

Florida legislator tells GLBT students, "God is going to destroy you."

by Brian Winfield
Special to Q-Notes

TALLAHASSEE — "God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, and he is going to destroy you and a lot of others." Through a fire of homophobic comments, Florida state Rep. Allen Trovillion (R-Winter Park) embarrassed the Florida Legislature on April 9 when he unleashed a personal tirade against Orlando students who visited him seeking help to end school-based harassment and violence.

Trovillion welcomed several Orlando-area high school students into his office who were taking part in Equality Florida Youth Lobby Day

2001, an event to promote awareness of the discrimination faced by students on campus. The students went to offer their viewpoints on the challenges they faced and their individual stories about the frequency of anti-gay violence in Florida schools. While there, the lawmaker launched into a shockingly mean-spirited lecture, railing against the young constituents. One of the students, 17-year-old Chris Vasquez, was left in tears by Trovillion's remarks.

"He [Trovillion] is one of the people we're supposed to look up to for moral guidance and support," Vasquez said. "He's spouting ideas that only make the world more dangerous for gay youth."

Statistics from national and state studies already paint a grim picture of life for sexual minority youth in schools. A nationwide report released by the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN) in 1999 revealed three out of four sexual minority youth report verbal, sexual or physical harassment on their school campus. Similar reports show that those students who are, or perceived to be lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender are four times more likely to be injured or threatened with a weapon on school grounds.

Thomas Gentile, a 19-year-old youth from Boca Raton, told Trovillion that classmates tar-

geted him because of his sexual orientation. School administrators suspended the attackers for only one day, then humiliated Gentile by suggesting he provoked the violence by being "too openly gay." Despite a nationwide call for additional security and safety on school campuses, Rep. Trovillion told Gentile, "You have to suffer the consequences of your actions."

Vasquez, a member of Orlando's Gay and Lesbian Idea Exchange for Youth (GALIXY), responded to the incident, "Ironically, Trovillion's comments only prove our point that discrimination against sexual minority youth is still rampant in our state...sexual minority youth need protection from harassment in their schools." A recent school climate survey in Pinellas County [St. Petersburg area] revealed that sexual minority youth were four times more likely than their straight peers to skip school because they feared for their safety. The survey also showed that 63 percent of the Pinellas students hear anti-gay comments more than twice a day.

"I don't understand why the gay population is becoming so vocal," Trovillion questioned. "You are going to cause the downfall of this country which was built on Christian principals."

Human rights leaders in the state and across the nation expressed outrage upon hearing of Trovillion's remarks. Equality Florida Executive Director Nadine Smith expressed her disappointment and urged the Florida Legislature to take action.

"Representative Trovillion has disgraced and embarrassed the Florida Legislature by callously dismissing the painful experiences of these students," said Smith. "We call on the Governor, Trovillion's colleagues in the Legislature, and all fair minded Floridians to stand with students who are striving to make our schools safe."

Brenda Barron, Southern Field Organizer for GLSEN, who participated in the Youth Lobby Day events, said, "GLSEN is appalled by Rep. Trovillion's use of his bully pulpit to intimidate LGBT youth. LGBT young people face this kind of discrimination in schools everyday. This incident underscores the desperate need to ensure that every student has equal access to education and a safe learning environment, free of verbal harassment, physical violence and intimidation." ▼

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