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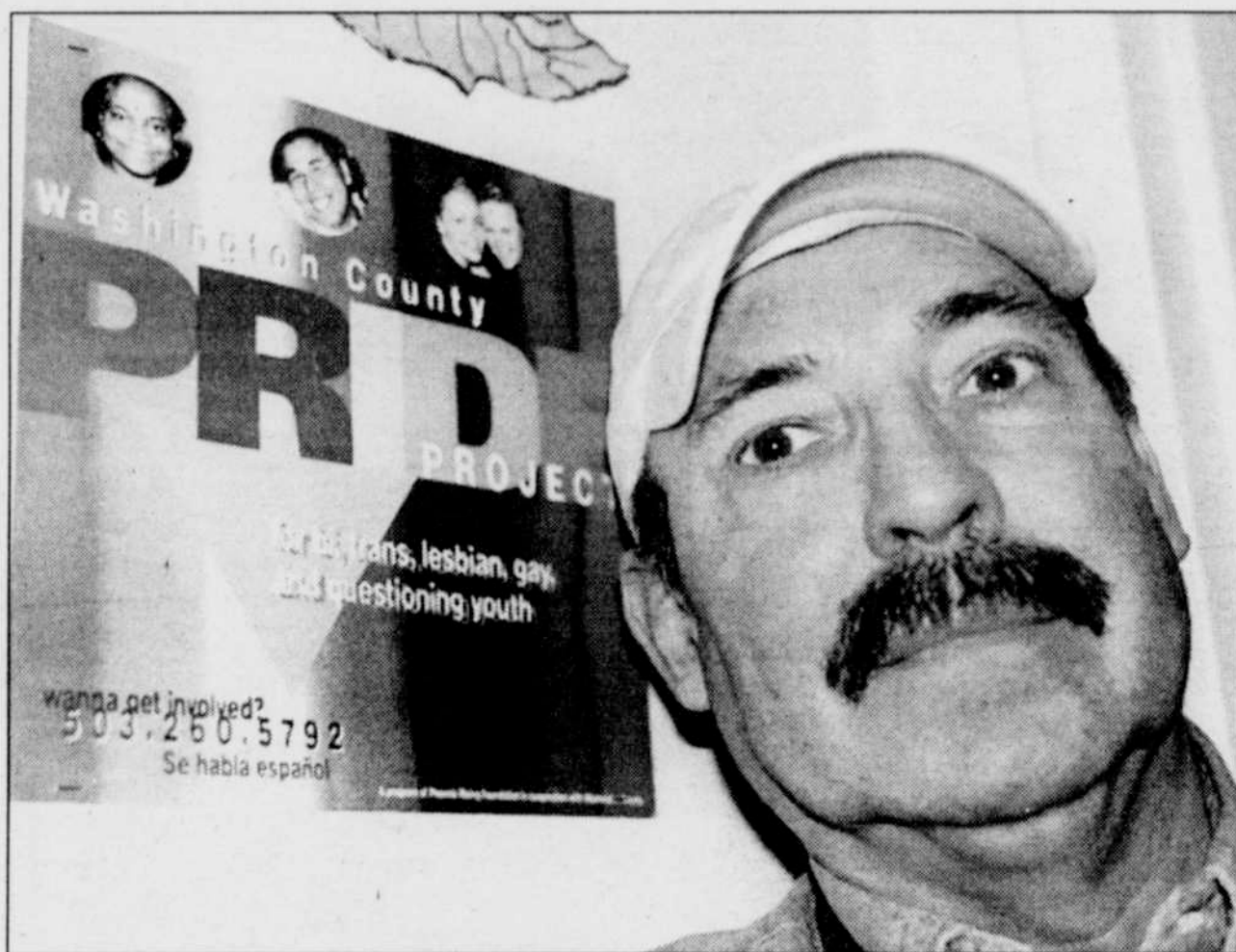


PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

Larry Smith believes the poster is informational, not promotional

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BEAVERTON TEACHER DEFENDS SIGN

Larry Smith, a drama teacher at Conestoga Middle School in Beaverton, is butting heads with administrators concerning a classroom sign advertising the Washington County Pride Project, a support group for queer kids. District officials believe such subject matter belongs only in the offices of counselors, who they claim are better prepared to answer questions about sexual orientation.

"I don't see gay and lesbian issues as a controversial issue," said Smith, who serves as chairman of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network's Oregon chapter. "Are black students controversial? Are Hispanic students controversial?"

Smith put up the district-approved sign three years ago after attending a sensitivity training aimed at helping queer youth stay in school and, ultimately, reducing teen suicide. Because he teaches about half of the students at Conestoga, he estimates 1,000 kids see the poster annually.

But when one parent complained to district officials that the sign "promoted homosexuality," they asked Smith to take it down and later banned all classroom displays that aren't directly related to the material taught there. He refused and threatened to file a grievance.

"It's an information poster," he said. "It is not promotional whatsoever. It does not recruit."

When the district formed a committee to create a replacement sign that would satisfy everybody, Smith attended one of the meetings. He was shocked to learn that administrators had been targeting queer instructors.

"We found out that throughout the district...the only people that were asked to take down the poster were those teachers who were openly gay or lesbian," he said. "This is obviously discrimination."

The Beaverton Teachers Union has asked administrators to rescind the poster policy because it was made without the input of instructors and infringes on academic freedom. To illustrate his point, Smith cited a music teacher who put up a sign about respect.

"Well now that has nothing to do with music, so should she have to take that down?" he said. "I have posters of a variety of icons—theater people, music artists—and some of them have probably not had the best valued moral lives in the whole world. Does that mean that

we negate what they've done? Do those posters have to come down? It just opens up a whole can of worms."

Smith remains hopeful despite the contentious environment, noting that schools are much more accepting than they were when he was a student. Still, he added, 90 percent of teachers have had no training on gay and lesbian issues, so this type of information is crucial for queer kids.

"Truly it's a civil rights issue. I have a right to put up in my classroom whatever I want that I think is of educational value to my students," Smith said. "How do you expect kids to feel safe in a school when gay and lesbian teachers and administrators don't feel safe?"

MATTHEW NELSON LEAVES FOUNDATION

Matthew Nelson, a longtime leader in Portland's sexual minorities community, will step down Feb. 25 as executive director of Equity Foundation, a nonprofit that awards grants to charities serving queers and allies in Oregon.

He recently accepted a position working for American Express' Philanthropy and Community Relations division in Minneapolis. His partner, Kip Beardsley, already works in Minnesota as the state's HIV/AIDS director.

"I've been in Portland for 15 years and been connected to Equity for 12 of those years," Nelson told *Just Out*, "first as a donor, then with their workplace giving, and then on the board" before becoming executive director in 2000. He proudly shared the biggest accomplishments of his tenure:

- **Investments in Dignity Awards:** Last year's inaugural event featured lesbian comic Lily Tomlin and drew a large audience of heterosexual corporate execs. "I love the fact that we had...all these CEOs hearing about how Equity impacts the queer community and having them hear those words 'lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender,'" Nelson said.

- **Grants:** Under Nelson's watch Equity began supporting Pride festivals in Portland, Salem, Eugene, Coos Bay and Ashland as well as an annual event in Bend; created the Lane County Fund, in which the foundation matches every dollar raised; and launched the Safe Schools Initiative, which conducted nationwide research to fight discrimination against queer students.



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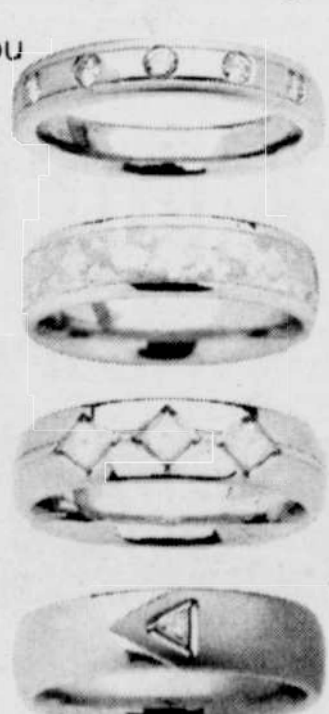



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