fall of 1988 I gave a chapel talk to the school -- with all faculty and students present -- in which I discussed being gay and what it had meant for my life. The response was electric, with students and colleagues hugging and embracing me all day long as a show of support. The next week, I was granted tenure. I had my job, and I had it on my terms.

Soon thereafter I was approached by an editor at Independent School, the professional journal for private school educators, to write an article about my experiences as an openly gay teacher.

"Why me?" I asked. "I'm a twenty-four-year-old nobody."

"You're the only one we can find," was the response.

I wrote the article.

Soon after that, I began getting calls. Many were from schools that wanted to address homophobia, and I was soon on the workshop-and-conference-presentation circuit. Suddenly, I was an expert, just because I had come out! I dutifully read up on all the articles written about gay issues in education in 1988 (both of them) and did my best. It seemed to be good enough, as I kept getting invited back.

After each presentation, two kinds of people would come up to me. One would be lesbian or gay teachers. Usually terrified, they often spoke in whispers, wishing they could do something about the homophobia they faced in their schools, but clearly convinced that they probably never could or would. The second type was the sympathetic straight teacher,

with a gay brother or a lesbian aunt, who wanted to do something but seem completely perplexed as to how to proceed. Frustrated, I called Kathy Henderson, a friend who taught in Andover, Massachusetts, and we came up with an idea: to found an organization that would bring all these people together behind the single goal of ending homophobia in our schools.

GLSTN was born.

One of our first problems was to gain credibility, and we decided to approach Richard Barbieri, Executive Director of the Association of Independent Schools in New England, to ask him to sponsor the organization as a standing committee of his association. He quickly agreed, and having his backing gave us instant respectability. We were quite clear about one basic principle: this had to be a group anyone could join. Sexual orientation, occupation, type of school in which in which one worked, were all irrelevant, we decided. All that mattered was that you saw ending homophobia in schools as a good thing.

This principle is what keyed GLSTN's explosive growth. It wasn't like we were the first homosexuals to think of starting a teachers' group: numerous local groups preceded us, and the major teachers' unions even had gay/lesbian caucuses. But GLSTN was unique in its focus on action and its philosophy of inclusion of people of all sexual orientations and occupations. People who came to our events knew that they would not be coming to a potluck to commiserate over the difficulty of being a gay teacher, or a strategy meeting on union negotiating, or a consciousness-raising sessions on the evils of homophobia: what they would get was practical, hands-on advice on how to go back home and make change. We decided early on that a successful event was one that left the participant with a concrete resource. If you didn't leave with something you could use, we had failed -- that was our philosophy.

And it worked. Our first conference in 1991 drew 80 people, mainly from Massachusetts; our fourth, in 1994, drew over 400, from over 20 different states. It was clear that there was pent-up demand for an organization of GLSTN's nature, and interest grew as we established a track record of success. By 1994, GLSTN had become known nationally as one of the key forces in the drive which made Massachusetts the first state in the nation to ban discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in its public schools. GLSTN members developed the recommendations that formed the basis of the Massachusetts Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth's report, "Making Schools Safe for Gay and Lesbian Youth"; GLSTN members developed the "Gay-Straight Alliance" student program, which was the key recommendation of the Commission; GLSTN was chosen to develop the faculty training component of the Massachusetts Department of Education's "Safe Schools for Gay and Lesbian Students" Program -- the first program to end homophobia in schools sponsored by a state government; and GLSTN was honored for this work with a proclamation by Massachusetts Governor William Weld in 1993. Things changed.

ORGANIZING NATIONALLY

Contemporaneously, a consensus was growing across the country that something needed to be done about homophobia in schools. The 1989 "Report on Youth Suicide" of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services -- which showed gay youth three times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers -- galvanized many who were previously unconcerned, and they began to look for a resource to call upon to make change. For many, GLSTN was that resource, and more and more of our members were coming from outside of Massachusetts and New England.

By spring 1994 a new problem became apparent to us. While there were many interesting individuals and local efforts going on around the country, there was no central focus for anti-homophobia work in schools. While anti-gay forces were unified and focused, pro-diversity groups were small, weak, and divided -- if they even existed at all. At the prodding of folks from other parts of the country, we decided to try to build a new national entity -- one based on local chapters that would develop programming appropriate for their communities, but also linked to in a national network to increase their resources and strengths. This way, we could respect the diversity of the challenges facing different communities, but also have a way to share ideas and make sure the wheel was not being constantly re-invented. We took the advice of Ben Franklin to delegates at the Continental Congress, who were bickering in 1775 as British forces closed in on the young nation struggling to survive: "We must all hang together or, most assuredly, we will all hang separately."

In the following year, GLSTN's growth was phenomenal. Local chapters were formed in over twenty regions, including Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Colorado, Columbus, Connecticut, Dallas, D.C., Detroit, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, New Hampshire, New Mexico, New York, Philadelphia, Portland (ME), Portland (OR), St. Louis, Tampa and Washington State. In 1994-95, GLSTN successfully staged regional conferences in Los Angeles, Louisville, Philadelphia, and Santa Fe, drawing over nine hundred people in addition to the five hundred who attended its 1995 national conference in Boston. GLSTN helped local groups introduce legislation to protect the rights of gay and lesbian youth into the state legislatures of California and Connecticut during the 1995 legislative session, and assisted many local groups doing similar work at the school board level. Virtually overnight, a national network of groups united behind the idea of ending homophobia sprang up.

The phenomenal growth of the organization posed a new challenge: how to maintain a cohesive sense of mission and direction while undergoing phenomenal expansion and incorporating new regions with their own needs and perspectives. We stepped back and focused our work on three major areas:

- 1) In-School Programming (such as brochures on Starting a Gay-Straight Alliance and Designing homophobia awareness training for school faculty and administrators);
- 2) Advocacy (working to get mainstream educational organizations to focus on gay/lesbian issues; to get gay/lesbian organizations to focus on youth/school issues; and shaping policy at the federal, state and local levels); and
- 3) Community Organizing (helping local groups start and prosper).

Maintaining a clear focus, we decided, would help us avoid the "all things to all people" trap.

Of the three, community organizing is clearly the linchpin. Without effective local chapters, there would be little to advocate for and no way to implement in-school programming. To insure the success of local chapters, GLSTN developed an innovative six-day Leadership Training Program. The product of a collaboration between educators, veteran organizers from the lesbian/gay movement, and experts in corporate restructuring, this institute offered a "change agent" training on how to make things happen in local schools, as well as a chapter development track that helped local leaders learn to do everything from write a press release to apply for a foundation grant to use electronic mail. The first Institute, held at Haverford College outside of Philadelphia in July 1995, trained 32 local leaders and led to an enormous upsurge in local chapter activities and effectiveness. The Second Institute was held in July 1996 at UCLA with 54 participants, and has evolved into the central institution of GLSTN's organizational existence.

Indeed, the rapid growth of the organization has made effective local leadership a necessity. With over 40 local chapters, the role of GLSTN staff has shifted from performing direct service to helping local chapters be effective in doing so. A major grant from the Columbia Foundation enabled GLSTN to add a full-time Director of Field Services in July 1996, with the sole focus of helping local chapters be effective.

The lessons for those seeking to organize effective work to end homophobia in schools are clear:

1. Frame the issue accurately.

In order to understand this, we must first understand some history. Various minorities have long been stereotyped as preying on children in order to frighten the majority into opposing equality for all. In the late 19th century, Russian Jews were accused of killing Christian children to use their blood in the Passover Seder, a myth used to justify pogroms; in the American South of the early twentieth century, black men were accused of molesting white girls, which justified the lynching of African American males; and, today, gay men and lesbians are routinely portrayed as pedophiles in an effort to justify discrimination, even though a 1993 Pediatrics study found that a child is one hundred times more likely to be molested by a heterosexual man than a gay one. Such attacks are common in gay history: there is a direct line connecting Anita Bryant's "Save our Children" campaign of the late 1970's to the campaign slogan of "Protect Our Children," used in the Oregon anti-gay referendum vote of 1994. This pattern tells us to expect attacks along these lines if we decide to do anti-homophobia work in schools, and to not be surprised by them.

Ironically, these attacks are successful because they appeal to a good impulse. The number one concern of every parent is, as it should be, their child's safety. The above attacks are designed to convince parents that we are a threat to their children's safety because, if they can be convinced of this, they will oppose any protections for a group such a dangerous group. If the Radical Right can succeed in portraying gays as preying on children, there is no way inclusive programming can be implemented in a school. The parents simply won't stand for it.

Recognizing this, we decided early on we had to clearly define the issue. We had seen how our opponents have had no compunction about distorting the content and intent of previous efforts to create change: witness their photocopying of pornography that was then distributed as the supposed "lesson plans" of the ill-fated "Rainbow Curriculum" in New York, a Nixonian "dirty trick" that was critical in the defeat of what was actually a quite innocuous program.

In Massachusetts, the effective reframing of this issue was the key to our success. We immediately seized upon the opponent's calling card -- safety -- and turned it to our favor by illustrating how homophobia is a threat to students' safety -- a climate where violence, name-calling, health problems, and suicide were common. Our report was called "Making Schools Safe for Gay and Lesbian Youth."

When we decided to take GLSTN national, we knew that we once again had to be very clear in what we were about, or else we would find our words and intents distorted and twisted by people who sought to portray us as something we were not. We spent a great deal of time working on developing a clear mission statement to avoid such distortion, and the following was adopted by our Board in August, 1994:

"The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Teachers Network strives to assure that

each member of every school community is valued and respected, regardless of sexual orientation. We believe that such an atmosphere engenders a positive sense of self, which is the basis of educational achievement and personal growth. Since homophobia and heterosexism undermine a healthy school climate, we work to educate teachers, students, and the public at large about the damaging effects these forces have on youth and adults alike. We recognize that forces such as racism and sexism have similarly adverse impacts on communities, and we support schools in seeking to redress all such inequities. GLSTN seeks to develop school climates where difference is valued for the positive contribution it makes in creating a more vibrant and diverse community. We welcome as members anyone who is committed to seeing this philosophy realized in K-12 schools."

In reaching out to unfamiliar people, we felt it was critical to explain our mission in positive terms linked to values we all share. After all, who can be against "valuing and respecting" everyone? Who can oppose "healthy school climates"? Who thinks a "positive sense of self" is a bad thing? Who decries "educational achievement"? It was essential to develop understanding and acceptance rather than creating defensiveness.

Too often advocates of equality for gay people are put in the position of saying "No" ("No on 9") or being against something (homophobia, heterosexism, bad hair, whatever). We felt it was critical to be for something instead. It is easier to work for something positive than against something negative, and this forward-looking approach has been one that many have cited as one of the GLSTN's best features.

2. Organize across existing divisions.

Just as the values espoused must be universal in nature, so must the approach taken in gaining new members. If we are truly about equality for all, we must include all people. This has been an underlying premise of GLSTN's work from the beginning, and another that many new members have cited as one of the organization's most attractive feature.

This, too, was part of a strategic decision made when we chose to "go national" in the spring of 1994. Straight people had always been welcomed in GLSTN -- even when we used our original name, "The Gay and Lesbian School Teachers Network." However, some of our active straight members pointed out that their friends didn't feel comfortable in coming to GLSTN, as they perceived it as a "gay only" group. "Gay-only" had never been our approach: the "Gay-Straight Alliance," open to any student, had been our most successful programs, and we felt it was important that such a philosophy pervade the organization. As a result, we decided to keep the old acronym, but rename GLSTN: in 1994, GLSTN became "The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Teachers Network."

The response to this change was electric. Straight allies felt a new sense of inclusion, and gay, lesbian, and bisexual folks felt a new sense of validation from the influx of straight people who saw this as their fight, too. In addition to adding numbers, the shift involved an important psychic shift as well. GLSTN was not about advancing "gay agenda" or setting up support groups: we were a group about equality and justice, which are values with which not only gay people are concerned but are also important to every American. We wanted to model in GLSTN what we wanted to see in society at large -- gay and straight people working together. If gay and straight people in GLSTN were truly "Together, for a change," then perhaps it would be possible to see this happen in our classrooms and hallways as well.

3. Put a human face on the argument.

Homophobia is basically a form of defamation, and depends on the ability of anti-gay people to depict gays as a frightening "other." If gays are faceless, it is that much easier for hate-mongers to put a negative spin on our intentions and character. Knowing this, we decided early on that a central strategy for GLSTN would be to put a human face on the "homosexual monster" (as I was one called by an administrator of my college). We needed to help the community understand the pain gay people endure in schools, and we set about doing that by confronting resistant or ignorant folks with real stories so that they would "get it." We knew that, faced with real-life stories of youth who suffer from homophobia, it would be hard for people to deny the need to take action. We wanted folks like school board members to have an actual kid in mind when they had to cast votes on our proposals. We knew this worked: when we brought the gay student rights bill to the Senate in Massachusetts in 1993, we won the final vote 33-7, while virtually the same Senate had passed the gay civil rights law by a slim four-vote margin three years earlier. If we could tell a story, we could win a heart, and a mind would follow.

From the beginning, we emphasized such stories in our work. Throughout our literature we sprinkled quotes from our students, ones which drove home what the inaction of schools did to them. Examples included:

"I was pushed, kicked, thrown against lockers and -- worst of all -- spit upon, like some vile piece of trash."
-- 16 yr. old gay boy

"I hear homophobic comments all the time in my classes. Sometimes I think teachers don't hear what goes on in their classrooms. I want teachers to remember the I can't block out the homophobia. I hear it even when I don't want to listen. I hear it every day that I am in this school. And it hurts a lot."
-- 16 yr. old lesbian

"Straight kids have all kinds of people they can talk to at the high school for advice and help in their personal lives. Lesbians and gays don't. We can't go to teachers because you don't know how they're going to react. And we can't go to friends for the same reason."
-- 16 yr. old lesbian

"I was very different from other students and they picked up on it. Immediately the words faggot and queer were used to describe me. Freshman year of high school is hard enough, but with the big seniors pushing you around because the rumor is you're the faggot, it's ten times worse. I knew I was gay. But who could I talk to? I was spit upon, pushed, and ridiculed. My school life was hell. I decided to leave school because I couldn't handle it."
-- 17 yr. old gay boy

"I go to school every day, afraid of violence, feeling that I can't be honest, that I have no right to be proud, that I am a second-class citizen."
-- 17 yr. old lesbian

Faced with these testimonies, educators find it hard to say our work isn't important. Opponents were similarly chagrined. In order to attack our program, they would have to attack people who had already been victimized once, which put them in a bullying position. No one likes somebody who beats up on a kid. Even the most retrograde opponents found themselves having to begin their rebuttals by saying "Now, of course, I think what happened to these kids was awful..." which allowed us to immediately ask "Then why aren't you willing to do something to help?" They often were at a loss for an answer.

An unanticipated benefit for this was the empowerment brought to the youth themselves by the opportunity to tell their stories. I initially worried about "exposing" the youth by asking them to speak out publicly, but they just seemed to get stronger and stronger, drawing strength from the chance to finally speak out about the obstacles they faced. They often became the fiercest advocates, being willing to go far beyond their teachers in their determination to confront recalcitrant administrators and politicians. Far from having to "protect" them, we often found ourselves thinking we'd better protect the administrators!

Inspired by this, in the fall of 1995 we decided to initiate our most ambitious program of this nature. Called the "Back-to-School Campaign," this national effort's goal is to get every gay adult to write a teacher at their old school to make sure they know what it is like for gay youth, and to demand to know what is being done for these kids. The goal is two-fold: first, to involve gay people with the schools again, as the majority do not have children and thus have little cause to interact directly with the educational system; and second, to make sure that teachers know that homophobia is a problem in their classes, even if they don't yet know who their gay students are. We hope to make sure that every educator in America has a human face in mind when it comes time to address homophobia. Teachers are good people: they've chosen the profession because they care about kids. The thrust of our work is to remind them that, if they really do care about kids, they need to address homophobia, because it hurts kids. It's that simple.

CONCLUSION

The opponents of equality for gay people are well-funded and determined, and willing to stoop to virtually anything to win. Our program calls upon people to overcome their stereotypes, to leave behind old ways of thinking, and to embrace a new way of relating -- one that is, in the end, healthier, happier, and more in line with American values of justice, equality, and fairness than the status quo, but one that is also new, frightening (for some), and a departure for accepted ways of thing. The jury is still out on whether or not people will take the leap of faith necessary to embrace our work.

Some think we may not succeed. I do not share that view. I do know it may not be easy: after all, it took our nation one hundred years to get the idea that slavery was inconsistent with our most fundamental values, and even longer to understand that denying suffrage to women violated those same values. But we did eventually get it, and we are on the verge of doing the same on equality for gay people.

Why am I so confident? Because I went to public schools in this country, schools where each day I pledged allegiance to a flag which, I was taught, stood for "liberty and justice for all." Homophobia is un-American; it violates the pledge we've all said since we were little kids in elementary school. This is not a new idea, but it's one we're starting to learn. I can't imagine a better lesson for any educator -- gay, lesbian, or straight -- to teach.

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This document is one of the many practical resources available online from GLSTN's web site at <http://www.glstn.org/respect/>.

The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Teachers Network (GLSTN) is the largest organization of parents, educators, students and other concerned citizens working to end homophobia in K-12 schools and to ensure that all students are valued and respected, regardless of sexual orientation.

To fulfill its mission and to raise awareness of these issues, GLSTN produces audio, visual and text-based educational materials, provides training, produces community programming and conferences, and organizes a growing national network of over 40 regional chapters.

Membership in GLSTN is open to anyone -- regardless of their occupation or sexual orientation -- who is committed to seeing that the current generation is the last to suffer from homophobia. More than 70% of our budget is funded by individual donations and we need your support to continue to make resources such as this available. GLSTN is a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation and all donations are fully tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.

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