

# local news

If you want a blunt assessment, look to Suzanne Pharr.

"Schools are the boot camps for homophobia," pronounces the longtime progressive activist and current executive director of the Lesbian Community Project, a social and educational organization.

Pharr is among those scheduled to keynote at an upcoming conference entitled "Bridging the Gap: Moving from Ideas to Action."

The event, to be held Aug. 18-19 in Seattle, will bring together educators, parents, students and community members from across the Pacific Northwest and western Canada.

The Washington and Oregon chapters of the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Teachers Network, along with Gay and Lesbian Educators of British Columbia, are sponsoring this first regional/international conference, which is designed to encourage participants to share ideas and strategies, and develop action plans to make schools safer and more affirming places for all, regardless of sexual orientation.

GLSTN is the largest organization of parents, educators, students and other concerned citizens working to end homophobia in K-12 schools and to ensure that all students are valued and respected, regardless of sexual orientation.

To that end, the group produces audio, visual and text-based educational materials, provides training, produces community programming and conferences, and organizes a growing national network of more than 40 regional chapters.

"Schools may be the most important place for us to focus our energy," says Pharr. "It's a place where we are essentially severed from young people during their first 18 years."

She adds, "Look at most schools. Generally speaking, we don't let queer kids get affirming support. We don't let queer kids learn about gay, lesbian, bi and trans history or culture. We keep literature from them. We don't let queer kids see adult queers in the classroom. It's amazing that people can work their way out of homophobia given those first—and formative—18 years of training."

Things are improving, albeit slowly and in a relatively few places. Perhaps the most notable recent advancement came June 27, when Connecticut Gov. John Rowland, a Republican, signed into law a ban on discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in the state's public schools. Connecticut joins Wisconsin (1985) and Massachusetts (1993) as the third state to pass such a law.

Meanwhile across the country, a Los Angeles school board voted June 2 to extend health benefits to the domestic partners of unmarried employees. Though several speakers blasted the board for pandering to gay men and lesbians, the vote came down 5-2.

Around the same time the Seattle school board pledged its commitment to a project aimed at

## School reform

*Educators, parents, students and others will gather this August to strategize for an environment of respect*

by Inga Sorensen



Suzanne Pharr

placing gay-friendly literature in school libraries despite protests from opponents.

Locally, Portland Public Schools Superintendent Jack Bierwirth and a supportive school board continue to work closely with gay and lesbian parents and educators to promote a safer more equitable school environment via staff diversity trainings, bolstering gay and lesbian support groups in schools, and holding ongoing dialogues with sexual minority parents.

More students nationwide, meanwhile, are attending their school proms with their same-sex partners.

At the same time, the mention of placing *Daddy's Roommate* or *Heather Has Two Mommies*—both children's books with gay themes—in school libraries typically sends communities into a tizzy.

Advances by gay and lesbian rights backers are in turn countered by groups such as Concerned Women for America, a 500,000-member conservative organization that has authored a sample school-board "pro-family resolution," which reads, in part, "Whereas the traditional family, of one man married to one woman and their children through birth or adoption, has been the norm in all civilized societies throughout

history...be it resolved that (insert your school district here) hereby endorses this pro-family resolution and affirms that pro-homosexual concepts on sex and family...will never be tolerated or accepted in this school."

At least one school district, in Pennsylvania, has adopted the resolution.

In early June, meanwhile, 18 Republican state legislators signed a letter condemning the University of Washington's president for promoting what they call "a pro-gay agenda" on campus.

According to the *Seattle Times*, the letter was sent to President Richard McCormick in reaction to the board of regents' unanimous decision in May to extend eligibility for certain health-insurance and family-housing benefits to same-gender domestic partners of students.

The letter reportedly "calls the regents' action 'a grave error' and describes McCormick's involvement as 'blatant pro-homosexual political advocacy.' The lawmakers also urged the regents to reconsider and reject 'this ill-conceived and socially irresponsible idea.'"

These few examples highlight how potentially explosive the issue of gay and lesbian visibility and equity is when you're talking about the educational system, from elementary schools to universities.

Pharr says it's also important to remember that in most places there are no employment protections based on sexual orientation—thus, if you're a gay or lesbian teacher, for example, (or simply perceived as such) you can be fired and have no legal recourse.

So teachers and counselors stay in the closet, shutting themselves off from others, including queer and questioning youth who may benefit from an adult role model.

"It's economic terror," says Pharr, adding that she was fired from her Tulane University English Department position several years ago because she is an ardent feminist and out lesbian. "Without legal protections, it's easy to be scared—and you can't fight for your young if you can't fight for yourself."

Jan Donald, co-chair of GLSTN-Oregon, understands that feeling very well.

For many years Donald, 43, who now works as a librarian/media specialist at Franklin High School in Portland, taught in less supportive districts.

"I had to be in the closet," she says. "It affected me professionally, because it was very draining having to worry about people finding out."

When she began working for Portland Public Schools six years ago, Donald tapped into a fledgling group called Educators for Equity, a gay and lesbian group which eventually evolved into GLSTN-Oregon.

The support she found through those entities allowed her to be more open about who she is. (Portland also has an ordinance barring employment discrimination based on sexual orientation.)

She and other gay and lesbian staff have since met face to face with Bierwirth, which she says has increased her confidence.

"It's very empowering for me to know that he knows me not only as a teacher, but as a lesbian—that we as lesbians and gays can be positive role models for young people—I know my being out has done a lot to raise the comfort level of kids."

Donald says she hopes the conference will allow others to learn and experience a sense of empowerment and solidarity as well.

Also slated to speak at Bridging the Gap are Oregonian Scot Nakagawa, a longtime grassroots organizer; Peter McCue of the British Columbia Teachers Federation; and Kelli Peterson, co-founder of the East High Gay-Straight Alliance in Salt Lake City and recent recipient of the National Education Association's 1997 Humanitarian Award.

Conference attendees will participate in a unique workshop format allowing them to develop action plans that can be implemented in their local schools and communities once they return home.

For registration information and directions, call GLSTN-Oregon at 282-9394; write PO Box 20565, Portland, OR 97294; or e-mail [GLSTNOR@aol.com](mailto:GLSTNOR@aol.com).

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