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'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' Is Alive and Well for Gay Educators

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On December 22, 2010, President Obama made history [1] by signing the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.”

During the emotional ceremony, he said [2]: “No longer will tens of thousands of Americans in uniform be asked to live a lie, or look over their shoulder, in order to serve the country that they love. For we are not a nation that says, 'don't ask, don’t tell.' We are a nation that says, 'Out of many, we are one.'”

Obama’s inspiring words represent a major civil rights victory for LGBT members of the armed forces, but the new law's reach is limited.

For thousands of gay teachers serving on the frontlines of America’s classrooms, “don’t ask, don’t tell” remains a painful fact of life.

UNSPOKEN CODE

Fredrick Willis has been a public school teacher for the past eight years. Originally from North Carolina, he currently teaches at a high school in Maryland.

In a recent interview with TakePart, Willis described the harassment he’s endured as a gay educator.

“I felt earlier in my career that I was targeted by administrators because of my sexuality,” Willis says. “It’s almost acceptable in our profession. It’s common. I’ve also been called names. Faggot,

gay, rainbow, player. You name it, I've probably been called it at some point in time by students."

In one troubling incident, a male student accused Willis of having a crush on him and being too hard on him in class. Thankfully, Willis says, the assistant principal helped convince the student's mother that her son's accusations were false.

LGBT teachers have long understood that openly expressing their identity in school can make them an easy target for discrimination.

"Don't ask, don't tell—that is the policy," Willis explains. "Keep your identity secret. If it doesn't come up, then don't say anything. If it does come up, you should deny. That is the unspoken code of conduct."

Matt Tratner is a 12-year veteran of New York City's teaching force. In an interview with TakePart, he talked about feeling pressured as a new teacher to keep his sexual orientation a secret. "When I first started teaching, it was suggested that I don't say anything," Tratner reveals. "They couldn't straight out say that, but it was suggested."

Tratner currently teaches at John Bowne High School [3], where he felt safe coming out to students and staff. "There's really never any issues with any of the gay, straight, lesbian, transsexual, transgender students. They're very open, and everyone's very supportive."

But a recent incident alerted Tratner that the openness at his school is the exception and not the rule.

A T-SHIRT WITH A MESSAGE

On November 17, 2010, Tratner wore a new t-shirt to school that said: "OUT and I am not alone" in large bright blue print. He wore the shirt at the request of a friend who designed it to raise money for the Trevor Project [4]—a national toll-free suicide helpline for gay youth.

When Tratner posted a photo of himself on Facebook wearing the OUT t-shirt in his classroom, he was overwhelmed by the outpouring of support he received. More than 300 people commented and sent messages. "By the end of the day, other teachers were asking where they could get the shirt," said Tratner.

After the Huffington Post and the AP picked up the t-shirt story [5], Tratner received hundreds of emails from around the globe. Many were from teachers who applauded his courage in boldly expressing his identity, and who wished they had the freedom to do the same.

"It's sad to say that I don't necessarily realize how much support we have here in New York City, where I can walk around with that shirt, and the Board of Education really can't do anything against me," Tratner marvels. "From some of the emails I received from people from other parts of the world, and other parts of the United States, I didn't realize how detrimental something as simple as that could be to their vocations, their job security, to their own safety. It was something I had an idea about, but it wasn't until I got people's personal accounts that it became something much more."

In the state of New York, it's illegal for employers to discriminate against employees based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation. That's not the case in other parts of the country, where teachers have been fired [6] simply for admitting that they're gay.

LEGALLY SPEAKING

Currently, 21 states and the District of Columbia have laws [7]that protect employees from discrimination based on sexual orientation. In nine of those states, discrimination based on gender identity is also illegal.

Carolyn Laub is the executive director of the Gay-Straight Alliance Network [8], which supports students in creating and sustaining school-based Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs.

Laub tells TakePart that gay educators in states without legal protection have to conceal their identity for fear of professional retribution.

"In states where there are not currently employment protections, based on actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, it's very risky for some educators who are LGBT identified to be out on their campus," Laub says. "They're fearful."

Those states typically have very few GSA clubs because students can't find enough teachers, gay or straight, who are willing to be club advisors. Laub explains: "The teachers are not willing to be out, or risk possibly being fired if their administration doesn't support them, and there are no legal protections."

According to Laub, the Employment Non-Discrimination Act [7] (ENDA) would put a stop to sexual orientation and gender-identity discrimination by extending employment protections to everyone across the country.

The current version of the bill has been pending in Congress since 2009, and might not be introduced until 2013 [5].

ENDA faces considerable opposition. When it comes to the teaching profession, there are those who believe [9] that openly gay teachers corrupt the morality of youth and should be kept out of the classroom.

But according to Matt Tratner, when gay teachers are forced to hide their true selves, it is the students who ultimately suffer.

SILENCE = DEATH

Back in the late '80s, the Silence = Death Project [10] was created to raise awareness for HIV and AIDS.

"Silence equals death in many ways," Tratner says. "Whether it's emotional or physical or social. It's sending a bad message. It's saying that we keep secrets because these secrets are bad."

Kids are usually aware of which teachers are straight and which are gay, Tratner claims. When students perceive that they're not supposed to talk about homosexuality, they conclude that there must be something wrong about being gay.

It's a dangerous message that can lead to bullying [11] and harassment.

Carolyn Laub highlights the need for LGBT teachers to serve as role models for kids: "It's very powerful both for straight students and for LGBT students to know that they have teachers and people they respect who are LGBT and who are good at their jobs. It's important for all students to see that modeled."

For Fredrick Willis, deciding if and when to come out to students is a delicate matter. On the one hand, he says, coming out provides students with "a great opportunity to be expressive and open and honest with their classmates if they observe a teacher who is open and honest."

On the other hand, it makes teachers vulnerable to a host of potential liabilities. "It does also cost a lot," says Willis. "Will you be limited in where you can go and what you can do because you opened up that gate? For me, as a teacher who wants to go further into administration, that is a concern. So all professionals, we find that balance to operate within the confines the system has set up. It's unfortunate, but that's the current system we play in."

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