

During the six years Sima Teherani taught at Hidden Valley High School in southern Oregon, her classroom became a haven for the "different" kids. When she was their age, "I guess I always rooted for the underdog."

Born in San Francisco but raised in Portland, Teherani has accomplished a great deal since the late 1980s. She moved to Ashland, where she finished her undergraduate degree in English at Southern Oregon State College.

She also married, became the mother of two daughters and worked as a teacher in Grants Pass. She later completed a master's degree at Western Oregon University, taking long-distance summer classes.

It was during her stint as an educator that Teherani began to develop a stronger sense of herself and of the priorities that now have become so integral in her work. She says she usually could recognize the gay and lesbian youths who came to her classroom to hang out.

Like kids everywhere, they were trying to escape the pervasive prejudice and the everyday hassles they encountered because they didn't fit into their peer group. She recognized these students often were ostracized simply because they were perceived as different.

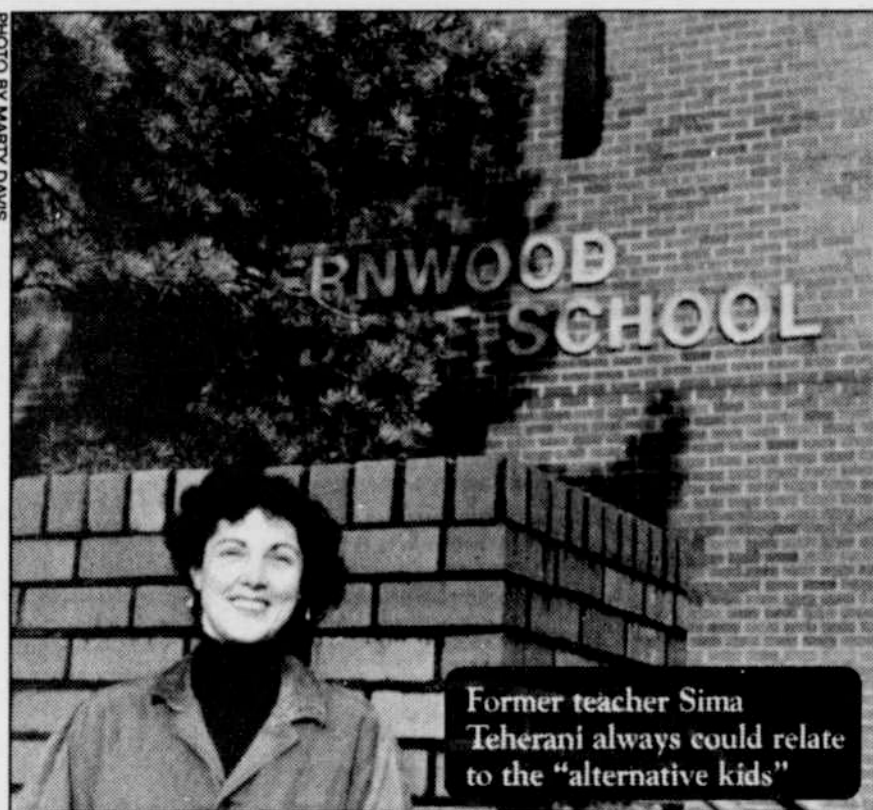
On a trip to Florida, Teherani met and fell in love with a woman. She soon decided to quit teaching, separate from her husband and move back to Portland, where she hoped to work on her new identity and her new relationship.

She also wanted to address her health issues. She had developed multiple sclerosis, and "it got worse each year."

Teherani worried about how her two young daughters would feel about having a lesbian mother. She and the children started attending

MOTHER KNOWS BEST

Lesbian parent determined to protect children in Portland middle schools by Jack Turteltaub



make the sometimes difficult transition to middle school, where "fitting in" and peer pressure become paramount concerns. Still in the developmental stage, the program involves working with three different middle schools in the Portland Public Schools district.

She says she is considering a number of ideas. One of these involves having middle school student mentors who would form relationships with third-graders to prepare them for the transition.

She recognizes that this is an unusual and ambitious program. She knows only a few schools and fewer districts help kids in sexual minority families combat peer prejudice and stereotypes about what constitutes a "normal" family.

Teherani also has translated her passions into intense volunteer work on a number of projects at Irvington Elementary, where her daughters are enrolled. She just finished a term as co-president of the school's PTA.

One project involves painting murals in Irvington's four main bathrooms through the vol-

unteer recruitment of Portland artists who she hopes will work with the kids. She envisions the adults helping translate the students' ideas into something uplifting and inspiring.

Irvington's new principal says Teherani has a reputation as a facilitator and an activist. Cynthia MacLeod describes her as a "very supportive parent, eager and willing to help and get anything accomplished in the school."

And Teherani's advocacy doesn't stop just with children who come from sexual minority families. Her concern extends to others in unconventional living situations: "grandparents raising children, adopted kids, children with physical and/or emotionally handicaps, children of biracial couples."

Some are sons or daughters who will grow up to become gay or trans. Others have two daddies or a lesbian mother—like herself—at home.

So how do her daughters understand and deal with their family situation these days? Teherani says that they are accepting but that it still can be hard because "sometimes the girls just want me to be living with a man."

Does that mean her children want her to change? "I think they want me to be happy. They know about me, and when I had a lover, they accepted having two mommies and a daddy."

But Teherani would like to see a world in which her girls could grow up knowing it is OK to be different. Above all, she wants them to accept themselves as they grow up.

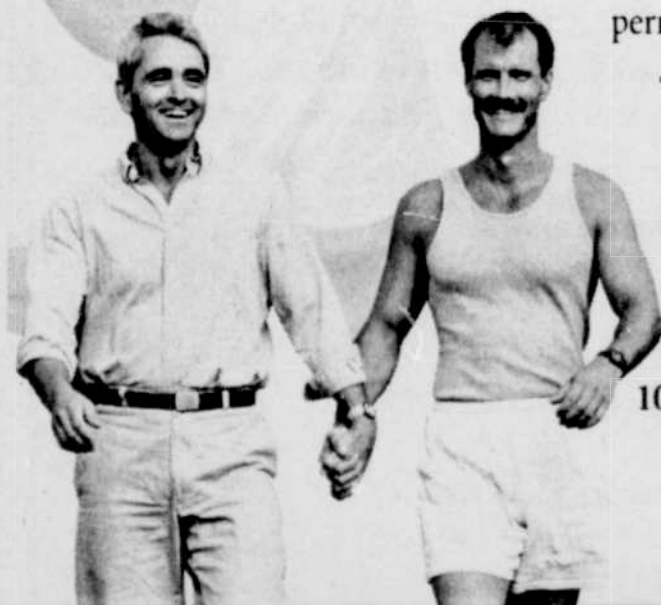
"I just want my girls to be comfortable in any situation they're exposed to," she says. "I want them to be free to be who they are. If they can achieve that, it would be amazing." □

Portland free-lance writer, coach and psychologist JACK TURTeltaub may be reached at turteltaub@e-z.net.

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