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Speak Out

Let's be rational

TO THE EDITOR:

One of your readers takes *Queer as Folk* to task for portraying and endorsing underage sex ["Age of Innocence," April 6]. This issue has been fermenting in my mind for a very long time.

In the 1960s, in the middle of my 13th year, I became friends with a man who was 31. It was so long ago and I was so young, I did not realize that he was gay—or that I was gay for that matter.

I sure knew what I wanted, though. I just didn't know it meant I was gay.

At the time there was no information about gay matters for youngsters and precious little for adults. There was no Internet, and there was no gay pride movement.

To read newspapers and watch television, you never would guess homosexuality existed. After surreptitiously reading the paltry offerings at the local county library, I was left with the impression that there might be a few hundred people on the planet who desired sex with their own gender.

Yes, this man and I had sex. It was tentative and scary for both of us. In that era such things would have shocked the community we lived in.

So this man was guilty of sex with a minor. Did it hurt me? Not at all. In fact, it helped in many ways.

He treated me with the greatest of respect. He never pushed or coerced. In fact, if anyone was aggressive, it was me.

But if I said no to something, he never brought up the matter again. I haven't met many people in my life as kind and gentle as he was.

Now I'm certainly not suggesting that for an adult to have sex with a child is acceptable. What I am saying, however, is that each case is unique. It is not always bad.

Of course, when there is coercion, whether the pressure is physical or psychological, it is rape. With apologies to Gertrude, abuse by any other name would stink as bad.

The law in Oregon says under 18 is illegal for those over 18. I have no argument with that point; it is a fact that anyone can look up in the statutes.

But the age of consent is much younger in other states and in other countries. In Washington it is 16 years. Evidently, lawmakers there think the Columbia is a mighty river if it can impart two years of maturity and wisdom to any youngster who merely crosses it.

Obviously, 18 is an arbitrary number. There are probably 25-year-olds who shouldn't be having sex, and there are no doubt a few 12-year-olds for whom it is fine.

I just wish we could take a more rational view of this issue. Instead of knee-jerk reactions and slavish obedience to arbitrary laws, we should judge the issue on the merits of the individual case.

Underage sex is not necessarily abuse. And, yes, I realize that is not realistic today. We live in a world where everything must be reduced to absolutes: black or white, good or bad; no in-betweens, no exceptions.

But that doesn't mean we shouldn't strive for a more reasoned approach to the matter. And I applaud the fact that the gay media have remained largely silent in this case.

The relationship between the 29-year-old and the 17-year-old on *Queer as Folk* is caring and decent. Were it otherwise, I'm sure the gay media would speak out.

Oh, and before someone decides I must be a pedo, I've never had sex with an underage person nor am I interested in it. I just think I should be tolerant toward those whose sexual orientation is different. As far as I am concerned, if the relationship is mutually good for the parties, then it should be respected regardless of their ages.

JOHN JORDAN
Portland

The facts of life

TO THE EDITOR:

This is in response to the letter from Charles Ward regarding the Showtime television show *Queer as Folk*.

One of the best things about this particular program is that it depicts the realities of gay life in a major city. As an almost 20-year-old gay man, I definitely can relate to many of the situations that have occurred since the show's inception in December.

Obviously, the activities that the characters participate in and the actions that they take do not represent the occurrences in every gay man's life, and they have that very disclaimer on every episode. Older men sleeping with younger guys is a fact of life in our community, and it probably always will be.

Besides, it's not like most television shows don't already show illegal activities. I realize it doesn't reflect very well on us, but it is a fact of life, and I say just sit back and enjoy it!

MATTHEW TAYLOR
Carlton

Bills, bills, bills

TO THE EDITOR:

State Sen. Ryan Deckert's Fair Schools Act is a waste of people's time, energy and money—not because prohibiting discrimination in public education on the basis of sexual orientation isn't laudable but because it already is prohibited in Oregon ["Capitol Gains," March 16].

In 1998's *Tanner v. Oregon Health Sciences University*, the Oregon Court of Appeals held that OHSU's "denial of insurance benefits to the unmarried domestic partners of its homosexual employees" violated Article I, Section 20 of the Oregon Constitution. The ruling cited the facts that "government entities" are prohibited from "passage of laws granting citizens or classes of citizens privileges or immunities on unequal terms" and that the "courts have construed the reference to 'laws' to include both legislative enactments and the administration of laws under delegated authority."

Publicly funded "government entities" such as Oregon's public schools thus already are prohibited from discriminating on the basis of sexual orientation—and that includes "privileges" such as the programs, activities and services that Senate Bill 912 and House Bill 3247 seek to address. Instead of supporting legislation that is redundant in light of existing law, sexual minority efforts should be directed toward enforcing the *Tanner* decision—for example, by bringing suit against any and all public schools that persist in violating the Oregon Constitution.

Then there's Deckert's introduction of Senate Bill 728, which "would prohibit employment discrimination based on sexual orientation." In the past, *Just Out* has quoted David Fidanque, American Civil Liberties Union of Oregon executive director, as saying with regard to *Tanner v. OHSU*, "The Court of Appeals has also made it clear that current Oregon law prohibits any employer—whether public or private—from discriminating in the workplace on the basis of sexual orientation" ["Kudos to the Court," Dec. 18, 1998]. And as recently as last spring, *Just Out* claimed *Tanner v. OHSU* was responsible for "making it illegal for Oregon's private employers to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation" ["Attorney Accolades," April 21, 2000].

No wonder Deckert reports that "many of my colleagues were at least surprised that you still could be fired" just for being gay. According to *Just Out*, the ACLU and others, the Oregon Court of Appeals says you can't.

Why is Deckert giving the Oregon Legisla-