



With liberty and justice for almost all

How the passage of Proposition 8 impacts one teacher

ON ELECTION NIGHT THE energy in my Fairfax neighborhood of Los Angeles was palpable. It was a seminal moment in the history of our nation. This election, unlike any other, raised issues fundamental to our growth as a society and culture.

But the presidential election wasn't the only litmus test being offered. In three states, the legalization of same-sex marriages was on the ballot. In California, Proposition 8 aimed to

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repeal the right of same-sex couples to marry granted them by the California Supreme Court in June.

The Yes on 8 forces were the self-proclaimed defenders of the sanctity of marriage, saying that public education was in jeopardy and educators would be tasked with promoting a "gay agenda." Yet not one word in Prop. 8 mentioned education. California's top educators, includ-

ing Superintendent of Schools Jack O'Connell, agreed: Proposition 8 has nothing to do with education.

For me, the issue is this: I work in a public school system that needs to include everyone in our society. The vote on Proposition 8 sends a message that even very young kids get on a deep level: When push comes to shove, there is still a pecking order and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender folks (and students) are at the bottom.

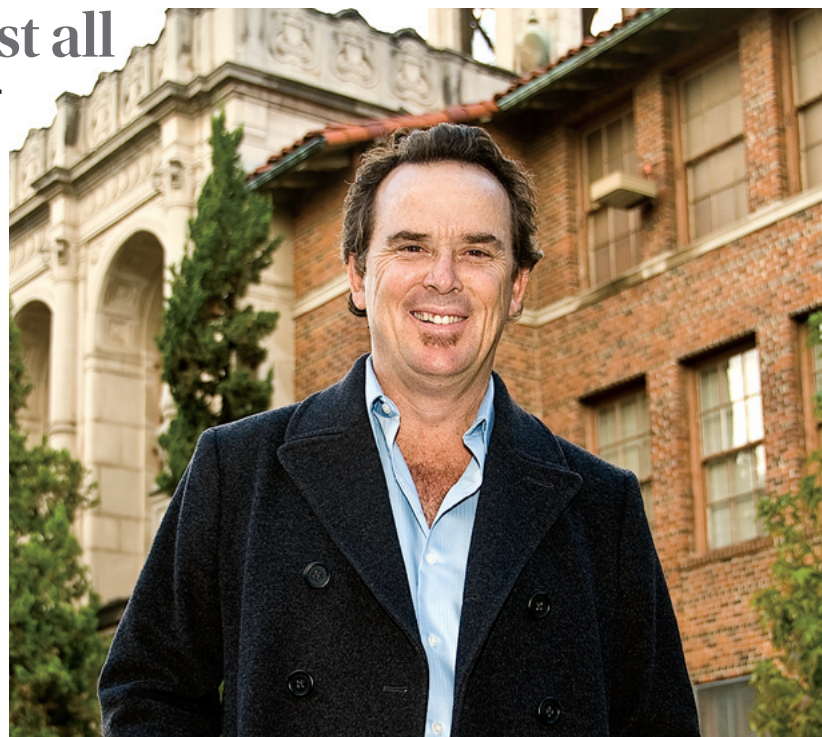
What message does the LGBT student get from this? LGBT youth are four times as likely to have attempted suicide. One of three teen suicides is an LGBT youth. Does this vote create a climate of cohesion and collaboration, or one of hostility and division? What message is sent when the majority of organized religions condemn the LGBT lifestyle?

After 17 years teaching human relations and anti-bias curriculum, the educational environment I work to create is rigorous, state standards-based, and one in which students can raise issues that pique their curiosity and affect their lives. Remark-

ably, students rarely have problems expressing themselves. To the best of my knowledge, no kid ever changed his or her sexual orientation from talking about it.

At a recent training at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, a Latino eighth grader from South Los Angeles brought up Proposition 8 and clearly identified its focus.

"It doesn't matter to me whether two males or females get married," he said, "because it doesn't threaten me in any way. It's kind of the same type



Los Angeles teacher Ron Rubine has worked with thousands of elementary, secondary, and high school students and says the vote on Proposition 8 sends the message that LGBT students are still at the bottom of the pecking order.

of discrimination that I have felt being Mexican sometimes. Besides, you can't help who you fall in love with."

AS I CELEBRATED BARACK

Obama's victory well into the night of November 4 with thousands of others at the Century Plaza Hotel, I felt sadness for my LGBT friends who would be feeling left behind. Mostly, I felt for students who have "come out" to me and shared their most sacred secrets knowing I would receive the information without judgment.

The bigger issue here is the one President-Elect Obama extolled: We are not a nation divided by demographics and categories, not by region or culture — we are the United States of America.

Our country is a work in progress, continually evolving. The ban on voting based on skin color was lifted with the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870. For women, the ban was lifted with the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. In 1967, the Supreme Court struck down miscegenation laws affecting interracial marriage.

As we stand at this remarkable crossroads in our nation's history, let's remember the words of Martin Niemoller, the German intellec-

tual who initially supported the Nazi regime, but after bearing witness to the Holocaust became the voice for German penance and reconciliation. His now famous poem speaks to the dangers of political apathy.

"In Germany, they came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist; And then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist; And then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew; And then . . . they came for me . . . And by that time there was no one left to speak up."

For the thousands of students who have heard me urge tolerance and understanding, you can count on me not to be silent.

— By Ron M. Rubine

Ron Rubine is a long-time secondary teacher, now elementary teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District, member of United Teachers Los Angeles, and founder of Standing on Common Ground, a group that provides student-centered human relations programs.

Tools for Teachers

The Trevor Survival Kit

contains a teaching guide for middle and high school teachers, posters, and the short film *Trevor*, the Academy Award-winning film about a 13-year-old boy who attempts suicide after realizing he might be gay.

To receive a free kit from the Trevor Project, phone 310-271-8845 or email info@thetrevorproject.org and include your name, title, workplace, street address, and phone number. www.thetrevorproject.org



AFT lesson plans about the 2008 election

contain materials to help students absorb the teachable moments of this history-making election that featured two strong female candidates and the election of our nation's first African American president. The lesson plans can be adapted for all students. www.aft.org/tools4teachers/AmericaElects