

For gay teachers to come out is a lot harder than it sounds

DON'T GET ME STARTED



ANGELA MOMBOURQUETTE

YOU PROBABLY saw (or heard about) comedian Rick Mercer's recent rant suggesting that gay and lesbian politicians and other public figures should come out of the closet to serve as role models for kids who are struggling with issues of self-acceptance around their sexuality. His rant was in response to the suicide of gay Ottawa teen, Jamie Hubley, who died in October.

"It's no longer good enough for us to tell kids who are different that it's gonna get better," said Rick. "We have to make it better now. That's every single one of us: every teacher, every student, every adult has to step up to the plate. . . . If you're gay, and you're in public life, I'm sorry — you don't have to run around with a pride flag and bore the hell out of everyone, but you can't be invisible — not anymore."

Rick had a great point. But although he touched on it, I think he missed the real key to his message. Sure, public figures would do gay kids a service by being more open about their lives, but if we're talking about actual role models for teenagers, should we really be looking to politicians? After their parents, the real role models for kids are their teachers.

And here's what I know: a lot of the teachers and school administrators in Halifax Regional Municipality are homosexual — and most of them are not even close to being out at school. I've met a whole bunch of gay teachers socially (have I mentioned I'm "in the club"?), and it kind of makes me wonder why, in this day and age, these teachers, many of whom live openly gay lives in every other way, choose not to disclose their sexuality to their students.

What I've learned is that, just like many of those gay kids, they don't feel safe.



Comedian Rick Mercer, shown here recording a TV spot at the Discovery Centre in Halifax in 2008, says many gays and lesbians have an obligation to be open as role models for teens who are struggling with self-acceptance, but Angela Mombourquette notes that many teachers keep quiet about their sexual orientations because of bullying by students.

(TIM KROCHAK / Staff)

You may remember the case of Halifax West high school teacher Lindsay Willow, who, about five years ago, won a human rights ruling after she was falsely accused by a senior administrator and other teachers of inappropriate behaviour with a female student. The ruling determined that she had been discriminated against because she was gay.

That's just one of the types of harassment out gay teachers can face. But the other, and the one that seems to be uppermost in the minds of some teachers, is actually the kind of harassment and bullying that comes from — you guessed it — the students.

None of the teachers I spoke with for this column would talk to me on the record. But they told me they'd had their Facebook accounts hacked, had received harassing phone calls and had been subjected to taunts in the hallways. "I've had kids walk by my class and say my partner's name. I remember hearing my address yelled out in the hallway," one teacher told me. "In some ways, you feel helpless, but the

kids can pick on you because there are few repercussions. They have nothing to lose." Another told me, "In the past, we used to think we'd lose our jobs. We know now that we won't, but there's a fear that the kids won't treat you the same way if they know you're gay. I still have a wall up, and I don't think many teachers are ready to go there."

So, all those potential role models are just as bullied as the kids. It's a co-

nundrum, but as Rick said, you can't be invisible anymore. Somebody's got to step up and lead the charge — and the school board's got to figure out a way to make it safe for more teachers to come out of the closet.

Angela Mombourquette is a Halifax freelance writer and associate editor of Saltscapes magazine.

(community@herald.ca)

Fresh and Healthy Authentic Thai Food

Lunch Special \$9.99

Thai Ivory Cuisine

served with Soup, Spring Roll and Jasmine rice.

New Menu • New Air Conditioning for Summer • Come enjoy our Patio!

Dine in, Take out, Delivery, Catering


431-THAI (8424)
 10:00am - 9:30pm, 7 days a week • www.thaivorycuisine.ca