

National News

IOWA**Drama in Des Moines**

School board member's emotional coming out speech packs a powerful wallop at hearing on Gay curriculum

by Peter Freiberg

Within a single evening, Gays in Des Moines, Iowa, suffered a defeat on a controversial schools issue, only to be reinvigorated minutes later when a prominent school board member and former president delivered a moving speech acknowledging he is Gay.

The defeat had been expected for days: In the face of vocal opposition from a Christian right organizer, a popular talk show host, evangelical ministers, and several thousand parents, school officials abandoned a proposal to "infuse" information about Gay people into the curriculum.

The coming out speech was also expected, at least by Gay activists and reporters. But when it was delivered, at the end of the school board's public meeting Tuesday night, it packed an emotional punch that overshadowed, at least temporarily, the curriculum furor.

Jonathan Wilson, a 49-year-old partner in Iowa's largest law firm, an elected school board member for the past dozen years, and president of the board three times, told a hushed crowd that "The negative things that have been said in recent weeks about Gay people — the awful stereotypes — are lies.

"I know because I am a Gay person," Wilson said. "Now this community can know that they are lies, too, because this community knows me and has known me for almost a quarter of a century."

With his father and sister — both Methodist ministers — in the audience, along with his two children and his former wife, Wilson advised the packed hall:

"Know the truth, that Gay people can be your neighbors, your teacher, your doctor, your lawyer. The truth will set you and them free."

Wilson said he felt compelled to acknowledge being Gay because widely circulating rumors about his sexual orientation were interfering with board deliberations.

"By exposing and destroying this secret," Wilson said, "I can reclaim my rightful privacy, and our entire board, me included, can participate fully and without inhibition or the threat of blackmail in finding the common ground that this community so desperately needs to heal."

The rancor over the curriculum proposal was reflected at the end of Wilson's speech: He received a prolonged standing ovation from supporters, while those who had come to speak against the plan stayed in their seats, according to Gay activist John Schmacker, who was there.

The next day, Wilson said he was "gratified by an avalanche of support" from school officials, business partners, and Gay and straight residents. His coming out makes him Iowa's second openly Gay elected official, after Bill Crews, mayor of Melbourne, a small town.

Schmacker, a longtime Des Moines Gay activist, called Wilson's address "eloquent" and said his coming out was likely to buoy the spirits of local Gays.

"I think the Gay community needs that," Schmacker said, "because the fact of the matter is that the proposal we wanted has been killed. We don't have any as-



Des Moines School Board Member Jonathan Wilson: "Know the truth, that Gay people can be your neighbors, your teacher, your doctor, your lawyer. The truth will set you and them free."

surances about how soon the school district will resume work on this issue."

Schmacker, who called Des Moines Gays "a depressingly apathetic community by and large," said, "I think that once the dust settles ... then we'll probably see more anger in the Gay and Lesbian community. We haven't seen that yet."

What the *Des Moines Register*, a daily newspaper, called "the hottest controversy ... in years," began in late December. A school employee delivered a copy of the draft curriculum proposal, which was midway in the approval process and likely to be revised, to Bill Horn, Midwest director of The Report, a church-affiliated anti-Gay group.

Horn brought the proposal to right-wing talk radio host Jan Mickelson, who attacked it daily. A protest organized by Horn drew 3,000 people, and a school board hearing attracted 1,500.

With rumors rampant that he is Gay, Wilson came in for particular criticism — and two telephone death threats — from curriculum change opponents, although he was not a member of the Sexual Orientation Advisory Committee that developed the plan.

His coming out speech, which was reprinted in full in the *Register* along with a front page story, came at the end of another public meeting on the proposal.

The school board adopted a recommendation from superintendent Gary Wegenke to kill the curriculum proposal and dissolve the advisory committee, composed of school administrators and community members.

Continued on page 23

Des Moines school board member comes out

Continued from page 16

While killing the curriculum proposal, Wegenke issued a strong reaffirmation of the school system's non-discrimination policy — a policy that includes Gays and that led the superintendent to establish the advisory committee to come up with curriculum changes.

Wegenke asserted that the schools will not tolerate words or actions disrespectful of anyone; that trained professional staff is available to support students "who seek help in dealing with their emerging sexuality;" and that students at risk of suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, and dropping out, including Gays, will be offered "counsel and factual information."

Christian right organizer Horn called the school system's curriculum action "a major, major victory [over] what the homosexuals were trying to get passed here."

"I thought that was exactly what the parents wanted," he said.

According to the draft pro-

posal, students would have been given the opportunity to learn the history and contributions of Gay people by "infusing appropriate information into courses in all appropriate subject areas and all grade levels."

Leading Gay activists enthusiastically endorsed the plan, but there was no mobilization of the Gay community to fight for its adoption, nor was there any outpouring of support from straights or mainstream groups to counteract the opposition.

In an interview, Supervisor Wegenke denied he buckled under to the Christian right in shelving the draft proposal.

Because of the furor, he said, the proposal never had the chance to "move through the system for any fine tuning." Once it became so divisive, he said, he decided to seek formation of a clergy group that included supporters and opponents. The clergy recommendation was to shelve the plan, which Wegenke accepted.

Gay activist Todd Ruopp

concurred with Wegenke's decision, saying, "Considering the baggage that was attached to this proposal, I don't see how the district had any choice but to start over."

Wegenke proposed that the school board discuss expanding the membership of two other advisory committees to examine the status of "where and how the issue of sexual orientation is addressed."

The possibility of curriculum change "is always there," Wegenke said.

The superintendent said the advisory group that drew up the curriculum proposal made a "serious tactical mistake" when it included among its goals 14 taken verbatim from Project 21, a national Gay organization working to bring accurate information about sexual orientation into the schools.

"That's probably a good observation," said Rob Birle, Project 21's Kansas City, Mo.-based regional coordinator. People who use Project 21 material, he said, should rewrite it

so that it is readily understandable to local parents.

In an interview, Jonathan Wilson insisted that the death of the curriculum proposal was not a defeat for Gays. The school's non-discrimination policy has been upheld, Wilson said, and "We are already discussing homosexuality" in a variety of courses.

"There are some inflammatory words that are red flags in front of a bull," he said. "Curriculum is one of them, so why use it?"

The Des Moines battle is one of a growing number across the country as educators and Gay activists push for changes in courses and services and the Christian right mobilizes against them.

"I think it's very typical," said Deanna Duby, director of education policy for People for the American Way (PAW), a national organization that fights the radical right.

Noting that a far less sweeping proposal to teach students respect for Gay people helped

get a New York City schools chancellor fired, Duby said:

"That was New York City, this is Des Moines, Iowa. You would think people there, having seen what was going on in these other places, would have been a little more careful in the ways they put this together."

In Iowa and elsewhere, Duby said, it is essential to "go for strong public support to begin with ... so that if stuff hits the fan, you know you're going to have people who will come to your defense."

Ruopp, currently serving as vice president of Des Moines' Gay and Lesbian Resource Center, said Gays and others know they will have to campaign hard in the next school board elections. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force is planning a "Fight the Right" workshop in Des Moines in March. And Wilson's coming out, activists say, may have a dramatic impact on Gays and straights.

"Iowa," predicts Roupp, "will never be the same." ▼