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Glendora Teen Advocates For Inclusion of Gay Figures in School Lessons

Isaiah Baiseri remembers the evening he and a friend wandered into a bookstore in downtown Glendora. Baiseri, then only in sixth grade, thumbed through a book his friend recommended to him.

The book was a teen novel called *Geography Club*, about a 16-year-old boy coming to terms with his sexuality.

It was then Baiseri, who was also struggling to come out to his own friends and family, said everything changed.

"It was the first time I had, even though he was a fictional character, someone to relate to, who seemed real and felt the same things that I felt," said Baiseri. "He was out and open, and had a boyfriend, and had all the things I really wanted."

Now 17 and nearing the end of his senior year at Glendora High School, Baiseri is part of an initiative to ensure gay youth like him can have a variety of positive gay role models to look up to.

It was Baiseri's testimony at a Senate committee meeting in April that helped Senate Bill 48, or the FAIR (Fair, Accurate, Inclusive and Respectful) Education act pass onto the Assembly. The bill, authored by Senator Mark Leno (D-San Francisco), Equality California and the Gay Straight Alliance Network, would add the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered (LGBT) community to the existing list of under-represented minority groups already included in the state's inclusionary education requirements.

"Most textbooks don't include any information about LGBT historical figures or the LGBT civil rights movement, which has great significance to both California and U.S. history," said Leno in a press statement. "This selective censorship sends the wrong message to all young people, and especially to those who do not identify as straight."

If passed, the contributions of LGBT figures will be included in the public school curriculum of "age-appropriate" social science courses.

“The challenge for any educator is to present information in a factual unbiased manner,” said Jim Carroll, interim executive director of Equality California. “We’re seeking the same factual, unbiased information of our history the same way the school system would teach slavery, or women’s right to vote or the labor movement.”

But in the wake of the voter approved Proposition 8, the bill faces strong opposition from groups who say the bill overrides an overwhelming number of people who view homosexuality as morally wrong.

“The bill equates for the first time that gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered individuals are akin to race, that homosexuality is not a choice when clearly it is,” said Elizabeth Swanson of Concerned Parents United. “We are forcing teachers to teach our children something they may be morally opposed to. Parents have no choice in the matter of what their child is being taught. It is careless and irresponsible for schools to normalize homosexuality and deny children the truth.”

But for Baiseri, the truth about the contributions of gay historical figures has been denied from students long enough.

“Growing up, I never had anyone to look up to,” Baiseri said in his Senate testimony. “Where was my history when I needed it?”

Creating a Safe Place For All Students

Even before he came out, Baiseri said he suffered cruel and relentless online bullying from those he thought were his friends.

At the start of his freshman year at Glendora High School, Baiseri said he noticed comments on his friends’ Myspace pages poking fun of various gay celebrities.

“They would say stuff like, “Oh did you see what Lance Bass was wearing today?” Or “Did you see what Lance Bass did in class?” Baiseri recalled.

Baiseri said another friend finally tipped him off on what the public online thread was about.

“When they were talking about all these celebrities they were actually talking about me behind my back, but in front of me at the same time because it was all public,” said Baiseri. “It was super depressing, I really gave up on trying to have a social life at the time and I just focused on school, and my entire outlook changed because I was still not comfortable to let the entire world know [I was gay].”

Baiseri said his English teacher spotted a drastic change in his behavior. When she discovered Baiseri had been a victim of online bullying, she intervened and school administrators confronted the students involved in the bullying.

But Baiseri, who later founded the Gay Straight Alliance at Glendora High School, said there are

many young gay teens who are not as lucky in finding an ally on campus.

"In a lot of communities, if they're not completely ridiculed, they're completely ignored," said Baiseri. "In both cases, it's extremely hurtful to communities as a whole. We need to foster an environment that shows that LGBT individuals are just as valid as everyone else in society."

According to Carroll, studies show that positive exposure to gay individuals decreases campus bullying, and creates safe places for students to learn.

"We think everyone is in favor of reducing physical violence and emotional harm in our schools," said Carroll. "This bill only reinforces the belief that with education, we can foster a more tolerant, safe environment."

But the "positive contributions" of the LGBT individuals the bill would introduce to school curriculum are questionable, according to those opposed to the bill.

"If you are to put up a gay figure for a student to study, are you going to reflect the entire truth about that person?" Swanson said. Although Harvey Milk is recognized in the gay community as the first openly gay man elected to public office, Swanson called him a "pedophile who had sex with young boys."

"Are they going to talk about that, too?" asked Swanson.

"Sexualizing" Education

In the debate on the inclusion of the LGBT community in school curriculum, both sides seem to disagree on what such curriculum would look like.

During a Senate Education Committee meeting in March, Senator Bob Huff (R-Diamond Bar), whose district includes Glendora, issued a statement against SB 48, arguing that the proposed addition to school curriculum would be inappropriate.

"I would suggest this is not the place to do it," said Huff. "To sexualize the training of our children at an early age when the psychiatrist was explaining that they're in a development state that is critical when they are trying to figure out their identity."

But Carroll insists that the bill has nothing to do with sex education.

"We're talking about the contributions of important historical figures who were also gay, not their conduct behind closed doors," said Carroll. "You can't talk about the women's movement without mentioning Susan B. Anthony, you can't talk about the Civil Rights movement without talking about Martin Luther King, Jr. As of now, there is no requirement in our schools to explain the gay movement and the people involved in it. I don't think you could have a very complete education and not know anything about the gay movement."

Despite the controversy, bill supporters say SB 48 has a good chance of becoming a reality.

A similar 2006 bill, which provided the basis for Leno's SB 48, passed through the Senate and the Assembly before former Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger vetoed it. With a new governor in the capitol, Carroll said he is confident that SB 48 will be signed into law. Having passed the Senate, the bill awaits its committee hearing at the Assembly.

Regardless of the outcome, Baiseri said he will continue to advocate for the inclusion of the LGBT community. Baiseri is currently on independent study from Glendora High School while he makes the countless weekend trips promoting SB 48 and other LGBT advocacy efforts with the Gay Straight Alliance Network. The senior is set to attend UCLA in the fall in art design and media arts.

"I'm really lucky that although Glendora is really conservative community, the Glendora High administration and staff is very inclusive and supporting," said Baiseri. "They've acknowledged the fact that everyone needs to be safe."

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