

# just out

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## Steppin' Out

Decade in review: protesting the Oregonian, 1988

PHOTO BY JAY BROWN



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# P A G E T W O

## A vote in favor of child abuse

*The United States Senate voted 85-13 to discourage school programs that are supportive of gay and lesbian youngsters*

BY ROBERT BERNSTEIN

Psychiatrist Erik Erikson said that "the most deadly of all possible sins is the mutilation of a child's spirit." But the United States Senate, it seems, pays more heed to the words of another sage, Henry Adams, who wrote that "practical politics consists of ignoring facts."

The Senate recently voted 85 to 13 to adopt an anti-gay appropriations amendment that would bar the use of federal funds in connection with any school materials that might suggest that being gay is "normal, natural or healthy." Its purpose was to discourage school programs — such as the ground-breaking Project 10 in Los Angeles — that are supportive of gay youngsters.

The measure has now been killed in a conference committee; but the size of the Senate majority stands as a shocking tribute to political hypocrisy. Many if not most of those 85 senators — who included numerous putative "liberal" members — must have known they were voting in effect to perpetuate a deadly form of emotional child abuse.

The story of Mary A. Griffith makes the point that the Senators cruelly chose to ignore.

As a member of a traditional mainline church in Northern California, Griffith bought into the popular notion that gays are sick and perverted. So when her teenage son, Bobby, told her he was gay, she told him he should "cure" himself by prayer and diligent effort.

Bobby did pray, and even willingly submitted to psychological treatment designed to "change" his orientation. In his diary, he wrote: "Gays are bad, and God sends bad people to Hell."

By nature, Mary Griffith says, Bobby had always been "kind and gentle, with a fun-loving spirit."

"There were many times I wanted to reach out and hold him," she says, "and tell him, 'You're fine just the way you are.'"

But she held back, she says, because "at the church they told me that feelings like that must be the work of Satan."

So Bobby grew despairing.

"I guess I'm no good to anyone, not even God," he wrote in his diary. "Sometimes I feel like disappearing from the face of this earth."

At the age of 20, Bobby did just that, by throwing himself from a freeway overpass and into the path of an 18-wheel truck.

Bobby Griffith could have been saved by accurate information and intelligent counseling. His mother still feels personal blame.

"His death was the result of my own ignorance and fear of the word 'gay,'" she says.

Now, Mary Griffith is president of the Diablo Valley, California, chapter of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. She is, in short, a crusader to save other desperate youngsters from the fate of her son.

Her tragedy is unusual only because she

has had the insight and courage to face up to its cause. Up to 30 percent of all youth suicides are probably traceable to similar societal and family indifference to the emotional needs of gay adolescents.

A report recently issued by the Department of Health and Human Services, for example, says that gay youngsters are two to three times more likely than their non-gay peers to attempt suicide. And it lays the cause largely to what it describes as "a society that stigmatizes and discriminates against gays and lesbians."

Professional educators are beginning to hear the message. The National Education Association has adopted a resolution urging schools to "provide counseling for students who are struggling with their sexual gender orientation." The American Federation of Teachers is on record opposing "discrimination on the basis of sexual preference."

So while there are reasons — blatantly political reasons — for the Senate's recent action, there is no acceptable excuse. The amendment was one of an ongoing series introduced by a cadre of mean-spirited fundamentalist legislators who have no purpose other than to appeal to their own bigoted and ignorant constituents and to embarrass their more moderate colleagues. And the latter capitulate for reasons that are perhaps understandable but nevertheless highly unpalatable.

They quake, that is, at the vision of future re-election television spots, announcing that they voted in favor of "teaching sodomy in high school," or some other propaganda rot.

And so they end up instead paying homage to Henry Adams — perhaps, one would hope, with a silent apology to millions of pained youngsters — and voting for death and despair in our high schools.