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PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

Tina Barfoot coordinates Bridge 13, which educates young people about gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation

## DIVERSITY OR PERVERSITY?

### Centennial High School caves to parental pressure

by Jim Radosta

Officials at Centennial High in Gresham apologized Feb. 15 for requiring student attendance at presentations teaching tolerance toward sexual minorities. The classes were part of the school's annual diversity week.

Bridge 13, a program of Vanguard Youth Services, arranged the Feb. 11 presentation, which educated kids about gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation. About 50 of the classes are held every year, primarily in the Portland area.

Youth facilitators focus on definitions of words as well as inappropriate slurs such as "fag" and "that's so gay," says Tina Barfoot, Bridge 13 coordinator. "We stress...eliminating those as much as possible and the importance of interrupting that language even if you're not an LGBT student."

She says the facilitators go through an intensive training before giving the 90-minute presentations. "They tell their coming-out stories and sort of put a real face to gayness, so to speak."

The interactive classes include games as well as a question-and-answer segment, Barfoot says. "We felt like it went really great."

She describes one Christian student who said that homosexuality is wrong but that people deserve support no matter what. "We acknowledged her for being able to stand up and say that."

One exercise presented scenarios to students and asked how they would respond—for example, what support they would offer to a friend who came out as bi. Again, the Christian teen had something to say.

"That student...said that she felt that it was important to offer resources to her theoretical bisexual friend because her opinions don't need to be shoved down other people's throats," Barfoot says. "So it was a really open environment."

Bridge 13 also distributed a role-reversal questionnaire that turns the tables on straight students. Barfoot describes it as an effective tool allowing kids to walk in someone else's shoes.

"People ask LGBT folks, 'What do you think caused your homosexuality, and isn't it possible that you just need to sleep with somebody of the opposite sex and then you'll figure it all out and then you'll be straight again?'" she says. "So the heterosexual questionnaire...asks those same questions to heterosexual people: 'What do you think caused your heterosexuality?'"

But then right-wing KXL-AM talk show host Lars Larson learned about Bridge 13 and started spreading lies on his Feb. 14 show. "He was saying [the Sexual Minority Youth Recre-

ation Center, another Vanguard program] is a sex club where children can go to meet adults to have sex with, which is just ludicrous," Barfoot says.

Nobody older than 23 is allowed in the facility except for volunteers. "We have very strict boundary guidelines that they have to sign, and one of those includes not dating or sleeping with any youth, obviously," Barfoot says.

Larson also concentrated on the heterosexual questionnaire. According to Barfoot, his listeners completely missed the point of the exercise.

"The parents who were calling in to Lars' show...didn't seem to read the first paragraph on the questionnaire that very clearly states that [these are] not questions that you are actually supposed to answer," she says. "And they were taking those questions out of context—and quite literally, as if we were asking the students to all go and find a gay lover so that they could be gay."

As a result of Larson's show, about two dozen parents complained to Centennial. Principal Curt Heath then canceled the Feb. 14 appearances of an HIV-positive speaker from Cascade AIDS Project and a student skit featuring a gay character, according to the *Oregonian*.

"I was pretty upset," says Barfoot, whose program never has received this kind of a response from a school. "I felt like that was kind of an overreaction."

Of course, the speakers focusing on the Holocaust, cerebral palsy and Africa did not require permission slips. "They're being treated differently, and I think that's really unfortunate because...LGBTQ youth deserve the same rights that everybody else has," Barfoot says.

Wendy Reif, Centennial School District communications specialist, says parents must be notified in advance of any human sexuality instruction. "That did not happen in this case, so the school really is taking responsibility for it because the policy wasn't followed."

Reif says the Bridge 13 instructors ventured into territory that goes beyond just teaching tolerance. "There were some pieces of the material that I think have raised some eyebrows as far as whether it was appropriate for a high school audience."

But how can a speaker discuss tolerance based on sexual orientation when the district's policy restricts human sexuality instruction? "The potential was there to have the same speakers and have it not tread on sexual material," Reif says, "but in reality what was presented, I think, fell into that realm." □

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