

No Homo Promo

Jefferson: I'm Jefferson Fietek and I teach theater arts at Anoka Middle School for the Arts, which for a number of years was Fred Moore Middle School for the Arts, and then a couple of years ago, changed its name.

Stephen: Did you have any idea what the policies or the attitudes towards LGBT people were when you took the job?

Jefferson: Having grown up in the school district, it was pretty clear to me that being gay was not OK, growing up there. So when I was offered the job, I was nervous.

Part of my training was through a mentor teacher saying to me, "You know, you really shouldn't be out." And she mentioned the No Promo Homo Policy, and that was the first I had heard about it, and just thought it was absolutely the most absurd, ridiculous thing I'd ever heard, cuz I couldn't imagine that I was the only gay teacher in the district that this was creating a conflict for.

You know, being a gay person you're always under a microscope for your behavior. Knowing that I was like I want to make sure I'm the teacher that's involved in the most stuff, that I have all my lesson plans and everything, so I'm just a really solid, strong teacher. I'm grateful to have been, actually, recognized for my work as a teacher. I was Anoka-Hennepin District's 11, one of their top teacher award winners; I was awarded by the Ordway Center for the Arts for my work with youth.

So that was really just trying to be a positive, positive role model so that they couldn't use the gay component to be negative. And if the kids figured out that I was gay, I thought, "Well, you know what, if the kids see me as a positive role model, and then they figure out that I'm gay" - it's against policy technically, because I'm being a positive gay role model - but I thought, "So be it."

And I kind of thought that was enough.

And then, as I started to really work with the kids and see what was going on and see the struggles and hardships, I thought, "OK. Me being a positive gay role model is not enough."

Stephen: You felt that the schools were toxic and hostile regarding LGBT youth.

How would you describe the school environment in Anoka related to antigay bullying?

Jefferson: It was tense. I always felt there was this elephant in the room that nobody wanted to talk about. When myself, as a gay person, and then me knowing gay students, but having to navigate in an environment when we were told we didn't exist?

But then we were also the one's that when you were in the hallway were the "that's so gay" and "faggot" . . . that was the number one put down. Like you knew, like, if you really wanted to hurt a kid, you went to, you know, "faggot."

So here we have an entire population of people that have been told "you don't exist." Yet you're the most targeted . . . [so, you sort of have this] . . . the only moments you existed was when you're being attacked.

There was never a moment where you could be yourself in a positive way or see representations of yourself in a positive way.

Stephen: Basically . . . you have a school system that was trying to erase the gay community.

Jefferson: Definitely, Yeah, definitely. In the brief moment were we could exist . . . and I remember a social studies teacher saying . . . she was able to get away with teaching about gays being exterminated during WWII . . . and that was kind of the extent of it.

So the one time we get to exist is when we are exterminated.

And when you have a population of people and students who struggle with a sense of self-worth and then the one time they get any sort of sense of who they are, is, "well, you're being exterminated."

And it got worse once we put those policies in place, and once we allowed people in the community who really had a horrific, hateful and hurtful agenda, who were fine with the idea of gay people being exterminated, quite frankly, who managed to get their people in power positions to make decisions.

I think the reason that you never really saw much of a response from some of these local hate groups, was because I think when they heard it was gay people killing themselves, I think they were OK with that.

That was fine . . . because, if you won't be "repaired," and become straight, then you should be killed . . . you should die.

Stephen: Just not exist.

Jefferson: Yeah . . . you should not exist.

Stephen: You've described the kind of color and the really toxic atmosphere within the school system.

How do you see that toxicity contributing to the self harm, the attempted suicides, and the eventual suicides?

Jefferson: When you become a teacher, they talk so much about the importance of, particularly with teenagers and youth, how they need to find themselves, they need to find that reflection of themselves; they need to be able to see "that family is like my family, or that person is like me, or that person's journey is like my journey, or that person's life challenges are like my life challenges."

It becomes really hard to navigate who you are when you think you are something that's wrong. I mean, if you can't find yourself in anything, then that says to you "there is something wrong with me."

I mean, the reality is not only were some of these gay kids dealing with being gay, but they were dealing with the fact that they were being bullied and then some of them were dealing with issues of depression, and just the general sense of not being of any worth. And we gave them no tools how to deal with it.

I thought that was the strangest thing. In all of our things to make it better for kids, we never talked about "how do you make it better?"

So what kids would do was they would go to their friends. And a friend would say, "Well, you know what I do? I drink." Or, "I take some pills, or I smoke some pot. I cut myself, I choke myself . . . I think I might kill myself."

Here are these kids in crisis, giving kids in crisis their tools to process.

Stephen: Because the adults weren't in the room . . .

Jefferson: Because the adults wouldn't deal with it!

And when we finally had a group of students who were courageous enough to step up and tell their stories, and when myself and other adults said what they were seeing. We were all told "You're lying!"

So all those kids that were sort of waiting in the wings to see how this processed through. When they saw that happened . . . Holy cow!

Stephen: Can you give me some example of how the administrators and other faculty members were shutting doors in students' faces?

Jefferson: Well, we had a couple students who spoke in front of the school board and told their very personal stories, and the superintendent sent a voicemail to all of us teachers, and then a community newsletter went out that basically said this information is not accurate; that these kids are saying.

“These victims are lying . . . they weren’t victimized.”

And just absolutely shameful to me that - particularly when these young people finally come to you and do what you’ve always said, because the antibullying policies were, “if you’re a victim you better report it, cuz if you don’t report it, then we can’t do anything about it.”

And that’s been a mantra from day one . . . and continues to be a mantra, and the kids finally do it . . . and what is their response?

“Nope, you’re lying.”

Music Break

Jefferson: When Sam Johnson committed suicide at my school - that young lady was bullied. We all knew it!

She talked to everybody about being bullied. She talked to her mom about it. Her mom came to the school and met with the coaches of Sam’s team.

When the Principal told us that Sam Johnson committed suicide, she said, “Sam was a little bit different . . . you all know what I’m talking about. She was different.” So the Principal even knew that there was something different about her. Yet, the public response to Sam’s death, was “Bullying was not a factor.”

And all these kids who knew her went “What? How can you say that?”

That’s when things got terrifying.

Music Break

Jefferson: The first time I met Sam was in that morning group time.

One of her very good friends brought her in and said, “This is my friend Sam and I thought this would be a great place for her to come and hang out.”

And so, that’s where I started to get to know her was in that morning time. And so we would talk about things she would have going on with her. You know, about how she was teased because she had a boy’s haircut.

She was tall. I mean, for being a middle-schooler, she was tall and broad. I mean she could not hide in that school. She was teased because she was too masculine, so everyone assumed she was a lesbian.

You know, her and I would just talk about, you know, just ways to deal with that, and process that . . . and you know, I said, “Are you letting people you know that this stuff is going on?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.”

I knew that it was tough for her, but I didn’t know how horrible as it was until after she died. And then suddenly the kids were telling me things that had happened.

Stephen: What were they saying to you?

Well . . . talked about how in volleyball her teammates would call her dyke. When she would get really depressed and suicidal they would tell her to kill herself and that it would be great and that the world would be better.

You know, again, all those things I wish either Sam or kids had told me before. One more reason why, you know, bullying prevention where it’s completely on the victim to stand up and say something, is a failed program.

Music Break

Jefferson: I remember just being so angry.

Talking to the kids who were her friends who were kids that were supposed to be a part of the GSA, who she told she was going to kill herself. She was very specific and even said when she was going to do it.

The kids didn’t know what to do with that information because no one had ever talked to them.

And one of the things that was on the curriculum for our GSA was a whole thing on The Dangerous Secret. “What do you do when you have a dangerous secret?” That was part of what we were going to talk about.

Because I knew, having talked to some students who had come to me said, “Hey, my friend has told me that they want to hurt themselves, or, I think I want to hurt myself.

We talked about . . . “How you deal with this?”

We couldn’t do that!

And so now these kids, for their entire lives, will always live with the guilt that they didn't do something to stop Sam.

Music Break

Jefferson: Then we lost Justin Aaberg.

And it was, you know, the summer right after we lost Sam, and it was a lot of the same circle of friends.

And I remember going to Justin's funeral, and so many kids coming at me *angry*.

At a funeral when they should've been grieving, there's all these kids who are in a rage and angry at a school district for their failed policies. And I'm sitting there thinking to myself, if these middle school and high school kids can see this, and us in the community can see this, why can't our district leaders see this?

Stephen: It's the antibullying policy that seems to be failing, but the No Homo Promo and Neutrality policies seem to be surviving and thriving.

Jefferson: Well . . . and they negate each other. You can't say that it's not OK to bully unless it's one certain type of people.

You can't put that little side thing on there. And that's what it was. It's not OK to bully, except the fat kids; it's not OK to bully, except the girls.

And we were operating in two policies that didn't . . . you couldn't have a zero tolerance for bullying and be an inclusive and saying we're all inclusive and everyone should feel welcome here . . . except for that one group of people that we're not going to talk about. It doesn't work!

Stephen: But society at large sanctions violence against the gay community, and sanctions the erasure of gay people.

Jefferson: Look at what's happening right now in the state of Minnesota with the anti-marriage amendment.

It's crazy to me that I have to go and teach my students that we shall not treat anybody like they're second-class citizens . . . oh, and by the way, in November your parents are going to be voting to change the constitution, for the first time ever, to actually include a piece of discrimination into the constitution. It's like no wonder we're having a problem. The kids are just watching their adults.

Music Break

Stephen: Let's take a look at how much influence you think PAL and MFC had in school policy.

Jefferson: I think certain members of that organization, of the Parent's Action League and the Minnesota Family Council, particularly one particular woman.

HUGE influence.

And it was something we sort of all assumed, but then they would start to publicly brag about it. Talking about taking ownership for the policies they were able to get in place.

One of the members of that group, at a school board meeting, said to the school board members, leaders, the chair and vice-chair, "that you promised me that these policies would be in place."

One of the most active and vocal members of the PAL referenced in a school board meeting . . . to the chair of our school board: "I door-knocked for your campaign."

These people were very smart because they managed to get their people into power. They are the reason why we had HIV prevention removed from our health curriculum because they said it was a gay disease. They were the reason we had the No Homo Promo Policy. It is these people.

Stephen: You're talking about Barbara Anderson and the PAL, aren't you?

Jefferson: OH yeah. Yeah . . . she has had a hold.

And she's proud of it! She's not been secretive about it. She's gone on to conservative radio shows and bragged about how she's the reason the policies exist.

Stephen: How do you react to her statements, and I'm paraphrasing here. I don't have the exact quotes here, but she turned around and basically blamed the kids for their own deaths.

Jefferson: As far as they're concerned, the best place for these kids is in the grave, so it's that whole idea of "Well, they shouldn't have been gay."

Music Break

Stephen: As an advisor, you've had many kids coming to you for help since Samantha took her own life; how are they reaching out to you and how have they been reaching out to you?

Jefferson: Because of what I do with directing theater and all these field trips, and other after-school programs I'm involve with, lots of families have my phone number.

Kids would contact me. Sometimes they'd call and say, "My friend did this, or my friend posted that, or I'm feeling this."

And it felt pretty manageable for a while. It was concerning, and I was keeping the guidance counselor in the loop, and the Principal . . . there was more than one occasion where I had to go into a kids record and call a parent and say, "You need to go talk to your kid right now."

But then what happened after the district released their blanket statement that this wasn't true, that these kids weren't going through this and bullying wasn't a factor in these suicides . . . [Narrate this]

It exploded. I mean, it was every night non-stop.

My son would talk about it too. It was nine months of . . . our life stopped. We didn't do social things. I couldn't go anywhere where I could shut my phone off.

I couldn't log onto FB without messages pop up from kids. When I was being interviewed by CNN, we had to keep stopping the interview because I was getting texts from kids who needed help or had a friend who needed help.

I talked to the guidance counselor and I said, "Holy cow, I can't keep up!"

And Tammy Aaberg was going through the same thing. I mean, she was flooded; flooded with kids who were coming to her . . . because we believed them.

Music Break

Stephen: The LGBT issue is front-and center, and that's the focus on gay bashing, bullying gay kids . . . but the very Neutrality policy, the very No Homo Promo, the name gives it away, is designed to directly marginalize the gay group as the one that won't be discussed.

Jefferson: Yeah, yeah, they did! I remember having a conversation with a woman from the PAL and she said, "You guys think it's all the gay kids."

And I said, "Is there a policy in the books that directly targets any minority population other than the one that blatantly and verbally targets gay people? There isn't!"

Let's call it what it is. It's censorship. It's a censorship policy.

It is going through text books and censoring them. It's going through American History and censoring it. It's going through the hallways and censoring the identities of these people; it's going through the adult role models that these kids deal with every day and censoring who they are. That's not curriculum.

Stephen: I liken it this way; I don't know if you'll agree with me, but see the Anoka District as just a Petri dish for the rest of the country.

Jefferson: You know, I'd like to say that our school district is the only district that is going through this, but one of the things that has happened once this went national, suddenly talking to school districts in other parts of the country, and kids in other parts of the country, with this same sort of things are happening where certain members of the community are holding school boards and school districts hostage. And I really feel like our school district was held hostage.

Stephen: In the mean time - in the rearview mirror - at least in Anoka-Hennepin District 11, there are 10 dead kids.

Jefferson: Yeah . . . yeah.

I still don't feel that the lives of these kids have been honored.

You know, there's a member of the school board who is running for office. And I should support him because we are the same political affiliation. And I've been harshly criticized because I can't . . . I can't support him.

When I got confronted by some political leaders, I said, "I have been on the phone with too many crying moms . . . too many crying kids. I've sent flowers to too many gay kids' hospital rooms; I've buried too many gay kids."

There is blood on all these peoples' hands. Any kid in trouble should be enough to move your hand.

And then when you start lining up the bodies?

If you're not moving by then, then you're soulless. And you shouldn't be in a leadership position . . . and shame on you . . . you know, just shame on you.

I can forgive, but I can never forget . . . what these people did.