

And They Are There

by Lionel Lumb

Education about diversity should start at the beginning of a child's school life, Bill Ryan tells teachers at a workshop in Ottawa on sexual minority issues. "We're talking about social diversity and respect for difference, and to reflect what society really is ... ultimately it's the duty of educators to make schools safe and eliminate oppression, because oppression impedes learning," the McGill University professor, social worker and adult educator said in a presentation at last November's Canadian Teachers' Federation "Building Inclusive Schools" conference.

Ryan, who titles his dose of reality *And They Are There*, says "There are hundreds of thousands of GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender) youth in all of our schools, in all of our communities no matter how small. They're in our elementary schools learning horrible things about themselves in the schoolyard which will affect their ability when they get to be adolescents." To illustrate that impact, he displays a half-dozen e-mail messages: "I really need help ... I am afraid to go to the school cafeteria, some guys say they are going to do all kinds of things to me ... I want to run away, or kill myself ... I am depressed, and sometimes I wish I was dead. Everything is very mixed up in my head ... It is hell."

"It is hell" is the phrase that comes back more than any other. And Ryan emphasizes he is not just picking the most distraught responses from youth reaching out for help. Youth who "erase" themselves in shame withdraw into isolation, lack confidence, develop low self-esteem and drop out of school at higher rates than heterosexual students.

A survey of 200 troubled youth in the Safe Spaces project, prepared for the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, reveals the gravity of the situation: 75% of those surveyed contemplated suicide, and 44% actually attempted suicide at least once. Those who get through the bad years offer hope: "I



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am 15, and came out seven months ago. I thank God that I am still alive ... Because I thought a lot about killing myself ... It is not easy but we can't give up."

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Ryan relates a couple of evocative examples of why it's important not to give up. A distressed student who complained "there is no one here to help us" gave Ryan permission to contact his school. He called and talked to the school social worker, "who responded in exactly the way you'd want - she was aghast and asked, 'What can we do?'" So Ryan called the student back, told him he was wrong, and that there was someone at the school who could help. In fact, the social worker set up a Professional Development day, and followed up with sessions involving all 2,000 students.

Another time Ryan was invited to address a PD day for 800 teachers in St. John, New Brunswick. He asked a local youth group if they could send along someone to relate their actual experiences to the teachers. A young man who'd graduated two

years earlier told the teachers how he couldn't pass a school toilet without feeling the urge to throw up. That's because for the first year at high school his tormentors had time and again stuck his head in a toilet. The only person who helped was the janitor, who allowed the student to hide in his windowless broom closet during free periods and the lunch break. Ryan says: "You can't assume you know where humanity is going to come from. It's very important to access the humanity of students. We forget sometimes that the vast majority of students have a well-honed sense of justice ... much better than ours was at that age and much better than our parents' was at that age."

In fact, parents all too often are part of the problem. "Young people in the Safe Spaces study tell us the worst things they hear are not in the schoolyard – and it's pretty bad in the schoolyard – the worst things they hear are around their dining room table." How, Ryan asks, do you look for support to your dad when he's voiced opinions like this: "If one of my sons was a faggot I'd kill him." That attitude drives troubled youth into isolation and secrecy.

Even teachers for the most part, with some notable exceptions, feel they have to hide their own sexuality from students and in effect become anti-role models, because what they're saying is, "You've got to be ashamed of this and you've got to hide."

On the positive side, Ryan adds, "A school where teachers aren't afraid to reveal their own sexuality, and where *they* feel safe from discrimination, is more likely to improve the lives of its students." But there's also a down-side: "The school environment is probably the milieu that *least* respects the legal changes of the last 30 years ... Over the past few decades we've seen an almost dizzying number of court decisions and challenges. The courts have said that, along with Aboriginal issues, sexual minority rights are *the* human rights issue in this country."

He acknowledges some steps in the right direction, such as the work of CTF and its teacher organization members. Initiatives at schools include gay-straight alliances to work

on issues of oppression. Ryan favours an integrated approach, such as Youth Against Discrimination in Amherst, Nova Scotia. "What they do is work on discrimination in all its forms. You can go in under any identity and help make school safer for everybody – including people who suffer from racism, or homophobia, or discrimination based on disability." Such a model brings more people into the fold. It also recognizes that racism, sexism, and homophobia all come from the same place and can be worked on together more effectively than by tackling each separately.

"It's important to remember that after the difficult years, most GLBT youth emerge as satisfied with their lives as other adult Canadians ... We have to give them hope that they can get through it, and we have to help them get through it, and give that same hope to their parents as well."

The Canadian Teachers' Federation has produced three publications to assist teachers in dealing with GLBT and heterosexual issues, and to make schools safer places for all students, staff and parents:

- *Gay-Straight Student Alliance Handbook* (2006) (authored by Kristopher Wells)
- *Lessons Learned* (2005)
- *Seeing the Rainbow* (2002) (co-published with the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario)

These publications can be ordered through the CTF website at www.ctf-fce.ca.

Other helpful websites:

- www.rainbowhealth.ca
- www.alterheros.com
- www.egale.ca
- www.galebc.org

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