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Pre-Election Tea Dance



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Groups fight military ban in court

by Kathy Strieder
Special to Q-Notes

NEW YORK—The Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund and the American Civil Liberties Union, having won a federal court ruling that the military's unequal treatment of lesbian and gay servicemembers is unconstitutional, fought the government's appeal in New York on April 2.

"This case is and always has been about just one thing," said Matthew Coles, director of the ACLU's Lesbian and Gay Rights Project. "The government says that, unlike everyone else who serves, lesbians and gay men in the military have to be celibate. Its only explanation for doing

grading and deplorable condition for remaining in the Armed Services."

The US Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit heard the appeal in *Able v. USA*, the government's first full defeat in a case involving the military's anti-gay policy. Ruling on the case last July 2, Eastern District Court Judge Eugene Nickerson struck the ban as unconstitutional. He said, "It is hard to imagine why the mere holding of hands off base and in private is dangerous to the mission of the Armed Forces if done by homosexuals but not by a heterosexual."

Nickerson found that the special rules the military imposes on gay servicemembers serve

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only to accommodate the anticipated anti-gay feelings of other servicemembers. "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" bans all

that to gay people is that it thinks straight soldiers and sailors are uncomfortable around lesbians and gay men. We say you do not discriminate against one group of Americans to make another group feel better. That is the whole case."

Lambda Legal Director Beatrice Dohrn said, "It is time for the court to call an end to the military's 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' charade. Qualified lesbians and gay men should serve under the same rules as non-gay personnel." Dohrn added, "Judge Nickerson said it best when he noted that 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' creates a de-

same-sex, but not mixed-sex, off-duty sexual and affectionate conduct, and also prohibits gay personnel from making statements that refer to their sexual orientation.

Able differs from previous challenges in that six servicemembers proactively sued, asserting that both the conduct and speech portions of the ban are unconstitutional. Other cases regarding "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" have been in response to discharge proceedings and most have focused on the "speech" portion of the ban and its presumption that anyone who speaks out also engages in prohibited conduct. ▼

lesbian notions

Queer writers required

by Paula Martinac
Special to Q-Notes

The San Francisco Board of Education has become the first in the country to require its high school curriculum to include books by authors of diverse racial backgrounds. Since only 13 percent of the students in that district are white, this move provides students with the opportunity to see their own cultural experiences reflected in their required readings. Before any of my readers sit down to write me incensed letters about imposing political correctness on education, there's something about this resolution of specific interest to the queer community. One of its provisions states, "Writers who are known to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender shall be appropriately identified in the curriculum."

Originally, the school board intended to impose quotas on the number of books by non-white authors (four out of seven) and GLBT authors (at least one). In the current backlash against affirmative action, the antagonism toward quotas was so strong that the final compromise resolution eliminated any stipulations about numbers. While works by writers of color must be read, the resolution only requires that known GLBT writers be "identified" as such. (It doesn't explicitly consider that some writers of color are also queer.)

Should we be thrilled or disappointed? I happen to think that the school board should be applauded for this first step toward educational reform, despite some flaws. The proposed curriculum has something for everyone, straight and gay, conservative and progressive, white and nonwhite. It respects the much-touted canon while at the same time expanding its definition. The compromise resolution is probably better news for the GLBT community than the original plan. Not that I dislike quotas. It's just that the queer contribution to literature has been so enormous and at the same time so secret that the potential for setting the record straight, so to speak, is vast.

A couple of years ago, I was invited to give a public reading and then to guest lecture in a literature class at a small private college in upstate New York, hardly the most liberal area of the country. When, at the first event, I read from my lesbian-themed novel, I was greeted first with stony silence and then rude questions from the audience about why lesbian and gay writers could never create viable straight characters. It seemed easy for homophobic students to dismiss contemporary GLBT authors, whose

work they viewed as politics and not art.

Since it's harder to dismiss the classics, I decided to open my guest lecture to a freshman and sophomore course the next day with a litany of GLBT writers from the past. I watched as the students' mouths dropped open. Most of them had read or knew about Walt Whitman, Willa Cather, Carson McCullers, Tennessee Williams, Edna St. Vincent Millay, James Baldwin, E.M. Forster, Oscar Wilde, Langston Hughes, and other writers who have become part of the literary canon. But their teachers had never stood up in class and pronounced those writers queer.

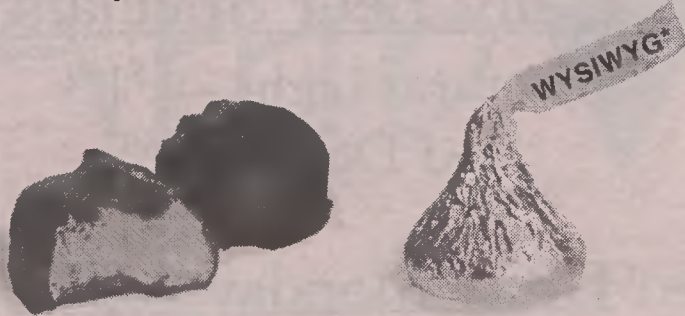
Simply knowing that a writer is lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender is, of course, just a start. What is more important is how being queer affects a writer's work, and it's unclear if teachers in the San Francisco schools will go that distance. For example, Carson McCullers, whose uncomplicated prose is considered perfect for teenagers, was a bisexual woman married to a bisexual man, and both were troubled by their same-gender desires. This may help students understand McCullers's penchant for creating outcast loners such as Frankie in *A Member of the Wedding*. In addition, Willa Cather's story, "Paul's Case," is often taught in high schools without the gay subtext that the author incorporated into it because she couldn't write openly on gay themes. Having these kinds of classroom discussions not only informs students but stretches teachers, too, making them examine the constraints placed on artistic expression. It could also have a big impact on isolated and vulnerable queer teens, who, just like white and nonwhite students, need validation of their experiences.

Unfortunately, though, high school is almost too late to introduce GLBT topics. The earlier that sexual orientation is addressed, the greater the chance that children will learn to accept difference. In their wonderful documentary, *It's Elementary*, filmmakers Debra Chasnoff and Helen Cohen record the marked differences in student reactions to GLBT themes from elementary through middle school. At six, kids are open to the idea that we're not all the same. By 14, many are already wrinkling their noses and saying "gross" when the words "gay" or "lesbian" are uttered in class.

The problem remains that sexuality and sexual difference are still seen as unsuitable topics for younger children, and this simply perpetuates ignorance and intolerance. What we clearly need are more GLBT people — even those who aren't parents — getting involved in their local school boards to try to influence curricula at all levels. ▼

[Paula Martinac is a lesbian activist and writer. Her latest books are the novel *Chicken* and the forthcoming *Lesbian and Gay Book of Love and Marriage*. She can be reached care of this publication or by email at LNcolumn@aol.com.]

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