

VOICES CARRY

Resolution of campus controversy over a teacher's comment proves one voice can make a difference by Inga Sorensen

A crisp wind blows. It's late afternoon, near 5 o'clock. Students trickle to and from the myriad parking lots strewn throughout the area. Just beyond the perimeter of the campus, rush-hour traffic zings about. But back on the grounds, it's pretty quiet, save for the pockets of folks who begin clustering near the McLoughlin Building.

"I was appalled by Dr. Epstein's comments," says Pat Lichen, a part-time writing student at Clackamas Community College, which is situated in Oregon City.

Accompanying Lichen is her 5-year-old daughter, Hallie, who clutches the colorful pint-size sign she crafted the night before. Her message? Stop the hate.

"I brought my daughter because I want her to know that when someone of authority does something wrong, it's OK to stand against it," says Pat, as the little girl nuzzles into her mom's side. "It's my hope my daughter would have the same integrity as Joshua Alexander."

Joshua Alexander is the Clackamas Community College student who recently filed a formal complaint against Dr. Donald Epstein, an instructor at the school for three decades, for allegedly making an anti-gay remark in class.

According to Alexander, Epstein was giving an overview of his Judaic studies course when he made the remark: "You are better off being dead than homosexual."

Alexander reportedly filed the complaint after talking with Epstein, who stood by his sentiments about homosexuality, the student says.

A debate ensued both on campus and in the broader community. (A rash of letters to the editor, overwhelmingly denouncing Epstein, appeared in *The Oregonian*.) The instructor ultimately apologized and promised to retire in March, when the current term ends. College officials went public with the news Jan. 25.

Which swings us back to the Lichens and the roughly 60 others who collected for a Jan. 26 campus vigil.

"When I heard about the comments [Epstein] made, it just made me so angry,"



Hallie (left) and Pat Lichen

explains Tam Oliver, a CCC student and resident of Washougal, Wash. "But I like how things have worked out."

So does Kate Gray, an English instructor and faculty adviser to the Rainbow Coalition, a support group for gay, lesbian and bisexual students at the college.

"Some of the students' hearts have been boosted so much by how this has been resolved," she tells *Just Out*. "It let's them know that they are being heard."

Gray, who has worked at the college for nine years, adds: "I think for faculty and staff it's very welcome—I've been out since I got here. But for students it can be really bad, especially when the OCA is doing things."

Once, when the coalition was advertising a Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays event, she says, someone drew a swastika and scribbled the German national anthem on the posting.

According to Gray, who organized the vigil, some queer students fear "bodily harm."

"This is a very homogeneous population," she says, referring to the campus.

At the vigil, homogeneity manifests itself in a more friendly way. One by one, people—including the college's president, John Keyser, a sprinkling of faculty members and a local minister—step to the microphone to share a hope, poem or prayer, then light a candle.

"This place feels a lot better than it did during Measure 9," assesses one person.

Another lights one candle for Alexander and a second "for those students who may have left the school, transferred from a class, and never had their voices heard."

She adds: "Maybe they can come back now."

One young man, a former CCC student, is the sole defender of Epstein, saying the teacher "was one of the best I ever had.... I'm lighting a candle for Dr. Epstein."

CCC's mission, according to a statement on the college's official Internet site, "is to serve the people of the college district with high quality education and training opportunities that are accessible to all students, adaptable to changing needs, and accountable to the community we serve. Our code of ethics calls all of us to...respect diversity and show concern for the needs and feelings of others."

The statement continues: "The Banyan Tree is our symbol of organizational strength. Like the Banyan Tree, whose branches grow into the ground to become new trunks, the college is continuously growing into a stronger, healthier organization through the personal commitment and initiative of each student and staff member."

Keyser tells *Just Out* he regrets what has happened at his school and concedes the brouhaha may leave a blemish on the institution.

"We have a very strong diversity statement, but I think, yes, this could hurt our reputation," he says. "But I believe this is a good learning experience, knowing that people will come together and take a stand for tolerance."

And he believes CCC, like the banyan, is stronger and healthier for it.

■ Think the situation at Clackamas Community College was handled fairly? Or do you believe instructors should be able to say what they wish in their classes without fear of repercussions? Send a letter to the editor at P.O. Box 14400, Portland, OR 97293-0400, or justout@justout.com. Fax your letter to (503) 236-1257 or submit it online at www.justout.com.

Help wanted: Seeking an individual with herculean strengths, multitudinous abilities and an iron stomach to take the helm of a boat that heaves and lists with each swell and wave caused by the dubious legislation and ballot measures concocted sporadically by Oregon's infamous right wing.

In other words, Basic Rights Oregon, the state's largest gay and lesbian rights organization, continues its search for a replacement for recently departed director Jean Harris.

BRO—which grew out of the battle against statewide anti-gay ballot measures 9 and 13 (in 1992 and 1994, respectively)—has matured into a multifaceted organization with many responsibilities.

Board member Laura Dellinger, who is also on the hiring committee, says three program areas that BRO has developed over the past two years will continue: the educational mission, the Fair Workplace Project, and campaign preparedness.

Additionally, because BRO has taken on the political campaigning and legislative lobbying

WHAT'S UP WITH BRO?

Just Out checks on the group's search for a new leader by T.K. Mantese

that was once the domain of the now-defunct gay rights organization Right to Pride, one of the requirements for the leadership position is political campaign experience.

The executive director will oversee work in four major program areas: the organizing of campaigns to defeat anti-gay ballot measures; efforts toward electing pro-gay and openly gay and lesbian candidates to public office; the securing of full equality for the sexual minorities community via legal, ballot and legislative channels; and expansion of the Fair Workplace Project.

Candidates for the executive director post must possess proven fund-raising abilities and be capable, according to the job announcement, of raising \$300,000 to \$2 million.

The hiring announcement also identifies a need for guidance from an individual who is able to build strong coalitions with other nonprofits,

business and labor, and to "act as a responsible and effective public spokesperson in a variety of venues."

A search committee is evaluating the applications and will make a recommendation to the board, which is responsible for the ultimate decision.

At press time, about 10 applicants had submitted résumés. The hiring committee is making a nationwide search and says it has no preference for an Oregonian or otherwise.

Though the official job announcement declares that the deadline for applications was Jan. 10, the committee "will close the search when we have the right person," Dellinger says.

■ T.K. MANTESE is a Portland-based free-lance writer and proofreader.



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