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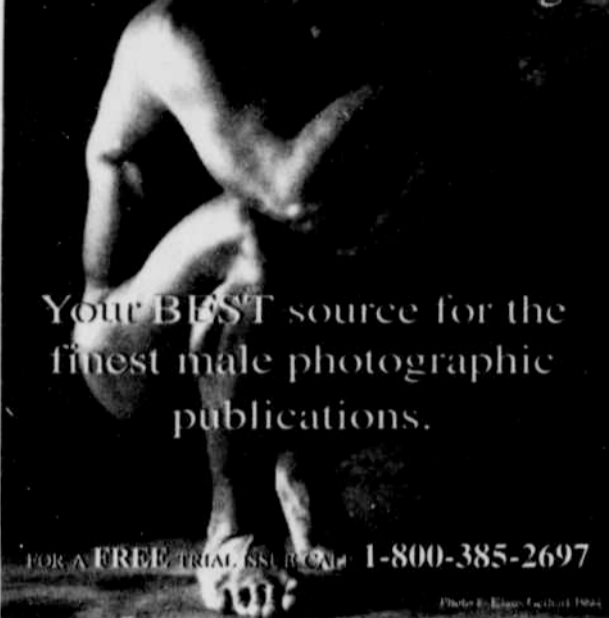
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local news

A lesson for educators

Portland P-FLAG embarks on an effort to create more supportive schools for gay and lesbian youth

by Inga Sorensen

In 1992, Massachusetts Gov. William Weld, a Republican, appointed a statewide Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth. Its mandate was to work to end all forms of discrimination against gay and lesbian youth, with an emphasis on preventing suicide and violence. After holding hearings, the commission concluded that "the prevailing unsafe climate denies equal educational opportunities to lesbian and gay youth. Virtually every youth who testified before the commission cited the need for action to change their school environments." The panel said it was imperative that school be a place "where all students might learn, free from fear and intimidation" and maintained that state government had a responsibility to ensure that that happened.

While many commission reports seem to disappear into oblivion, Weld studied this one and announced in May 1993 the first-ever statewide effort to train educators about lesbian and gay issues. His advocacy did not end there. A few months later, Weld pushed for the passage of a controversial bill protecting gay and lesbian public school students from discrimination and harassment. He was successful. On Dec. 10, 1993, Weld signed the bill—the first of its kind in the nation—into law.

"It's just a marvelous success story. It's something we should all be striving for," says 56-year-old Anne Bliss, president of the Portland chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, a national support and educational organization for families and friends of gay men and lesbians.

Like most people, Bliss had viewed herself as a relatively well-informed and fair-minded citizen. But five years ago, her then-23-year-old son told her he is gay.

"Up until that point, I had never thought about homosexuality. I didn't have bad feelings towards gay people. I didn't have positive feelings. I just hadn't thought about it before. Suddenly all of these feelings rushed to the surface. First and foremost I was afraid for my son. I was afraid he would be hurt by others. I was fearful of what could happen to him," she says.

Bliss, a life-long Republican who grew up in southern Oregon, spent the ensuing months grappling with her feelings around her son's identity.

"But it wasn't until Ballot Measure 9 that I really began educating myself about what it means to be a gay person in this society. I got involved in the No on 9 campaign and became exposed to many gay men and lesbians, as well as many supportive nongay people. It's amazing to look back and see how much I *didn't* know," she says. She adds, "One of the things that I had never known before—because the information was never readily out there—concerned the high suicide rate among gay and lesbian youth. When I found out that nearly a third of youth suicides involved gay and lesbian young people, I was shocked. I really think if the public knew this they would want to help change it."

So Bliss has embarked on a campaign to get the word out. Using a \$2,000 grant from the Equity Foundation—and with assistance from the Oregon

Education Association—Portland P-FLAG has compiled and distributed informational packets to the counseling departments of nearly 200 high schools throughout Oregon. The packets include the Massachusetts commission report, a 1989 federal study addressing youth suicide as well as two issue papers on the same subject, and other P-FLAG materials.

"I don't believe the public realizes that gay and lesbian youth are at such high risk for suicide or drug and alcohol abuse. These kids are up against so much because society puts a lot of pressure on them," says Bliss. "I look back and can now see that my own son was struggling—by himself—when he was younger. No one should have to go through that."

She adds, "I think the least we can do is get the word out to counselors and educators—people that young people often turn to."

Bliss says she has asked P-FLAG members to personally deliver the packets to schools. "Some are afraid to, so we mail the packets," she says. "But we have parents who have delivered the packets to schools in Bend, Redmond, Sisters and Eugene. In Salem the school district is delivering them to counselors, and we provided 56 packets to Portland school officials, which were handed out during [district] trainings."

"This is wonderful information that I am sure will prove very useful to counselors," says Carolyn Sheldon, assistant director of student services for Portland Public Schools. "In the past we've distributed bits and pieces of the information, but never has it been offered in such a comprehensive fashion. It's great."

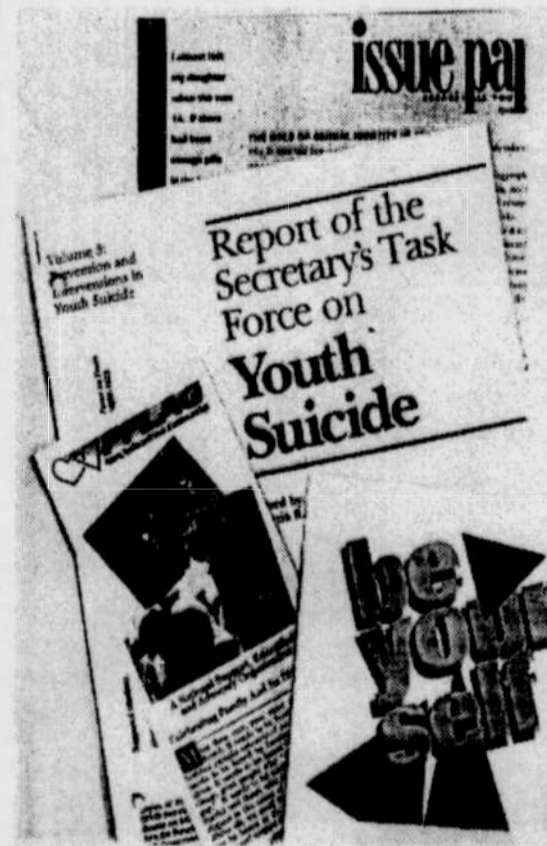
Sheldon says she realizes there may be some negative reaction prompted by P-FLAG's actions, "but quite frankly," she says, "it's time to get over this. I know many of our counselors have been approached by gay youth and we have an obligation to meet the needs of all of our students."

According to Sheldon, Portland Public Schools plans to offer—for the first time—a school-sponsored support group for gay and lesbian youth at the high school level this upcoming school year.

"In the past we've referred gay and lesbian youth to outside organizations that could assist them," she says. "This year we plan to have a support group for gay and lesbian students," she says. "We already have groups designed to meet the needs of other students, for example, those who are dealing with divorce."

"Sometimes I think things are getting better, but then you look at the comments Jesse Helms recently made about people with AIDS and you realize that we still have a long way to go," says Bliss. "P-FLAG is going to do whatever it can to make a difference, and we hope these packets do that."

Bliss invites the public to attend Portland P-FLAG meetings the fourth Wednesday of each month from 7 to 9:30 pm at the First United Methodist Church at Southwest 18th Avenue and Jefferson Street in Portland. For further information, call 232-7676.



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