

northwest

Too Hot for Middle School

Play about bullying banned from Sherwood; drama teacher under investigation

by Jaymee R. Cuti

Sherwood Middle School drama teacher Jennie Brown received e-mails of support from parents, students and teachers across the country when her play, *Higher Ground*, was banned.

But many of those e-mails didn't reach Brown. Without explanation or warning, the administration changed her e-mail address, opened an investigation on the teacher and canceled the play. Brown continues to teach at Sherwood but has not yet been told what she is being investigated for.

"As far as I know, it's because I wrote a play," said Brown.

The show—an exploration of the scalding adolescent social scene—was deemed too mature for the school, where Brown has taught for two years and has been a district employee for eight. She has sought legal representation through the Oregon Educational Association during the investigation.

Brown says she's never clashed with the district before, but *Higher Ground's* gay content caught the eye of some parents, who sent three letters to her and principal Anna Pittioni objecting to the play's portrayal of the "homosexual lifestyle."

Pittioni did not return *Just Out's* calls seeking comment, but she told *The Oregonian* that the play was banned because its "content exceeds the maturity of many of our students."

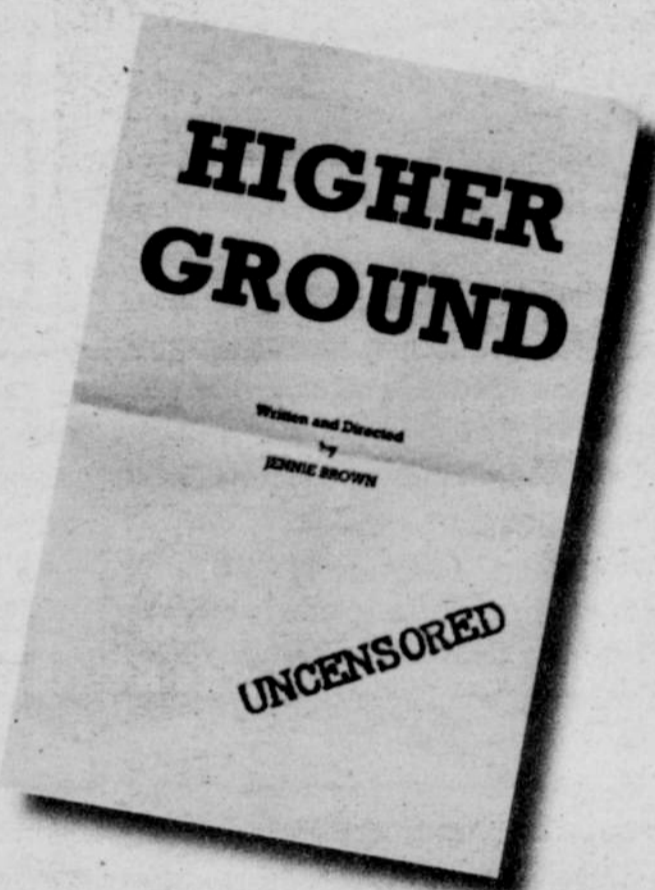
Irate, confused and frustrated, Sarah Grant, a parent volunteer whose son, Freddie, was set to perform the role of a bully who finds his conscience and voice through the course of the two-hour production, confronted Pittioni.

"I asked her if the primary reason for considering the content too mature was the homosexual theme, and she said she had several concerns but if that theme remained in the play, she's afraid it appeared that Sherwood Middle School endorsed that lifestyle," said Grant. "I was horrified. It worries me that by trying to prevent this play from offending people, she was defending bigotry."

Higher Ground is the story of a boy whose perceived sexual orientation makes him the target of bullying by his immature classmates. The plot touches upon bullying toward all sorts of deviations from the norm—a Latina student, a group of Goths who refuse to conform to the Abercrombie set, a round-cheeked girl who is called "cow" and several other stereotypes familiar to all survivors of middle school. The play contains no vulgar language, no sexual situations and no gay characters.

"The message was that kids have power in numbers and don't have to be afraid to stand up for each other and that words they use can be incredibly hurtful," said Brown.

Kathryn Martini, a lesbian parent of three students in the Sherwood School District, contacted Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays and Oregon Safe Schools and Communities Coalition, which sent representatives to a school



Sherwood Middle School students performed the uncensored version of their banned play, *A Higher Ground*, at Portland Center for the Performing Arts.

district board meeting March 5.

"This is a serious issue, not only for the school and the kids but for this community," said Martini. "Not every Sherwood resident is white, Republican, Christian and straight, and those people who aren't deserve the same acceptance and respect as anyone else."

Joyce Clow, a Portland PFLAG board member who spoke at the meeting, offered resources for teachers and counselors on how to create and maintain an environment safe for all families, teachers and queer or questioning youth. She said she is in contact with the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network and would like to help Sherwood Middle School start a Gay Straight Alliance. Martini has volunteered to be the group's parent representative.

Banned at Sherwood, *Higher Ground* was rescued by Portland Center for the Performing Arts assistant executive director Lori Kramer. The show enjoyed two sold-out performances March 9 and 22 at Brunish Hall downtown.

"We felt it was worthy of getting an audience, and the kids really needed to be able to perform it after all that hard work," said Kramer, whose grandson is a middle schooler. "I believe it was very age-appropriate. It was a tame version of what kids deal with every day in middle school."

Brown agreed. "I think people need to pay closer attention to what kids are doing and give them credit for being savvy."

Despite the overwhelming response to the performance of *Higher Ground*, Brown said the play would no longer be performed by the Sherwood Middle School cast. She said other districts have expressed interest in the script, though, so the show may yet go on. 10

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