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## “It Has Nothing to Do with Me”

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DIANE ELZE

*I remember in fifth grade we had this thing called the “fag test.” What would happen is that a kid would go up to another kid and scratch him on the hand as hard as he could, and if it made a scar, or if it bled, that meant he was a fag.*

—A seventeen-year-old

**H**e said it so adamantly, this eighteen-year-old working-class man. “It has nothing to do with me. It has nothing to do with me,” he said, glancing quickly at his friends for their nods of approval, his body tensing, when I asked him how he feels when he witnesses homophobic name-calling directed at other young people.

I sighed. Well, I never thought interviewing a group of heterosexually identified adolescents about homophobia would be easy.

“It has nothing to do with me.” When I left him and the others that day, his words rang in my ears, a perfect encapsulation of what we are up against when we try to challenge homophobia and other forms of oppression. How do I teach him that it has everything to do with him?

I remember the young boys squirming in their seats when I popped the hot question. “What could be wonderful about having a friend who is gay?” I asked, during a workshop on prejudice with a group of fifth- and sixth-grade students. Oh, how they squirmed, their hands tightly gripping their pencils or the sides of their chairs, their faces growing flushed, their heads nervously moving from side to side, hoping their friends knew they were not taking this question seriously.

Earlier, we explored the language of racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and ableism, and, in small groups, the students shared how they had been victimized by different forms of prejudice, particularly by classism, as so many came from rural poor and working-class Maine families. With much honesty, they also shared how they had victimized others.

They responded enthusiastically to questions like, "What could be wonderful about having a friend from Cambodia or Vietnam?" and, "What could be wonderful about having a friend who uses a wheelchair?" They talked of learning about each other's cultures, enriching each other's lives, helping their friend fight for access to school programs. But when asked, "What could be wonderful about having a friend who is gay?" many moments of silence followed.

"I know this is very difficult," I said, my voice soft and encouraging. "We're used to hearing only bad and untrue things about gay people. Now, really think hard. What could be wonderful about having a friend who is gay?"

The young boys continued squirming. Several more minutes lapsed. Finally, a fifth-grade girl raised her hand. "I might learn that I wouldn't have to be afraid," she said. I thanked her for her heartfelt response and then felt very sad at how difficult that question was for them.

"What gives?" I asked Bill, an OUTRIGHT member, after he and several other young men missed their prescheduled interview with me for the second time, highly atypical behavior among these young gay activists who are usually, if anything, *too* committed, eager to risk their jobs or a school detention to attend the next speaking engagement. "How can you tell who is the gay or lesbian youth?" they'll sometimes joke. "It's the workaholic who's always falling asleep in class." For this essay, I wanted their perspective on how homophobia hurts heterosexual youths.

"I just don't want to talk about it," Bill said, shrugging his shoulders and looking confused, searching himself for exactly why he felt troubled. "I don't care if it hurts them," he finally said, anger in his voice.

I scold myself for not anticipating this. Bill, nineteen years old, has been repeatedly bashed, verbally and physically, in his small, rural high school, his wounds too raw for him to theorize how such homophobia could harm the perpetrators.

This essay is a collection of voices. The voices belong to young men and women between fourteen and twenty years of age, heterosexual, gay, and lesbian. The young people represented here are white, the majority from poor and working-class families. Their voices tell us about the many ways homophobia hurts them. Their words also show us how homophobia and sexism are inextricably linked. As they go about their lives in school, at work, and in their neighborhoods, young people risk the label *queer* or *fag* should their behavior fall outside rigid gender-role expectations. Their voices tell us how much work we still must do.

### "I'd Have Sex Just to Prove I Was Straight."

*I think homophobia forces a lot of people to be sexually active. Even young people who know they're straight feel like they have to show it to prevent themselves from being called queer.*

—A sixteen-year-old woman

Young people have sex for many reasons: fun and pleasure, rebellion, to defy parents and other authority figures, for love, money, status among their peers, out of boredom, because they are under the influence of alcohol or other drugs, for attention, affection, and intimacy, and to prove they are "normal" (i.e., heterosexual). In a society that stigmatizes homosexuality and withholds from young people accurate information on sexuality, including the development of sexual orientation, heterosexual sex provides anxious teenagers with a means to prove their heterosexuality.

We bombard adolescents with conflicting messages about sexuality and sexual decision making. Family, religious institutions, peers, videos, music, and advertising scream at teenagers every-

thing from "Abstinence Makes the Heart Grow Fonder" to "Sex Is the Gateway to Nirvana." We fail to empower young people to integrate the joys of sex into their lives, protecting and caring for themselves at the same time.

Hence, teenage sexual activity can have serious consequences. Only 24 percent of unmarried sexually active teenage women, ages fifteen to nineteen, consistently use any form of birth control, and only 21 percent of those using contraception report condom use. Each year, one teenager in six, or 2.5 million teens, contracts a sexually transmitted disease. Over 20 percent of people with AIDS are in their twenties, most of whom were probably infected as teenagers.<sup>1</sup> The Center for Disease Control reported 1,429 cases of AIDS among teens by March 1990.<sup>2</sup>

Some young women we interviewed had this to say about the pressures to be sexually active:

In the locker room we'd talk about how many of us were virgins, how this guy was in bed, what party you were going to that night, and who you were going to be with. After softball or basketball practice, everybody would be showering and then doing up their hair and putting on their makeup to get ready for their man.

The thing to do was to go out and get laid.

In my high school, we were expected to have a boyfriend who would give you his letter jacket or his high school ring, and be the happy couple, and get married with a Catholic wedding right after graduation.

For gay and lesbian youths, heterosexual sexual activity serves as a refuge, although sometimes an anguished one, from the label *fag*, *queer*, *lezzie*, or *dyke*. They may use heterosexual relationships to mask their sexual orientation or to attempt to force themselves to change.

YOUNG LESBIAN, AGE TWENTY: When I first noticed I was having these "odd feelings" toward women, probably in seventh grade, I tried to hide them for a long time. By the time I was in high school, I was very sexually active with men. I'd have sex at parties just to

prove I was straight. I grew up in a very Catholic community. To have sex before marriage was a sin, but to screw another woman was to get in big trouble and commit a mortal sin. I'd go to parties and get real drunk. I couldn't have sex with a man when I was sober. I wasn't into makeup or stuff like that, but I could get by because I was fucking men. Looking at me, everyone thought *dyke*, and I had that against me, so I started doing anything I could to make them think I was straight.

YOUNG GAY MAN, AGE SEVENTEEN: I just fucked someone to prove that I was OK. I'd go to a party and go into a bedroom with someone, and I was OK.

YOUNG LESBIAN, AGE SIXTEEN: Some young women I know become really sexually active to avoid being called a lesbian, and they're straight. I think homophobia forces a lot of people to be sexually active. Even young people who know they're straight feel they have to show it to prevent themselves from being called *queer*.

YOUNG LESBIAN, AGE SIXTEEN: I remember a friend of mine who was sleeping with a lot of men. I overheard someone asking her why she was going to screw this one guy who was a real loser, and she said, "If I don't, people will think I'm a dyke." She was only thirteen at the time.

This pressure to prove one's heterosexuality places young people at risk for pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. In addition, AIDS-phobia has fueled homophobia, and homophobia allows teens to ignore their own risk for HIV infection. A common misconception among heterosexual teens is that AIDS affects only people who are gay and IV drug users, a belief that places heterosexual teens at risk.

Many gay and lesbian high school students in OUTRIGHT have admitted that they dread the day AIDS education is scheduled for their health class, as it provides students with one more opportunity to engage in verbal gay bashing, much of which goes unchallenged by the teacher.

YOUNG GAY MAN, AGE EIGHTEEN: When we do any kind of AIDS education, I brace myself for days of hearing "fag this" and "fag that,"

and it's never handled very well by the teachers. All the teachers say is that anyone can get AIDS, but they don't say that it's wrong to use the word *fag* or that homosexuality is normal, and they don't talk about how calling people names is the pits.

YOUNG LESBIAN, AGE TWENTY: I didn't ever really think about getting pregnant. I didn't do anything about it. I never used any type of birth control. I thought it would be cool to have a kid because that would mean I was definitely not gay. . . . And I never worried about STDs.

YOUNG GAY MAN, AGE NINETEEN: Just look at the graffiti in any high school bathroom, especially right after we talk about AIDS. If anybody wonders whether homophobia is a problem, they just have to look in there.

YOUNG MAN, AGE EIGHTEEN: AIDS scares people. It's the first thing people think of when they think of homosexuals.

While the young heterosexual men denied that homophobia played a role in their sexual decision making and in the sexual decision making of their friends, their denial was strongly challenged by the young heterosexual women in the interview group.

YOUNG WOMAN, AGE SEVENTEEN: Guys try to prove how manly they are by how much they score, how many girls they conquer. If they can brag about how many girls they've slept with, if they can score a lot, no one would ever think they are gay.

YOUNG WOMAN, AGE EIGHTEEN: If a guy goes out on a date with some girl, and his friends ask him if he scored last night, if he says no, they'd say stuff like, "Oh, you're not good enough," or, "You must be a faggot." If it happens over and over and over, they might even think he never went out on a date with her and that he must be gay.

Young women realize how such different prescriptions for acceptable male and female sexual behavior lead to violence against women. A film in the "Acquaintance Rape Prevention" series addresses the relation between peer pressure, gender roles, and ac-

quaintance rape. *Just One of the Boys* shows a sexually inexperienced young man wondering what to do when two of his football teammates urge him to participate in the rape of a young woman with a "bad reputation." "What if they find out?" he says to himself, as they shout for him to come on. Find out what? That he is inexperienced? That he is, therefore, a *sissy*, a *fag*, a *wimp*?

YOUNG WOMAN, AGE SEVENTEEN: I think some guys prove themselves, prove their sexuality, their masculinity, by raping women.

YOUNG LESBIAN, AGE EIGHTEEN: I have so many friends who have been date raped. I know someone who was raped in front of a male friend of hers, and he didn't do anything about it. She said he just looked away and allowed it to happen. I'm sure he was afraid of being called *queer*.

### "He Talks Like a Girl"

LAURA: *Being caring and sensitive is not macho.*

BARB: *That's why I'm attracted to more feminine men.*

SUSAN: *Men with emotions.*

LAURA: *Yeah, normal.*

—An exchange among three seventeen- and eighteen-year-old women

Homophobia serves to squeeze young men and women into rigid gender roles, limiting their aspirations, squelching their dreams of what they can be, isolating those youths whose behaviors defy traditional ideals of "masculine" and "feminine," and fostering violence against gay and lesbian youths and those perceived to be gay or lesbian. A spirited debate about gender roles naturally evolved in our discussions about homophobia. This dialogue also illustrates how both heterosexual and gay and lesbian youths are victimized by homophobia and become potential targets of violence.

DIANE: Who gets called *queer* or *fag* in school?

TAMMY, AGE THIRTEEN: People who look different, who aren't as

smart as other people. Someone who is unpopular. Boys who are more feminine get called *fairy* or *fag*, and kids don't hang around with them. They avoid them. Sometimes people get called *fag* because of the way they talk, like if a boy's voice squeaks, and no one will hang around with them.

MARK, AGE FOURTEEN: Lots of kids, but most of the time it's only joking. You do something goofy and people will call you *queer*.

DIANE: Who gets called that seriously?

TOM, AGE FIFTEEN: A guy at our high school on the cheerleading team. He does the cheers with the girls. He gets called names constantly, every game. He's about as feminine as you can get. The only thing he doesn't have is a skirt.

JIM, AGE EIGHTEEN: Does that make him gay?

TOM: No, but everybody calls him a fag.

PHIL, AGE SIXTEEN: He's a sick puppy. Who wants to watch a boy cheerleader? It's mostly girls who go out for cheerleading. I've never seen a guy out there cheerleading before. I wouldn't look at him, for one thing. It's pretty sickening.

DIANE: Tom, you used the word *feminine*. How is he feminine?

TOM: The way he walks. The way he acts. You should see him cheerleading. He's right at home. I've never seen him walk down the halls at school. He doesn't dare show his face.

ALICE, AGE SIXTEEN: He hangs out with a couple boys, and he doesn't really seem to be a fag, but everybody thinks he is because he does all girl things. He walks like a girl.

DIANE: How do girls walk? Can you describe that to me?

TOM: Hands out to the side. Real soft.

ALICE: Like this. [She demonstrates, making quick, small steps with her feet and holding her arms out to the side.]

DIANE: Is that how you usually walk, Alice?

ALICE: No. [Laughs.]

JIM: You mustn't be a girl, huh?!

DIANE: Where does that leave us, then?

Among the heterosexual youths we interviewed, adherence to gender-stereotyped norms of behavior extends to perceptions of

appropriate career options. Both sexes lose. Young women receive some affirmation for pursuing nontraditional jobs, but they are under tremendous pressure to pursue traditional female occupations. Young men, however, garner no status in jobs historically assigned to women and are more likely to be labeled *queer*. Homophobia also limits the aspirations of gay and lesbian youths, as they believe a meaningful career cannot coexist with their sexual orientation.

TAMMY: There was this guy. He was my uncle's friend, and he was really nice, and you never would have thought he was gay. He dresses like a man, he has a job, and he acts like a man, talks like a man. He has a man's job.

JIM: What's a man's job?

TAMMY: You don't see many women out there selling cars, do you?

JIM: Sure you do. Sure you do.

TAMMY: Construction workers.

MARK: Construction worker. That's a man's job.

JIM AND ALICE: [In unison.] No, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter.

DIANE: If you saw a woman carrying a big sledgehammer, Mark, what would you think about her?

MARK: Dyke. Dyke.

JIM: I think it would be cool.

TAMMY: Yeah, I think it would be cool, if they did whatever they wanted to do.

MARK: If she was walking like this [demonstrates], acting all big and tough like a man, I'd think *dyke*.

JIM: There's no difference between a man's job and a woman's job. Women are doing just as much as men. Chemists, technicians, machine operators, laborers. I'm a hand sewer. There are women hand sewers, construction workers, everything.

MARK: Well, if I saw a woman driving a truck, I'd think *dyke*, just because of the way she acts and what she does for a living.

TAMMY: I think a woman has guts if she does what she wants to

do, like if she wants to be a construction worker, and I think a man has guts if he wants to do what he wants to do and doesn't care what other people think.

DIANE: Why does it take guts? What is gutsy about that?

TAMMY: Because they might get called *queer*, and people would think they are no good. My sister is a secretary, and I know a guy who is a secretary, and he gets called a *fag* and everything. I know a lot of men who are secretaries. If they go anywhere, they're all supposedly *fairies* because it's a woman's job.

When gay and lesbian youths acknowledge their sexual orientation, a fairly typical response, especially among those youths who have experienced isolation and the absence of any positive information about gays, is illustrated by the experience of this eighteen-year-old lesbian:

When I came out, I thought my life was over. I thought I'd never be happy now that I was gay. I thought I could never have a house, or children, or a relationship, or a good job.

### "They'd Call You Sissy"

*No one feels free enough to be real with each other, and people keep each other at a distance.*

—A seventeen-year-old

Homophobia interferes with the development of physical and emotional intimacy between same-sex friends. Young people fear being stigmatized as *queer*. Young men feel terror at the thought of a male friend touching them in an intimate way. Friendships also become strained between gay and lesbian youths and their heterosexual peers, as gay youths often approach their friendships expecting rejection.

YOUNG LESBIAN, AGE TWENTY: Before I got into junior high, my friends and I would always be touching each other, hugging each other, and holding hands. That's what little girls do. When we got

into junior high, that changed. You never saw much of that. No one ever did that in public anymore. No one touched each other. Everyone stopped hugging each other. We wouldn't brush each other's hair. We'd never hold hands.

YOUNG WOMAN, AGE SEVENTEEN: I know a lot of young men who are gay. Homophobia played a role in how they treated me in a different sense. My gay friends started out fearing I'd be homophobic. They'd assume I wouldn't understand how they felt or that I'd have a negative reaction. And they'd play it up in a way. I have a friend whom I met when he thought he was straight. We were never sexually involved, but we'd kiss and play around. I didn't see him for about a year, and friends told me he came out. I ran into him, and he was "Mr. Homosexual" with me, and talked down to me, like, "Oh, you could never understand me."

YOUNG LESBIAN, AGE EIGHTEEN: Yeah, and everyone assumes everyone else is going to be homophobic, and they play off each other and feed each other, and everyone acts homophobically because that's what they all expect.

YOUNG WOMAN, AGE SEVENTEEN: I think it's so great to see a man hugging another man, and you just don't see it very often. They'll punch each other on the arm, and do macho stuff like that. It's more accepted for women to be affectionate with each other than it is for men, and I think it's very hard for men to even imagine themselves with another man. The thought horrifies them, and they get instantly defensive.

YOUNG LESBIAN, AGE EIGHTEEN: There was a popular movie last year, *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*, and it was a pretty good movie, really hilarious. In one scene, however, one of them had fallen down the stairs, and the other was very concerned, and ran over to make sure he was all right, and they hugged each other, and then both backed off, and looked at each other, and yelled "fag" at each other. I was really pissed.

YOUNG WOMAN, AGE SEVENTEEN: I've always been physically affectionate with my friends—hugging, kissing them on the cheek,

walking arm in arm down the street. I've experienced people assuming we're lesbians because of what we're doing. I've been called *dyke* by people on the street when they saw us being physically affectionate. I've had some friends get nervous and push me off, not wanting to touch anymore.

**YOUNG LESBIAN, AGE SEVENTEEN:** Young people who are really prejudiced against homosexuals are really prejudiced against a lot of different people. If you open yourself to one prejudice, a thousand others seep in. Many kids I know who are prejudiced against gay people are also prejudiced against people of color and people who dress a certain way. That really hurts people. They become really close-minded.

The young heterosexual men with whom I spoke could not conceive of expressing physical affection with their male friends. As we would expect, however, it is more acceptable for young women to be affectionate with their female friends, although anxiety is present, and self-censorship occurs.

**DIANE:** Mark and Tom, do you have a best buddy?

**MARK AND TOM:** Yes.

**DIANE:** Would you feel free to walk from one end of Congress Street to the other with your arm around him?

**TOM:** If you paid me money to do it.

**DIANE:** How much money would it take?

**JIM:** You don't have enough.

**MARK:** It depends. If my friend went away for a long time. . . . No, I wouldn't do it then, either. I'd shake his hand.

**JIM:** I wouldn't do it. But I wouldn't be afraid to do it. What would make me do it in the first place? He's my friend, but I don't show affection. I'd shake his hand. That's good enough for me.

**DIANE:** How come you don't hug your friends?

**JIM:** I do.

**DIANE:** Your male friends?

**JIM:** [Makes a noise like a buzzer.] Wrong answer. Girls.

**DIANE:** How come you don't hug your male friends?

**JIM:** Because they are friends. How do you greet a person? You say hello and shake their hand. Am I wrong? I rest my case. There's nothing more to it than that.

**PAM:** I disagree with him. I hug my female friends. If I hadn't seen my girlfriends in a month or two, I would hug them. It's easier for girls to do it. It's more acceptable for girls because you find more guys who are gay. Guys are more afraid of people thinking they're gay.

**TAMMY:** I disagree with Jim, too. Whenever I see a friend from another grade in the hallway at school, we'll give each other a hug. And whenever I see my cousin, she'll always ask for a hug because she misses me. I know she's my cousin, and I know she's not gay, but sometimes when she kisses me on the cheek I feel really weird. People look and laugh at us. She doesn't care, but I feel a little weird.

**TOM:** You hear girls all the time saying, "Oh, she looks great today. Isn't she pretty!" But if a guy says that, you're gay right there. If you say one of your male friends looks good today, someone will say, "Hey, you homo."

The verbal and physical abuse directed at those who do not conform to gender-role expectations victimizes both gay and heterosexual youths, and gay and lesbian youths may participate in their own oppression by perpetrating or silently witnessing the abuse of others.

**YOUNG LESBIAN, AGE EIGHTEEN:** I didn't know women could be homosexual. I knew that being gay was wrong for guys. I used to be just one of the guys. I was an active participant in creating homophobia. If a guy didn't play football, which was a big thing in my neighborhood, or if a guy wore mittens to play ice football, we'd all go, "Oh, you sissy, you fag," and we'd start pushing him around and tackling him extra hard. . . . If you could fight, people would take back calling you a sissy. If you couldn't, you'd be tagged a sissy for the rest of the time you lived in the neighborhood. I got picked to go after this one guy. The guys would never let him live down the fact that a girl kicked his butt.

YOUNG LESBIAN, AGE SEVENTEEN: I was like one of the guys in my neighborhood, too. I played ice hockey. It was a really big thing in my family to play ice hockey, and my brother wouldn't play, and he was the only male child. My grandfather really regarded my brother as a sissy. He called him a sissy to his face. So I started to play ice hockey. My brother would sit on the sidelines, and we'd call him a sissy and harass him. We'd call him a faggot.

YOUNG LESBIAN, AGE EIGHTEEN: I suffered a lot of harassment in high school. The woman who harassed me the most my freshman year was a very big, very tall, very masculine-looking woman. She would just rag on me about being a dyke. Others did the same thing to her. She didn't belong to the nice preppy group, and she was targeted by them.

YOUNG LESBIAN, AGE EIGHTEEN: In gym class, we'd tease boys who couldn't throw a ball, of course. We'd call them fags. In high school there were kids who everyone thought were gay, and other kids were very violent toward them, toward one kid in particular. I don't remember ever seeing him with anyone as a friend.

YOUNG LESBIAN, AGE EIGHTEEN: In high school I had these two girlfriends, and we were always together, but there were these rumors that I was a lesbian and in love with one of them. I knew I was a lesbian at the time, but I wasn't in love with my friend. A lot of people stopped talking to me. I stopped going to school halfway into my senior year and eventually applied to a private program for kids having trouble with public school.

### “If He Touches Me, I’ll Bash Him”

*I was in a rehab for adolescents. The health teacher asked us what we'd do if we found out our best friend was gay. There had been a movie on TV about it. Well, the kids in the rehab said things like they'd beat on the person. Then the teacher asked what we'd do if one of the kids in the rehab was gay. People's answers were really scary. “I'd beat on him.” “I'd kick*

*him out.” One guy even said he'd kill the person. A gay resident left after that. He was just coming out about his sexuality and got really freaked out.*

—A twenty-year-old

Sadly, the heterosexual adolescents we interviewed found it difficult to imagine befriending someone who is gay or lesbian. During this discussion, additional myths they held about homosexuality emerged—that gay and lesbian people possess uncontrollable sexual urges and are attracted to everyone of the same sex, that close relationships with gay and lesbian people will transform them into homosexuals, that homosexuality is deviant and unnatural, and that gay and lesbian people have nothing in common with them.

Not only are they afraid to establish intimacy with same-sex friends, but for the young heterosexual men touching that fear of getting close quickly leads to articulations of violence against any man who would approach them in a physically intimate manner. The terror of being touched lies right under the surface.

DIANE: Can you imagine having a friend who is gay or lesbian? [Lengthy silence, nervous giggles.]

JIM: It depends. If that person is your only friend, you have nothing to worry about. But if you have more friends than that, there goes your reputation.

PHIL: I'd be afraid they'd be looking at me. I'd definitely have a hard time. I don't want some guy looking at me.

JIM: I'd be afraid they'd be undressing me in their mind, and I'd have that instant uneasy feeling.

PAM: But let's say they're your friend and they know you're not gay.

MARK: If it's your friend and they're queer, they probably want you to be queer.

LORI: I'd be very uncomfortable, like among my peers. I'd be afraid they'd think I was gay, too.

JIM: Yeah, it would make you feel like nobody would look up to you the same way as they did before, knowing that you have that gay friend.



TOM: I definitely couldn't have a friend who was gay. If someone hit on me, I could see how I could definitely fly off the wall and hurt someone.

MARK: He better not touch me if he's homo. If he's attracted to me, he's not my friend anymore. Well, he could still be my friend, but he'd have to stay away from me. If he did touch me, he wouldn't live to see the next day.

PHIL: Same thing. As long as they didn't touch me, it would be all right. If he ever hit on me, that would be a big problem.

TOM: I'd definitely want to bash him if he touched me.

PHIL: Definitely.

DIANE: What if a woman hit on you whom you weren't interested in at all?

TOM: I wouldn't be offended if a female hit on me who was a friend. I might tell her off.

PHIL: At least they'd have the sexes right.

MARK: Yeah, at least they'd have the sexes right. I'd tell her to stay away from me. I'd never hit a girl. If she was a nice person, I'd say, "You're a nice person, but you're just not for me. I don't want you touching me."

LORI: I wouldn't feel as threatened if a woman hit on me. Guys are bigger.

JIM: If you have a friend who you know for a fact is gay, then you worry. You're always going to be wondering if the two of you joke around physically. Maybe they don't know when to draw the line. Maybe you don't know when to draw the line, and that's when you have to call it quits. You're always going to worry about whether they are really joking.

TAMMY: If I had a friend and I found out she was a lesbian, it really wouldn't change my opinion of her. I would still hang around with her unless she started throwing passes at me, and then I'd back off.

## "We Want Them to Do Something"

*Can it happen that a heterosexual guy will wake up and say, "Oh, I think I'm tired of the opposite sex."*

*I'm going to find me a man? That's a scary concept. I hope that can't happen.*

—An eighteen-year-old male

*What do we want teachers to do? I want them to stop allowing gay and lesbian kids to be verbally abused in class, right in front of their noses, and to think about the fact that we're sitting right there, but they just don't know it.*

—A sixteen-year-old lesbian

"You can't do anything about it," Pam said, during our discussion of gender roles and homophobia. "It will always be like that."

Tammy seconded her remarks. "You can't change it. There's nothing you can do. It's always going to happen," she said.

Our task is to show these young people a different way—not an easy assignment, but one we must take on if we believe in stopping young people from being needlessly hurt.

Gay and lesbian students are being oppressed by name-calling, physical violence, and, perhaps most insidious of all, damaging myths about who they are and what they can be as gay men and lesbians. Heterosexual students are being hurt by name-calling and physical violence, should they defy gender-role stereotypes, and, perhaps most insidious of all, damaging myths about who they are and what they can be as men and women.

Parents and professionals working with youths possess a great deal of power to transform homophobia into understanding and appreciation of gay and lesbian people, to transform anxiety and ignorance about issues of sexuality into self-esteem and self-confidence, and to help young women and men aspire to greatness as compassionate people capable of establishing intimacy with other human beings.

Just ask any gay or lesbian youth. These youths can teach us how to create safe environments for young people. They are experts at knowing what does not feel safe. Safe environments allow self-esteem to flourish, environments free from racist, sexist, able-ist, classist, and homophobic oppression. I have learned this from gay and lesbian youths.

"My English teacher stopped a homophobic joke once," one

young gay man shared. "Man, I thought I'd get down on my knees and kiss her feet on the spot. It made me feel like I wasn't all alone. I even thought about coming out to her, but I didn't. But it helped just the same."

Young people know that we teach them as much by our silences as we do with our words. They hear the ear-splitting messages in our silence about gay and lesbian youths in health and sexuality education, our silence when the homophobic or sexist joke is made by the student in the front row, our silence when the new poster about gay and lesbian youths is pulled off the wall in the school nurse's office, our silence when the presentation by a gay and lesbian youth group during "Teen Issues Week" is suddenly canceled.

The interviews with heterosexual youths illustrate how homophobia is rooted in ignorance and untruths. Myths about homosexuality abound, and most school health education curricula do little to dispel the stereotypes. The words of the eighteen-year-old quoted above illustrate the lack of knowledge shared by so many young people about the nature of sexual orientation. This young man feared that he could wake up one morning and find himself turned into a homosexual, against his will, a victim of some mysterious, supernatural force.

During a workshop on gay and lesbian youths for high school peer counselors, a student wrote the following note to the OUTRIGHT participants in the question-and-answer period: "Your presence here today has done more to show me that homosexual people are people just like me than anything else ever could." We need to do more of the same thing, and at an earlier age.

I have a little friend who is five years old. We spend an evening together every week, and my partner sometimes joins me. One night, my little friend and I got into one of our many intense conversations, this one about families. He told me all about the different kinds of families the children in his day-care center come from. I asked him if he knew that it was against the law for my partner and me to get married. (He knew what "against the law" meant because we once had a lengthy conversation about my stay in the D.C. jail following the 1987 civil disobedience action at the U.S. Supreme Court. "Sometimes people should do things that are

against the law," I taught him, with pride.) Uncertain, he wrinkled his brow and asked me why. I explained that the law allowed only men and women to marry each other, not two women or two men. His face suddenly brightened, as if a light went on in his very big brain, and he said, with excitement, "We talked about that at school, Auntie Elze [his pet name for me], and my teacher told us that was going to change soon, and if you'd like me to, I'll ask her when, and I'll call you and let you know tomorrow."

Oh, how I laughed, and I gave him a very big hug, and I told him I would look forward to his phone call.

"It has everything to do with me," I hope he will say at eighteen, when he witnesses someone being victimized by prejudice.

#### NOTES

This article was developed with the invaluable assistance of members of OUTRIGHT, the Portland Alliance of Gay and Lesbian Youth, and the People's Regional Opportunity Program Peer Leaders, who contributed their own words and the words of their peers. Their names, and the names of other young people interviewed, have been changed to protect their privacy. I interviewed small groups of gay, lesbian, and heterosexual identified teenagers, and a few of the young people also interviewed some of their peers. Established in 1987, OUTRIGHT is Maine's first support group for gay, lesbian, and bisexual youths. The PROP Peer Leader Program, also established in 1987, is a nationally acclaimed substance abuse prevention program training young people from Portland's public housing projects to be peer leaders.

1. Center for Population Options, "Adolescents, AIDS, and the Human Immunodeficiency Virus," a fact sheet, April 1989, Washington, D.C.
2. Barbara Kantrowitz, "The Dangers of Doing It," *Newsweek* (special issue, Summer/Fall 1990), 56-57.