

Courage in the classroom

by Timothy Krause • Photos by Marty Davis

A statewide coalition will teach educators and students how to make Oregon schools safe for all

adult leaders from across the state to teach them how to present workshops in their communities.

During the past two years, Franks, Liljeholm and other advocates have conducted more than two dozen presentations in places such as Eugene, Bend, Hood River, Salem and Portland. These safe school pioneers sought change within the culture of their academic halls by raising awareness of queer youth issues, ranging from kids feeling invisible and left out of the curriculum to incidents of property damage and physical violence.

Although some Oregon schools do offer a safe haven for sexual minorities, Liljeholm says the statistics are more drastic for queer youth than their heterosexual peers, especially when looking at dropout rates, unsafe sex practices, substance abuse and other ways in which kids try to deal with the pain of abusive treatment at school.

Looking back on her own experience as well as those of her classmates, Wagner says the hardest part of academic life for queer and questioning students is the fear of coming out. So most remain in the closet, where they feel depressed, unsafe and angry.

Wagner says that when kids call you queer, the immediate thought isn't always fear of harassment or violence but rather an emotional fear that what they're saying is true, that they recognized your sexuality before you did. Or maybe that classmates have pigeonholed you into a sexual identity you weren't quite sure of yet. Either way, you're scared to accept yourself because you don't have any positive queer role models.

"It doesn't have to be physical to be a problem," she says. "Fear is fear."

But through efforts by educators to reach out to queer youth, she has found an affirmative mentor in Franks. Now, Wagner wants to set an example for others that it's OK to be queer or to question your sexuality or gender.

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Hate graffiti is scrawled on the sidewalk of Portland's Lincoln High School. A drawing of a triangle with a slash through it targets a boy by name and reads, "Die, asshole."

A girl on a suburban dance team is left alone in the locker room because her teammates refuse to change clothes in front of a "dyke."

A student in Vancouver, Wash., sits in the high school cafeteria and in the course of a short lunch period hears more than 60 anti-gay comments.

That's so gay.

Stop acting so queer.

Faggot.

Harassment and discrimination are just part of another day in many area schools, where queer and questioning students often feel unsafe, unwelcome, hidden in a closet and left alone.

Kids ask themselves: Who wants to go to school when you are afraid of being beaten up? Who can concentrate on learning anything when you have to put up with teasing, taunting and prejudice? What is the point of bettering yourself through education when the environment around you is demeaning and you're scared to just be yourself?

Sticks and stones and words that hurt

"It's like you're living in a bubble," says Amanda Wagner, a 17-year-old queer senior at Sunset High School in Beaverton. "People can get pretty close to you, but until the bubble gets popped, they'll never get there. It's very lonely and very isolating."

And, for some, even violent.

A recent Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network survey of queer youth found that nearly one out of three kids had been physically assaulted because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

In 1999, the Oregon Health Division found that an estimated 20,000 high school students statewide reported that they had been targeted with anti-gay harassment at school or traveling to and from school.

These same students were also three times

more likely to report a suicide attempt than their nonharassed peers. And they were four times more likely than their nonharassed peers to report that their suicide attempts resulted in medical care from a doctor or nurse.

Ron Bloodworth serves as a liaison between the state's youth suicide prevention office and various agencies, schools and organizations. He says, "Research evidence is clear that gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans youth are at a greater risk than their heterosexual peers, and the strongest indications are the harassment, social stigma and marginalization that many youth experience."

Reducing harassment in schools and communities through the creation and implementation of inclusive policies, staff training and curricula is one of 15 strategies recommended by the Oregon Department of Human Services in its Oregon Plan for Youth Suicide Prevention. Now, a new alliance of advocates has stepped forward to help put the state's strategy

into action with a hope to quell the queer fear of our schools.

Following the example, showing your work

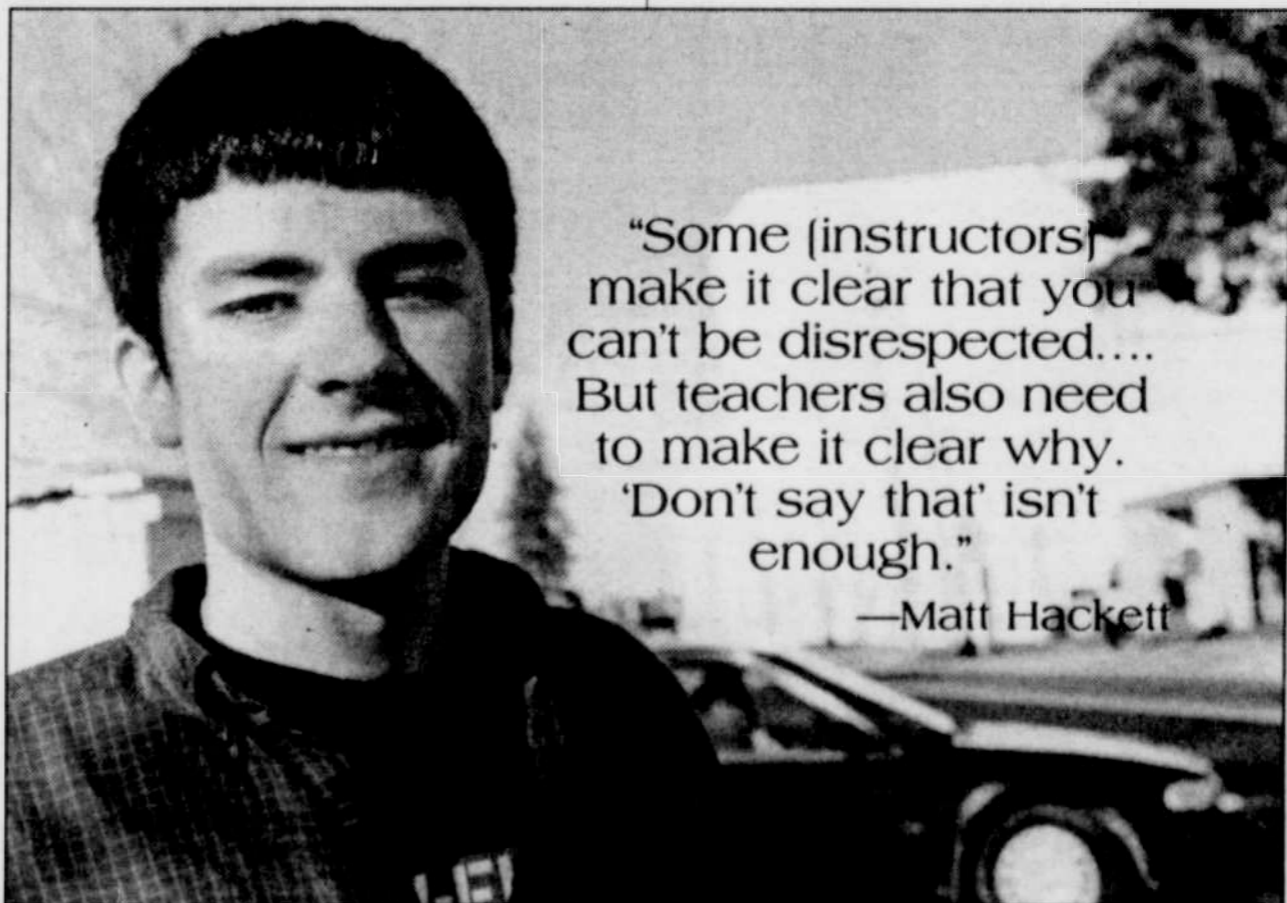
With support from Equity Foundation (see sidebar), the recently formed Oregon Safe Schools and Communities Coalition has an

ambitious plan to train teams of adults and kids from across the state to create positive academic environments—not only for the queer and questioning, but for all students. Joyce Liljeholm, a retired school counselor, and Molly Franks, a leader of the Washington County Pride Project, have helped launch the nonprofit with its proactive mission of creating safe spaces where "every family can belong, every educator can teach and every child can learn regardless of actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity."

Now a cross section of public and private organizations, the coalition grew out of a training session funded by the Oregon Department of Education in March 2001. Held in Eugene, that groundbreaking workshop brought together 40

"I'm going to leave behind a new generation of queer youth willing to step out as who they are and talk about it. If I don't try to make a change, how can I expect others to?"

—Amanda Wagner



"Some [instructors] make it clear that you can't be disrespected.... But teachers also need to make it clear why. 'Don't say that' isn't enough."

—Matt Hackett