

## Book Review:

### Troubled Teenagers Urged to Self-Identify as "Queer Kids"

*Cruelty to homosexually-oriented teens is a sad and very disturbing fact which schools must address. But is "coming out" the solution ----and is it a decision best made in adolescence?*

by Louis A. Berman, Ph.D.

Meet the author of *Queer Kids; The Challenges and Promise for Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth* (Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press, 1998). He is Robert E. Owens Jr., Ph.D., who candidly tells the reader he is gay. The author is a specialist in language development and disorders. He is not a psychotherapist, although his publisher classifies Owens' book as psychotherapy.

*Queer Kids* has some bold and gay-friendly advice for teenagers troubled about their sexual identity. Along the way, the book also vividly illustrates the social ostracism and harassment experienced by many sexually confused teenagers.

Owens has some strong advice for counselors. He says school counselors dealing with troubled teenagers should get right to the point of their sexual orientation, and suggests that the non-directive approach is seen by teenagers as a sign of either evasion or stupidity. If a teenage client gives every sign that he is struggling with his sexuality, he says, help him deal with it openly.

Owens quotes a teenager who says he has been harassed by fellow students since the sixth grade. When he went into counseling, this young man was surprised and disappointed that the counselor would not bring up the topic of sexual orientation:

"I was obviously more effeminate than other people, so . . . it wouldn't take . . . a college degree to figure out, hey, we have somebody here who is struggling with their sexuality. . . . [I]f this group of sixth graders could figure it out, then why can't a professional counselor . . . ?"

And what should the counselor advise the troubled teenager? If the counselor adopts the premises set forth in Owens' book, this is what the teenager would learn about himself and his social world:

(1) **It's a cruel, heterosexual world out there and the sooner you leave it the better.** "Society would rather that lesbian, gay, and bisexual teens die than admit that they exist" (page 81). "Institutionalized heterosexism and homophobia are psychologically damaging in the extreme" (page 83). "[M]any gay and lesbian kids are told flat-out [by their teachers] that they're sick perverts" (page 85). One teenager laments (page 62): "My father would tear me apart if he found out I was gay." Owens (page 76) reports a newspaper story about parents "who battered their own son into insensibility" after finding homosexual literature in his room.

(2) **Cruelty to gays is not only the tactic of your elders—parents and teachers—but is also the perverse sport of your classmates.** Owens (page 110) quotes a 16-year-old's story of the event that destroyed his will to succeed in school:

"I was in the locker room, and this guy who didn't like me starts going, "Brent sucks d—k," and soon the whole locker room was full of guys shouting this for . . . three minutes. And I had to pretend I didn't give a shit . . . but I really wanted to kill myself. That's when I started to cut school. I had a 4.0 grade average, and within months I went to Ds and Fs."

Owens (page 97) quotes a young suicide survivor:

"People used to pee on me in the shower. . . . People were slamming me into lockers. . . . I would be standing at a urinal and someone would come up and kick me in the small of my back . . . and had to hide in a stall in the bathroom. . . . I used to get punched a lot in the locker room. . . . I couldn't learn [at that school]."

These are only two of many, many incidents cited in the book, of physical abuse and emotional torment suffered by

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teenagers labelled as gays by their schoolmates. If one accepts as representative and accurate the book's many testimonies of unjustified harrassment, abuse and labelling, one must ask, Is this typical of what is going on in our schools? This kind of abuse not only shameful but intolerable. It is time for teenagers and their parents to demand that schools ban this kind of cruelty and enforce it.

Do not many schools sponsor art classes, drama groups, choral groups, bands, literary groups, debating societies, etc. where less-than-100-percent-macho boys find fellowship and gain recognition by the school as a whole? One piece of advice this reviewer would give to a teenager who faced repeated bullying, physical and emotional abuse at school, is: File a formal complaint, and then find another school.

**(3) Mistreatment, oppression, betrayal, rejection, and ostracism can be damaging, and may lead to alcoholism, drug abuse and suicide attempts.** But there is scarcely a mention of an inner conflict of values that burdens the troubled teenager; instead, Owens implies: "Put all the blame on social oppression."

**(4) Gay teens: Your only salvation is to escape from your enemies and join your friends; you must not only be openly gay, but proud of it!** (pages 39-40). He advises:

"For many, coming out is a 'rite of passage' into a well-adjusted adulthood. Although coming out can be social suicide in high school, more and more adolescents view it as a badge of honor or courage and as an expression of individuality. In the process, they are increasing the visibility of sexual minorities and making coming out easier for the next teen."

Owens encourages gay teens to actively advocate gay pride and awareness, and to get connected with other gay youths and adults through the internet and advertised social groups. But he fails to mention the problem of hardcore pornography aimed at teenagers found on some gay sites, and the subsequent problem of addiction to pornography which is often reported by therapists. He says:

"The personal computer offers unprecedented opportunities for queer kids to connect with others through the Internet, to declare their sexual orientation, to ask for advice, and to seek support (page 153).

"[Look for youth groups] outside the educational setting. One of the oldest, the Boston Alliance of Gay and Lesbian Youth, began in 1981. . . . Adults act as consultants. . . . BAGLY has a speakers service and sponsors dances, trips, outings, and other social services (page 155)."

**(5) What are the rules for coming out? There aren't any, he says, and the trend is to come out as early as age 14.**

"By all accounts," writes Owens (page 41) more and more youths are self-identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual at a younger age and remaining open as they get older. . . . Some youths are coming out as early as age fourteen. No rules exist for coming out, so each individual must improvise."

If it's advice troubled teenagers are looking for, Owen's main message is to "come out early." He makes a strong case for joining the gay community as a refuge from an oppressive heterosexual world, but not all his arguments are based on a balanced view of the facts. For example, one major study found that early self-labeling as homosexual or bisexual is one of the three top risk factors for gay teen suicide attempts. In fact, the risk of suicide decreases by 80% for each year that a young person delays homosexual or bisexual self-labeling (*Pediatrics* 1991:87:869-875).

There is also the very real concern—which the book evades—that teenagers are notoriously impulsive and poor at rational decision-making, and that encouraging a teenage boy to become part of the notoriously promiscuous environment of the gay community makes unsafe sex (and death from AIDS) a very serious possibility.

#### Misinterpretation of a Finding

The twelve chapters of Owens' book are heavily documented with a grand total of 1,174 footnotes. The author apologizes humorously for his penchant for documentation, saying, "I never met a fact I didn't need to pass along to others (page xii)."

For example, Owens advises gay and lesbian teenagers not to try "passing as a heterosexual," warning, "The overall result of this charade is a psychological tension which may lead to depression, shame, fear of disclosure, and anxiety." As evidence, he points to the research finding that "covert gay college men experience more psychological tension, social problems, and isolation than openly gay men." But when this reviewer took the trouble to trace back the author's documentation, he found the summary totally inaccurate.

Owens was referring to a 1965 *Genetic Psychology* Monograph by Braaten and Darling. This reviewer's curiosity was piqued by this 35-year-old reference. He had never seen this reference before, despite his wide familiarity with psychological research on homosexuality.

After locating the 1965 publication (in the storage section of a university library basement), a careful reading brought to light the fact that (1) The study was based on the records of a university mental health clinic. (2) The "covert homo-

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sexuals" were students who came to the clinic because they were troubled by "homosexually oriented . . . impulses, fantasies, and dreams, but . . . have *never engaged* in more than incidental homosexual behavior after puberty, or in no homosexual behavior at all" (p. 273, emphasis added).

At issue here is the fact that the investigators' unusual use of the term "covert homosexuals" could, indeed, mislead a hurried or superficial reader. In fact, "worry about homosexuality" is a familiar presenting problem to clinicians who work with adolescent boys, but these "worriers" are usually sexually inexperienced adolescents, not closet homosexuals. Owens' claim that his advice is supported by Braaten and Darling's research is totally unjustified.

It should also be noted that the Owens book includes 48 pages of gay-positive resources for youth, counselors and families: books, magazines, curricular materials, coming-out and parental-acceptance handbooks, pamphlets, videos, internet resources, telephone talk lines and hot-lines, national organizations, youth groups and support services listed state-by-state, and pen pal services.

The unintended message of this voluminous appendix is to demonstrate how exceedingly well-organized the gay community is, and how daunting is the task of counteracting its dubious message.

### A Different Kind of Self-Help Book is Needed

*Queer Kids* is unabashedly a piece of gay advocacy, addressed to teenagers. To balance this sort of advice, I would like to propose the following: imagine a self-help book for teenage boys, written by a psychologist who would like to see young men grow into an adulthood worthy of their biological and spiritual heritage, and eager to enjoy the roles of husband and father.

This book would express a feeling of compassion for the teenager who is isolated, sexually troubled and confused. Such a boy is growing up in a world of all-too-easy answers to complex and subtle questions; of short cuts that ignore long-range aspirations; and of cynicism and immediate gratification.

Such a book would acknowledge that, thanks in large part to advertising and television, our culture is overloaded with eroticism and pornography, which makes growing up more stressful than it ought to be.

This book would remind teenagers and their parents alike to exercise the human gifts of humor and patience, but unlike *Queer Kids*, it would not direct young teenagers to "come out early."

## Join the Union of Concerned Teachers

Gay activism is now having a profound impact on our public schools. Often, it is assumed that teachers are either willing allies, or that they will be silent witnesses to what is being said and done. We, as teachers, would like to change that.

Many of us have found that opposing gay and lesbian activism in our schools is a lonely, frustrating and fruitless mission. Therefore we have created the Union of Concerned Teachers.

### Our concerns can be summarized in three ways:

1. Are these gay-affirming programs in the best interests of children—from the standpoint of their emotional and physical health?
2. Are parents being informed about one of the most

monumental decisions a child could make—the decision to enter the gay lifestyle? Are children and their parents fully informed about the risks of this lifestyle?

3. Does gay and lesbian activism in schools facilitate adults' access to children for sexual purposes?

We would like your help in reaching other teachers who feel alone, frustrated and hopeless in their efforts to provide what is truly best for the children they care for.

**e-mail us at: [uct@unionct.org](mailto:uct@unionct.org)**

or visit our website at [www.unionct.org](http://www.unionct.org). We will send you a questionnaire to help us understand what is happening at other schools around the country. Very soon, we expect to provide feedback via a newsletter and advice.