

Reading, Writing & Gay Issues

Groups Protest Film To Air on Public TV

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The film "It's Elementary: Talking About Gay Issues in School" opens with footage of Sen. Robert Smith (R-N.H.) protesting gay and lesbian "filth"—in the schools. He waves documents and warns about the dangers of such "trash." Smith is then juxtaposed against a third-grade classroom, where children discuss the same issue. One small, brown-haired boy has this to say: "Who, like, really cares if you're gay? It's like barely nobody knows in the world. It's, like, what's the big whoop?"

Written and directed by Oscar-winning documentarian Debra Chasnoff and produced by Helen Cohen, "It's Elementary" is set to air on public television stations across the country this month and is stirring up some controversy along the way. Locally, a one-hour segment (edited down from the original 77-minute documentary) will air on WETA at 9 p.m. on June 11, on WHUT at 9 p.m. on June 14 and on six Maryland Public Television channels at 9 p.m. on June 7.

The film—which advocates what Chasnoff calls "age-appropriate" discussions of gay issues in schools—takes viewers inside six

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elementary and junior high schools from New York to San Francisco. Teachers talk with their students about topics ranging from same-sex marriages and gay families to depictions of gays in mainstream media, as well as anti-gay stereotypes and slurs. In one school, a teacher comes out to his students. In another, the symbolism of the pink triangle is discussed. In yet another, a teacher reads to first- and second-graders from a book about a girl with two mothers.

Several conservative groups are protesting the airing of the film. D. James Kennedy, a Christian evangelist who heads Coral Ridge Ministries, wrote a four-page letter to supporters about it, asking them to "call a halt to the recruiting of children for the homosexual lifestyle" by signing petitions and sending them to Rep. C.W. Bill Young (R-Fla.), chairman of the House Appropriations Committee (which partially funds public television), and Robert T. Coonrod, president of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. According to Coonrod, the film was not funded by any federal dollars. It is being distributed to local public television stations by KQED in San Francisco, through American Public Television.

"That there is this sentiment out there is important for us to know," said Coonrod, who said that "It's Elementary" has prompted more mail to CPB than any other show in recent years, even before it has gone on the air. "That they are expressing concerns about a program that they've never seen makes it interesting in an academic sense. . . . The concern is useful for us to understand what the mood is, but it doesn't cause us to reconsider whether this is something that public television should broadcast.

"It sounds to me like a program that helps parents do a better job of parenting, and that is the kind of thing that public broadcasting has the right to air."

Beverly LaHaye, chairman of Concerned Women for America, refers to the film in a letter to her members as "an insidious attempt to recruit children into the homosexual lifestyle." The American Family Association has made its own video, titled "Suffer the Children," which the group's president, the Rev. Donald Wildmon, describes in a letter as giving "our children the TRUTH about homosexuality."

"I think there's a bit of hysteria around these broadcasts, and I think there are some right-wing organizations that are alarmed," said Chasnoff, "but the way that most parents and educators who have seen this film have reacted has been very positive. That is, they've embraced it and they're really challenged and excited by it."

Chasnoff's film is not targeted at children but at parents and educators. More than 500 schools currently use it, and it has been requested by more than 200 school districts, she said. The Chicago school system has acquired a copy for every school. According to Chasnoff, approximately 90 PBS stations are planning to air the program; 80 have declined and 55 haven't decided. Each station makes its own programming decisions based on a range of considerations, including but not limited to subject matter. Thus, it is not clear how many stations have turned it down because of the subject matter.

Laurie Fry, director of broadcast promotion for WETA, called the film "editorially solid." Maryland Public Television plans to air a round-table discussion on teaching gay issues in school at 7 p.m. on the night of its broadcast, with a rebroadcast following the documentary.

"Basically, what our viewpoint is, is that we're not advocating a position," said MPT spokeswoman Colleen Wright. "It's preaching tolerance. We're hoping members of the community will discuss the pros and cons of teaching gay issues after watching this."

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