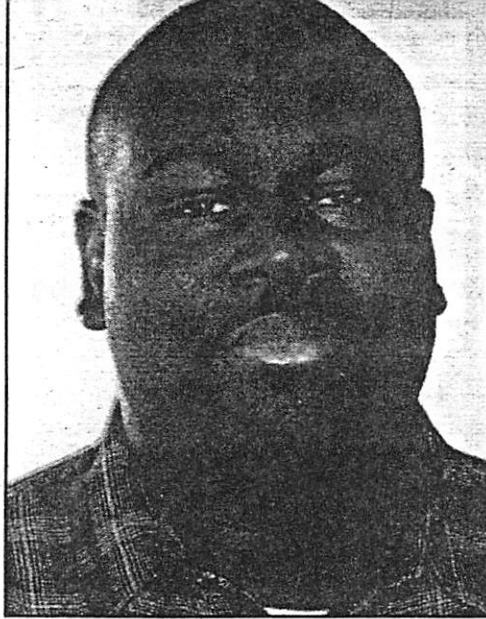


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"Most teachers just ignore homophobic slurs," said Nathan Postell IV, a recent high school graduate from Prince George's County, Md.

Gay teens educate teachers

Local youth confront NEA on homophobia in schools

by Wendy Johnson

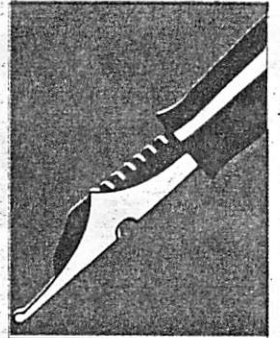
It was one of those occasions when students brought teachers to tears. And to their feet. Their message was a call to action: Teachers need to do more.

Addressing more than 150 educators at the National Education Association's annual conference here Feb. 14, three Gay teenagers recounted to a captive audience of educators what it was like growing up Gay in D.C. area schools. Each made compelling pleas to teachers to confront anti-Gay language and to let students know that teachers won't tolerate it.

The meeting marked the first time Gay youth were invited to address the group. NEA President Bob Chase invited them earlier this year by contacting the Sexual Minority Youth Assistance League in D.C., a youth advocacy group that last year launched a "Safer Schools" coalition of groups committed to pushing for safer schools for Gays students in the D.C. area.

"Most teachers just ignore homophobic slurs," said Nathan Postell IV, a SMYAL youth board member and recent high school graduate from Prince George's County, Md. "Gay and Lesbian youth need to know that if they're in a situation where they need help, they can get it from their teachers and their administration."

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Youth educate teachers

Continued from page 1

Postell described the loneliness he felt growing up black and Gay.

"Walking through the halls of my high school, I felt like I was the only one," he said. "There is a belief in the black community that black people aren't Gay, and that being Gay is a 'white thing.'"

Rachel Stewart, a sophomore at Montgomery Blair High School in Montgomery County, Md., said that "no one bothered me" when she came out to her peers as bisexual last year.

"But that was because I had a boyfriend," she said.

A close female friend who also came out as bisexual, but who had a girlfriend, received a difference response. The female friend was subjected to repeated verbal and physical attacks from other students, said Stewart. In one incident, Stewart said, a male classmate hit her friend in the head with a brick. In another, Stewart said, a teacher allowed a photo of her friend that someone had defaced with the word "dyke" to hang in the classroom.

Stewart said that despite a human relations policy that prohibits anti-Gay discrimination within all Montgomery County Public Schools, her friend "didn't feel she had anyone to go to."

Repeatedly harassed by other students, Stewart said, her friend is trying to graduate early so that she can leave school as soon as possible.

"It's really hard for her," said Stewart. "Nobody says anything, nobody does anything [to stop the harassment]. At school, I do not feel safe even though nothing has happened to me personally."

Dave, a 13-year-old student from Northern Virginia who requested that his last name not be used, said that he has felt "different" ever since he first realized his feelings of same-sex attraction at age 8. Those feelings led him to attempt suicide twice, he said.

"I was very depressed," he said. "But eventually, I started to ease up on myself when I realized that [my sexual orientation] wasn't going to change."

Since then, Dave said, he has come out to his parents and become certified as an HIV educator. All along the way, however, Dave said, school officials "were never there for me."

Dave said he is still too afraid to come out at his school.

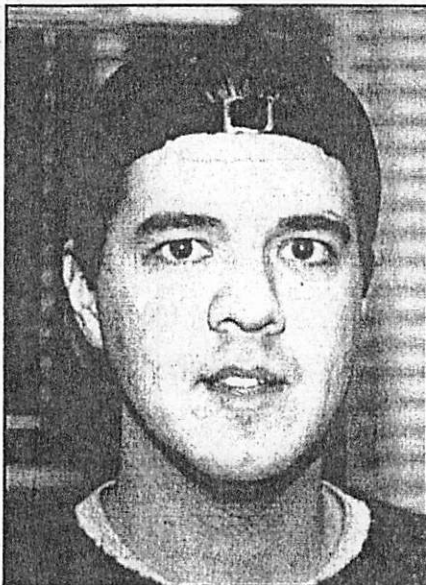
"I'm so scared," he said. "I hide all the time and keep a low profile. But it still hurts when I hear 'faggot,' 'dyke,' 'queer' in the hallway. Teachers pass it off as common vocabulary."

The students received a standing ovation from educators, who listened attentively and, in some cases, later approached the young people in tears.

During a question-and-answer period, a New York teacher stepped up to a microphone and said he was unable to find support at his son's school when his son began to question his sexual orientation.

"I didn't know what to tell him," the man said. "There was no one at the school who could help him answer his questions."

When one teacher asked the youth presenters what educators could do to help Gay students, each presenter said they should speak out against anti-Gay language.



by Clint Steib

"Young people need to know that if they have questions, they can get answers," said Craig Bowman, executive director of SMYAL.

"I would hope that all of you would walk up to a child who said something homophobic and say, 'This is not appropriate in our school,' regardless of what your school's discrimination policy states," said Dave.

The students also mentioned some of the "demands" listed as part of the Safer Schools Initiative, including enacting anti-harassment policies that would protect Gay youth from verbal and physical harassment; integrating Gay, bisexual, and transgender-positive images into existing courses; and creating an anonymous system for students to report anti-Gay harassment.

"Young people need to know that if they have questions, they can get answers," said Craig Bowman, executive director of the 13-year-old SMYAL.

The presentation also included the screening of 15-minutes from the award-winning documentary *It's Elementary*, which focuses on how some elementary schools educate children about Gay issues.

"The 'sticks and stones' statement we all heard when we were little isn't true," said Postell. "Words can kill."

A 1989 study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found that Gay teens are two to six times more likely to commit suicide than their heterosexual peers. Nationally, 28 percent of Gay youth drop out of school because of anti-Gay harassment, and 40 percent say their school work suffers because of homophobia at school, according to the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Teacher's Network. ▼

Anti-Gay Violence

Gay Men and Lesbians opposing Violence is a group that monitors anti-Gay violence in the D.C. area. To report an incident of verbal or physical harassment, call GLOV at

202/ 452-7448