

The Queer Foundation Scholar



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Dear Friends of Queer Youth,

Since its founding in 2004, the Queer Foundation's Effective Writing and Scholarships Program has helped almost 200 outstanding, talented young lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender writers—from all regions of the United States as well as from abroad—by recognizing and encouraging their contributions to their communities. These courageous young people compete, during their senior year in high school, in The QF's annual High School English Essay Contest. Fourteen have so far been named Queer Scholars and received \$1,000 scholarships for studies in queer theory or a related field at the college or university of their choice. More will be announced later this year as results of the 2011 contest are known.

The QF defines effective writing as writing that results in changed attitudes or behaviors. Contestants must demonstrate that in their writing they

- **are out, proud, and activist,**
- **have a social conscience,**
- **will fight discrimination against queers,**
- **are committed to social change,**
- **believe in organization, and**
- **are of good will.**

Effective writers naturally want to know that their writing reaches readers who are willing to pay attention. I am pleased to be able to tell contestants—and they are invariably delighted to know—that their writing has been read by experienced, successful LGBT writers who taken an interest in their studies and their development and in the issues they have addressed. The contest judges are a small subset of the many volunteers who together help The QF in this work. Countless teachers and counselors in schools throughout the United States provide guidance and encouragement to students with their contest entries. Their submissions are then read by members of the Gay-Straight Educators' Alliance (an Assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English). Finally published LGBT authors name the top essayists and scholarship recipients. Judges also mentor scholarship recipients during their first year in college or at the university. With the efforts of all these individuals, and the monetary donations that build the endowment, The QF will be able to continue providing scholarships to talented young queer writers for many years to come.

Joseph Dial,
Executive Director, The Queer Foundation

The Sixth Annual High School English Essay Contest selection committee will soon announce the 2011 scholarship recipients and Queer Scholars. I encourage you to read their essays as your way of joining us in congratulating the authors. The essays should be posted on The QF website by late May or early June: www.queerfoundation.org.

The good, the bad and the ugly. We hail victories LGBT people have attained during the past year. Not only was “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” repealed, a recent poll also revealed that a slight majority of Americans (53%) agree with that decision. A year or two from now when the dire predictions of the most vociferous opponents of repeal do not materialize, “gays in the military” will likely be a non-issue for a solid majority of Americans.

Equally encouraging are the results of another recent national poll that reveal that the same slight majority (52% in this case) now favor same-sex marriage.

This month’s issue of the journal *Pediatrics* also included the results of a three-year study by researchers at Columbia University who studied the lives of queer teens in 34 of Oregon’s counties. Counties were rated as more or less supportive of queer teens based on a variety of factors, including the percentage of registered Democrats in the county, the percentage of self-identified LGBT adults, the presence of GSA or similar organizations in schools and communities, and the percentage of schools that had specific anti-bullying/pro-tolerance policies. Oregon was chosen for the study because it is one of few states that asks all high school students to identify their sexual orientation on a school questionnaire.

The researchers found that in counties that were rated non-supportive of LGBT students, 1 in 4 queer teens (25%) either contemplated suicide, attempted suicide, or succeeded; in supportive counties, the ratio was 1 in 5 queer students (20%). Although still an unacceptable level, more so in mostly liberal western Oregon, the researchers conclude that providing and having a supportive system for queer teens in a county does indeed help eliminate the climate of fear that gives rise to self-destructive thoughts and actions.

Also significant: the study found that the factors that reduced the climate of fear for queer teens also led to a 9% reduction in suicidal thoughts and actions among students who self-identified as heterosexuals, from roughly 4% to about 3.6% of the heterosexual teen population.

Even without realizing it, by working to establish a more positive climate in their schools and communities, most of the students who enter The QF’s

English essay contest each year may help save lives.

As I write this, I also read that Lewis Marinelli resigned last week as the organizer of the “Summer for Marriage” tour and disassociated himself from the anti-gay National Organization for Marriage (NOM) sponsoring the “Summer for Marriage” tour. Marinelli’s about face on gay marriage was brought about after talking to several queer students on the Courage Campaign.

Unfortunately, every step toward social justice is invariably met with a backlash, now exacerbated by the worst economic recession since the 1930s and the all too obvious racist overtones of much of the opposition to the election of Barack Obama to the presidency.

Anti-gay organizations long countered GLESEN’s “Day of Silence” in the schools ever since it began fifteen years ago by encouraging their followers to keep their children home on the day when students could show their support for the queer peers by not speaking during the lunch period and between classes. This year, however, a national anti-gay organization vowed it would counter the “Day of Silence” with a “Day of Dialogue.” Of course, there could be no dialogue since they planned to send students to school armed with talking points to convince their peers that being a LGBT person was sinful and an evil to be eradicated. Apparently, in their minds, the bullying, harassment, physical, and sometimes sexual abuse of queer youth can be justified – even if in the process, as the Columbia University study of 34 Oregon counties now makes clear, more heterosexual students are also sacrificed. Queer youth are expendable and if heterosexual students get caught up in the net, so be it.

It reminds me of a 13th c. legend, that of a French general who, sent to the south of present-day France to eliminate the Albigensens, wrote his king that he could not tell the difference between Christians and Albigensens. The king’s supposed reply: “Kill them all. God will know the difference.”

Our opponents are the same people whose ancestors, Bible in hand, defended slavery and a century later, Bible in hand, defended Jim Crow laws; the same people whose parents, Bible in hand, stood at the schoolhouse door to prevent the desegregation of schools and who, Bible in hand, still oppose equal rights for women. And now who, Bible in hand, we increasingly hear demanding that homosexuality be re-criminalized or that homosexuality once again be made a capital crime.

We might view the renewed and more vitriolic anti-gay rhetoric to be the last hurrah of a wounded and cornered tiger. As anyone knows who has studied the

history of the modern gay liberation movement, with its origins in Prussia in 1740, when homosexual King Frederick II (the Great) abolished the death penalty for homosexual behavior, to 1935, when the Nazis re-established the death penalty, wounded and cornered tigers can recover and devour their enemies and even their own children.

Many forces came to bear in all of Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, but among them in Germany was the fact that a majority of gay men, enjoying until then unprecedented freedom, became complacent, apathetic, apolitical. [Massimo Consoli, *Homocaust. Il nazismo e la persecuzione degli omosessuali* (Milano: Kaos Edizioni, 1991) is the source of ideas expressed in this and subsequent paragraphs about both Germany and the Soviet Union.]

Even General Röhm, openly homosexual, and his military supporters (most of them openly homosexual) never suspected, despite their differences with Hitler, that the National Socialists (their own political party) would set out to exterminate all homosexuals in the ranks of the “Aryan race.” Röhm and his military supporters were all assassinated during the “Night of the Long Knives,” more appropriately the *Röhm-Putsch* (30 June - 2 July 1935), announcing the beginning of the Nazi homocaust.

Heinrich Himmler, author of the Nazi homocaust, was convinced that homosexuality was caused by either a virus or a gene (be careful what you wish for!). To prove one theory or the other, he and his medical underlings subjected dozens of young gay “Aryan” men and dozens of young male “undesirables” to barbaric medical experiments. Himmler’s goal: to eliminate homosexuality among the “Aryan race” and to help spread it to all of Nazi Germany’s enemies.

It was all part of Himmler’s breeding war. The “undesirables” were outbreeding “Aryans,” which did not bode well for the Thousand-Year Reich. It was Himmler, Hitler’s best friend, who convinced Hitler to outlaw contraception and abortion for “Aryan” women and also to deny women access to university. The sole responsibility of healthy “Aryan” women was to bear babies and raise them; the sole responsibility of able-bodied “Aryan” men was to get women pregnant.

If we conclude that racism lies behind the anti-gay rhetoric, we might well be right. Too many white men are gay; too many white women are not having babies or not having enough babies and too many are having abortions. Except for the most virulent white supremacist groups, of course, most anti-gay groups are very careful to cull racist terminology from what they say or write.

When it comes to the opponents of social justice for queer people, they claim to be Biblical literalists, but

we know they cherry pick whatever Biblical passages serve their aims. In terms of their anti-gay proclamations, they latch onto any argument that suits them. In fact, Article 175/A of the Nazi Penal Code doesn’t give them much to go on – nothing beyond the racist justification for Nazi homophobia. Himmler convinced Hitler of the need to amend Article 175 of the German Penal Code, reinstating the death penalty for homosexual acts, only after his barbaric medical experiments failed to eliminate the homosexual “virus” or “gene” from “Aryan” men and failed to infect “undesirable” men.

Not wanting to appear openly racist, over the past twenty-five years anti-gay organizations in the U.S. have also borrowed freely from Article 120 of the Soviet Penal Code. The leaders of the Kremlin had originally taken their cue from Frederick Engels. Homosexuality was the product of decadent capitalism. Members of the degenerate leisure-class corrupted working-class youth. Gay men (all of them supposedly wealthy) recruited working-class boys.

In a letter to Karl Marx in 1886, Engels concluded that homosexuality would disappear once socialism triumphed. That was the initial position of Lenin and his followers in 1917. The state had no business interfering in the private lives of its citizens.

Anti-gay rhetoric, however, began to appear in the Soviet Union as early as 1921, and the tempo increased after 1925. In state-sponsored publications homosexuals were blamed for many things, including crop failures and natural disasters.

Article 120 (December 1934) compared homosexuals and their supporters to murderers, rapists, corruptors of working-class youth, pedophiles, thieves and common criminals, counter-revolutionists, and traitors.

Demagogues have no difficulty cherry-picking whatever suits their aims. Right-wing organizations that were once staunchly anti-Communist and have suddenly become staunchly anti-Socialist, have no qualms about borrowing freely from Article 120 of the Soviet Penal Code – still in effect in a number of the former Soviet Republics.

The march of history is not on the side of the homophobes, but like the wounded and cornered tiger, they are anything but toothless. They have deep financial pockets, they are well organized, and they are in this battle for the very long term. They will be with us for decades and from time to time will still inflict serious wounds.

The two-sided Internet sword.

Every year several of the essay contestants praise the Internet. In some aspect it was their salvation. The Internet helped some realize they were not alone; at times, it helped spur others to action.

Unfortunately, as we've seen in the past year, the Internet can also kill – quite literally. In response to several highly publicized suicides of queer students impacted by postings on the Internet, the Trevor Project launched its “Things Get Better” campaign. A couple of examples:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KnYa9R4N-8c&NR=1>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NeKI8biAglU&feature=related>

Since the aim of the Trevor Project is to help prevent queer teen suicides, the heartfelt message of the “Things Get Better” campaign is certainly in keeping with suicide prevention research. The immediate concern is to convince suicidal teens not to act on their impulses. And then? Perhaps the Irish “Stand Up” campaign, part of a larger BeLonG project. See, for example:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IrJxqvalFxm>.

This video and others in the “Stand Up” series do deal with an ideal. It may sound as commercial or folksy as Old Ma Bell’s “Reach Out and Touch Someone,” but it may still bring tears to your eyes.

In this particular video, we don't know the sexual orientation of the male student who first stands up to offer his hand to the bullied gay student. He's certainly not the stereotypical macho male, so he might be gay and then again, he need not be. The implication is clear: someone has to have the courage to take the first step, to reach out and support the victims of bullies, even if it may result in ridicule or even more vicious bullying.

Welcome to all of the students who for six years now have submitted essays to the English essay writing contest. In some way they have all stood up to the bullies and, often without realizing it, they may have saved a life and even rescued a bully from his or her own quagmire.

To end on a somewhat lighter and more positive note, there has been an increase in positive queer TV commercials in a number of other countries. Hyundai's “If You Meet Your Spouse” commercial that first ran in France, but was also shown in several European countries, is now a classic – although it tells us how far we have to go before any corporation would dare run anything similar in the U.S. MacDonald's also had a rather good gay TV commercial it ran in several European countries. I don't see MacDonald's running

a “We welcome all types of families” focusing on a gay teen any time soon in the U.S. Pepsico's H2H0, a soft drink, has run gay-friendly TV commercials in Argentina and Brazil. H2H0 bills itself as “una bebida para toda la familia” (a drink for the entire family—including gay families).

Or watch this recent Israeli TV ad by Matimli, the Israeli clothing store chain. It also aired in Spain – why it has a Spanish title – and in Italy.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1SfFj08tYs>

Is Matimli using sex to sell clothes? Obviously, but with a twist. Interesting question, though: would men (gay or straight) even know what was being advertised? Still, as one of my younger gay friends pointed out after I emailed him this video, the woman's final reaction is a very loud and clear “gay is very okay,” indeed, the only okay reason for any man to ignore her.

The Queer Foundation Endowment now has a value of slightly more than \$11,000. As endowments go, that is still small, but as it grows, it will ensure the future of the QF scholarships.

We welcome donations, however small. Even \$5.00 can add another brick to strengthen our house and our resolve to help young queer writers and activists pursue their academic careers slightly less burdened with debt. At the same time, perhaps to encourage them to strive to make a difference for themselves and for future generations of queer youth.

Visit www.queerfoundation.org for information on how to donate.

As editor I also welcome your comments and your suggestions regarding either this e-newsletter or any aspect of The Queer Foundation. I also encourage you to spread the word about The QF to your queer and queer-supportive friends by forwarding this e-newsletter to them or recommending that they visit The QF website: www.queerfoundation.org.

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