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national news

Reading frenzy

A plan to distribute gay-positive books in the Seattle schools has so far surmounted boisterous challenges thus far

by Inga Sorensen

Ted Lord *thinks* everything is back on track.

"We met with members of the [Seattle] school board and essentially got a commitment from them on a number of fronts," says Lord, executive director of the Pride Foundation, a Seattle-based organization that issues grants to Northwest organizations promoting lesbian and gay equality and dignity.

The Pride Foundation awarded a \$6,150 grant to the school district earlier this year for a "Diversity Books Project," designed to create a safer environment for sexual minority students in the public schools.

In March, Tracy Flynn, a health curriculum specialist for the Seattle public schools system, told *Just Out*, "Gay and lesbian families exist in our district and our goal is support *all* families."

One way Flynn sought to do so was by making books featuring a diversity of families available

Volatile school board meetings have transpired, prompting Seattle School Board President Linda Harris to publicly apologize for "a lack of clear direction" regarding the matter.

The grant, however, was ultimately accepted, and the 28 titles compiled by the Sexual Minority Advisory Council are poised to be distributed to the schools.

(Protocol calls upon the district's 90 librarians, teachers and principals to decide which—if any—of the books belong in their respective school libraries.)

But the fight continues.

During a June 4 school board meeting, the Washington Family Council and a group known as Parents and Teachers for Responsible Schools, continued to blast the plan.

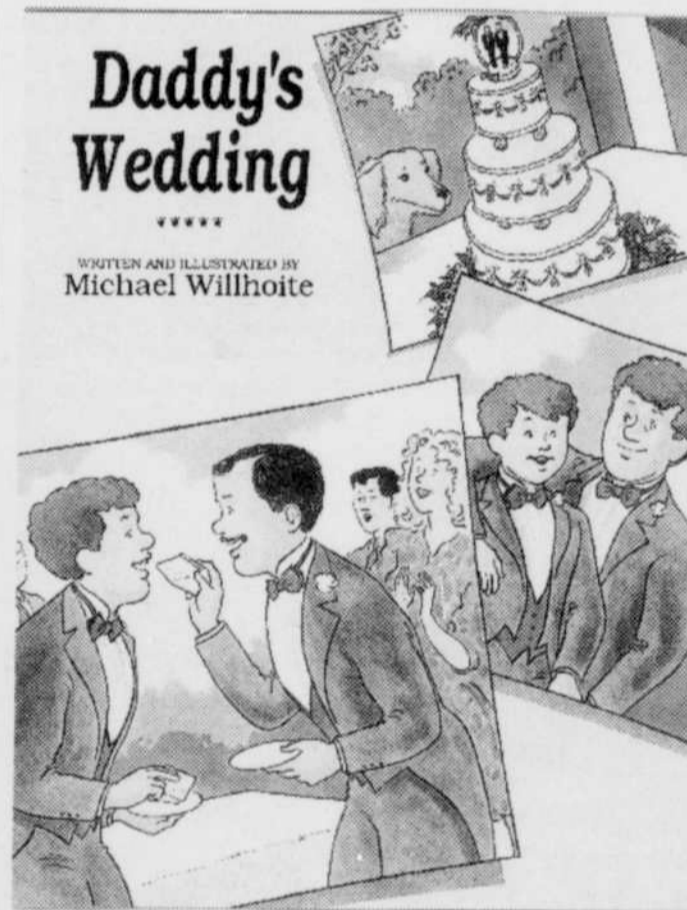
Some protesters waved signs saying "Shame is good" and "You need God."

But proponents outnumbered opponents by an

estimated 60 to 20. Lesbian and gay—as well as heterosexual—parents testified in favor of the project.

Among them was Rabbi Drorah Setel, who said, "Like sexual minorities, Jews are often invisible to the public, and I know the delight my children [feel] when their experience is reflected in the classroom. I know how heartbroken and devastating it would be to them to have their experience denigrated in the way I've heard gay people denigrated here tonight."

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to public elementary schools throughout the Emerald City.

As with school districts nationwide, money is tight, so Flynn (and the Sexual Minority Advisory Council, a district group) turned to the Pride Foundation and Fund for Lesbian & Gay Families with Children—endowed last year by Seattle City Councilwoman Tina Podlodowski and her partner, Rochelle Mileur—to secure the grant.

A critical component of the project was the purchase of books such as Michael Willhoite's *Daddy's Wedding*.

Not surprisingly critics emerged, including state Sen. Val Stevens (R-Lake Stevens), who unsuccessfully pushed a bill seeking to prohibit schools from "presenting or promoting" homosexuality in the schools.

In the spring Flynn told us the district had received phone calls both for and against from concerned parents. She said the district intended to follow through in procuring the books, although she admitted that enough opposition could "lead to a holdup in the process."

That's basically what happened. Over the past several weeks—and under the orchestration of the anti-gay Washington Family Council—some school board members proposed reviewing the grant, the books and the work of the Sexual Minority Advisory Council.

One opponent chastised the board and argued the "books plant the seed for children to experiment with homosexuality, since being gay is portrayed as so fun, natural, better, the best way to be. And no STDs or deadly consequences are ever mentioned. The books paint a very rosy unrealistic picture of the gay life while making traditional families appear unkind, too busy, angry, grumpy, boring, rejecting and unreliable."

Pride Foundation's Lord says he's pleased the school board has held its ground, but just to be safe, he, Podlodowski and some other advocates met with board members to shore up support.

"They basically acceded to our conditions," he tells *Just Out*.

Those points include a confirmation that the district accepted the grant it applied for; an affirmation that the Sexual Minority Advisory Council followed all of the appropriate procedures and is an authorized district group; a vow that the same review and selection process routinely employed by librarians to select books will apply to the project's titles; and a commitment for key players to keep dialogue open over these types of issues during the next year.

"We're pleased," says Lord, "but I expect opponents to be back out there at the July school board meeting."

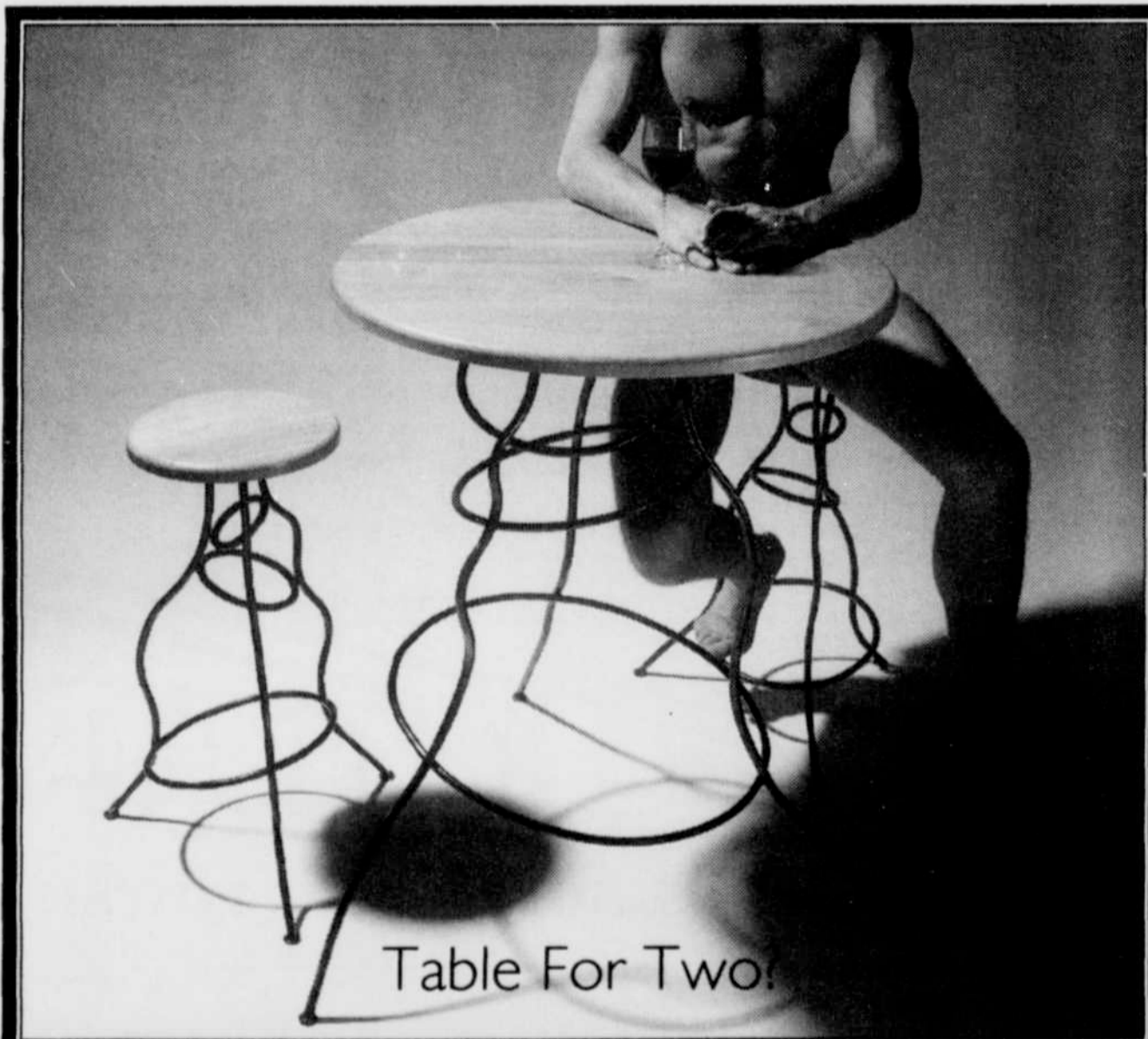


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