



**Deciding Who Decides:  
The Debate Over A Gay Photo Exhibit In a Madison School (C)**

Both supporters and opponents of the *Love Makes A Family* exhibit agree that the second meeting to decide how to handle the photos was calmer and less incendiary. There had been a subtle shift in Principal Peg Hamele's presentation, and it now seemed inevitable that the exhibit would be mounted in one form or another. The audience had also thinned, and many teachers stayed away altogether. "People were tired," parent Jini Kai states flatly. Nevertheless, Hamele and others say a resolution still appeared elusive. "We weren't reaching consensus, we were just going around the same issues," Hamele says. "There was a point where I was very concerned that we weren't ever going to be able to bring that group together, the opinions and the views were so strongly held and so different from each other."

As the meeting progressed, circle members remained far apart on an approach that would satisfy both sides. Parent Chris Ellis wanted to put the exhibit in an isolated room, so that children would not be confronted with the photos every time they went into the library. Supporter Debb Schaub, on the other hand, thought the library wasn't public enough, and that the school's main hallway would be a more appropriate venue. Cynthia Walton Jackson suggested staging the exhibit as an after-school event to avoid cutting into the time available for regular academics. Several participants insisted that sending permission slips home to parents would resolve most complaints, allowing those who were uncomfortable with the display to keep their children away.

With 20 minutes remaining in the scheduled two-hour meeting, Tom Swenson wrote all the proposals on sheets of paper and began going around the circle, asking participants if they could tolerate the compromises suggested. After a few passes, the meeting finally came to a quiet and anticlimactic close when the last parent said, "I can live with that." "I remember walking out and people saying, 'How did that happen?'" recalls teacher Kate Lyman. "I think people

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realized that they didn't want to come to a third meeting, and unless somebody started agreeing to something, nothing was going to happen.”

The final resolution reached by the Hawthorne parents was not markedly different from what teacher Daithi Wolfe had originally proposed, except for the addition of parental notice and the offer of alternative activities if parents asked that their kids not participate. *Love Makes a Family* would be displayed in the Library Media Center, an open room off the main library that could accommodate either drop-in visitors or entire classes. Teachers would inform parents ahead of time about how they planned to use the exhibit, and if parents returned a note saying they did not want their children to participate, those students would be offered appropriate educational alternatives.

Not surprisingly, the settlement did not end the controversy. While most parents and teachers declared themselves content with the actual resolution, those who had supported the exhibit from the start believed the process to reach a decision had been hurtful and irresponsible. The district-sanctioned meeting, Kate Lyman says, gave “public credibility” to those who expressed disparaging views about gays and lesbians. Wolfe, meanwhile, says that if the administration had been brave enough to support the exhibit in the first place, the entire public confrontation could have been avoided. “I want this district, this administration, to have a backbone and to say we stand for some things that are controversial, and we’re going to support the people doing that,” declares Wolfe. “When they want to say no, they say no. But if they want to say yes, but don’t want to have any responsibility, then they say, ‘Oh, it’s your decision.’“

Yet some observers felt the community meetings had produced real benefits. School Board member Carol Carstensen, for example, says forcing people to talk about homosexuality allowed some individuals to reexamine their beliefs. “There were people who really listened and changed their views,” she says. Facilitator Tom Swenson also felt satisfied with what the group had accomplished. “This had real destructive potential in terms of what could happen within that school community, and even in a broader sense, in terms of people’s respect for differences in the community,” observes Swenson. “In retrospect, it’s complimentary to the people that were there that we were able to deal with it in a basically constructive way.”

In an editorial which appeared a few days after the meeting, *The Capital Times* wrote: “We hope Superintendent Cheryl Wilhoite and other Madison school administrators will come away from this whole mess duly chastised. Their handling of the affair created, rather than quelled, the conflict.”

## Aftermath

At the School Board meeting the following Monday, emotions still ran high. More than twenty people spoke out about the exhibit, including ubiquitous anti-gay firefighter Ronnie Greer. When Daithi Wolfe asked the administration to apologize to those verbally attacked during the community meetings, and demanded greater administration support for Hawthorne's anti-bias work, Wilhoyte, while applauding Wolfe's own efforts, responded, "The leadership for anti-discrimination has to come from all of us in the community."<sup>1</sup>

That same day, Hawthorne students began visiting the exhibit that Wolfe and others had installed in the Library Media Center. Photographer Gigi Kaeser served as a docent for many of the classes, answering questions about photography and about the specific families shown. According to Kate Lyman, whose class had two students who did not attend, the best thing about the exhibit was its mere presence. "The fact that it was a given that these were gay and lesbian families helped counteract all the stereotypes," she explains. "These were just normal families. We knew they were gay and lesbian, but that wasn't at all the point of the discussion."

Supporter Debb Schaub says she and her partner brought their two children to the exhibit before school one day to view it as a family. As they walked through, she says, two young boys snuck in off the playground. "They slowly crept up and they were looking around, and one said to the other, 'So where are all the bad pictures?'" she recalls. "There were no neon lights flashing saying, 'Fag,' or anything like that. They were beautiful pictures of families, of people, and those two little boys didn't know where they had put the bad pictures, so they left."

Ellis and McQueen say only one of their children's four teachers took students to see the photos. A neighbor, meanwhile, kept her children out of school for the duration of the display. Walton Jackson sent in a note requesting that her son not go, but she doesn't think his class visited, anyway. Her child's teacher, she notes, was one of only a few not to sign the original letter of support, and he left the school the following year. Hamel, who had received angry phone calls at her home and at school after the community meeting, says "quite a few" parents asked that their children not see the exhibit, and several teachers—particularly those of younger grades—chose not to take their classes at all. "It was a great educational tool for those who were allowed to see it," insists parent Jini Kai. "Unfortunately, because of the way it was handled, the children for whom the show would have been most helpful were not allowed to go."

In the winter of 1997, a similar issue cropped up again at the school. The investigative news magazine program, *20/20*, approached teachers at Hawthorne and asked to do a segment on the gay photo exhibit controversy. This time, however, while the school's new principal kept

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<sup>1</sup> *The Capital Times*, "Gay Photos, Other Woes Dog School Board," May 7, 1996.

Wilhoite's office informed, she handled the issue on site. After considering feedback from teachers, several of whom wanted to participate, the principal decided against it, concluding that the program would detract from the school's efforts that year to improve student literacy. "The way she handled it with all of the input, but keeping the final decision as hers, was just done incredibly well," Wilhoite says.

Many who had struggled through the community debate wondered why *Love Makes a Family* wasn't handled the same way. According to Nancy Lanyon, she and the other teachers bore partial responsibility for the issue's escalation. If they had presented Hamele with a strong initial proposal, she says, including a plan for informing parents, the central administration might never have become involved. This, however, didn't happen. "It was probably one of those situations where no one was really happy," admits Hamele. "The good piece was that parents talked with and learned from each other. The sad piece is that in the process, people were hurt, and there are always going to be scars." While she refuses to criticize the decision-making process directly, Hamele, who transferred to another Madison school after one year, says, "I think it is important for a district to have policies in place so when a school is faced with a potentially controversial issue such as this, it's very clear how a school should proceed, in what ways, and at what grade levels, so that it can be a positive community-building experience." Parent Jini Kai agrees: "These are the sorts of discussions that should happen on a district-wide level way before you've got upset, confused, and angry parents in the library."

For Assistant Superintendent Kery Kafka, who left the Madison school system a few months after the exhibit controversy, the solution that Hawthorne parents eventually devised was creative and sensitive to most people's needs. This good end result, however, she says, did not justify the unnecessarily contentious process of getting there.

Deputy School Superintendent Art Rainwater and Wilhoite, however, disagree that the process was flawed. "My own personal belief is that there are all kinds of families, and if they love their children and support them and do the kinds of things that good parents do, those families can provide the same positive environment as more traditional families," says Rainwater. "That's just not where we are as a nation right now, and we're going to have to go through that battle." He adds: "Fortunately or unfortunately, one of the opening shots in that battle was here. In terms of allowing that community to explore that issue, we did that, and I think we did that successfully."

Wilhoite, who never saw the exhibit, agrees. Moreover, she insists that the decision-making process had been as important and successful as the resolution itself. "I hope parents felt like the school system was respectful of the different views of parents and gave everyone space to be who and what they felt they needed to be," she says. "A top-down approach would have quieted it. But learning isn't easy and learning isn't a clean process; it's messy and painful. I think an incredible amount was learned."

