

# MEDIA MONITOR

**Documentary sparks reaction at Oregon Public Broadcasting; The Oregonian hosts epistolary dialogue on racism** by Inga Sorensen

## IT'S ELEMENTARY, IT'S A HOT POTATO

Even weeks before it was slated to air, *It's Elementary* was evoking reactions.

"We probably heard from a couple hundred people who opposed the airing of the documentary," assesses Susan Thomas, director of corporate communications for Oregon Public Broadcasting. "The calls and letters started a couple of months beforehand.... Other public broadcasting stations reported the same thing; it wasn't just happening here."

Thomas speculates the nay-sayers were in part "spurred on by Jerry Falwell's Web site."

*It's Elementary* is a 60-minute documentary that shows various elementary and middle-school classroom discussions about gay and lesbian diversity in four schools around the country. The critically acclaimed instructional film is aimed at an adult audience, and has been used by hundreds of schools and colleges to help sensitize educators around gay and lesbian issues.

It was shown on OPB June 22, although missives against the program's showing far outweighed those favoring it.

And, according to Thomas, the protests didn't end there. The day before the film's airing, a handful of demonstrators turned up on the sidewalk in front of OPB's facilities in Southwest Portland.

"I stepped out and was handed a Christian Coalition flier," says Thomas. "One of the protesters was Lon Mabon!"

The demonstrators eventually packed up their pickets and went home without incident.

In Texas, meanwhile, protesters popped out in abundance. According to the July 3 *San Antonio Express-News*, nearly 200 people participated in a July 2 picket against public television station KLRN's airing of *It's Elementary*.

The report says the protest was "encouraged by Christian radio KSLR talk show host Adam McManus, who for a week challenged his listeners to attend the downtown demonstration.... The crowd drew the attention of passing motorists, most of whom honked in agreement. Some showed their disagreement by flashing obscene hand gestures."

Echoing OPB's Thomas, KLRN's senior vice president of telecommunications, Charles Vaughn, said the decision to air the show was "based on the mission of public television, which is to educate and inform our community and be a place where important issues can be discussed."

As of June 23, about 100 PBS affiliates had scheduled the program, 54 were considering it and 85 had no plans to broadcast it, according to media reports.

In Washington state, meanwhile, Seattle-based public television station KCTS aired *It's Elementary* on July 6 along with an anti-gay rebuttal video called *Suffer the Children*, produced by the American Family Foundation.

According to the June 25 issue of *Seattle Gay*

*News*, KCTS is the only station known to have also presented an opposing view thus far. (KLRN refused to air *Suffer the Children*, and OPB says no request has been made for the station to air the program.)

*Seattle Gay News* reports that the video contains "long segments from *It's Elementary* and points out evidence that the film advocates an unhealthy, sinful lifestyle; undermines the moral teaching of the home and teaches children that homosexuality is a normal sexual expression."



Angela Wilson

According to *Seattle Gay News*, KCTS program director Kay Ingram said: "The purpose is to look at both sides of an issue and let viewers make up their own minds.... I know that both sides are going to be angry, but the issue needs to be heard."

## BIG O'S HOT TOPIC

"I didn't expect the volume of denial I saw in the newspaper," says Angela Wilson, an environmental justice activist and current staff assistant to Portland City Commissioner Erik Sten. (Wilson, who is a lesbian, was featured in the Feb. 19 issue of *Just Out*.)

It's been two months since *The Oregonian* published an "In My Opinion" essay by Wilson, and the letters in response continue to pour in.

The column, headlined "Here's where America's conversation about race can begin," appeared May 14.

In the piece, Wilson wrote, in part: "It's been 30 years and I can't do it any more. I can't stand the mewling, earnest voices asking me what Caucasians can do about racism. I don't need you to try to understand the black reality.... Try understanding your own reality. White people, take my advice and talk among yourselves.... Go to your neighborhood grocery store and talk to those white women who put a death grip on their purses whenever a black person passes. Ask them what the color of their fear looks like—and why. Or maybe talk to the scores of white men who think all black women are just yearn-

ing to sell our dignity to some red-faced Caucasian interested in living out his sexual fantasies."

Wilson continued: "And when you want to ask a black person 'what black people think,' please don't. Instead, go to the next white person who voices such a question and ask why there's the assumption that one person can represent an entire race. Here's something else you can do: Please stop acting as if African Americans and Caucasians are equal in our society. Racism is more than a couple of mean or nasty white people acting out. If racism puts one group of people at a disadvantage, then some other group is given an advantage.... Can you recall when a group of black police officers pumped 41 bullets into an innocent white man or the last time a black cop shot a white cop in a case of mistaken identity? Don't be surprised if you

can't. Coincidence? I think not.... White people, the easy work in dismantling racism is talking to people who look like me. The necessary work is having conversations with folks who look like you."

The essay spawned a profuse and passionate response, with staggered batches of letters appearing in the Big O. (The last go 'round was July 3.) Not surprisingly, the tenor of responses stretched the spectrum.

Some respondents recoiled, among them Lake Oswego resident David Child, who wrote: "I don't want to listen to the whiny, indignant voices telling me what Caucasians should do about racism.... Black people, take Angela Wilson's own good advice and start talking among yourselves; do not wait for a white to walk into the room and you instinctively start thinking 'devil' before you have a conversation about how racism comes in all colors."

On the other hand, Peggy Bird of Vancouver, Wash., recounted how one child was treated at the Rose Festival by the person operating a popular ride: "Soon, all the cars had two children, save one near the middle. The child the ride operator kept passing by, the little boy who rode alone, was the only African American child on the train."

At the time, Bird failed to speak up but continued to think about what she had witnessed. She wrote: "[W]hile I may be tardy, I want the father of that little boy to know that those of us who saw what happened were appalled. While not as deliberate as laws that discriminate, nor as dangerous as racial profiling, what the operator did was no less discriminatory, no less offensive and no less wrong."

Wilson, a former journalist with *Willamette Week* and *The Skanner*, Portland's African American newspaper, tells *Just Out*: "I was interested in waking people up."

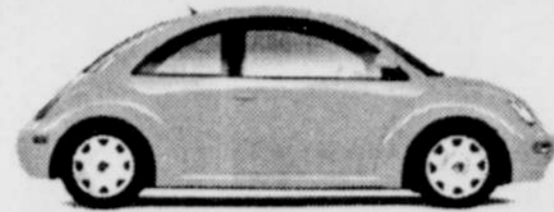
Still, she admits, the flurry of reaction has been a wonder to watch.

"I think it shows that there is a great desire among people to talk about race and racism," she says.

"Black people talk about race all the time, unlike white people," says Wilson, who feels people need a venue in which they feel safe and comfortable in order to begin such an exploration.

"I think single-race conversations could be very beneficial if we focus on the highest common denominator and not the lowest," she adds.

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