

Books about teen-agers exploring homosexuality given to schools

By Mary Sanchez
THE KANSAS CITY STAR

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — A national group that wants to inject homosexual references into school curriculums has donated books about teenagers exploring their homosexuality to 42 area high schools.

Project 21, which wants to expose young people to fair, accurate and unbiased portrayals of homosexuals, gave the paperbacks to the districts. School officials are reviewing the books before deciding whether to place them on library shelves, said Robert Birle, a coordinator of Project 21.

"We will use the same criteria as we use to choose any of our other materials," said Don Shirley, director of library services for the Shawnee Mission district.

Several of the Shawnee Mission high schools already have one of the books, "Annie on My Mind" by Nancy Garden, in their collections, Mr. Shirley said. The other book, "All-American Boys," is by Frank Mosca and follows the story of two homosexual teen-age boys.

The Shawnee Mission district has not received any complaints from parents about the Nancy Garden book, Mr. Shirley said.

But elsewhere in the United States, the work of Project 21 and similar groups has intensified arguments about how, or if, homosexuality will be addressed in public schools and whether such efforts give credence to a lifestyle some people believe is morally objectionable.

Elementary level books such as "Daddy's Roommate", "Gloria Goes to Gay Pride" and "Heather Has Two Mommies" have raised concerns. In New York, months of angry debates erupted last year when the school system proposed a diversity program called Children of the Rainbow, which taught tolerance of homosexuals.

In California, where Project 21 was founded, the Bay Area Network of Gay and Lesbian Educators received a \$4,000 United Way grant this year to donate books with homosexual themes to schools in the San Francisco area.

Officials with the Traditional Values Coalition have fought such efforts for years, including those of Project 21.

"It [homosexuality] should not be taught as a viable or positive life alternative," said Steve Sheldon, political director of the coalition. "If the parents choose to say it is fine, that's

OK. But it should be done at home. Schools should not promote it."

Project 21, which refers to making progress for the 21st century, was co-founded in California in 1990 by Mr. Birle. The group also works in other states, including Iowa, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Texas, Minnesota and Oregon.

Mr. Birle, a retired art teacher, moved to Kansas City two years ago from a rural area east of San Francisco.

But action by the Missouri General Assembly could curtail future efforts. State Sen. John Russell said he will reintroduce legislation that won't allow public schools to "promote or advocate homosexuality as an acceptable lifestyle." Last session's bill did not reach the Senate floor.

Mr. Russell said he has read several elementary-level books.

"It was very subtly, in my opinion, saying there is nothing different or wrong about this," he said.

Mr. Sheldon, son of Traditional Values Coalition leader the Rev. Louis Sheldon, agreed.

Historical information, such as factual teachings about the persecution of homosexuals during the Nazi holocaust, can be included in lessons, he said.

CULTURE, *et cetera*Reactions mixed
to teachers coming
out of the closet

Students clap; some parents object

By Connie Farrow
ASSOCIATED PRESS

ST LOUIS
What began as a routine history class for Rodney Wilson's students at Mehlville High School became a real-life lesson in civil rights for the entire district when the 29-year-old teacher disclosed he is homosexual.

Last March, after showing a film about the Holocaust, Mr. Wilson held up a poster showing emblems used to identify people in concentration camps. He said: "If I had been in Europe during World War II, they would have put this pink triangle on me and gassed me to death, because I am gay."

First there was silence. "Then one of my students said, 'That was a very brave thing to say.' Then another student said a similar sentiment, and then it seemed to me that the whole class started clapping," Mr. Wilson says.

Mr. Wilson is among a growing number of homosexual teachers across the nation who have chosen to reveal their sexual orientation in class. Many cite a need for honesty and a desire to serve as role models for homosexual students.

But supportive applause has not been the response of some parents and school administrators. Karen M. Harbeck, a Boston lawyer who specializes in homosexual issues, says some gay teachers are being forced to choose between keeping their sexual orientation a secret or fighting to keep their jobs.

"Teachers are one of the last professions to come out of the closet," says Ms. Harbeck, who believes there are an average of 2.4 homosexual teachers in every school building in America. Of course, no one can say for certain.

Kevin Jennings of Cambridge, Mass., author of "One Teacher in 10: Gay and Lesbian Educators Tell Their Stories," says the desire to be honest about who they are is the reason most homosexual teachers give for coming out.

"It's very stressful to hide who you are. You have to lead two lives, keeping distance between yourself and others, and that makes it difficult to bond with students," Mr. Jennings says.

Mr. Wilson argues that disclosures like his can save lives. A 1989 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services study said homosexual youth are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers. Homosexuals may account for 30 percent of suicides among minors annually.

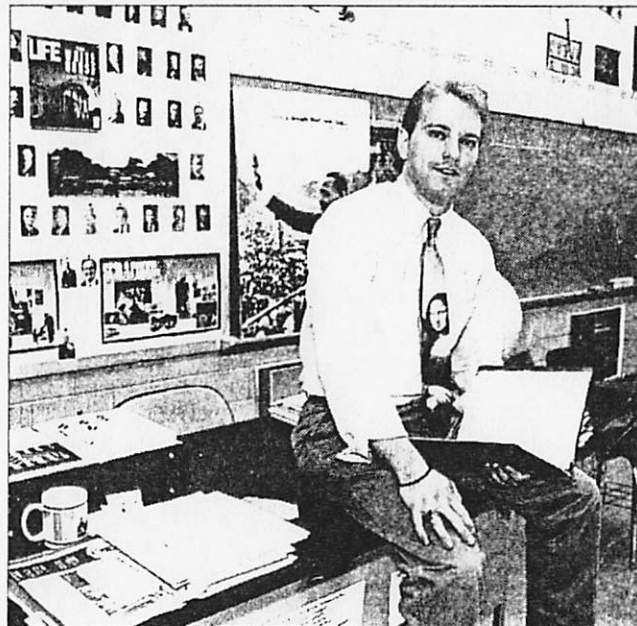
Parents on both sides of the issue spoke to the Mehlville School Board after a local newspaper published a story about Mr. Wilson.

"I really do feel [Mr. Wilson] has the right to say he's gay," said Anne Kasal, who identified herself as the mother of a homosexual student who graduated from Mehlville High in 1992.

Debbie Povich disagreed, saying that while she had nothing against Mr. Wilson being homosexual, "we just don't want him to teach it to our kids."

The issue of homosexual teachers had never come up in Mehlville, a suburb in southern St. Louis County. School administrators responded by placing a memo in Mr. Wilson's personnel file that says, "Mehlville School District considers it inappropriate conduct for a teacher to discuss facts of a personal nature, regardless of the nature of those beliefs, in the classroom."

They also told Mr. Wilson he



Rodney Wilson revealed his homosexuality to his students at Missouri's Mehlville High School during a lesson on the Holocaust last March.

was to mention homosexuality in class only if it was part of the existing history curriculum.

Mr. Wilson won't be eligible for tenure until September. Worried that the memo could pave the way for his dismissal, he hired a lawyer to have it removed. While the district protects students against discrimination based on sexual orientation, no such policy protects teachers.

Mr. Wilson has won support from some teachers, parents and students, as well as from the homosexual community. He's also backed by the 2.2-million-member National Education Association. Since 1973, the NEA has offered free legal counsel to teachers harassed or discriminated against because of sexual orientation.

"Some organizations would take Rodney's case for free," says Ms. Harbeck, who says such cases "can bankrupt a school district."

That may be among the reasons some districts choose not to take them on.

On Oct. 11, National Coming Out Day, San Diego teacher Jose

Arroyo greeted his students at Sweetwater Union High School wearing a pink triangle and other symbols of gay pride. Though publicized, school officials did not try to stop him from answering students' questions about his homosexuality.

"I told them I was not going to discuss my personal life, just like you wouldn't talk to a straight teacher about their love lives," Mr. Arroyo says. "They asked questions like 'How long have you known you were gay?' 'How did you know you were gay?' I answered those."

Mr. Wilson and Mr. Arroyo, both considered excellent teachers by their principals, say they struggled with their decisions to reveal their homosexuality.

"I think back to when I was in high school," says Mr. Arroyo, who teaches learning-disabled students. "I wish I had known there was a gay or lesbian teacher, even if I had never talked to that person. Just to know there was someone there who was successful and open about it would have helped."