

Gay Activism In The Schools

No Name Calling Week?

By Warren Throckmorton, Ph.D.

"There is a special place in hell for people like you!"

These words were directed at me by a teacher during this past summer's National Education Association convention in Washington, D.C. This delegate to the NEA convention made his prediction in response to my presence at the NEA's Ex-Gay Educator's Caucus booth in the convention exhibit hall. His cheery salutation caught me off-guard given the message of tolerance and acceptance I had been hearing around the exhibit hall. This teacher disagreed with my views of sexual orientation and made sure I knew it.

I thought of this encounter as I perused the list of organizations that have teamed up to bring us "No Name Calling Week" during the week of January 24-28, 2005. Based on a fiction book called *The Misfits* by James Howe, the purported purpose of NNCW is to raise awareness among school children of how destructive name calling can be. I noted that the NEA was one of the co-sponsors of the week. I had to chuckle as I wondered if this event would be observed at this delegate's school. While the NEA delegate did not technically call me a naughty name, I don't think he meant his prediction of a special place as a random act of kindness.

Another sponsoring group is the Gay Lesbian and Straight Educators Network. In fact, the president of this group, Kevin Jennings, is also a national spokesperson for the NNCW. Curious, I have read that Mr. Jennings knows how to call a name or two. In fact, several years ago, he used language in a speech to supporters that might have gotten him expelled from many schools. In the speech, Mr. Jennings was audio taped discussing his feelings about those he labeled, "the religious right." Concerning those who disagreed with him, Mr. Jennings told the audience:

"We have to quit being afraid of the religious right. We also have to quit — ... I'm trying to find a way to say this. I'm trying not to say, '[F---] 'em! which is what I want to say, because I don't care what they think! Drop dead!' (Speech at Marble Collegiate Church, New York City, March 20, 2000).

Mr. Jennings and GLSEN have been called upon by numerous school districts to provide in service training concerning sexual orientation. Perhaps the NEA delegate who talked about my "special place in hell" attended one of those training meetings.

GLSEN's news releases are filled with words like "bigot" and "hateful" and "homophobic" describing people who disagree with them. Hence I am surprised at the choice of Mr. Jennings as a national spokesperson for the NNCW.

Mr. Jennings and GLSEN tirelessly inform us that many students are bullied and verbally attacked at school based on perceived homosexuality. Of course, all such name calling is wrong and schools should insist on a safe environment for all students. However, it does not seem an improvement when the response to name calling is more name calling.

The irony of all of this is that the main purpose of NNCW does not seem to be ending name calling. It is about telling the story of Joe, the "gay character" in *The Misfits*, the book from which NNCW is derived. According to author James Howe, who is gay, he wanted the *Misfits* to put a more positive slant on being gay in middle school.

Thus, ideology is the real issue here and not name calling.

In an interview with author Howe, published on childrenslit.com, he says concerning Joe: "I wanted him to be a kid who sees himself as cool, who sees nothing wrong with being attracted to the boy who sits next to him in art class as opposed to the girl on the other side of him. He understands, as do the other "misfits" in this story, that the problem isn't with himself, it's with the attitudes and ignorance of others."

Mr. Howe's representation of Joe is not simply an incidental device to encourage civility to those who seem different in some way. Rather, it is a clear bid to change beliefs. Mr. Howe wants kids everywhere to come away from this

book seeing “nothing wrong” with homosexuality. In actuality, Joe is not a misfit, he is a teacher, making sure those who disapprove of him get the message that they are plagued with incorrect “attitudes and ignorance.”

Now I know why GLSEN is involved with this event.

It appears that NNCW may be another effort on the part of GLSEN and other event organizers to tell those who object to homosexuality on religious or philosophical grounds to “drop dead.”

Adults: want to end bullying and harassment in the schools? Don't call names, don't pit groups against each other, enact anti-harassment policies covering all students and then enforce them. Oh, and do this year round, not just during NNCW.

No Name Calling Week Revisited

Recently I wrote a column criticizing an event known as “No Name Calling Week.” NNCW is an event created by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Educators Network to address name calling and gay public policy objectives all at once. Since the publication of the column, an Associated Press story on the event by David Crary quoting my objections has been widely circulated. As I write this column, we are in the midst of the NNCW in many middle schools. However, many of those who have responded to my thoughts apparently are not celebrating NNCW. I think they must have things confused. They must think this week is “Call People You Disagree With As Many Names As You Can Include In An Email Week.” A short hand for this alternative observance might be: “Call Throckmorton A Nazi Week.”

No matter, I have thick skin. I won't react with cries of Throckophobia or some other slur. But I think I will give this another try.

It may surprise some that I originally considered endorsing NNCW when I first learned about it last school year. Furthermore, I have spoken in schools and youth groups against name calling and harassment and believe it or not, specifically speaking against the use of the insult “fag” and derogatory use of the term “gay.”

However, after I explored the NNCW website and read *The Misfits*, the book on which the week is based, I decided against an endorsement. Essentially, I decided that this intervention served ideological ends much more so than educational ones. Moreover and perhaps more importantly, I believe this intervention is likely to hamper efforts that could be much more effective.

The ideological purpose is to change beliefs about homosexuality. The author of *The Misfits*, James Howe made this end clear when he said in a *childrenslit.com* interview con-

cerning Joe, a gay 7th grader featured in the book: “I wanted him to be a kid who sees himself as cool, who sees nothing wrong with being attracted to the boy who sits next to him in art class as opposed to the girl on the other side of him. He understands, as do the other ‘misfits’ in this story, that the problem isn't with himself, it's with the attitudes and ignorance of others.” If you disagree, you're ignorant. Indeed, the book depicts a we-they mentality that does not seem to be about tolerance but as the author said, is rather about exposing “ignorance.”

Associating an attempt to change beliefs with an anti-name calling campaign reveals an interesting but I submit fallacious assumption.

Let me frame this assumption via two questions. Do bullies harass gay kids primarily because bullies believe homosexuality is wrong? If we convince everybody that homosexuality is of no moral or practical consequence, then will the bullying cease? The basic premise of school based efforts to change beliefs concerning homosexuality is that bad beliefs are the primary causes of maltreatment of kids who identify as gay. So, the thinking goes, if schools get students to see the GLSEN light then all the bullying will stop. I believe this approach is misguided and insulting to those who have traditional views of sexuality.

My research suggests that beliefs about homosexuality have no necessary relationship with the likelihood that young people will harass those who appear to be or identify as gay. So attempting to “re-educate” students concerning homosexuality may confuse and stigmatize traditional teachers, parents and kids, but it will do little if anything to prevent bullies from finding kids who appear weak and vulnerable. Do we really think that the reason bullies attack kids with large ears or smart kids or obese kids is because bullies believe the wrong things about ear size, intelligence or obesity?

Remarkably, research has shown that many people who harass gays do not have negative beliefs toward homosexuality. Of course some bullies do have such attitudes, but for the most part, bullies bully because they can. Kids who harass other kids are primarily looking for a weak link in the social chain. Thus, NNCW may change the beliefs of some toward homosexuality but this alone will not prevent bullying.

Amazingly, the prime sponsor of the NNCW and similar events such as the Day of Silence, GLSEN, is aware that there is no evidence that such efforts work. I have asked GLSEN for the research backing for these belief change programs and they have had the integrity to admit that there is none.

The prime problem with NNCW is that the effort to change the beliefs of the masses moves the focus away from where research shows it should be – on the perpetrator. Victims

need assistance and support to be sure but the key to solve the harassment problem in schools is to intervene with the bully.

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The Harassment Problem in Schools is to Intervene with the Bully

As a result of the harassment problem in schools, many students are unable to focus on their studies and are often absent from school. The harassment problem in schools is to intervene with the bully.

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