

I'm no activist," bursts out Rocky Svarvari, 42 and solidly stocky. "At least I wasn't until now, that is."

Svarvari, who used to ship heavy freight internationally for a Fortune 500 company, says he was unexpectedly shoved into his new role via a stinging scenario that has left lingering bad vibes.

"It's really unbelievable—no one should be treated that way," he says, a smattering of edginess sifting through his words.

Svarvari, who resides in Longview, Wash., is a gay man living with AIDS. While he won't cop to being an activist, he is a person who tells it like it is. And perhaps that's why he is considered by some to be a potent public speaker—or a threat.

"I'm still waiting for an apology. There hasn't been anything," he sighs.

Svarvari's tale begins back in mid-April when he was asked to speak about AIDS with students at W.F. West High School in Chehalis, Wash.

According to Svarvari, school officials asked the Lewis County Health Department to send an AIDS speaker months earlier, specifically requesting the person not be gay.

Andi Greek, the county's HIV/AIDS coordinator, received those calls from the school nurse.

"She asked that we supply a speaker, which was great, but even before I could say anything she added, 'You can't bring a homosexual.' My first reaction was, 'What's the punch line to this joke?'" says Greek, who has been an AIDS educator for the past several years. "Never before has someone said, 'Don't bring a homosexual.' I wanted to hang up the phone."

Instead, Greek flatly told the nurse that neither she nor the Lewis County Health Department discriminate on the basis of sexuality.

The nurse, meanwhile, stood her ground. "So we had several such phone calls," says Greek, who always refused to accommodate the request.

Eventually, however, the nurse acquiesced, essentially saying, "Send someone, anybody."

That "somebody" was Svarvari, who, along with Greek, was slated to appear before two W.F. West classes on April 16.

"Rocky knew about the [nurse's] earlier phone calls, but was still open to speaking," says Greek, who was familiar with Svarvari's speaking style and presentation content.

(Svarvari, along with his partner of six years, Jake Smit, had previously spoken publicly about the traumatic toll the disease had on their lives. Smit, a pre-law student and "brilliant shoemaker" died in January 1995 at the age of 30.)

"Jake wanted to die with dignity. It didn't wind up that way," says Svarvari, who shared with students details of his companion's horrendous demise, which included battles with spinal meningitis, blindness, paralysis, dementia and multiple suicide attempts.

He talked about projectile vomit, likening it to Linda Blair's flying puke scene in *The Exorcist*.

## Rocky start

An AIDS speaker is yanked out of a Chehalis, Wash., classroom for referring to his late partner as 'he'

by Inga Sorensen

"But imagine being covered in that 24 hours a day," he urged them.

And when Svarvari described how caretaking Jake had sucked every ounce of the energy from his body, he served up the analogy of his moving comalike through life as though a ghoul from the *Night of the Living Dead*.

"The kids laughed at that, but clearly at the same time understood just how awful the whole thing was," he recounts. "You have to talk so they'll listen."

And listen they did, Svarvari says.

"And they asked good, sensitive questions—

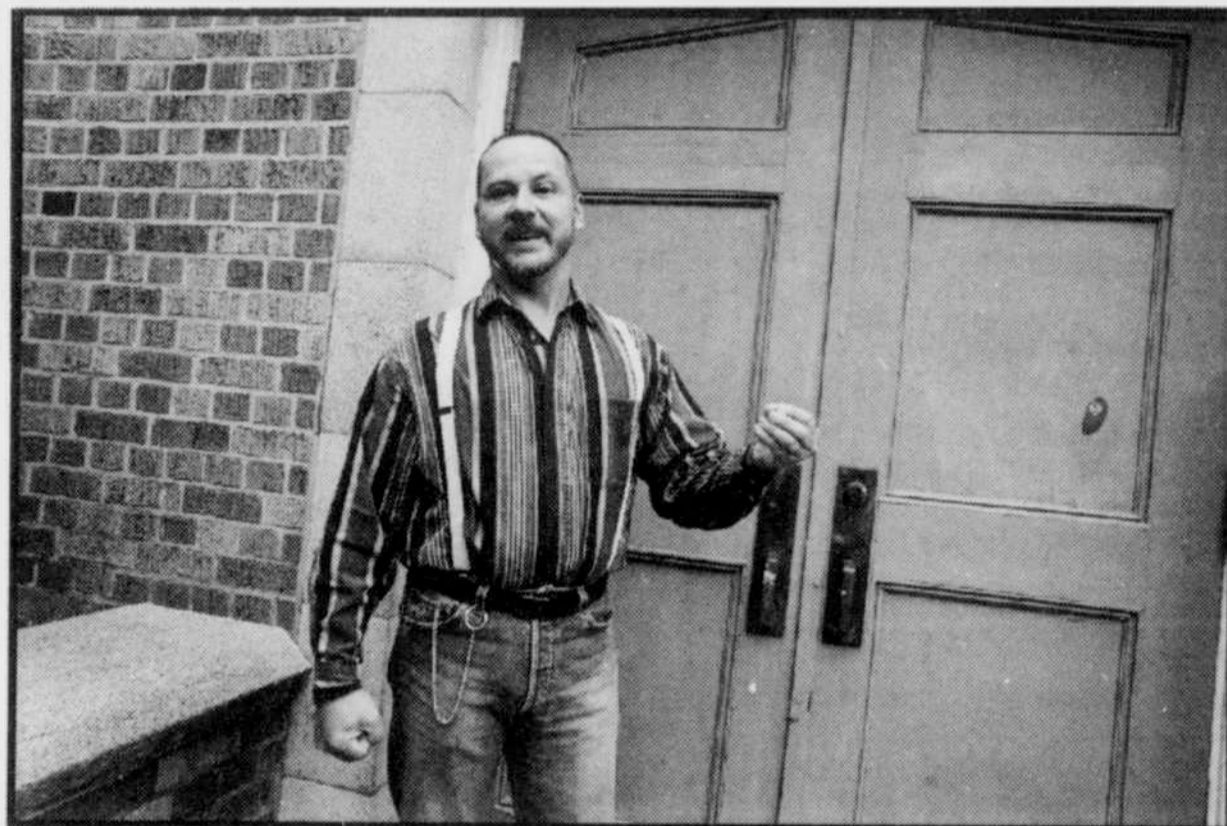
(Linda Smith is also the name of Southwest Washington's conservative Republican congresswoman.)

At that point, Greek says school officials told her and Svarvari to basically take a hike—immediately.

The duo, who were supposed to conduct another presentation for students, were stunned.

"The word that comes to mind is 'flogged,'" says Greek. "We were told to get out, and then paraded through a line of glaring teachers. The school principal was cruel."

"It was beyond unacceptable," says Svarvari,



Rocky Svarvari

even the jocks in the back row that you expect to misbehave or crack jokes were very attentive," he says.

Greek echoes that sentiment: "The kids were terrific."

As for sexual orientation, Svarvari says it came up when he first began describing Smit's struggle: "I said, 'My partner, he suffered terribly.' I wasn't touting the gay lifestyle. I wasn't talking about going to the bars or sex or anything. I didn't even say I was gay. I simply said 'he.'"

And when he said that, students didn't blink an eye.

"It was like it was nothing, but obviously one of the teachers slipped out and told the principal, who—get this—is named Linda Smith," he says with a chuckle. "Can you believe it?"

adding that he firmly believes his expulsion was prompted by his sexual orientation. "Andi had told me about the school calling and specifically asking for a speaker who was not a homosexual."

When *Just Out* contacted Smith for comment, we were referred to Chehalis schools Superintendent Greg Kirsch.

Kirsch did not return our phone calls. The *Olympian* newspaper, however, says Kirsch denied any discrimination had occurred "but was looking into the claim that a nongay speaker was requested."

The publication's May 7 issue adds that Kirsch says, "Svarvari's second lecture was canceled because Smith realized she failed to review the presentation in advance. He said the 'pre-presentation' is required for guest speakers."

Kirsch also admitted administrators "could have handled it differently."

In response to the incident, more than two dozen W.F. West students walked out of classes May 6 and demonstrated throughout the day.

They were later joined by dozens of other students from Centralia High School and Centralia College.

Protesters, who held signs saying "Teach education, not discrimination" and "Ignorance breeds fear," remained on hand for a Chehalis School Board meeting that night. Svarvari and a Seattle television news crew were also at the meeting. (The board discussed the matter but took no action.)

Jeff Granger, who graduated from W.F. West on June 7, was very involved in organizing the protest.

"I didn't see the presentation, but I later heard from other students what happened and was really appalled," says Granger, 18, who believes the administration's removal of Svarvari promotes discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Prior to the walkout and protest, he and a handful of students crafted a letter to the administration (copies of the letter were then circulated as petitions) calling for a public apology to Svarvari as well as an invitation for him to speak at the school again, and a pledge that no such incident would occur in the future.

According to Granger, administrators have been totally unresponsive to the letter. He adds that he feels they are attempting to sweep the issue under the rug.

To make his case, Granger says Smith called several students into her office "and tried to persuade them why she was right."

He also asserts that Smith made false claims during one meeting.

"She said Rocky was blowing the whole issue out of proportion, and claimed he called the TV stations," he says. "I knew that wasn't true because I made the calls."

In addition, both Granger and Svarvari contend Smith said she attempted to contact Svarvari after the episode.

Svarvari says neither Smith nor Kirsch have ever contacted him.

Granger also says he, his mother, Kirsch and Smith held a sit-down three days before graduation to discuss the issue—to no avail.

"Kirsch seemed very angry," he says, "but I told them again that what they needed to do was invite Rocky back if they really wanted to prove that they did not promote discrimination.... Who knows if that will ever happen?"

For his part, Svarvari says he feels bruised by the ugly unfolding of events and is exploring possible legal action.

On the flip side, he's grateful for the support he's received, particularly from the younger generation.

"It's really uplifting to see," he says. "As for the administration, though, it's really sad. I mean, it's almost the year 2000."



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