

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.

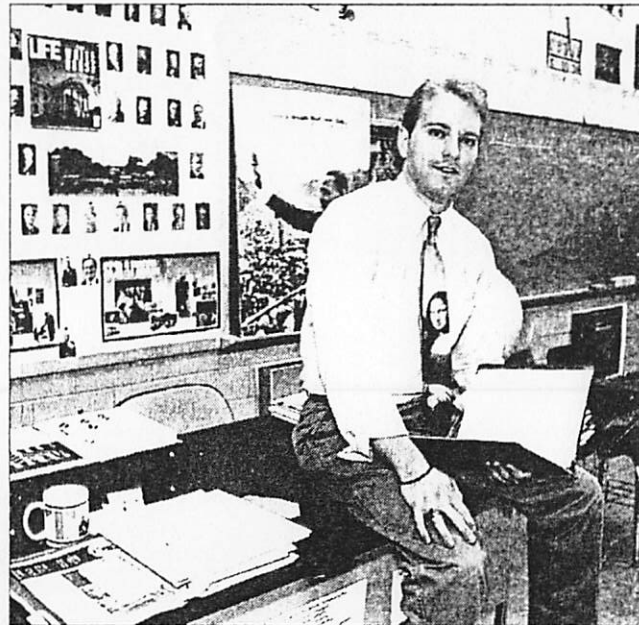
Parents on both sides of the issue spoke to the Mehlville School Board after a local newspaper published a story about Mr. Wilson.

"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 troubled, 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."