

Community & Lifestyles

'Heather's Mommy': Teach Understanding

By Judy Thomas

Author Leslea Newman, who has been called the Erma Bombeck of the lesbian community, manages to find humor in even the bleakest situations.

In response to theories that teaching children about homosexuality may alter their sexual preferences, Newman joked that reading thousands of books about straight people had no effect on her sexual orientation.

Newman, writer of the controversial *Heather Has Two Mommies*, spoke at Penn State University on February 12, coinciding with National Freedom to Marry Day. She discussed the uproar surrounding the publication of her book in 1989 and touched on the common struggles of lesbian and gay communities nationwide.

Newman said she was surprised by the attention the book received. By 1994, *Heather* was the second most banned book of the year, knocking Madonna's *Sex* out of its position. It was headline news and she has since coined the "most dangerous living writer in America." She appeared amused by this title. She said she has also been accused of having a militant agenda and a radical message. Newman emphasized that while the book became controversial, her goal in writing it was to educate children about family diversity.

But her troubles began long before the book even made it to press. After submitting the book to more than 50 publishers, many of whom recognized the need for such

a book but would not "touch it," she said she decided to publish the book herself.

She said she recognized how important it is for a child to see his or her own family represented in literature. She said she remembers feeling alienated growing up as a Jew in Brooklyn because the books she read rarely reflected her own life and family. Not surprisingly, when she was approached by a lesbian couple she knew about writing a children's book illustrating a family with

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—Leslea Newman

same-sex parents, she took on the challenge. At the time, she said, there weren't any around. This was her first children's book.

She said children have had a positive reaction to the book. One child thanked her for writing a book about "her family." Another child of a heterosexual parent, she said, was intrigued by the idea of having "two mommies."

Exposing children to "all kinds" of families is important, she said. She said she lives in a very liberal community, "Lesbianville, USA," where diversity in the family is accepted. It is ideal, she said, if children never learn prejudices. They are not born with prejudice, she emphasized, but learn it. "Education is the key," she said, to combating prejudice. The "earlier it begins the better," she explained.

She said she doesn't think there are any fundamental differences between children raised by homosexual parents and those raised by heterosexual parents. There is a difference, however, in households "that provide unconditional love," she said. "Any child lucky enough to have two loving parents is starting off life on the right foot," she said.

In contrast to children's acceptance of her book, Newman discussed some very different adult responses, including a campaign initiated in Queens to have it removed from New York school systems, where it was made part of the "Rainbow Curriculum."

One parent charged that the children were being instructed about sodomy in the school. Newman said she challenges anyone to find any reference to sex in her book. Her book is about families, she stressed, not sex. To date, only one of 32 New York school districts is using the Rainbow Curriculum for first graders, she said.

Even copies of her book that made it to library shelves were attacked, she said. Some copies were taken out and either never returned or brought back with their pages glued together.

When approached on her personal views from a religious standpoint, Newman said she always tries to quote the bible. She said Jesus said things like "Love thy neighbor" and "Let he who has not sinned cast the first stone." She said she has not been convinced that "loving another human is a sin." "I just don't understand that theory," she said.

She said she is puzzled by those who feel homosexuals should not have children because they may be treated unfairly. She said that homophobia is the problem, and lesbians and gays who want to have children should not be penalized for society's ills.

Newman said she thinks the legalization of same-sex marriages is "going to be a long battle." But, she said, "love will prevail."

Newman discussed the hardships homosexuals experience at the secondary educational and college level, particularly obtaining financial support from the school for their organizations and acceptance of the group's legitimacy.

With respect to the difficulty experienced

by local schools concerning the inclusion of homosexuality in diversity training, she said she would encourage them to "be very public about it." She said they should seek support from the community and be "willing to have discussion with people who don't agree with them." It is important to take an open-hearted approach, she said, and avoid falling "into ugly tactics."

Although she has become a political activist, Newman said her "real love" is writing poetry. She closed her talk with a reading of "Right Off the Bat" from her book *Secrets*, a story about a young adult of lesbian parents.

Alex Boyd, secretary and treasurer of the Penn State Lesbian Gay and Bisexual Student Alliance (LGBSA), said there was a large turnout from the organization to hear Newman. She said she thought Newman was a "very good speaker" and that the alliance planned to bring her in for Gay Pride Week at the end of March.

Newman's talk was sponsored by the Lecture Series on Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Lives and co-sponsored by the Center for Women Students.

Alternatives to Violence Workshop

The next Alternatives to Violence workshop will take place March 20-22 at the Centre Region Senior Center in State College. The workshop involves 20 hours and nine sessions of very interactive and experiential learning. It is limited to 20 participants, including a facilitating team of three individuals. Workshops can also lead to facilitator training. Facilitators are currently needed for new programs starting in Huntingdon prison, neighboring communities, schools, local businesses and more. The cost, which covers food and materials, is \$30.00 and partial scholarships are available. For information or to register, call Ann Ward at 863-8693 or Shirley Tuttle at 234-3361. The registration deadline is March 10.

A Book for Every Child: A Gift for All Seasons

Donate a new book for Centre County children, served by Centre County Toys for Tots. Drop-off bins are located at most area bookstores, Schlow Library, and the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Centre County.

Washington Worries

By Dana Hafter-Manza

Some people in Washington, DC (I've really noticed) could not be happier. But that's not always the case. The last time I visited there, it didn't look like the prettiest sight. I saw extremely poor people at least once a block. They were dressed in dirty clothes and rags.

Every day I would come downstairs with my hair brushed nice, because of my mom, but when I think of these other people, their hair was just there, all dragged down and tangled. Lots of people I saw looked at me sadly. They sometimes had cups, and signs asking for money. My mom told me that they need money for food and homes.

On one street I saw one of the saddest sights. There was a homeless person with a ragged old blanket, laying on the street. The weather was very cold. I could feel the warmth of my big heavy coat. And looking up, I could see the rain starting to fall. As I looked back at him, I noticed he had no coat. This was an

absolutely, terribly sad thing to see. He probably didn't have a home.

The President lives in Washington, DC! Lots of people there just kind of forget about these homeless people. They just walk by them. I feel angry about that. All these special people live there, people who help the United States by working in the government, they should try to help them get a job, help them buy a house, and help them have enough food, and help them have a good life.

People all need food and a good house to live in. There are people in the world who need help. Some people who might be reading this might think that people in our community have enough to eat, to drink, and everything is just fine. But they're not okay. Some cannot afford enough food, or a home. We should try to help them.

Dana Hafter-Manza is a third-grade student at Fairmount Elementary School, in State College.