

PROGRESSIVE ACTION FOR THE COMMON GOOD

3707 Eastern Avenue Davenport, IA 52807 563-676-7580

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A coalition of local and statewide groups and schools is sponsoring a Safe Schools week and event in Davenport on February 22, 2006. The purpose of the event is to raise awareness in the community regarding bullying and name-calling in our schools and especially the need to create a safe environment for students who are gay and lesbian. Part of this observation will include the promotion of the **week of February 20 as No Name-Calling Week**, a national effort to discourage name calling of all kinds that was inspired by James Howe's book, *The Misfits* and a '**Community Read**' of Howe's new book *Totally Joe*.

The Misfits by James Howe was responsible for launching a very successful national project that promotes a **No Name-Calling Week** in schools each winter. For more information about this event, go the website www.nonamecallingweek.org. We will be promoting a **No Name-Calling Week in local schools the week of February 20th**. The book tells the story of four best friends trying to survive the seventh grade in the face of all too frequent taunts based on their weight, height, intelligence, and sexual orientation/gender expression. No Name-Calling Week is now an annual week of educational activities aimed at ending name-calling of all kinds and providing schools with the tools and inspiration to launch an on-going dialogue about ways to eliminate bullying in their communities.

The Safe School event, "**Making Our Schools Safe for GLBT Students**" will be held **on February 22, 2006 at 7 PM at Davenport West High School, 3505 W. Locust, Davenport**. It will feature a dramatic presentation directed by Dr Corinne Johnson of St Ambrose University and featuring St. Ambrose students, comments from parents and students and a book reading and comments by nationally recognized author James Howe. This event will feature four St. Ambrose students under the direction of Theater Director Dr. Corinne Johnson of Saint Ambrose University in a reading of vignettes of real life people who were harassed at school (including late President Harry Truman) and a reading and comments by the national award winning author, James Howe.

A book discussion of Howe's new book *Totally Joe* with the author will precede the event at 6 PM in the West High Library. We are sponsoring immediately a '**Community Read**' of Howe's new book *Totally Joe* and with the **book discussion with the author on February 22** at the West High Library at 6 PM.

Sponsors of this event include Iowa Association of School Boards, Iowa Civil Rights Commission, Iowa Department of Education, Iowa State Education Association, School Administrators of Iowa, and the GLBT Youth in Iowa Schools Task Force.

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Local sponsors who have signed on to date include the East Iowa Community College District, Quad City Federation of Labor-AFL/CIO, Churches United Social Justice Committee, Davenport Civil Rights Commission, the Quad Cities Anti-Hate Coalition, Quad Citians Affirming Diversity, the Quad City chapter of PFLAG, Metropolitan Community Church, Unitarian Church, NAACP Davenport Chapter, QC NOW, the Pleasant Valley Education Association, Progressive Action for the Common Good, American Association of University Women- Davenport Bettendorf Chapter, Rivermont Collegiate , the Mississippi Bend Area Education Agency and the Davenport School District.

A local group of citizens organized by Progressive Action for the Common Good is putting together this event in cooperation with the Iowa Safe Schools program of the Iowa Civil Rights Commission. When asked why such an event and week dedicated to anti-bullying efforts is necessary, organizers shared the following:

According to Rev. Ron Quay, director of Churches United and Baptist minister, we must address the need for Safe Schools in the broadest possible understanding of that term. All students must feel safe and protected, including the GLBT young people. Quay believes the power of the book "*The Misfits*" (which led to the promotion nationally of No Name Calling Week) was that it looked at prejudice broader than one stereotype. Quay says, "If we step away from safe schools, we are harming all students and creating an environment of fear and condoning name calling even if we do not say such in direct words." We must protect the rights of all students to live in a safe and protected environment.

Joe and Mary Gross are local teachers and parents of a gay son who is now twenty-five. Only now is their son revealing to them some of the ridicule he had to endure as a student in junior high and high school. According to Mr. Gross, "No young person should have to endure that kind of treatment for simply being different or being perceived as different. According to my knowledge of scripture, and as a Christian, I feel that Christ himself, when pressed by person to name the greatest commandment, replied that it was to love God and our neighbor. So I ask, how can we call ourselves Christian if we fail to love our neighbor by calling him/her names or discriminating against them? To do so is to be a hypocrite. Christ spoke out against that sin more than any other. (Mt. Ch 23) Christ did not associate himself with the rich and popular, but rather the poor and marginalized. He said, "Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me"."

Stella Herzig, a local librarian and mother of three from Davenport, is also helping to plan this event. She states, "I feel it is very important that we as a community address the issue of harassment and bullying to ensure the positive growth and education of ALL our students. It is a core idea in our Constitution that the rights of individuals be upheld against oppression by larger forces, be they government or corporate bodies or mobs. The habits formed in the tender ages of schooling can be influential not only in

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the lives of the individuals in order to reach their full potentials as human beings, but is vital to a republic that can better be served by those same individuals realizing their potential as citizens as well. Children who are trained not to bully or name call, may in adulthood not be pawn to war or hate mongering and thus be beneficial to the integrity of America."

Joyce Wiley, co-founder (with her husband Jack) of Quad Citians Affirming Diversity applauds the local effort. According to Ms. Wiley, "A Safe Schools forum is needed because LGBT youth are still subjected to severe physical, emotional and psychological violence. Students in high schools in the Quad Cities are slapped, spit on, called names, and rejected by classmates and staff. School for them is not a safe place. We must keep working toward the time when all students are treated with respect and diversity is appreciated." These quotes come directly from Quad City youth who participate in the drop-in program at Quad Citians Affirming Diversity (QCAD) in Rock Island.

"How can I learn chemistry when someone is calling me a fag all period and the teacher doesn't do anything?"

"I was walking down the hall today and someone called me a fag. The teacher said the student was just joking around."

"I can't come out at school because I'm too afraid to be alone."

"If I'm so good at everything, maybe if they find out I'm gay, they will still like me."

According to Joyce Wiley in surveys with QCAD drop-in participants, approximately two-thirds report hearing homophobic remarks by most of the students. Almost half reported that when homophobic remarks are made and a teacher or other staff person is present, the staff person never intervenes. Three-quarters reported that staff intervened either some of the time or never. Three-quarters reported that other students intervene only some of the time or never.

Dan Jens is a social worker for the Mississippi Bend Area Education Agency, a co-sponsor of the event. He believes that No Name Calling week is especially important. He recalls a radio show sponsored by Genesis last year on which students were interviewed about bullying. One was Missy Jenkins, who was a student shot and paralyzed in the school shooting in Paducah, Kentucky. Jenkins says she now recognizes that the shooters were victims of bullying, and that is where we need to begin in order to address school violence. By the way, she is now a social worker. A West High student named Luke Faley was also interviewed. As he was commenting regarding his experience with bullying, he said, "Bullying is always going to be there. We just accept it ". According to Jens, "Bullying is not a rite of passage. Allowing name-calling and bullying compromises student performance, damages mental and physical health, and perpetuates a cycle that can lead to violence (a pattern of escalation from

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routine use of slurs and degrading language, to stronger language, to threats, to violence). GLBT students are at disproportionate risk for bullying and harassment. A very important first step in prevention is to develop an understanding throughout the school community that demeaning words are harmful and their use is pervasive. Therein lies the significance of No Name-Calling Week.”

Kathy Bowman, local marriage and family counselor and former school psychologist reports that, “Schools have an obligation to provide a safe, respectful, and inclusive environment for all students, staff, and their families. My experience as a marriage and family therapist and school psychologist leads me to believe that events like the Safe Schools Initiative and No-Name Calling Week are essential in helping create this safe and respectful environment in our schools. Educators in Iowa have ample evidence that homophobic name calling in our schools is seriously compromising quality education for those students targeted as gay or lesbian, and for all students in that hostile environment who suffer from vicarious anxiety.”

James Howe is the author of over 70 books for young readers, and is perhaps best known for the *Bunnicula – A Rabbit tale of Mystery* and its numerous sequels. Among his books are the *Pinky and Rex* series and the picture books *I Wish I Were a Butterfly* and *Horace and Morris but Mostly Dolores*. After his experience talking with students at middle schools over the country about *The Misfits*, Howe decided to write *Totally Joe*, about *The Misfits'* gay character. He says he wrote the book “not only for the Joe’s out there , but for everyone else”, because he believes schools needs to be a safe place for all students and that all students have a right to feel good about who they are.

For more information, contact local organizer Cathy Bolkcom at 563-289-4155 or email at cbarts4@aol.com. You can reach James Howe at HOWEWRITE@aol.com.

You may also contact Caroline Vernon at PACG at 563-676-7580; Dan Jens, AEA Social Worker at AEA- (563) 344-6295 or at West High at 386-5500; Rev Ron Quay at 309-786-6494; Brad Clarke at Iowa Safe Schools in Des Moines at (515) 243-1221; Joyce Wiley at QCAD at 309-269-9037 and Dr. Corinne Johnson at (563) 333-6427.