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Sexual orientation leads to discrimination, locals say

By Toni Mailloux

Monday night, Midcoast Won't Discriminate held a speak-out in the Abbott Room of the Belfast Free Library. The purpose was to hear from local people with stories of discrimination they have experienced based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation.

As one organizer put it, "The proponents of Referendum 1 want us to believe there really isn't any problem in Maine with discrimination based on sexual orientation, so it's important to hear actual stories from people who have experienced it."

Nan Stone told the first story on behalf of Rep. Walter Ash of Belfast, who could not be present at the meeting. She said his wife has a friend who is raising a child who is mentally and physically handicapped. The child's care is challenging and exhausting and every third week, the woman's husband takes over for three days to give her a break.

A couple of months ago, the woman and a female friend decided to go camping in Old Orchard Beach during those three days. The woman made a reservation at the campground under her name.

When the two arrived at the campground, the owner asked the name of the second person who would be staying at the site. When the woman gave the name of her friend, the owner replied, "We don't rent out campsites to two women."

Stone said Ash wanted everyone to hear the story so they would know that the law banning discrimination based on sexual orientation won't just benefit gays but is for everyone's benefit.

Stone also spoke for Suzanne Montgomery, who was ill and could not attend. She said when Montgomery and her female partner tried to get a construction loan to build a house, they encountered problems at two different banks. Each time, the person on the telephone was friendly about setting up an appointment to discuss a loan but when she and her partner arrived for that appointment, things changed. Stone said Montgomery said, "You could see it on her face. She didn't know how to handle it."

Stone said eventually Montgomery and her partner got the loan but not until they appealed the denial to a higher level at the bank.

Adam Flanders of Belfast, who graduated from Searsport District High School in June, said he "came out" to his parents in the eighth grade. He said they were very supportive and his mother told him she'd known since he was in third grade. His problems started, he said, when he entered Belfast Area High School. He said for the first two years, he was called names five or six times a day and there was one group of boys that waited outside the lunchroom for him every day.

Flanders said in his junior year, he decided he should do something so he investigated resources on the Internet and eventually decided to start a Gay Straight Alliance at the school.

He said the administration was not supportive and tried to get him to take the word "gay" out of the name of the group because they said they didn't think it was appropriate. Flanders said it took him a month to convince them he had a right to start the group and to hold meetings at the school.

He said he started the club late in his junior year with about 12 people attending the first meeting. He said attendance dwindled off very quickly after posters about the group were torn down and the announcements about meetings kept being forgotten.

Flanders said there was only one supportive teacher in the school and in fact, he said he saw one teacher taking down one of his posters. He said when he confronted the teacher, he was told the principal wanted it taken down because it was inappropriate because the word bisexual was on the poster. He said another student told him she couldn't attend meetings because her younger sister would tell her parents and she would get grounded.

Flanders said he put up posters stating "It's OK to be gay" but those kept being ripped down too. He said eventually he asked to have the posters put in a glass case at the school but he was told they were inappropriate for school. When he finally convinced the administration he had a right to put up the posters since other clubs were allowed to someone used a coat hanger to rip up the poster even under glass.

Flanders said he was so frustrated he started skipping classes to put posters up and his grades started going down. But he said the posters were still being torn down faster than he could put them up.

He said one day his mother was watching a television show about people getting their messages out on T-shirts so he made a T-shirt with "It's OK to be gay" on one side and "It's OK to be a lesbian" on the other.

He said he wore one to school and was called to the office and told six students and two teachers had complained that the T-shirt was inappropriate and he should turn it inside out. He said he went back to class without changing the shirt and then was called down again and told he had to remove the T-shirt or leave the school.

Flanders said he walked out of the office and went to his next class while the administration called his father. He said he was called down again but he wouldn't go. He said the principal came to the door of his classroom and told him he could be arrested if he didn't go to the office. He said he replied he was not going down and said, "I have a right to wear this shirt."

He said during the last class of the day, he again refused to go to the office and the principal came into the classroom and told him he was giving him once last chance.

When Flanders continued to insist he had a right to wear the shirt, he ended up getting suspended for five days. Flanders said he used that time to do legal research and found he had a right to wear the T-shirt. He said he had a meeting with the superintendent and wore the shirt to school the next week without any problem. He said then he made more T-shirts and wore them all week.

Still, Flanders said during this time his grades slipped and he failed two classes so he had to attend summer school.

Flanders said at the start of his senior year, he again asked to put posters up in the glass case and was told the posters were inappropriate. He said he made another appointment with the superintendent who said he could put the posters up. Meanwhile, Flanders said the harassment was continuing so he sent an e-mail to all the staff at the high school explaining how he felt.

He said he was called to a meeting with the principal and vice principal and the meeting didn't go well. Flanders said he felt they were reacting in a "childish" manner because they felt they were criticized in the e-mail. He said they told him an individual's sexuality should be a private matter.

Flanders said he set up another meeting with the superintendent and asked to be transferred to Searsport District High School. He said the one teacher at Belfast who had supported him had gotten a job there and he'd met another teacher from there during summer school.

Flanders said the paperwork approving the transfer was completed within a week.

Flanders said when he got to Searsport, he and two other students wore the T-shirts he'd created and he got called to the principal's office there. He said the principal there told him he respected him for what he was doing and just wanted to make sure he was OK. The principal also said that some students who had put up some cruel posters would be disciplined.

Flanders said the Searsport principal also offered him 15 minutes at an upcoming assembly to explain what he was trying to accomplish with the T-shirts.

“Such a difference,” said Flanders.

Another member of the audience said he worked at Belfast Area High School for a while and said he is aware of the atmosphere at the school. He said the principal and vice principal are “nice guys” who just want everything to be OK. He said the most derogatory word for anything at the school is “gay” and the powers-that-be don't do anything about it.

Sylvia Simms of Palermo said she and her female partner have been traveling together for 16 years. She said they'd never been refused accommodations or service; that is until they went to Eastport. She said they made reservations three months ahead to attend the Nature Conservancy annual meeting, which was being held the same weekend as a salmon festival.

She said when they showed up at the hotel, they were told there was only one room left and it had not been cleaned so they would have to go elsewhere. She said she showed the manager her receipt and insisted on a room.

She said the next morning, she and her partner went to the only place in town to eat breakfast. They went early and were the first ones there. She said they ordered breakfast and then waited and waited. She said others came in and got their breakfasts. When she asked what had happened, she was told, “I forgot your order.” She said the reason was obvious and it was “very painful.”

Meredith Bruskin of Swanville has worked as an emergency room nurse at Eastern Maine Medical Center for nearly 15 years. She said she's seen many suicide attempts and many suicides and more than the statistical one-third of the young suicides are individuals who feel it would be better to be dead than gay. She said unlike Flanders more than 50 percent of the kids she sees don't have supportive parents or a supportive community.

She said she's glad to be a nurse to try to help these individuals but she said she almost quit following the last people's veto vote when she found out that only two of her co-workers bothered to vote even though they knew her sexual orientation and the need for legal protection. She said their failure to vote was “a personal hurt.”

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