

TEACHER AWARENESS SEMINARS

Background

The Gay Activists of Washington (GAA-WASH), like many other gay liberation groups throughout the country, has learned a good deal since the Stonewall Riot of June, 1969. That event--the first large-scale, organized public resistance by gays to our oppression--set off a number of forces for gays which GAA-WASH is convinced are of benefit to the entire community. The gay movement has forced all of us--gay and non-gay alike--to think about the nature of bigotry and oppression in a new way. Thinking about it, talking about it, and confronting it head-on is the first step toward eliminating it.

That was our first lesson, that we have to speak of the "unspeakable." We have to avoid allusions to homosexuality and, instead, deal with it rationally. This was (and is) true for ourselves as much as it is true for non-gays. We must "come out of the closet," be recognized for what we are, and be dealt with on equal terms with others. Winning recognition for the sizable minority we are (20 million Americans) was a second step in our movement.

Now that homosexuality is a topic that is more freely discussed, and now that the gay population is coming into its own as a cultural and political force, we have begun to assess the true nature of bigotry against gays and the true nature of "homophobia"--the fear of gays and homosexuality.

What do we know about gay bigotry and homophobia? At least a partial list of what we have learned follows:

- (1) Homophobia is pervasive--it is found at intense levels in nearly all segments of our society.

- (2) Homophobia starts at a very young age--like all forms of bigotry, it is passed on scrupulously from generation to generation. Children get large doses of homophobia at the same time they are taught other forms of biases-- racial, sexual, and religious.

- (3) Continued anti-gay prejudices may have many causes--for some, there exists a fear about dealing with one's own gay feelings. For others, homophobia and gay bigotry is caused by genuine ignorance. For most people who suffer from homophobia, their condition is perpetuated by the fact that their gay friends and acquaintances do not "come out" and discuss their homosexuality openly.

- (4) Nothing destroys homophobia better than personal, real-life interactions with gay people. One can read about gays, see gays in the media, even know that an acquaintance is gay. But for most people, there are very few substitutes for dealing with a gay person, in person, one to one.

That last lesson has been the most important of all because through it begins the understanding of how deeply-rooted homophobia is. All of our efforts in various institutional frameworks, all of our media appearances as gay activists, all of our political activities, as important as they are, cannot alone achieve what human interaction achieves--the kind of mutual respect and understanding between gays and non-gays that is the goal of the gay liberation movement.

Why D.C. teachers?

Since the task before us is a massive educational one, we feel that teachers should be the first to be made to examine their own beliefs about gay people. Teachers, after all, are charged with imparting knowledge to our community's young people. If they indoctrinate the young with their own anti-gay prejudices, what hope do we have for ever changing the community's attitude toward gays?

Teachers, parents and peers influence young people about whom to like and whom to dislike. There can be no doubt that the great bulk of "teaching" relative to gay people has been incorrect in its content and negative in its tone. Even when teachers have not openly espoused their prejudices in the classrooms, they more often than not have not corrected anti-gay expressions among students as they occur. Can it be imagined that a teacher in today's classroom would not correct a student who used derogatory terms to describe an ethnic or racial minority? And yet just from our own experience, we know that anti-gay expressions continually go uncorrected.

Several things need to be done. First, teachers must learn the facts about gays and homosexuality. Secondly, teachers must learn not to fear the implications of instilling correct views. There is no "guilt by association" because there need be no guilt at all in being gay, much less in talking intelligently about gays. We must make it comfortable for gay and non-gay teacher alike to deal rationally and frankly about homosexuality.

One recent gay author has written:

Speaking from my own experience and that of many gay friends, high school can be hell for a young homosexual. Young men or women who are first becoming aware that they are homosexual are placed under an enormous emotional strain. Why are they different from everyone else? Why do people hate homosexuals so much? How can they hide the truth from family, friends, and school authorities? *

High school students are constantly troubled by inner conflicts over homosexuality which they dare not express to anyone. It will be of enormous value for a gay student to see that his/her teacher, if not everyone in society, understands homosexual feelings. This understanding needs to be promoted among teachers whether or not they themselves are gay.

What will the seminars be like?

Our experience has taught us that the best way to organize discussions about the gay experience is on a highly interactive basis. Two principle means of facilitating interaction between gays and non-gays would be involved in our teacher seminars: (1) the entire group of gay activists and teachers would experience something in common that can serve as a beginning point for discussion and (2) ample time would be given to frank and open discussion between individuals in the seminar.

That which is experienced in common can range widely in content and is likely to be adjusted over time as we learn more about the teachers' interests. It may consist simply of a short talk by one or several of the gays present, a talk which would probably relate individual experiences in being gay. It may consist of audio-visual

*Peter Fisher, The Gay Mystique, Stein and Day, New York, p. 177.

materials selected from a steadily growing body of educational materials becoming available.*

Whatever the case, the presentation would last for 30-45 minutes and would be followed by discussion for approximately 60-90 minutes. The discussion segment can best be handled by dividing the original group of teachers into smaller groups, say 6-8 teachers per group. Each group would be assigned a gay activist for the discussion segment. It is hoped that these smaller groups will encourage a frank and extensive exchange of views.

GAA-WASH hopes to initiate these teacher seminars during the 1974-5 school term. We are seeking the cooperation of the D.C. school system, its administrators and teachers alike. The system itself can match our volunteered time and resources by providing the schedule and locations for these seminars. We look forward to working with the system to set up a workable schedule of such seminars.

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A list of such materials is available from the Task Force on Human Sexuality of the American Library Association. Barbara Giddings of the Task Force has agreed to assist GAA-WASH.