

northwest

Standing Her Ground

Teacher sacrifices job for gay-themed play

by Jaymee R. Cuti

Students who returned to Sherwood Middle School in the fall encountered one noticeable absence: Drama teacher Jennie Brown did not return from the leave she took in March.

Brown, who was embroiled in controversy last spring because of the gay content in her banned play, *Higher Ground*, says she left the school after suffering months "under the microscope." The show—an exploration of the scalding adolescent social scene—was deemed too mature for students at Sherwood Middle School, where Brown taught for two years and had been a district employee for eight.

The gay-themed play caught the eye of some parents, who sent three letters to Brown and principal Anna Pittioni objecting to its portrayal of the "homosexual lifestyle."

Higher Ground is actually a play about bullying. The main character becomes the target of bullies because of his perceived sexual orientation. The play contains no vulgar language, no sexual situations and no gay characters.

Pittioni, who did not return calls to *Just Out* in March or this month, canceled the performance three days before opening night.

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 play, confronted Pittioni.

"She said if that theme remained in the play, she's afraid it appeared that Sherwood Middle School endorsed that lifestyle," Grant told *Just Out* in March. "I was horrified. It worries me that by trying to prevent this play from offending people, she was defending bigotry."

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

But trouble did not end for Brown at curtain call. "It got to be so uncomfortable working there. Everything I did was under the microscope. There were surprise observations by administrators and other teachers, which is not contractually allowed," said Brown, who says she began suffering from panic attacks and was on the verge of a nervous breakdown before taking the leave of absence.

The Sherwood Middle School principal and district superintendent opened an investigation on Brown. She and her union representative and attorney sat through approximately 10 hours of meetings with the administration, who scrutinized her e-mails and time logged onto her computer.

"I was being investigated because I wrote a play," Brown says. "The other stuff they drummed up was just BS."

The investigation was dropped, and Brown was formally reprimanded in June for using e-mail too

much at work, conspiring with community members after her play was banned and violating a student's privacy. According to Brown, the district contacted the parents of the student, informing them that their son was depicted as a bully in the play.

"It pissed me off that this kid got a phone call saying, 'A teacher you trusted betrayed you,'" said Brown, who denies all charges.

During the controversy, par-

ents of student actors contacted the Oregon Safe Schools and Communities Coalition and Portland Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, which sent representatives to a school board meeting March 5.

Several students have since expressed interest in creating a Gay Straight Alliance at the school and plan to attend a workshop teaching students how to build support for GSAs among school boards and administrations at this month's the Oregon Safe Schools Training.

Brown, meanwhile, remains unemployed.

"I'm writing a lot," she said. "I'm looking for something that will incorporate all my passions. I love every aspect of theater from the costumes, sets, props, writing the material, directing the plays and coaching the kids."

Despite the drama, Brown says her play was worth the fight.

"Speaking with school counselors, they say [gay-baiting] is the No. 1 tool kids use to harass other kids," she said. "Certainly there are gay students at Sherwood Middle School, and I want them to know they are acknowledged, embraced and supported." ☐

The seventh annual OREGON SAFE SCHOOLS TRAINING takes place Oct. 24 and 25 at Portland State University's Smith Center, 1825 S.W. Broadway. For more information visit www.oregonsafeschools.org.



Sherwood Middle School teacher Jennie Brown left her job because of alleged harassment by the administration after writing a gay-themed play.

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