



Community View, "The News Journal"
Sunday, June 21, 2009

We're sorry, Carl and Jaheem, society has failed you

COMMUNITY VIEW • By DOUGLAS MARSHALL-STEELE • June 21, 2009

In April, two 11-year-old boys committed suicide to escape anti-gay bullying.

Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover, who was not gay, hanged himself in his Springfield, Mass., home after enduring daily taunts of being gay. His mother had repeatedly asked Carl's charter school to address the problem.

She told ABC News, "I have been homeless, but Carl made it through. I was a victim of domestic violence, and we made it through. The one thing we couldn't get through was public school."

Jaheem Herrera hanged himself after what his family characterized as "relentless" anti-gay bullying, even though his DeKalb, Ga., elementary school had a strict anti-bullying policy.

His friend had reported, "He told me that he's tired of everybody always messing with him in school. He is tired of telling the teachers and the staff, and they never do anything about the problems. So, the only way out is by killing himself."

Jaheem's 10-year-old sister discovered the body. "His sister was screaming, 'Get him down, get him down,' " said Jaheem's stepfather. When he got to the room, he found his daughter holding her brother's body, trying to lessen the pressure of the noose.

Harris Interactive and the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network found in 2005 that actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender expression constituted two of the top three reasons for bullying. In 2007, GLSEN found that of more than 6,000 lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students, 86.2 percent had been verbally harassed; 44.1 percent had been physically harassed; and 22.1 percent had been physically assaulted.

Then there are the children like Carl and Jaheem who opt out.

What is happening here that 11-year-olds are killing themselves? First, schools don't always respond well, even when they have strong anti-bullying policies. According to the 2007 GLSEN poll, 60.8 percent of respondents who experienced harassment or assault never reported the incident to the school. The most common reason given was that they did not believe anything would be done to address the situation. Of those who did report the incident, 31.1 percent said the school did nothing.

But schools are only the last line of defense. Where does the problem originate? Sadly, it appears that some parents are failing their offspring.

Some pass on their own homophobia to their children. Other parents think bullying is normal. That assumption not only contradicts many school policies and state laws, it is opposed by mental health professionals.

The American Psychological Association, for example, stated, "Bullying exerts long-term and short-term psychological effects on both bullies and their victims. Bullying behavior has been linked to other forms of antisocial behavior, such as vandalism, shoplifting, skipping and dropping out of school, fighting, and the use of drugs and alcohol. Victims of bullying experience loneliness and often suffer humiliation, insecurity, loss of self-esteem, and thoughts of suicide. ... The impact of frequent bullying often accompanies these victims into adulthood." That is, if they survive.

But it's not just parents. There are some religious groups that appear to implicitly condone anti-gay bullying in schools. In some states where anti-bullying legislation was considered, anti-gay groups have objected on the grounds that a law against attacking LGBT students might "promote a homosexual lifestyle."

Even the annual Day of Silence -- in which LGBT youth and their straight allies observe a day without speaking at school to symbolize the voicelessness of gay students -- has come under attack from religious parents who threatened to keep their children home rather than allow them to attend school when some of their classmates might remain quiet in protest of anti-gay bullying.

In Delaware, we have seen 11 years of primarily religious opposition to even the most incremental and basic sexual orientation antidiscrimination law. What message has that sent to Delaware children?

But in the end we have all failed to make this a world in which diversity is respected. We have all failed Carl and Jaheem.