

Gastonia father of gay son learns about harassment first hand

by Dan Van Mourik
Q-Notes Staff

GASTONIA, NC—Doyle Criswell's signature appeared at the bottom of a letter sent to Gaston and Lincoln school principals urging them to recognize that gay and lesbian students face discrimination and violence in their classrooms and on campuses. The publicity that followed brought him a dozen harassing telephone calls at work, giving him an idea of what his son went through for years.

"This is the first time that I — a straight, white, married male and father of two — have been harassed," said Criswell, a local outreach director for Parents, Friends and Families of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) and on whose behalf the letters were sent. "All because I'm trying to promote diversity."

Criswell got involved in PFLAG after his son, Wes, came home from college with two black eyes and a broken nose. He had been accosted on the street by someone who saw him leaving a restaurant frequented by gays. Wes Criswell died three years ago of AIDS at the age of 24.

Criswell said he would have liked to talk to the callers, but none would leave their names or numbers with his secretary.

"They refused," Criswell said. "They would only say, 'We just wanted you to know blah, blah, blah,' and then they would blast away at me."

Criswell hasn't received a response from any of the Gaston or Lincoln principals to whom he sent the letter, offering P-FLAG as a resource. And he most likely will not.

School superintendents in both counties say they don't see harassment or discrimination of gays as a widespread problem. They said their systems have policies that would cover harassment, though those policies do not specify homosexuality.

"I don't expect children to be harassed — period — whether for sexual orientation or any other reason," said Ed Sadler, Gaston schools superintendent. "I think that we have a vehicle in place already that would effectuate that."

In Lincoln County, Superintendent Martin

Eddy said he hadn't seen Criswell's letter, though at least one of his principals had. He said he's confident that school counselors could handle any such discrimination.

"We respond to any physical attack in a very serious and active manner," Eddy said, "regardless of the reason for the attack."

Sadler said he didn't want any Gaston counselor or principals making referrals to P-FLAG.

"Based on my interpretation of the letter, I think that the kind of counseling services that they are espousing, in my opinion, should best be provided by parents," he said.

But Criswell said many students with questions about sexuality might seek out a teacher or school counselor, especially if harassment takes place in the classroom. He said most of those officials lack the perspective that his support group could provide.

Criswell also said that harassment and violence takes place in schools more often than administrators realize. He noted that Time Out Youth in neighboring Charlotte, which offers counseling and support to youth aged 13 - 23, often gets visits from Gaston and Lincoln teenagers who have talked about trouble they've had with peers and students alike.

"What we're concerned about is that a lot of teachers don't know how to handle it when a student comes up to them and says, 'I'm a gay kid,'" he said. "We're not trying to change the whole world. We're just trying to help them understand."

Criswell said he did get one supportive phone call. And he's hoping to hear from others who might disagree with his view, but would be open to dialogue about it. He said he once shared many of their prejudices.

"They're not bad people," Criswell said. "They're just misinformed."

To illustrate the devastating affect classmate and peer harassment can have on today's gay youth, the following poem was written by Robbie Kirkland in 1995. Two years later, Robbie, a 14-year-old gay youth from Strongsville, OH, ended the turmoil in his heart by putting a bullet in his head on January 2, 1997.

*I'm Dying and No One Cares
I try to stand and walk
I fall to the hard, cold ground
It feels as if to life I'm no longer bound
The others look and laugh at my plight
Blood pours from my nose. I am not a pretty sight
I try to stand again but fall
To the others I call
But they don't care
The pain is unbearable
The world is not fair
I'm lost and cold
I wish one would lend a hand to hold
My tears mix with my blood
The End of My Life*

*It nears
I'm Dying and no one cares
The pain the pain
THE PAIN!
I scream in pain!
My body shakes in violent spasms
I cry out in pain again!
I scream
My blood pours like a stream
I'm Dying and no one cares
I scream in pain one last time
And then it's over
I am Dead and no one cares
note: a lot of stuff in here is weird like this
I'm not really like that ▼*

Margarethe Cammermeyer receives endorsement from gay rights group

by David M. Smith
Special to Q-Notes

WASHINGTON, DC—Decorated Vietnam veteran and retired army Col. Margarethe (Grethe) Cammermeyer has earned the endorsement of the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) in her bid to unseat Rep. Jack Metcalf (R-WA) in Washington state's 2nd Congressional District, the organization announced.

"Grethe Cammermeyer is an American hero who has served our country with undisputed distinction in the military and she will do so again in the House," said HRC Political Director Winnie Stachelberg. "She is a decorated Vietnam veteran, a nurse, a mother and a grandmother with the character and commitment to well represent all the people of her district."

Cammermeyer earned the bronze star for her military service as a nurse. During an interview for a top security clearance in 1989, she was questioned directly about her personal orientation and honestly acknowledged that she is a lesbian. Nearing the height of her long and distinguished career, and despite universal acknowledgment that her conduct as a soldier had always been impeccable, her honesty resulted in a discharge from the armed forces in 1992

under the military's policy mandating anti-gay discrimination. She was reinstated in the Washington State National Guard in 1994 after a successful court case found her discharge unconstitutional.

Her opponent's record on issues of fairness for lesbian and gay Americans has fallen far short. Metcalf scored a zero on HRC's rating of the 104th Congress, consistently failing in a wide range of areas from equal rights to sound public policies on AIDS prevention, housing and discrimination. In his last election, he squeaked by in a very close race with a scant 49 percent of the vote.

"Grethe Cammermeyer's honest voice for moderation and common sense deserves broad support," added Stachelberg. Among the issues which Cammermeyer will be advancing in her campaign are health care, transportation, education and the environment.

HRC supports fair minded Republican, Democratic and independent candidates for federal office, based on a range of factors — including such merit-based considerations as their support for issues of fairness for lesbian and gay Americans, their record in office and their viability. ▼

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By calling the Pride Information Hotline, you can receive information concerning a multitude of categories including **Current Events in the Gay Community**, Religious Groups, Community Organizations, Information for Gay Activists, Gay-Friendly Businesses, HIV/AIDS Information, & Support Groups/Hotlines. With a single call, you gain access to any of these categories and the answers to any questions you may have regarding services and organizations in North Carolina.

You may access it 24 hours a day. If you or your organization would like to be on the Hotline, call (919) 542-7412, Fax: 542-7416, email: VenturedOut@webtv.net, or snail mail SV Communications, PO Box 1221, Pittsboro, NC 27312. For all non-profit organizations, there is no charge to be on the Hotline.

Coming Soon to the Hotline... "Nightlife Guide."