

NATIONAL news

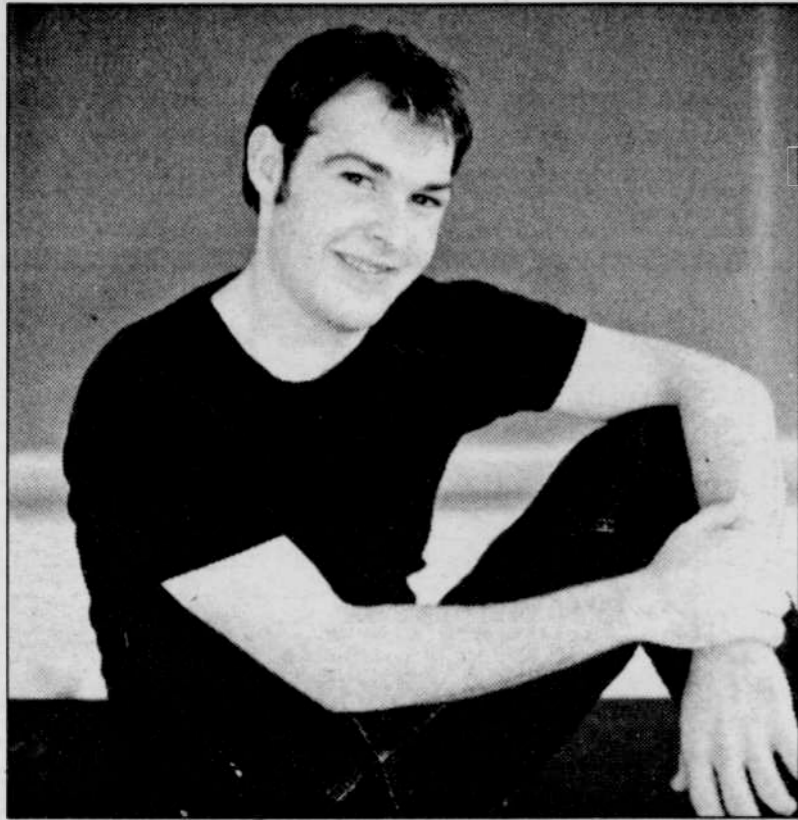


PHOTO BY SVEN WIEBERHOLT
Loomis was a senior at his California high school when one of his teachers, referring to the boy's earring, told his class, "Only two kinds of guys wear earrings, pirates and faggots, and I don't see any water around here." During the next few weeks the teacher continued making such remarks about him in class, sparking a wave of harassment and threats from other kids and staff members that eventually drove the honor student from school.

Derek Henkle endured years of anti-gay verbal and physical abuse in Reno high schools

names, shoved against lockers and spit on.

A group of boys even threw a lasso around Henkle's neck and threatened to drag him behind their pickup. He escaped, only to have a teacher laugh at him for being so upset. He was transferred to a school for students with behavioral or academic problems where the principal warned him against "acting like a fag."

After Henkle was transferred to yet a third high school, the harassment continued, and campus police officers stood by while a student repeatedly punched him in the face. He finally was forced to enroll in adult education classes where a high school diploma was impossible to obtain.

"I'm signing this agreement today on behalf of the 84 percent of my peers who are assaulted daily while trying to go to school," said Henkle, now 21 and a resident of San Francisco. "This settlement will help make sure other students don't go through what I did in Reno."

CALIFORNIA

The Visalia Unified School District has agreed to adopt sweeping reforms to address anti-gay harassment, including groundbreaking measures to train staff and students with the goal of preventing harassment before it happens, the American Civil Liberties Union announced Aug. 13. The settlement ends a federal lawsuit concerning routine harassment of queer youth, some of whom then were forced into a special program for students with behavioral problems.

"This milestone settlement shows schools how to meet their legal obligation to not only respond to anti-gay harassment but to actively work to prevent it," attorney Ann Brick said. "Anti-gay harassment is a particularly big problem in schools outside major urban centers, like those in Visalia. Students there will now have a shot at being treated equally, and the rest of California and the nation will have a strong model for addressing these issues."

The settlement requires mandatory training for all high school staff and students to promote tolerance. Employees will learn how to intervene and remedy acts of harassment and how to prevent them from occurring in the future.

"No student should have to go through the kind of harassment I did. And parents deserve to know their children will be safe when they're at school," plaintiff George Loomis said. "This settlement will have a major impact on the lives of students and their families. I'm really glad to see such a positive outcome to this case."



George Loomis

San Leandro High School English teacher Karl Debro ended a more than four-year battle with his district Aug. 27, settling his civil rights claim for \$1,155,000. He filed the complaint in February 1999 after being reprimanded for discussing "controversial" subjects in his classroom, including racism and homophobia.

A jury awarded Debro \$500,000 in emotional stress damages Aug. 8. The additional \$1.5 million award will cover legal fees and case costs and includes more than \$600,000 in punitive damages because the district's superintendent, Thomas Himmelberg, was found to have engaged in "oppression, malice or fraud."

The California Alliance for Pride and Equality announced Aug. 22 that the Assembly has given final approval to a measure extending inheritance rights to domestic partners who have registered with the state. It now will go to Gov. Gray Davis for his signature.

Under current law, a surviving domestic partner is not entitled to receive any portion of a deceased partner's estate. The measure will provide registered domestic partners the right to inherit a specified portion of a partner's estate automatically should one partner die without a will. The bill also directs the California secretary of state to notify domestic partners of the change in the inheritance formula.

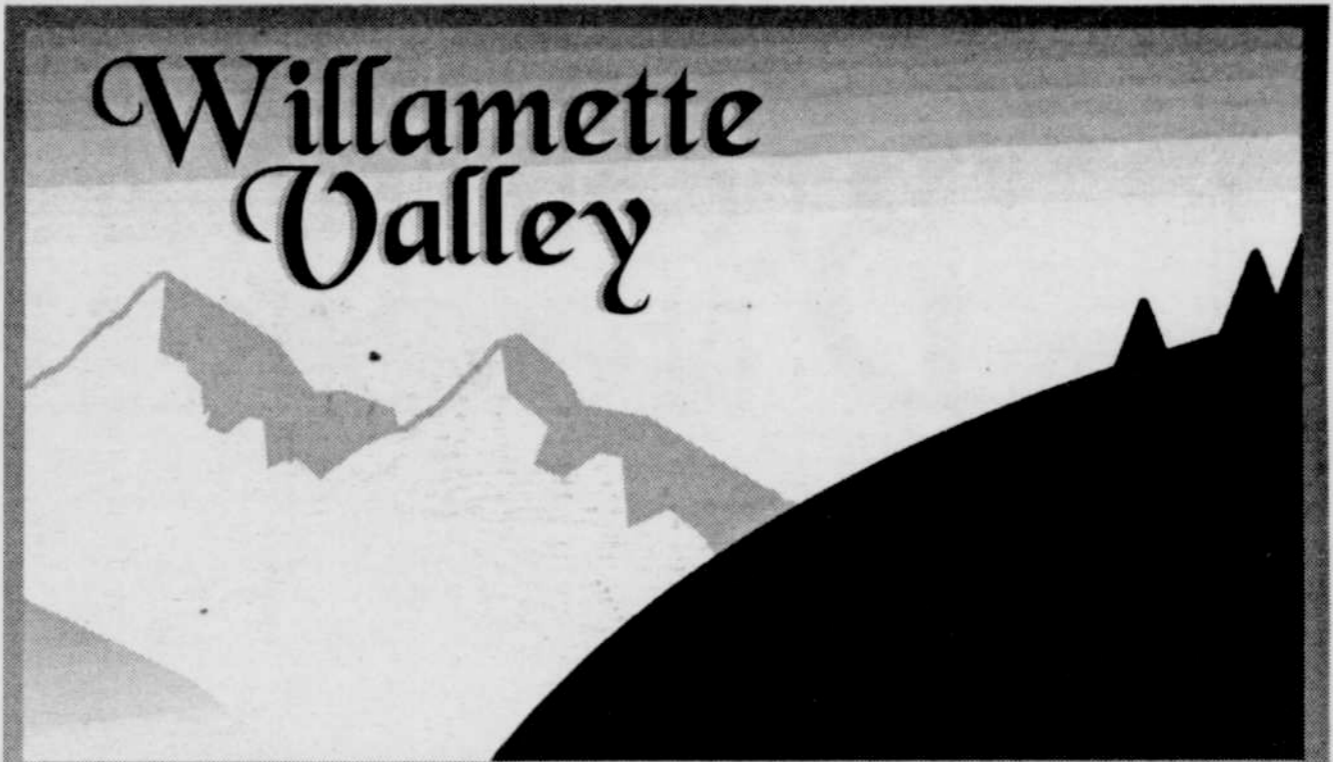
"This disparity was brought home for many people after the tragic events of Sept. 11," explained Geoffrey Kors, CAPE interim executive director. "Many individuals in long-term relationships who lost their same-sex partners were left with no legal right to any of their partner's possessions or assets. This financial crisis only added to the trauma of losing a life partner."

The Assembly took the final step to approve a landmark bill protecting queer youth in foster care Aug. 19. It now will go to Gov. Gray Davis' desk for his signature.

The bill would prohibit discrimination and harassment against foster youth, foster parents, other foster household members and staff based on a number of factors including sexual orientation, gender identity and HIV/AIDS status. It also allows nonmandatory training for foster parents to include education on teen-age sexual health, the challenges faced by queer youth and sensitivity to kids who have been sexually or physically abused.

The bill directs the Department of Social Services to expand recruitment activities directed at gay, lesbian, bi and trans individuals who are interested in caring for queer foster youth. Finally, it requires the Office of the State Foster Care Ombudsperson to address complaints about care, placement and services.

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