

Remembering Brewster

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Kevin Jennings, the Executive Director of the Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Educators Network (GLSEN) is rightfully proud of his profession of teaching. Best known as the founder of GLSEN, Mr. Jennings also founded the first Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) when he was a teacher at the Concord (MA) Academy in 1989.

Both by virtue of mission and founder, GLSEN and school based GSAs are inextricably linked. Growth of these clubs has been phenomenal. There are currently over 2,500 GSAs nationwide.(1) These alliances have been controversial in many schools as has GLSEN's involvement in them. Observers from Boston University President John Silber to every day parents have expressed concerns that such clubs place undue emphasis on sexuality in schools and may even promote homosexuality and sexual behavior among teens. Supporters of GSAs, including GLSEN, counter that critics do not understand that the purpose of the clubs is not sex education but rather the promotion of tolerance of gay teens. Paralleling the explosion of GSAs in schools has been the growth of GLSEN. Founded by Mr. Jennings in 1990, GLSEN has grown to include over 50 local chapters and uses its multimillion dollar budget to pursue its objectives. As described on its website, GLSEN's mission "envision[s] a future in which every child learns to respect and accept all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression."(2)

As noted, Mr. Jennings began his career as a teacher and sometimes uses former students to make various points in his books and talks as executive director of GLSEN. One such troubled student he calls Brewster. He referred to Brewster in his book, *One Teacher in Ten* and in at least one talk to a GLSEN rally in Iowa. Brewster was at the heart of a controversy in mid-2004 involving the National Education Association (NEA) and some teachers in the NEA who protested the Virginia Uribe Human Rights Award given to Mr. Jennings by the NEA.

Now it is at the intersection of Brewster, the NEA, and GLSEN that we might glean some insight into how Mr. Jennings handles teen sexuality. How one responds to situations often reflects one's actual beliefs concerning a matter. And that is focus of this article. As a teacher, how did Mr. Jennings handle the sexual disclosures of his young student Brewster?

Rather than once upon a time, I want to pick up the story at the point lawyers got involved.

On August 3, 2004, Diane Lenning, Chair of the NEA Republican Educator's Caucus, received a letter from Nixon Peabody LLP, a law firm representing Mr. Jennings. In this letter, attorney Constance Boland threatened Mrs. Lenning that GLSEN would pursue "other remedies" if she did not retract statements made to NEA president Reg Weaver alleging that Mr. Jennings engaged in unethical conduct while a teacher at Concord Academy. She claimed that Mr. Jennings knew that Brewster was involved in a sexual relationship with an adult man and that once Mr. Jennings learned of this relationship should have reported it as sexual abuse to the authorities as was required by law. The Nixon Peabody letter denied any wrong doing. Mr. Jennings also wrote a letter to the editor of the Washington Times denying any unprofessional conduct. That letter, the Nixon Peabody letter, along with various news reports and the Washington Times articles are archived elsewhere.(3)

As noted, Mr. Jennings leads GLSEN, an organization that seeks involvement in our schools through gay straight alliances, teacher in-service training and a variety of other means. They have a message concerning sexuality that they want to communicate to the nation's children from kindergarten through college. What is that message?

One aspect of their stated objective is non-controversial. They want schools to be safe for students who identify as gay. Any caring adult wants the same thing. However, there have been repeated concerns on the part of some parents and educational policy groups that GLSEN's methods to achieve the objective of safety may unnecessarily attempt to change beliefs concerning homosexuality.(4) Further, there is some concern that the views of Mr. Jennings and other

GLSEN activists are too permissive about teen sexuality. There are resources on the GLSEN website that contain positive and explicit references to teen and pre-teen sexual activity. Some of the novels and stories contain uncritical references to teen sex with young adults. GLSEN was also involved in the infamous Fistgate at Tufts University, an event in May, 2000 for high school teachers and students involving very explicit discussions of sexual acts. To his credit, Mr. Jennings has distanced himself from the event and denounced the explicit sexual language. But what did Mr. Jennings do when confronted with a situation where he could convey to a student his attitudes toward teen sexual behavior? Mr. Jennings gives us insight into this matter from the following passage from his book, *One Teacher in Ten*.

“I remember Brewster, a sophomore boy who I came to know in 1987, my first year of teaching at Concord Academy, in Concord, Massachusetts. Brewster was a charming but troubled kid. His grades didn’t match up with his potential, his attendance could be irregular, and he often seemed a little out of it. He was clearly using some substance regularly, and was not very happy with himself. But I didn’t have a clue as to why—at least not at first.

I had come to Concord from Moses Brown in search of a place where I could be more open about who I was. I wore a ring that symbolized my commitment to my partner, and students like Brewster started asking me what it meant. Confused, I went to the head to ask how I should respond. “Tell them it’s a gift from someone you love,” he said. Incredulous, I replied, “Do you say your wedding ring is a ‘gift from someone you love’?” I answered Brewster’s question about my ring honestly. To my surprise, he and the other students who asked didn’t turn away from me, unlike my peers who had turned away from Mr. Korn in 1978. They didn’t seem to care much at all about my being gay.

Toward the end of my first year, during the spring of 1988, Brewster appeared in my office in the tow of one of my advisees, a wonderful young woman to whom I had been “out” for a long time. “Brewster has something he needs to talk with you about,” she intoned ominously. Brewster squirmed at the prospect of telling, and we sat silently for a short while. On a hunch, I suddenly asked “What’s his name?” Brewster’s eyes widened briefly, and then out spilled a story about his involvement with an older man he had met in Boston. I listened, sympathized, and offered advice. He left my office with a smile on his face that I would see every time I saw him on the campus for the next two years, until he graduated.”(6)

Reporter George Archibald of the Washington Times confirmed in a July, 2004 story that Mr. Jennings did not report this apparent sexual involvement of Brewster with the older man in Boston. Later Mr. Jennings acknowledged that in fact he did not report the incident but through his lawyer gave reasons which are important to note. In the letter to Mrs. Lenning from Nixon Peabody LLP, attorney Boland said that Mr. Jennings was under no obligation to report the incident. Through his lawyer, Mr. Jennings made several claims:

- He denied any unethical practice by not reporting Brewster’s relationship with an older man
- He denied knowing Brewster was being victimized or abused.
- He denied knowing Brewster was having sexual relations
- He said Brewster was 16 when he talked to him

While the letter does not say so explicitly, the denial of unethical behavior seems to be in the claim that Mr. Jennings was told by Brewster that “his involvement with an older man” was not sexual in nature. From the incident as reported in his book, these claims could in fact be defensible. However, Mr. Jennings has spoken about Brewster on at least one other occasion.

The story in the book concerning Brewster is considerably different than one Mr. Jennings told in Iowa at a 2000 GLSEN rally. The following is a transcript of a portion of his talk where he again mentions Brewster.

And it took me back to 12 years ago at Concord Academy in Concord, Massachusetts where I taught, where I was a very scared young gay teacher. I had been fired from my first job for being gay.

And in my second job I wasn’t sure how I wanted to deal with that. And I was in my first month on the job and I had an advisee named Brewster. Brewster was missing a lot of classes; he was in the boarding school so I said to his teacher,

his first period teacher, I said, 'next time Brewster misses a class I want you to tell me that he's missed that class and, uh, I will go find him.' So I went and found Brewster one morning when she had called and he was asleep in his dorm room.

And I said, "Brewster, what are you doing in there asleep?" And he said, "Well, I'm tired." And I said, "Well we all are tired and we all got to school today." And he said, "Well I was out late last night." And I said, "What were you doing out late on a school night." And he said, "Well, I was in Boston..." Boston was about 45 minutes from Concord. So I said, "What were you doing in Boston on a school night Brewster?" He got very quiet, and he finally looked at me and said, "Well I met someone in the bus station bathroom and I went home with him." High school sophomore, 15 years old. That was the only way he knew how to meet gay people. I was a closeted gay teacher, 24 years old, didn't know what to say. Knew I should say something quickly so I finally said, My best friend had just died of AIDS the week before. I looked at Brewster and said, "You know, I hope you knew to use a condom." He said to me something I will never forget, He said "Why should I, my life isn't worth saving anyway."

I cannot remain closeted; I cannot allow the next generation to feel the way I felt....

The only way these stories can both be accurate is if Mr. Jennings knew this young man was sexually active and did nothing about it. The timing is given in both stories and is important.

In the lecture, Mr. Jennings says he was in his first month on the job when he met Brewster which would have been in the fall of 1987. In his book, he never mentions the story he tells in the lecture. He says in his book that he met Brewster in 1987 but did not say Brewster was an advisee. In fact, he said in his book that he knew something was wrong with Brewster but that he "didn't have a clue as to why." If the story in the lecture is true, then this statement in the book cannot be true. He states in both stories that Brewster's attendance was sporadic but in the lecture he said he found out the reason late in 1987.

Mr. Jennings says in the book that a female student advisee brought Brewster to him toward the end of his first year, in the spring of 1988. If both stories are true, Mr. Jennings knew the boy was going to Boston to have anonymous and unprotected sex for possibly as long as seven months without intervention. If the story in the lecture is true, then his claims to Mrs. Lenning in the Nixon Peabody letter cannot be true. He apparently did believe the boy was having sexual encounters which is why he invoked the admonition to use a condom.

The story in his book seems to be the most contrived in that he says that he asked Brewster "on a hunch, 'what's his name?'" This would not have been much of a hunch given the story he told in Iowa because he would have already known the boy was sexually active.

It seems clear that the boy was experiencing distress as indicated by his negative statements concerning himself as reported in the Iowa lecture and the description of a troubled student in the book. Further, if the Iowa lecture story is true, then Mr. Jennings did know the boy was having sexual encounters long before the female student brought Brewster to Mr. Jennings office as reported in Mr. Jennings' book.

In neither story does Mr. Jennings mention any efforts to alert parents, school officials or the authorities. In the Nixon Peabody letter, he said he did not have a reason to report these events. This is difficult to understand given the statute in Massachusetts mandating the report of sexual activity between an adult and child under 18 at that time. When presented with the transcript of the Brewster scenario as recorded at the lecture in Iowa, Tara Bradley, Director of Communication at Concord Academy said that such actions on the part of a student should be reported by a teacher to school administration. Concerning the Brewster story, she added: "The Dean of Students and the Head of School are mandated reporters who have to file a 51A with DSS [Department of Social Services] in a situation such as this."

Nowhere does Mr. Jennings say he told anyone at the Concord Academy. According to Ms. Bradley, current school policy would make Brewster's actions a violation of the rules. Asked about Concord's policy concerning Boarding School residents, she said, "Our current policy forbids students traveling to Boston or Cambridge unsupervised and without permission from the Dean of Students or Administrator on duty." According to both accounts, Mr. Jennings knew the student was in Boston unsupervised and informed no one.

Assuming the accounts are true and somehow fit together, let's again examine Mr. Jennings claims in the Nixon Peabody letter.

Mr. Jennings denied knowing Brewster was having sexual relations

- Mr. Jennings knew the boy was reporting unprotected sexual encounters with people old enough to take the boy home. He then reported that the boy was involved with an older man in Boston, the same place he was meeting people for sexual contacts. If he did not believe Brewster's contacts were sexual, then why did he advise Brewster to use a condom? Brewster's response seems to corroborate the sexual contact when the boy acknowledged the risk to his life by his actions.

Mr. Jennings denied knowing Brewster was being victimized or abused.

- Mr. Jennings reported obvious behavioral and verbal signs of emotional instability (attendance problems, not happy, etc.). Brewster was obviously showing signs of depression and was quite fatalistic.

Mr. Jennings denied any unethical practice by not reporting Brewster's relationship with an older man.

- Mr. Jennings was told that at least one of the partners in these trips to Boston was "an older man." Given the boy's age (15), it is hard to conceive of a scenario that does not lead to a report to authorities.
- Mr. Jennings was telling people as of the 2000 lecture that his intervention with the boy was to discuss condom usage and then for himself to come out at school as gay. He did not report what he believed was sexual activity, nor is there any indication that he reported to the parents or school officials. In fact, he says in his book that he did not have a clue why the boy was acting in an unstable manner. If his lecture is true, then he was withholding information that could have been very helpful to this boy.

In his book and the letter to Mrs. Lenning, Mr. Jennings said Brewster was 16 when he talked to him.

- On the tape, Mr. Jennings said he was 15. I assume the boy had a birthday before the account in the book took place.

There are three broad questions that I have as I read these accounts.

1. How did Brewster get out of the school to go to Boston? How is a 15 year old getting from the Concord Academy boarding school to Boston 45 minutes away without the school knowing it? According to current school officials such actions are not permitted. Clearly, Brewster's behavior should have been reported to school officials in order to help the young man with his attendance and risky behavior. Current school policy requires such a report.

2. Where are the parents in all of this? Mr. Jennings does not mention them at all. I would be horrified to learn that my son was unsupervised at a boarding school and allowed to conduct himself in this manner with full knowledge of a member of the faculty.

3. Why did Mr. Jennings not report these activities to at least the administration of Concord Academy?

At the least, Mr. Jennings conduct conveys a disregard for the role of parents and school in this boy's life. The school was not informed which seems irresponsible given that Brewster was somehow leaving the school and was unsupervised as a minor while in the care of this institution. At most, there is a need to report the sexual involvement of this boy with probable adults according to Massachusetts law. Teachers are not responsible to investigate for themselves how appropriate a referral is; they are to report and let the child welfare authorities determine the appropriate disposition of the case.

So are there any bigger picture points to take from this story?

I am not suggesting that Mr. Jennings face an investigation into this incident. Given his comment concerning using a condom, it seems clear that he assumed that the boy was having sexual relationships. Thus, since the boy was 15 and at least one of his “involvements” was with an adult, it appears from the evidence of these two accounts that a report to at least school officials should have been made. However, the incident took place in 1987-88 and is probably not legally relevant now.

To those who groan that I am harping over ancient history, I want to point out that Mr. Jennings was touting his approach to Brewster as late as 2000 and mentioned him indirectly in two 2005 articles in NEA publications. To teachers and GLSEN volunteers and staff, he gave an account of his handling of this boy without any qualifications or self-critical remarks (e.g., I should have done this instead of that). As the founder and executive director of the organization, his example is powerful. Isn't it plausible to think that those listening to him will assume his endorsement of this method of handling young teens who report either risky sexual behavior or sexual involvement with an adult or both?

I do not see how one can escape the uncomfortable inference that Mr. Jennings leans toward an out-of-the-mainstream position when it comes to handling teen sexuality. It is natural to wonder if GLSEN as an organization might also promote a too-casual attitude toward teen sexuality. In addition to the sexually explicit reading materials recommended to middle school students on GLSEN's website, the leader of the organization evidences a cavalier attitude in his public statements toward minors engaged in risky sexual behavior.

Students who identify as gay can be safe in school without compromising a school's role in promoting a healthy sexual ethic. One does need to promote a casual attitude toward sex in order to promote worth and dignity for all people. It is understandable that parents and school officials are concerned about the close links of GLSEN with GSAs. Possibly, Mr. Jennings and GLSEN err on the side of permissiveness so that students will not feel insulted concerning their sexual impulses. Many of us had a teacher in school who tried to be cool by using slang or even dropping sexual innuendos. These teachers usually could get laughs and small following of students but rarely do such teachers come away with the respect of most students.

When we remember Brewster, let's remember a young man who needed guidance and an adult strong and objective enough to get him the help and protection he needed. Teachers can play an invaluable role in modeling appropriate concern about the wisdom of behavior without conveying a disrespect of the student. Adolescents need more than acceptance of their actions; they need guidance. The way modeled by Mr. Jennings does not appear to model the kind of caring intervention needed by youngsters in similar situations. Let's not make these mistakes with future Brewster's by promoting a cavalier stance concerning teen sexuality.

ENDNOTES

1 Tomorrow's Teacher, April, 2005. <http://www.nea.org/tomorrowsteachers/2005/interview.html>

2 www.glsen.org

3 <http://www.drthrockmorton.com/article.asp?id=90>

4 Sweetwood, M. & Sweetwood, B. (2004, April 6). Critical Review of LWS D Curriculum: 'Dealing With Difference: Opening Dialogue About Lesbian, Gay & Straight Issues'. White paper, available at <http://www.drthrockmorton.com/article.asp?id=131>.

5 Sanchez, A. (2003). Rainbow Boys. New York: Simon & Schuster. Frequent themes include obtaining sexually explicit magazines (p.51) and movies (p. 88), as well as graphic descriptions of male homosexual arousal (pp.51-52, 89). The book features several scenes of explicit heterosexual sex, and a scene where one of the teen boys has anal intercourse without a condom with a 29-year-old man he has just met via the Internet (p.148). Rainbow Boys is recommended by GLSEN for students in grades 7-12.

"My first experience was with a much older man, a friend of Derek's [his dad]...When I was fifteen, he must have

been twenty-nine, thirty...I seduced him...It was a wild night. We did everything." Young man, Eliot, telling about earlier experiences in a story excerpted in *Growing Up Gay/ Growing Up Lesbian*, ed. Bennett Singer, New Press, 1994, p.100. This book is part of recommended reading by GLSEN for 7-12th grade students. p.111.)

6 (Kevin Jennings, former teacher and current president of GLSEN, describing his interaction with a male student, in *One Teacher in Ten: Gay and lesbian educators tell their stories*, Kevin Jennings, ed., Alyson Publications, 1994, p.25.)

Posted August 21, 2005