

Don't be a bully, from Oregon's 2014 Teacher of the Year

Brett Bigham is Oregon's Teacher of the Year for 2014. This is the latest in a series of columns on marriage equality in Oregon

BY BRETT BIGHAM
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

When I was 15, my best friend killed himself. He was gay. Jack probably felt alone. He was not. In Oregon, one out of five gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender teenagers have attempted suicide in the last year, according to the Oregon Safe Schools and Communities Coalition's 2013 report. Over 30 percent of teens that commit suicide are gay — but those are the ones who have said they are gay. I think the figure is closer to 50 percent of teens who kill themselves are gay.

Jack had heard over and over again, from many different people, that he was not okay. And like many gay teens, myself included, he started to believe it. It is hard to accept and love yourself at any age. It is especially hard when you're a teenager.

Today's teens are no different. They are still children. They believe what others say about them, especially authority figures like teachers and lawmakers. Every time we have a discussion or hear a television debate about whether gay people deserve equality, it puts their identities on the line, creating a pressure they don't deserve, emboldening bullies who attack them. Legislators and anti-gay groups do the same thing when they push for discriminatory policies.

That's why I'm particularly concerned

about the latest discrimination measure being promoted by anti-gay activists. The initiative would allow businesses to deny commercial services to people because of who they are and whom they love. Treating people differently because of who they are is discrimination, and discrimination measures like this one have no place in Oregon.

I remember how it felt to get bullied for my sexuality. I remember not knowing how to fight back or stand up for myself. Now that I'm older and more comfortable in my skin, I realize young people are still being bullied because of who they are. By being who I am, I am sending a message, and that message is you can be anything you want. You can work hard and be part of society, and somehow, somewhere you're going to find the will to stand up for yourself if you need to. Or if you're lucky enough to be a person like me, you get to speak up for other people.

In this country, we raise our kids telling them you grow up, you fall in love and you get married. We teach that to every child. And it is damaging to a gay person's self-identity to reach the age that you fall in love, but you're not allowed to fulfill that dream that every child is raised with. I don't feel it's right to deny something that we teach children is normal and necessary.

As Oregon's 2014 Teacher of the Year, I speak up for kids. But I also speak up for their parents. The gay and lesbian parents I see are loving and devoted. We have a lot of kids who are raised in foster care, where everyone in your life is basically paid to be with you. We also have kids raised in gay and lesbian households, full of love. Nobody should be putting limits on that. They should just be grateful these children have loving homes where they can thrive.

In the early 20th century, the Oregon legislature passed a bill that people could be castrated for gay behavior. Since then, we've seen a huge shift. More and more Oregonians understand that love isn't something that should be decided at the ballot box. I want the freedom to marry in Oregon. I want to get married in my own home. I shouldn't have to go to the Holiday Inn in Vancouver to marry my partner of seven years. Neither should my students when they grow up.

To me, it's simple. Gay people pay taxes, vote, serve in the military and pay into the same system as everyone else. They shouldn't be singled out for unfair treatment. No one should be told it is illegal to marry the person they love, and no one should be turned away from a business because of who they are. Freedom means freedom for everyone.



... to the
health care you
know and trust.

Working in partnership with providers, community health centers and social service agencies to serve people on the Oregon Health Plan, Health Share is building a more accessible and coordinated care system throughout the Tri County area.

503-416-8090 | www.healthshareoregon.org

Together we are
health share
Health Share of Oregon

Dad

by Mike Vance

Now more at peace with grudges and judgement,
And feeling new wisdom within me,
We started a conversation in his truck.
I felt good about being alive and about visiting with him.
(The Greyhound to Tacoma had been full of questions
about how it would be.)
I had a lump in my throat.
(When I was younger there was always an uncomfortable silence
between us that was next to impossible to break. Too much tension.)
In the truck, on our way to his place, he opened up to me.
He fascinated me with stories about things he did as a policeman.
He talked about blackwater commercial diving
and all the dangers that go along with it.
He even talked a bit about being in Vietnam in the Navy.
And all the nightmares.
For the first time in forever, I felt like a little child again!
I didn't feel like a lost bastard or a step-kid anymore.
We spent 4 days in pleasant company.
It was almost as if the divorce had never happened
And like there had never been heartache and confusion or regret.
We didn't have to get drunk to loosen up and talk.
We rehashed some of the painful past
And we actually were able to laugh
About a lot of things that would have previously made me feel
suicidal and homicidal.
I never thought that the day would come.
When Dad and I could spend more than just a couple of disgruntled hours together
On a rare occasion before he would have to head back down the highway.
I never expected for us to be able to laugh and relax about things,
To accept each other.
So, in closing, if you have a Dad that is still among the living,
Take the risk of letting things go.
You only get one Dad and one life.
Peace.



**VOODOO
DOUGHNUT**

THE MAGIC IS IN THE HOLE!

22 SW 3RD
& BURNSIDE
1501 NE DAVIS

OPEN
24/7!

SUPPORTING STREET
ROOTS SINCE 2003

Vendors are regular contributors to Street Roots' content, as columnists, poets and artists.
Look for your favorite vendor's writings in each edition of the paper.