

Interview with a Parents' Rights Activist

by Joseph Nicolosi, Ph.D.

In cooperation with gay groups such as GLSEN and GLAAD, the state of Massachusetts has recently instituted a broad range of gay-affirming Health and Human Sexuality programs. Some of these programs have caught the attention of parents, who are disturbed at the programs' one-sided approach, and also their tendency to override the values of many families. Here, NARTH interviews Massachusetts parent-activist Brian Camenker.

JN: Tell us, Brian, what is the Parents' Rights Coalition? And what motivated you to get started?

BC: It's an organization focusing mainly on the gay-affirming and sex-education programs in the state of Massachusetts.

JN: You're a parent, yourself with two children in the public school system in that state. What problems did you see in those programs?

BC: In my hometown of Newton in 1992, a group of parents became very concerned about the homosexual agenda and the general approach to sexuality being introduced into the community schools by those programs.

When we first went to the local school committee to discuss our concerns, we were rebuffed. They called us some very unflattering names, and said that the community should avoid people like me because I was a Christian fundamentalist. *Even though I'm Jewish!* We basically got nowhere. Then the newspapers contacted me.

Later that year the Catholic Archbishop of Boston called a meeting of intellectuals, academics, and others from different ethnic backgrounds and religious faiths to talk about the issues troubling them in our culture. One of those issues of concern was Massachusetts' new sex-education programs. This group became The Interfaith Coalition of Massachusetts, and I was elected chairman.

JN: And where did you go from there?

BC: The first thing we wanted to do was create the "Parents' Rights Bill," which we wrote and presented to the State Legislature. Essentially, it said that parents have to be told when their children are being put into these courses. They should have the option to remove their kids if they wished; schools could not take retribu-

tion on the kids that had opted out; and parents had the right to see the course material.

Over a period of time, The Interfaith Coalition became the Parents' Rights Coalition. In short order our work began to generate a lot of controversy, and then a lot of the clergy involved didn't want to take the heat, and they stepped back.

What was left of our group then solidified, and it became less of a group of academics and community leaders, and more of a group of thousands of parents.

JN: It seems that many religious leaders tend to avoid conflict, doesn't it?

BC: Oh, yes, there was a great reticence about controversy. Eventually we had to forget about the religious leaders and rely on the parents instead. They were the ones who carried us through.

What happened next, was that we presented this bill in the State Legislature. It got tremendous hostility from the Teachers' Unions and the homosexual groups. Tremendous, tremendous hostility. However, we battled on, we got thousands of parents involved, and it took a couple of years—but we got it passed by both Houses, and then signed into law by Governor Bill Weld.

Now during that process, unfortunately it got watered down a lot, but still, it was a great victory for us and a great defeat for them because they put a tremendous amount of effort into killing it.

JN: How did you keep the bill alive?

BC: One of the interesting things was when it came down to the very last afternoon of the legislative session, we were outside the chambers of the House of Representatives, and the activists had a dozen of their key lobbyists there. They were polling every single member of the legislature as they came in and went out, as to how they were going to vote. In that same room, we had 120 parents! These activists were very upset because for the first time, they were being challenged.

These concerned mothers, some had come in 100 miles from Worcester, saying to the legislators, "Why won't you let us have these rights, why are you doing this to

our children?" And the legislators had no answers.

JN: They weren't expecting such resistance.

BC: They're used to being the intimidators. They're used to holding the moral high ground against people they had been painting as bad guys, and they were in shock at who they actually had to answer to. They had to answer to a group of dedicated mothers.

JN: So much of the success of the gay agenda has always been because the victims take the moral high ground. The fact they tend to blur, is that while gay-bashing is morally objectionable to everyone, people are entitled to voice legitimate, *principled objection*. There are some *reasonable distinctions* to be made between homosexuality and heterosexuality, and that of course is not "hatred" of a group of people.

BC: Indeed it is not. But the Legislature did not want to pass this bill, so we essentially had to show them that we had the support to get it through, and now it is state law.

Since then, we've had some other minor victories too. In my own situation with my then 11-year-old daughter in the sixth grade, she was put in a Health course whose goal, among other things, was to help each child understand his race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. This was a course they had in place for an 11-year-old.

The principal would not let me take her out. He said the Massachusetts court curriculum guidelines required Health, and so I presented all of this to the State Board of Education.

A few months later, the state Board of Education removed Health from the curriculum guidelines.

But that victory stirred up a new controversy. Making my experience as an example of what's wrong in Massachusetts, *The Boston Globe* was livid, and they published a story that was very unflattering about me.

But the controversy settled down again because parents and a lot of other people got involved. What I've found is that's what it takes—parents getting involved.

JN: Why is it so hard to mobilize parents?

BC: The other side is tremendously well organized, but mostly, parents have their own lives to live and don't have the time to get involved in activism to defend the issues that are important to them. On the other hand, our opposition on this issue can invest a great deal of time, energy and passion in what they believe in.

Also, many people are simply unaware of what is happening. When we show them these school curriculums, they don't believe us.

I have a close friend, an older guy who was interned in Nazi concentration camps in World War II. He was a Holocaust survivor, and he "gets it"...he understands the problem of denial and how it can paralyze a whole society. When people don't believe something is actually going on, they go about their lives as if nothing is happening.

So because people can't imagine it is that extreme, we've very carefully documented all of what we talk about.

In fact, we had an article about us in the *National Review*, in September 1995, that documented a lot of this. We still get calls from that article.

JN: Where can people reach you?

BC: Our address is The Parents Rights Coalition, P.O. Box 541612 Newton, MA 02454. We have a voice mail at (781) 890-6001 or office@parentsrightscoalition.org. We finally were able to get an office with an Executive Director—we've been able to raise enough money from concerned citizens to establish ourselves.

Our tape has been heard by thousands of people by now. In fact when the Speaker of the Massachusetts House of Representatives heard it, he called me into his office while the House was in session to talk about his concerns about the school system. But that time, the lawmakers didn't have the guts to follow through and actually do something.

JN: They were intimidated.

BC: They didn't want to offend anyone. So our job in this next year is to make them more afraid of the voters than they are of the gay agenda. What I think is their Achilles' heel, is the recovery movement.

JN: Absolutely.

BC: That is their Achilles' heel, and that's what we have to nurture in Massachusetts.

JN: Where do you plan to go from here?

BC: What our latest objective is to de-fund the million and half dollars that Republican Governor Celucci gives every year to the Gay /Straight Alliance *out of the state budget*. We think that should be a private enterprise, like our group—not a cause promoted by tax dollars. As our audiotape reveals, this group has been incredibly destructive in the public schools.

Another thing we've done is to document the educational abuses we talk about. I can cite the location of every one I've mentioned—"chapter and verse."

Another thing we did here in Newton is to support candidates for the school committee. Recently we almost won several seats, so the school committee is worried about us.

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JN: What do they say about your tape?

BC: One of the committee members called me up and we went to lunch this past Friday. I pulled out documentation of all of these things that are going on in the public schools. She didn't believe what I'd said—until I showed her the papers and school handouts.

JN: What is your strategy in approaching the schools?

BC: We used to just say to the school committees, "We hope that this is something you won't do, because of this-and-that reason." But we've changed. You need to confront these people directly.

Our stand now is, "You do not have the right or the authority to do this to our children." That is a different perspective that takes them a little off-guard, and it is much more effective. Because in these programs, nobody is standing up and admitting to the kids, "This is a self-destructive lifestyle that could kill you."

Someone who believes in what we're doing once came here and spoke to a Parents' Rights gathering. At first he was arguing whether or not these programs that support kids in getting into a gay lifestyle are a civil right or not. I believe that when you argue on that level, you've lost. I believe you have to get right to the heart of it, right to the behavior, right to what a gay lifestyle really is...the whole way it tears apart your soul.

One of the reasons that I feel more comfortable than others in discussing this is that in my own life I've had many close friends who are homosexual. I've seen a close-up what this does to them...the inner turmoil they're going through.

I may not be a psychologist, but I can see very clearly—I'd say, intuitively—that homosexuality has got to be a symptom of something deeper going on in the individual.

JN: I agree. It's about a deep desire to be acceptable within the company of members of one's own sex, and to experience their affirmation, attention and affection. Homosexuality is not, fundamentally, about sex. It's a search for identity and a sense of belonging.

BC: Yes, that's exactly how I see it. They take these fragile, confused kids and say to them: "Well, you may feel unsure of who you are, but from what you've told us, we've decided that what you really are is homosexual, so come on downtown and meet these other guys."

The superintendent of the schools at Newton actually had a public meeting, where he introduced a 16-year-old who talked about his love for men. The superintendent was

proud of this! This is how the schools' Gay/Straight Alliances are helping kids.

George Orwell once said that "There's no idea so bizarre that it will not be accepted by an intellectual." It seems that the smarter people are, the more willing they are to accept nonsense that simply contradicts common sense.

I live in Newton, which has several Nobel Prize winners, and...

JN: ...And I bet they're all paralyzed when it comes to thinking clearly and decisively about these issues.

BC: You're right.

JN: Because the intellectual says, "Well, I don't know...maybe it's true, who can say, who can judge? Maybe that's *his* truth, even if it's not *my* truth." When you talk about something that you passionately believe to be true, and offer reasonable arguments, their eyes just glaze over.

In fact—I still laugh when I remember this—*The New York Times* ran an article in 1998 called "Analysts Get Together for a Synthesis." It was a report on a psychoanalytic conference at Mt. Sinai Hospital in Manhattan.

Analysts now tend to avoid the attempt to get to the truth in their patients' histories—"abandoning certainty in favor of a reasonable myth the patient can believe in."

"The discussion of true versus false is a false issue," one analyst said. Another conceded, "We're all anxious to show what we don't know."

"During the meeting," said *The Times*, "only a few analysts claimed to know anything."

BC: Yet they all believe that homosexuality is normal and healthy, and a gay lifestyle is good. That, they seem to have no doubt about.

The root of this problem—and so many other people around me find to be true also—is that when you give up believing in a transcendent moral order reflected in human nature, with laws that mankind cannot change by popular vote, then anything's possible. *Anything at all is possible* when you say there is no objective truth. That's a big problem, particularly among intellectuals, who are much smarter than God.

One of the things for which I've looked to NARTH, is help in getting the scientific facts together. I really enjoyed a book by one of your Scientific Advisory Board members,

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Jeffrey Satinover. His *Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth* has been very important to us. I also liked both of Scott Lively's books...very good. That's what I find is very powerful—when you confront people with the truth.

JN: People who in their gut feel there's something not quite right about homosexuality. That's what I call "natural homophobia." I'm not talking about the kind of homophobia that leads to gay-bashing or scapegoating...we all know, without question, that's wrong. I'm talking about the gut feeling people have that there is something not really quite normal about two men or two women falling in love.

The average person just *knows* there is something missing there. There is—as a very prominent member of the American Psychiatric Association, Dr. Robert Spitzer, recently admitted—something that is just "not working."

But when the layman thinks this way, he is hit with so-called scientific information that disproves his intuition about homosexuality, and then he feels guilty and embarrassed about having had that intuition. The gay movement says that his idea is the same as racial hatred—a feeling all of us know is reprehensible. So at that point, the average person just throws up his hands. After all, if science is against him, then his feelings must represent nothing more than ignorance and prejudice.

But the fact is, science *supports* his gut reaction.

BC: And NARTH is clarifying that for us—that there's scientific information on the other side of this issue.

JN: I'm glad we've been able to get the information out there.

BC: By the way, I've discovered that when I deal with the media, it's actually better to say it exactly as it is; don't sugar-coat it.

I had an interesting situation on WGBH-TV, the public television center in Boston. They had me there on a talk show last year. I was on on Emily Rooney's show—she's Andy Rooney's daughter—along with a woman who's the head of New England Gay and Lesbian Advocacy.

Emily Rooney's first question was, "Well Mr. Camenker, what is it about homosexuality that seems to bother you so much?"

And I said, "Well Emily, for one thing it's a public-health problem. A lifetime of anal sex does not do great things for the body."

Nobody had ever said that on public television.

JN: So you got right to it.

BC: The place erupted. They started screaming at me.

JN: Because as troubling as that statement sounds, there is no logical argument against it.

BC: So then she said, "Well, what about lesbians?" And I mentioned something about the lesbian sexual practices that happened to be described in detail *to kids* in my daughter's "Living and Learning" health class—a particular practice which happens to be especially gross.

She said, "What do you know about what *I* do with my sexuality—what do you know?"

I said, "Emily, that's the whole point, we don't *want* to know. Nobody wants to know." And neither do our children need to be taught these things in junior high school.

She apparently is heterosexual, but she just lost it.

I must have gotten letters and phone calls from people for two months saying, "Boy, you were wonderful!"

JN: Sometimes you have to get right down to the bottom line and just say it. Because the paradox is that many people who support the full affirmation of homo-

sexuality in our society do not even want to consider what the actual behavior is.

BC: No, they don't.

JN: They like to think, as someone once commented, "that gay men just hug."

BC: In fact, I've found that the truth is a very powerful thing. I think it was Pope Paul who was quoted in the *Wall Street Journal*, of all places saying essentially, "The main thing that brought about freedom in Eastern Europe and destabilized the totalitarian movement was *people's refusal to lie*." That is what we have to learn.

JN: And your audiotope has been pretty clear in delivering the facts about what's been happening in the schools.

BC: We've gotten out that one-hour tape to thousands of people by now. In fact, when the Speaker of the Massachusetts House of Representatives heard it, he called me into his office while the House was in session to talk about his concerns about the school system. Of course, he didn't have the guts to do anything. But our job in this next year is to make them more afraid of the voters than they are of the gay agenda.

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in fact, I'm Jewish."

What I think is their Achilles' heel, is the recovery movement.

JN: Absolutely. And that's where NARTH comes in.

BC: Right. That is their Achilles' heel, and that's what we have to nurture here in Massachusetts.

JN: This is really where the solution lies—reparative therapy, the healing of homosexuality. When we show a person who was once gay and now is no longer gay, that pulls the rug out from under the entire notion that there are two distinct groups of people, different from birth—gay people and straight people.

BC: I don't think we're really going to get anywhere until we can get the recovery movement off the ground.

JN: That's what NARTH is trying to do.

BC: It must be extremely difficult. I can imagine that it is one of the most difficult things for a person to get free from—harder, I would think, than alcoholism.

JN: Yes it is, because there's not just an addictive behavior involved, but it's more than that—the basic issue goes

back to identity. The only solution for many men seems to be an annihilation of the self, and an identification with an idealized male who it seems must be "out there" somewhere, if only he can find him. The issue is about a struggle with self-hatred, and about the search for identity.

BC: You know, I personally have known dozens of such men. I've had many as close friends who I deeply cared about, and I've seen this torment and watched it in their lives. And I hope to persuade the Massachusetts schools that they aren't helping our kids by opening up the door into a destructive lifestyle.

JN: NARTH's position is that the teenage years are not the time to make a decision about sexual identity. This is a decision to be made by a mature person in adulthood, when all the facts are available, and when the options can be carefully considered, and he has the benefit of a few more years of life experience.

Thanks very much, Brian, for a most interesting description of what's happening in Massachusetts.

In our next issue, we'll publish a transcript of your audiotape describing those Massachusetts sex education school programs in detail.

NARTH Therapists: Stay Connected on the Internet

In March, 2000, listserv connectivity was made available to NARTH members.

The listserv has two primary functions:

- 1) to serve as a resource and means of informal consultation for clinicians who are doing reparative therapy with individuals experiencing same-sex attraction; and**
- 2) to serve as a forum for general questions and thoughts that individuals would like to circulate among the membership only.**

Please be aware that at this time, the list is available only to **NARTH's full members** with clinical credentials.

To subscribe, please send an email to: MembersL-request@narth.com.

Please type your name in the body of the email so that we can confirm your membership in NARTH. You will receive a welcome message to indicate that you have been added to the list.