

School's Out

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Knowing all this now, does she ever regret walking into that first GROH! meeting earlier in the year?

"Definitely not!" she answered firmly. "I'm not the kind of person who can see something wrong, and not do something about it. It's like the line I heard — I think it was in Brad's play, Cabaret. It goes something like, 'If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem.' Well, I want to be part of the solution. And I think with GROH!, I am."

Of course, Massachusetts does not have a monopoly on gay-straight alliances. A similar group exists in North Carolina. It may be the only one in the state — but it thrives. And the tale of how it came to be is at least as interesting as the story of what it does.

With two thousand ninth through twelfth graders, Chapel Hill High is overcrowded (the city's second high school opens in 1996). But CHHS is by no means a typical large school. Veteran English teacher David Bruton describes it in his soft drawl as "filled with a lot of kids who are ambitious and work hard. Chapel Hill's got a pretty high percentage of well-educated, upwardly mobile folks"; it is, after all, home to the University of North Carolina, and sits on the edge of the famed Research Triangle. In 1994 Redbook named CHHS the top high school in the Tar Heel State, and if that isn't exactly true, Mr. Bruton allowed, "I think most people wouldn't hesitate to call it at least one of the best."

He and his partner, middle school teacher Duff Coburn, have been together for nearly twenty-five years. They met at UNC, and have always taught in the same school system — first Raleigh, now Chapel Hill. For a while they were even in the same building where, Mr. Bruton said, "You couldn't not notice our distinctive rings. Our relationship was never secret, even the first year.

We always used the words 'we' and 'our,' and parents always invited us into their homes. As a couple we did couple things, so for a long time we had more straight friends than gay friends. And we never had a problem with administrators or colleagues. Never."

But at the outset they commuted more than twenty miles from Chapel Hill to Raleigh, because they thought it would be difficult to teach in the same community as they lived. In Raleigh, Mr. Bruton said, "I saw kids going through the kind of anguish most gay people go through when they're young. I heard the word 'faggot.'" But as out as he was to adults, he felt he could not say anything to his students; in his classroom, he remained in the closet. "I stewed about it. I was frustrated," he admitted. "But I felt if I was out to kids, my job would be in jeopardy. It wouldn't have been, of course. That was just my own pure internalized, institutionalized homophobia."

In 1986 he transferred to Chapel Hill High. Things went well until 1989. "We started talking about the importance of multiculturalism, but we never did anything about it. I teach mostly American literature, so I finally said to myself, 'What can I include?'" He worked up a multicultural unit, based on collaborative learning. Small groups would explore what made various groups — Native Americans, Hispanic-Americans, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Jewish-Americans, females — different from, and similar to, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant males. His department chair and his assistant principal both okayed the inclusion of gays and lesbians as a multicultural group. In the summer of 1991 Mr. Bruton began assembling book lists; they soon grew to more than two thousand titles.

He stressed that he did not assign students to groups they did not want to be in. During the year-long independent study project, each group of three to five students read sixteen to twenty books. It was a tremendous success, he said; their faces beamed with delight.

In the winter of 1992 a faculty committee received a letter from a CHHS junior, who complained that the school was not addressing gay and lesbian issues. Had it done so, he wrote, he would not have attempted suicide the previous year. Many staff members felt that homosexuality was an inappropriate subject for school discussion, but an optional schoolwide meeting was set. It was announced the same way as other talks: through posters, bulletins, and memos. Mr. Bruton's name was included in every announcement.

The discussion — which included a mother from Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, and a representative of the Outright organization — went well. But around that same time the English teacher's classroom windows were shot out; bricks were hurled through, and a dead opossum landed on his floor. The vandalism escalated: one night "Bruton's a Fag" and "Fire Bruton" were painted on nearly a dozen school buses. They rolled through Chapel Hill the next morning with those words emblazoned on the sides.

David Bruton was crushed. He had done nothing to hurt anyone; he thought most students liked him. He still had not told any classes that he was gay. (He learned later that one of the vandals was a boy who went along with the crowd to hide confusion about his own sexuality.)

No one at school knew what to do. At a well-attended voluntary faculty meeting, a colleague suggested an "old-fashioned, sixties-type demonstration." A number of staff members agreed to show solidarity by holding hands in the school courtyard during lunch. "No sooner had we done that than students poured out," Mr. Bruton described. "They all wanted to join in. There was even a little scuffle when kids tried to get next to me." The circle grew so large that another one formed inside. Students apologized all day to Mr. Bruton for the graffiti; some of them he did not even know. He was flattered and honored by their concern.

The teacher soon noticed a new group of

students hanging around his classroom. "A sizable number were from the lacrosse team," he said. "They decided they'd take care of me. 'Liberating' is a cliché, but I don't know a better word to describe how I felt. Kids started asking me stuff about everything — including homosexuality. The word started getting around school that I don't judge anyone harshly." He felt as if he had gotten a new family.

The next year a former student committed suicide, just a few days after asking to talk with Mr. Bruton about an unspecified problem. Soon thereafter he and his partner traveled to Washington, D.C., to see the AIDS Quilt "I wasn't prepared for the vastness of it," he recounted. "But what really got me was seeing very young guys squatting on the soggy ground weeping uncontrollably, and being hugged by total strangers just so they wouldn't feel alone. I saw those people doing more just by hugging than anything I'd ever done for anyone."

Mr. Bruton returned to Chapel Hill convinced he must do something. He asked a guidance counselor if she would be willing to co-sponsor a support group for gay and lesbian students. Coincidentally, she had also been thinking of the desperate need for such a group. They decided to move slowly, spending the rest of the school year writing schools around the country to find out how to begin such a project. But when a student approached the counselor seeking support, the need became more urgent.

At the same time, the group that had caused such an uproar the previous year with its schoolwide discussion on homosexuality announced plans for a mandatory assembly on oppression. Student organizers asked Mr. Bruton to speak. He did — and announced the formation of the gay and lesbian support group. The first meeting was set for mid-December.

By the end of 1993 a Gay/Straight Alliance of about twenty-five people, in all four grades, had developed. Thirteen teachers signed on as faculty

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