

It won't be long before students and educators find themselves back in the classroom. Yet, while some young people are eager to go back to school, others—notably sexual minority youth—often look toward the experience with some trepidation.

The newly formed Oregon chapter of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Teachers Network hopes to extinguish those fears by promoting safe and equitable school environments so that all students—as well as teachers, counselors and parents—can enjoy a positive learning experience.

GLSTN/Oregon co-chair Ron Bloodworth, a counselor with Portland Public Schools, says he and other group members hope to carry out the national organization's mission of working to end homophobia in all schools through a variety of projects. The other co-chair, Jan Donald, is a media specialist with Portland Public Schools.

"One of the things we're working on now is bringing the film *It's Elementary* to Portland," says the 49-year-old Bloodworth.

It's Elementary: Talking About Gay Issues in School, is the latest documentary by Debra Chasnoff, who won an Academy Award in 1992 for her documentary *Deadly Deception: General Electric, Nuclear Weapons and Our Environment*.

It's Elementary explores what happens when educators utilize age-appropriate and creative ways to confront homophobia in the classroom, as well as to counter gay and lesbian invisibility.

The film thus far has received a stamp of approval from Bill Rojas, superintendent of schools for the San Francisco Unified School District, Board of Education President Steve Phillips, and many others.

"It really is a terrific documentary," says Bloodworth, who saw the work in its entirety during a recent GLSTN training in Los Angeles. "There are folks who say *maybe* you can address gay issues at the high-school level. Or *maybe* you can do it at the middle-school level—but *never* could it be done at the elementary-school level. This documentary says, 'Wait a second, it is doable.'"

He adds, "We'd like to bring *It's Elementary* and the filmmakers here probably in late September and use the proceeds from the showing to help pay for the film, which I've heard cost about \$1 million to produce."

Bloodworth says GLSTN/Oregon is looking to connect with other individuals and organizations interested in bringing the documentary and its creators to the Rose City.

"Perhaps we can form a host committee or something along those lines," he says. "We're asking anyone who's interested to please contact us."

GLSTN was founded by teachers in the Boston area in 1990, and according to organizational materials, was instrumental in the work that led to

Back to school

A newly formed chapter of GLSTN advocates for a safe and equitable environment for queer youth

by Inga Sorensen



PHOTO BY PHYLIS CHRISTOPHER

Debra Chasnoff, director, and Helen Cohen (left), co-producer of *It's Elementary*

Massachusetts becoming the first state in the country to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in its public schools.

In response to growing interest in GLSTN, the group and its founder, Kevin Jennings—a teacher and author of *Becoming Visible: A Reader in Gay and Lesbian History for High School and College Students* and *One Teacher in 10: Gay and Lesbian Educators Tell Their Stories*—incorporated in 1994, hired staff and developed what is believed to be the first national network whose purpose is to weed out homophobia in the schools.

By the end of the 1995 school year, GLSTN's work had expanded to include a push to establish October as National Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual History Month. (Gov. John Kitzhaber issued a proclamation establishing Lesbian and Gay History Month in Oregon this past October.)

GLSTN has also assisted local groups in introducing legislation to protect the rights of sexual minority students in states such as California and Connecticut, and has sponsored programming on the local level in more than 20 states.

According to Bloodworth, there was a group in Oregon known as Educators for Equity that was working toward the same goals as GLSTN.

"Educators for Equity was really created in response to Measure 9," he says. "We did good work, but we were really on our own with respect

to resources and information-sharing and all of those important organizational details."

Bloodworth says Educators for Equity hit a crossroads several months ago and was forced to decide whether to establish its own nonprofit tax status or become part of the already-developed GLSTN network.

Members opted for the latter. "Becoming a GLSTN chapter frees us up to do the mission of working to end homophobia in the schools," he says. "We'd rather get on with that than get totally bogged down with other matters."

Since May, the fledgling GLSTN/Oregon has met four times, including one meeting that featured Jennings. Currently GLSTN/Oregon is in the process of establishing a board.

"We've had about 20 to 30 people at our meetings," says Bloodworth, who estimates many—but certainly not all—of the participants are involved with Portland-based schools.

"They've mostly been teachers and counselors who work at all levels—elementary school, middle school, high school," he says.

The majority are gay or lesbian, though straight educators have attended as well.

"There is still some risk for teachers to be out," says Bloodworth, "especially if they're working in areas that are not covered by antidiscrimination laws. Teachers also have to deal with a probation-

ary status which can last three years. There is not much job security under that circumstance, so they have to be very cautious."

Admittedly, great gains have occurred in some places during the past few years. More schools are sponsoring support groups for sexual minority youth; gay and lesbian parents are working with educators and parent groups to create dialogue and understanding about sexual orientation issues and more local governments are approving legal protections based on sexual orientation that may prompt gay educators (and their supportive colleagues) to feel more secure about publicly addressing sexual-minority-youth issues.

A regional conference is now held regularly in the Portland area, but it remains just one of a few in the nation that explicitly aims to improve services for lesbian, gay and bisexual youth.

Another symbol of acceptance includes the Portland School Board's vote last year to bar recruiters from school grounds because of the military's ban on openly lesbian and gay service members, as well as the district's backing of a plan to provide broad-based sensitivity trainings for educators and administrators.

Nonetheless, plenty of work clearly is left to be done. According to a comprehensive 1991 Oregon study, there are at least 50,000 sexual minority youth statewide, many of whom face hardship and discrimination. The report, which included several interviews with young people, found that support systems for sexual minority youth were woefully deficient primarily due to a lack of relevant education among service providers.

The study concluded that many service providers brought their prejudices with them to work, or simply overlooked the needs of sexual minority youth because their professional training never addressed the subject. It also found that many gay, lesbian and bisexual youth experienced severe ostracism and harassment within the school setting.

GLSTN/Oregon wants to abolish such tough realities, and is developing ambitious plans to do just that.

In addition to bringing *It's Elementary* to town, Bloodworth says GLSTN/Oregon wants to get involved with Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual History Month by developing related lesson plans that educators can use in their classrooms.

The group is also launching a "Back to School" campaign, which encourages lesbian and gay adults to write to their former teachers, and highlight the difficulties they may have experienced as students.

The letter, says Bloodworth, is designed to raise awareness among teachers, and ask for their support in making a positive difference in the lives of lesbian and gay students by countering homophobia in the school environment.

To get involved with GLSTN/Oregon, call 282-9394 or send e-mail to GLSTNO@aol.com. Annual membership fees range from \$15 to \$25.

SUMMER

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