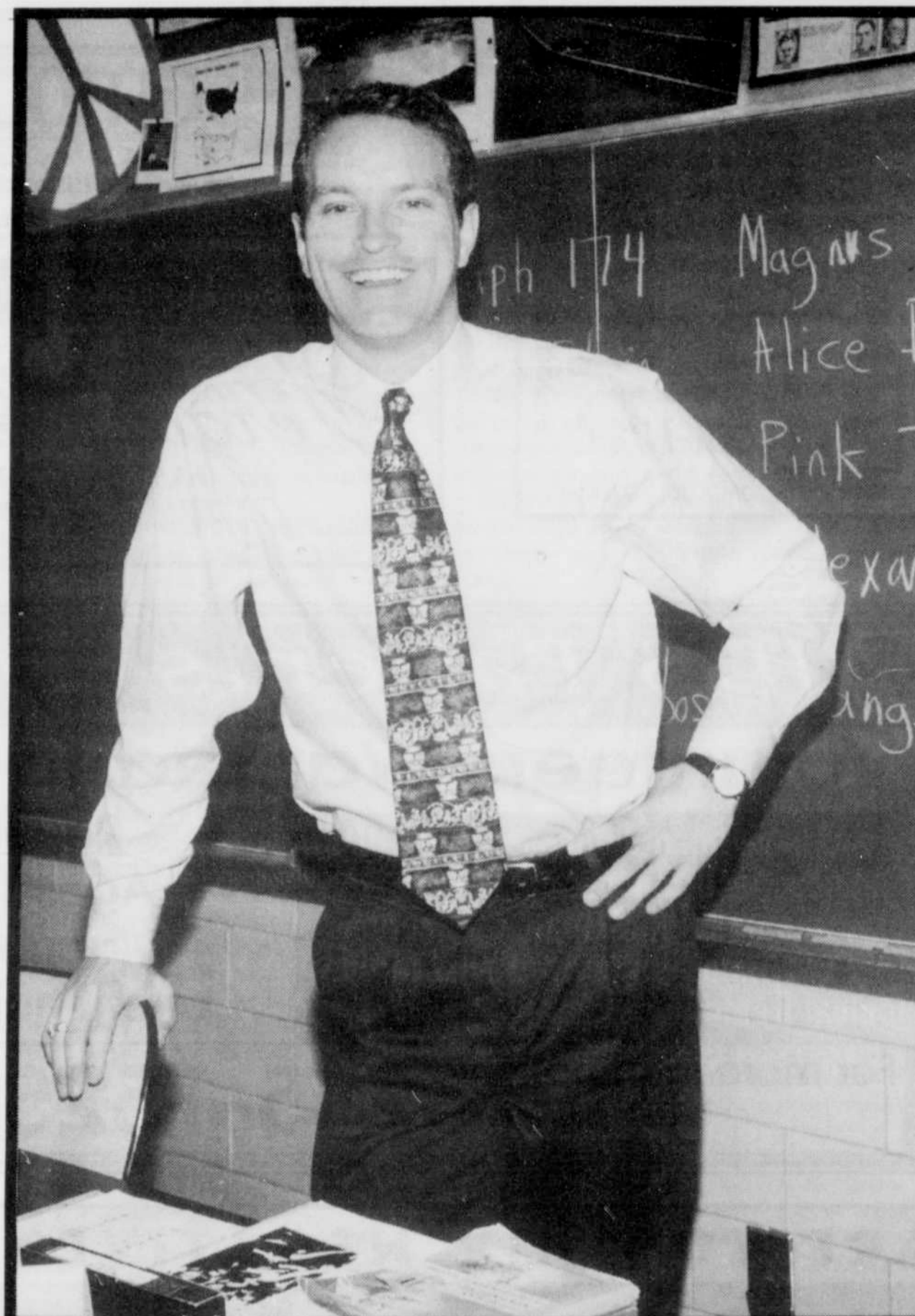


TEACHING BY EXAMPLE

October means Coming Out Day and queer history month: Out queer educators pave the way to explore our past and build our future



Rodney Wilson

Elvis Presley. Two words, one man, the focus of innumerable fantasies.

Rodney Wilson knows this well.

"In January 1973, the month I turned eight, Elvis Presley beamed across the world in a wonderful comeback known as 'The Aloha from Hawaii Concert.' As Mom, Dad, my sister and I sat in the living room of our small, white house in a small, southern Missouri town, I knew that I was in love," Wilson told a University of Massachusetts audience in March.

"I still remember a 38-year-old Elvis taking his microphone and putting it inside his outfit, hiding it for a moment against his sweaty chest. (Hmm, a sweaty chest, a microphone...I figured it all out that evening.) Ever since that day in January 1973, I've fallen for dark-haired guys with sweaty chests, and let's say it's Elvis' fault," says Wilson, who years later made his own presence felt (admittedly minus the flamboyance of the King) when he became what is believed to be Missouri's first out gay teacher and, soon after, the catalyst behind national Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual History Month.

"Like many gay people, coming out was a process for me," Wilson, 32, tells *Just Out*.

As with many queer youth, Wilson knew the drill: Keep your gayness closeted or risk big-time ostracism, which is exactly what he did.

It would be another 18 years—in 1991—before his parents were offered the truth. That was also the year he fell in love for the first time, a year after his first "official date" with another man.

Wilson's evolution as an out gay man didn't end there, however.

While working on a master's degree in history

at the University of Missouri, he wrote all he could about gay and lesbian history, amazing his professors with the paper topics he would dream up: "Lesbianism in Colonial America," "Homosexuality in Pre-Modern Spain," and the paper that "ultimately was the first article on gay history ever to be published by the old-money, conservative Missouri Historical Society: the history of the 1973 founding of the [Metropolitan Community Church] in St. Louis by a dynamic, ahead-of-her-time religious activist named Carol Cureton."

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—Rodney Wilson

"History, like God, grounds us in something bigger than ourselves," says Wilson. "It can offer us security and a sense of why we are where we are now."

In the early 1990s, Missouri was facing anti-gay ballot initiatives and Wilson, who was teaching history at a suburban St. Louis high school, says he felt it was his "obvious duty to say to my colleagues, friends and family, 'Please don't sign this ballot initiative—it will hurt me.'"

On March 22, 1994, his "outness" expanded exponentially when he disclosed his orientation to a classroom of 16- and 17-year-old students as they discussed the Holocaust.

"I explained to them the horror of that period and the uniqueness of the Holocaust as an attempt to exterminate the Jews of Europe, but I also men-

tioned the 'peripheral' victims like Gypsies, Jehovah's Witnesses, political and religious opponents, and others including, as we now are well aware, homosexuals," he says. "And then I identified with the homosexuals of the time by saying to my students that I too, as a gay man, would have been one of the targets of Nazi terror, one of the violators of the infamous Paragraph 175 of pre-Nazi, Nazi and, sadly, post-Nazi Germany."

"The kids were great," he said, though he admits he received some hate mail, had "fags" written on his mailbox, received "several invita-

tions to attend church" (not MCC, mind you), and "had a terrible message or two" left on his answering machine.

Though there were precarious moments, the administration didn't totally freak, and Wilson held onto his teaching post.

In the midst of all this, he organized a chapter of the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Teachers Network (recently renamed the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network), and, with "lots of help from many friends" including national GLSEN's Kevin Jennings, launched the first academic-based celebration of October as Lesbian and Gay History Month. (The event has since become widely known as Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual History Month.)

Inspired by such existing celebrations as Black

History Month (February) and Women's History Month (March), they sought to create a time during the academic year when special attention could be focused on the contributions of lesbian, gay and bisexual people to world history.

The group proposed "that October 1994 be designated the First Annual Lesbian and Gay History Month in the United States. Coming on the heels of the June 1994 Stonewall 25 Celebration, and in the already established month of National Coming Out Day (Oct. 11), October 1994 seems to be a reasonable month for the celebration."

In a nutshell, advocates went on to seek and acquire support from national and local gay and lesbian organizations, historical associations, and the influential National Education Association.

They distributed materials to schools and colleges nationwide and garnered proclamations from political leaders including Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber, who in the summer of 1995 issued a proclamation declaring October as Lesbian and Gay History Month in Oregon.

In his proclamation, Kitzhaber wrote in part, "All citizens will benefit from a better understanding of this history...[and I] encourage all our citizens to join in this observance."

Says Wilson, who recently moved to western Massachusetts with the man he calls his husband, Edgardo Reyes, an administrator with a local public school system: "I urge teachers to come out in the faculty room, in the board room, in the classroom. Every school in this country, from kindergartens through graduate schools, must have openly lesbian and gay members on staff."

He adds, "When a student's family complains that they don't want their son or daughter in the classroom with a gay teacher, the principal should

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