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Safe Proms in High-Risk Times

By **Nicholas J. Pace** From *Principal Leadership*

THE tiny midwestern community where I began my career as a school administrator was like many others. A grocery store, a post office, a grain elevator, two banks, three convenience stores, and three bars lined Main Street. Among the school's enrollment of 540 students was a young man who would both challenge and teach as he made his sexual orientation known to his family, community, and classmates.

"Pete" was a high school se-

nior in a class of 38. His family had been in the community for three generations, and he had attended school in the district since kindergarten, as had most of his classmates. If there is such a thing, Pete was a typical small-town high school kid. If there is a stereotypical gay look, he didn't have it. If there is a stereotypical straight look, he didn't have that, either.

In the fall of his senior year, Pete began to confide his sexual orientation to a small number of

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close friends who, at Pete's request, kept things very quiet. They shared his apprehension about how people would react but appreciated the weight that Pete said was lifted from his shoulders after being honest with them.

He also shared his thoughts and feelings with "Jeri," the counselor at my school. He had all but told her that he was gay, and she was trying to help him explore his feelings and fears about it. "He's said everything but," Jeri said. I thought, "He probably is. I can see that." I thought nothing more about it, because I was preoccupied with other issues that felt more pressing.

For Pete's Sake

As the long midwestern winter drew to a close and our students' attention moved toward the prom, a growing number of students had heard about Pete's sexual orientation, either directly or by rumor. There was talk that perhaps he would bring his boyfriend, who was from another community, to the prom.

To my surprise, the rumor didn't command the attention I thought it would. I really didn't give the possibility a great deal of thought at the time. Although I didn't view Pete as having the desire to make a grand statement, the principal in me became slowly concerned about the possibility.

In the spring of Pete's senior year, Jeri told me that he was

probably going to stop keeping his secret and would likely bring his boyfriend to the prom. I exhaled a heavy combination of a laugh and a scoff. "You've got to talk him out of it," I said, matter-of-factly.

My initial response had no relationship to my feelings toward the morality of homosexuality, nor did it result from any deeply held philosophical or religious views on homosexuality. The gut level response came, sadly, from a purely administrative, managerial, "try to keep the lid on" mentality.

We talked about the potential reactions, mainly on the part of the students. We both had concerns about Pete's elementary-age siblings, who also attended the school.

To be sure, my initial reaction was selfish, which is not something I'm proud of. Looking back, what bothers me most is that my initial reaction of self-pity has to pale in comparison to the needs of a young man who is trying to find his way in the world and who had not felt comfortable and confident enough to end his charade, even in his home school and community.

Vivid worst-case scenarios—such as walkouts, assaults, vandalism, and harassment—filled my head. As we prepared for the reality that Pete would go through with his plans, it was also difficult to know whether I was accurately gauging what the

community's reaction might be. Perhaps, I thought, the principal's job is to expect the worst, which, although a miserable way to live, would at least make me prepared.

As the prom drew closer, we tried to ensure that we were planning and responding appropriately. Disallowing Pete from attending the prom was never discussed as an option, despite my initial wish for Jeri to dissuade him from his intentions of coming to the prom. Although I am now aware of the relevant court decision (*Fricke v. Lynch, 1980*), I was unaware of it at the time. I contacted a number of principals in our area to ask for advice about how to handle the situation, but they didn't know how to proceed either.

One of the prom traditions at the school was to announce the couples as they arrived on the sidewalk in front of the community center. Parents, grandparents, elementary kids, and dozens of other folks turn out to "see the kids all dressed up."

The way in which Pete and his guest would be announced was a concern. Jeri learned that Pete and his boyfriend would be attending with two female students and that they simply wanted their names to be read as they arrived. "OK. We can handle that," I thought.

As the crowd gathered outside the community center, students began arriving. Polite applause greeted the students as

they were announced. Pete and his party of four arrived at about the same time that another group of students did, were announced, were greeted with polite applause, and entered without incident.

Hate Notes

As is the case in many rural high schools, the prom included a meal for the juniors, the seniors, and their guests. Another curious tradition which existed at the school involved note passing. As the wait staff brought the food, students began writing notes which were to be delivered to classmates and teachers.

After a couple of minutes, a female guest who was in Pete's party brought over to me about five notes that had been delivered to their table and which visibly upset her. As one might imagine, they'd received notes about "faggots" and "queers" and primitive stick-figure drawings that were completely inappropriate.

My first instinct was to grab the microphone and tear into somebody, but a staff member's cool advice to simply tell the wait staff not to deliver any more messages to Pete's table was better. Why make everyone more uncomfortable and draw more attention to an already-difficult situation?

High school dances, like many social settings, take a while to get going. Eventually, the air seems to change, energy increases, and

students begin to mingle and dance. At first, I was certainly not the only one who was wondering if Pete and his boyfriend would dance together. We got our answer on a few slow songs.

Quiet or Quelled?

As the dance floor filled, Pete and his boyfriend made their way into the group. Needless to say, this attracted some attention, albeit quiet attention, from the students. The fact that I was receiving play-by-play reports from my wife as we danced a few feet away may have contributed to this quiet reaction.

"I think they're gonna kiss," my wife said after a few more dances. Despite all the situations which I had envisioned while getting ready for the prom, I hadn't really thought about this one. My guidelines to be used for acceptable displays of affection in this setting are, I think, like most principals'. They're not hard and fast rules, but when someone is over the line, a judgment call is usually pretty easy to make.

"If we're letting the rest of the couples embrace and exchange some kisses, we can't very well pick and choose, right?" I asked myself. "I guess not," came the tentative and unconvincing answer. Although I was uncomfortable walking through this minefield, I think my actions were guided, almost subconsciously, by some sense of equality. I was uptight and uncomfortable and

trying to model respect and equality. I wasn't sure of much, but I was sure that no violence or inflammatory actions would be tolerated.

Later in the evening, the students and staff members earned high praise from me. Pete's guest did a solo dance to a popular song that could have rivaled some of the dancing seen on MTV. A group of students, made up mostly of girls, soon gathered around him to watch. As an invisible but palpable tension filled the room, the staff members, without formal instructions from me, instinctively chatted with students about all sorts of topics—the baseball season, cars, summer job prospects—and the moment passed without incident.

Because the teachers who were there knew the students, they could anticipate which students might be likely to hurl an insult, create a scene, or worse. They also knew the students' interests, and could legitimately talk with them about things that mattered to them.

At the same time, a diverse group of students who had assembled around Pete's boyfriend made it apparent that anyone who would be interested in causing trouble would be uncomfortable doing so. They, too, found themselves in a situation for which they had not been prepared, but they seemed to be guided by a sense of hospitality, curiosity, tolerance, and goodness.

Safety at the Prom

After the dancing display, one of the boys requested a hard rock song and performed a wild air-guitar solo. It was odd, but it also served to break the tension in a way that could never have been better scripted. It made everyone, the hospitable and the hostile, sit back in their chairs and smile a little bit about all they were seeing that night. The exquisite sense of relief I felt as we walked home shortly after midnight was one I have not often experienced.

With about three weeks to go in the school year, Jeri and Pete received word that Pete would be awarded one of the Matthew Shepard scholarships—a privately funded, full-tuition scholarship for an openly gay or lesbian high school student who will attend a state university. Several decisions had to be made as we planned for Awards Night.

Where should Pete's scholarship be placed in the program? How should the presenter, who was coming from the state capital, be introduced? Did we need to find out exactly how the scholarship was going to be presented and anticipate any possible problems?

We contacted the group responsible for the award and got the exact wording of the presentation. We explained our concerns about trying to ensure an enjoyable and appropriate evening for all our students. As our planning moved forward, we

became aware of the possibility of a protest of the award by a religious group that frequently stages demonstrations at funerals, concerts, and other public events.

To avoid trouble, the scholarship presenters did not release the name and the school of the scholarship winner. Nevertheless, we informed the sheriff's office, some 20 miles away, in case we needed them, and we instructed the staff to route all inquiries or questions about scholarships and the awards ceremony to the superintendent.

Placing Award

I smile now as I picture us discussing the placement of the award during the ceremony, as if there was a scientific way to determine whether Pete's award should be announced after the Lion's Club scholarship or before the Tyler County Hog Producers Scholarship. I recall seeing a few wide-eyed glances between surprised attendees at the ceremony when Pete's award was announced. There was polite applause. No shouting, no insults. Congratulations to all, best wishes to the graduates, thank you for coming.

The last hurdle was now the commencement ceremony itself. Pete never seemed to be alone or in a position at the school where he was overly vulnerable to verbal or physical threats or worse.

I'm certain he heard comments, and I now know there were frightening instances outside school, including phone calls and other threats, but very little of note took place at school.

A couple of days before graduation, I was going through my stack of mail. Amid the pile of catalogs was a handwritten note from Pete thanking me for my support and attention in the last few months. He said he knew this was something I never wanted to deal with, but that he appreciated the way we handled things just the same.

Relief and Pride

After commencement, standing in the freshly cut grass surrounded by smiling students and families, I felt a tacit sense of relief and pride in our students, staff members, and school. The seniors were out of the building now, the year was nearly over, and the last public event had passed without incident. Pete would later recount to me that he was denied a few handshakes in the receiving line that day, but he endured no overt insults.

I accepted a university faculty position in teacher preparation the summer after Pete's graduation. In addition to placing and supervising student teachers in several rural school districts, I am responsible for teaching a human relations course. My job requires a significant amount of driving over the course of each

month, and I try to use the time productively to develop meaningful, real-world questions and lessons for my future teachers. It wasn't long before I realized that Pete's senior year warranted another look.

I began talking with Pete, who accepted my invitation to speak to my human relations class. He gave me the names of several students whom he thought I should visit. From there, I talked to many others who were involved in that year—teachers, students, clergy, and family members.

What I found astonished me. Like me, virtually everyone said they would have predicted Pete's coming out to have been a giant controversy and a potentially explosive event. Their ideas about why this did not happen are provocative.

Students from a physics class of six students talked about how Pete's situation offered them the opportunity to open up to one another. Each revealed a different struggle that they, like Pete, had kept largely hidden from classmates and teachers, even in their tiny high school. They described the pain of being shunned for not attending beer parties, fear of anti-Semitic remarks in elementary school, concern for a suicidal classmate, and the challenges which were involved in remaining true to a friend.

Teachers and clergy described how they faced new chal-

lenges in balancing mission and policy statements with the complex world of teaching and ministering. Nearly everyone talked about how this issue became real for them because Pete was a person in their town, their family, and their school.

Why Not?

When asked regarding the question of why our dire expectations were not fulfilled, people offered a host of explanations. Some students speculated that their classmates were simply afraid of getting in trouble. Others said that they'd always known Pete and thought he was OK, so he was still OK. Some said, "He wasn't in my face with it."

Others credited the leaders and the personality of that year's senior class at the school. Townspeople talked about the many good works the polite young man had done for his town, church, school, and family. Pete credits a good school with aware and caring students and staff members. Jeri speculated that because Pete was not a threat to anyone, they lacked a real reason to hate him.

The experience was not one that I would have chosen for myself. Yet I know that I'm a better teacher and leader for having gone through it. Even though the journey was one which some of us took unwillingly, it revealed a number of challenging, real-world issues for educational leaders.

For one, we must guard against self-serving reactions. My life would certainly have been easier if Pete had waited to come out. But principals' lives would be much easier if they didn't have to deal with many of the things that make the principalship so difficult. When we accept the challenge of leadership, we accept all the challenges, not just the few easy ones.

Second, we must be ready to live our school's mission statements. Every school I've seen has spent a lot of time agonizing over wording and syntax. But, if we're only willing to live our flowery, optimistic claims about who we are as a school when things are smooth, the statements aren't worth much.

Finally, we should remember that our school might surprise us. I was sure that Pete's coming out could derail our educational process for that year. And I know that there are many districts which have been less fortunate than ours in dealing with sexual orientation. However, despite everyone anticipating a rough ride, our school experienced almost no problems.

In fact, about a year ago, I received an e-mail from Pete. He reminisced about how he went to the best high school in the world because we "weren't going to let him fall through the cracks." Wouldn't it be great if every high school student felt the same way? *ef*