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SPOTLIGHT ON KEVIN JENNINGS: EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND CO-FOUNDER OF THE GAY, LESBIAN, AND STRAIGHT EDUCATION NETWORK (GLSEN)

By Lydia Edwards*



We chose Kevin Jennings for the spotlight in this issue because of his dedication to creating a discourse that empowers all people gay and straight to do something to protect our youth. As co-founder of GLSEN, Mr. Jennings has helped create a movement that all people

can rally around: protecting and educating America's children. Recently, *The Modern American* was able to interview him to give us his thoughts on a variety of topics within the movement including: being "locked in;" keeping your head up; the generation gap; race and diversity; gay high schools; and starting a discourse.

LOCKED IN

In a recent talk at Holland and Knight's Boston Office, you quoted Virginia Woolf's reaction to being locked out of a library: "I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse, perhaps, to be locked in." How does homophobia "lock in" American teens?

Jennings: Susan Pharr wrote a book called *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism* and in it she notes that sexism is about gender role constraints and homophobia is the weapon we hit people over the head with when they break out of those constraints. We call boys who express their emotions "fairies" and girls who are assertive a "bitch" or "dyke." This is particularly constraining for men. There is such a taboo about exploring a part of their nature that cries because you are called a faggot and that's the worst. Also powerful women are also seen as lesbians. For example look at newest book about Hillary Clinton, *The Truth About Hillary: What She Knew, When She Knew It, and How Far She'll Go to Become President* by Edward Klein. These labels are used to constrain people in roles that are unnatural. Women are assertive and men are sensitive.

KEEPING YOUR HEAD UP

With all the focus on marriage rights and the current reaction from state governments to change their Constitutions, do you think protecting gay children has a chance?

Jennings: As progressives we have a tendency to look at the glass as half empty. My mom used to say, "the only person who likes change is a baby with a wet diaper." The intense backlash we experience today is due to developments in the past two years. Sodomy laws were struck down by the Supreme Court

and the Massachusetts Supreme Court granted equal marriage rights.

Movements for social justice follow patterns. The more visible you are, the more progress you make, the more you are attacked. The more you are attacked the more people will take a stand. The backlash is hateful but then people will stand up. I don't think history is linear. For every two steps forward you take one step back. Some people will be very adamant to this change. People were getting blown up in churches when the civil rights movement was most successful. Compare the world we live in now to the world I was born into 1963, where segregation was prevalent and homosexuality was "treated" with electric shock therapy. So I don't find it a depressing thought, *What did you think was going to happen?* We should not be discouraged because our success is inevitable.

COMPARING THE MOVEMENTS

You mentioned the civil rights movement, how is the LGBT equality movement and the civil rights movement comparable? Are they the same? What about the role of young people?

Jennings: First, as a history teacher I am often bothered by people that say that the black experience and the gay experience are exactly the same. I think the experience of gay people is most like that of the deaf. Like sexuality, deafness is not immediately seen. Both are born into families that cannot "communicate" with them. Black children are most likely born in black families with a preexisting dialogue.

Second, despite our differences, Americans believe that all children deserve protection and education. Those are areas around which people who feel very different can come together. GLSEN was the first gay rights

organization to put "straight" into our title and 33% of our executive board are straight. We bring people around a common title, like white and black parents united around wanting education for children.

Third, the children are pushing us. For example, in the South young people like Jon Lewis were only 18 or 19 at the time of the civil rights movement and Martin Luther King Jr. was only 26 when he led the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Young people were willing to take risks that their elders weren't willing to or able to take. In our case, young people came up with the day of silence, in which today half a million people take part.² Young people push elders and demand more. They say, "hey movement get your act together." There has never been a successful movement in America that didn't have young people front and center. It was the influence of the young at a critical point that lead the civil rights movement to victory. That is why I don't get worried about setbacks. Because it is inevitable we are

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going to win; there is no doubt in my mind.

GENERATION GAP

A recent Times magazine article about young gay people noted that they seem to see themselves as not really “gay” but just wanting to fit in. It’s as if many don’t see themselves as part of a movement.

Jennings: I think the article oversimplified the situation. There is a generation gap in every community. It’s a huge factor and it makes a big difference. For example, there is a huge difference between the African American youth and the LGBT youth because African Americans are raised by black people and whatever generational issues that may exist there is still a dialogue. There is no venue for LGBT youth because they are not raised by gay people, so they don’t have much contact with older gay people. Young people are excluded from many of the venues designed for gay people like bars. So a 45 year old gay man and 15 year old gay student don’t really talk a lot.

Today’s youth is the first generation who are coming out while still in adolescence and demanding for the same adolescence as their straight counterparts. You were biding your time in my generation, waiting to start your life. I am 42 and today kids at 17 are saying, “I want my life now.” “I am not willing to wait for a means of escape.” It’s very exciting, because why should they have to wait to start their life. They want to go to prom, have dates and tell their friends about the crushes they have.

DIVERSITY WITHIN THE LGBT MOVEMENT

Essentially where is it? Many people of the LGBT community of color often criticize mainstream LGBT organizations for leaving them out.

Jennings: That is a legitimate criticism; the gay rights movement is no different than any other. It would be nice to think that if you are a gay white person you could liken your struggle to a straight black person. But you can be racist, and straight black people can be just as homophobic. How you experience oppression is not how someone else experiences theirs. At GLSEN’s national student leadership program we made a goal that at least 50% of our leaders have to be students of color, transgendered, or straight allies. At least 60% of our leaders are that. In order to reach diversity you have to practice it from the very onset.

Well if diversity is so great what do you think of schools like Harvey Milk, an all gay high school in New York?

Jennings: I think that at this juncture it is a tragic necessity. The students otherwise wouldn’t get a high school diploma because they dropped out of other schools because they were tired of being beaten up. It’s a tragedy; every child should feel free to go to school get an education without fear. That we even have to

consider this to make sure some kids get a diploma is a tragedy. The Harvey Milk people say the same thing. They look for the day they can close their doors because a school like theirs is no longer necessary.

No one is asking what’s wrong with mainstream schools where these students can’t get an education. These students have already been segregated out of that system. If mainstream schools were doing their job we wouldn’t need this. At GLSEN we believe in bringing people together. If you take all of the gay kids out of the schools, how do you expect to teach people about getting along with others who are different.

STARTING A DISCOURSE

So then is GLSEN targeting the youth who are not quite political or have no intention of becoming political but need a voice?

Jennings: Eleanor Roosevelt once said that “Where do universal human rights begin? In small places close to home.” Many get involved in politics when they see injustice and wrongs in their lives. They then see that it is connected to a system and then they begin to get involved at a larger scale. They get involved because of name calling and bullying. They start to understand that it’s because elected officials don’t make policies that protect young people. To solve problems in their lives they have to attack systems that cause them. It’s about inequitable systems that perpetuate injustices on groups of people.

So we are inspired now, but how do we start a discourse when all I hear about is sin and sex acts?

Jennings: First ask what is the point in America we are trying to create? There is an obvious huge gap between what it seeks to be and what it is. We seek to be a country where people are not the same. I may not like it, but you have a constitutional right to think I am going to hell. But you don’t have a right to stop me from exercising my constitutional rights.

What lowers the blood pressure is that we are not saying there is one way to think. We say regardless of what you think you have to treat people with respect. You don’t have to like, approve, or think I’m moral. Religion is clearly a choice yet we protect people from religious persecution. You have to respect people even if you think they are wrong. We have Christians, Jews, and Hindus in this country and we recognize they have the right to be, despite some beliefs that a particular person is going to hell. We have somehow managed to figure that out for religion. We need that for sexual orientation.

People need to understand that is what we are trying to do and that it is American.

Kevin Jennings received his MBA from New York University; MS from Columbia; and BA at Harvard University. He also the author of five books and his sixth book is due out in the Fall of 2006 on Beacon Press. If you have any questions

ENDNOTES

* Lydia Edwards is a third-year law student at American University Washington College of Law and the co-editor-in-chief of *The Modern American*.

** Photo used courtesy of www.glsen.org.

¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*.

² See Dayofsilence.org (explaining The Day of Silence, a project of the

Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) in collaboration with the United States Student Association (USSA), is a student-led day of action where those who support making anti-LGBT bias unacceptable in schools take a day-long vow of silence to recognize and protest the discrimination and harassment -- in effect, the silencing -- experienced by LGBT students and their allies).