

Documentary fosters dialogue by bringing rural GLBT issues to the forefront

By Bob Howden

When Oil City native Joe Wilson wanted to share the joy of his marriage, he like so many others, paid to put an announcement in *The Derrick*, Oil City's daily paper, and *The News-Herald of Franklin*. But this announcement was different, and the community reaction was less than celebratory.

Joe Wilson and his partner, Dean Hamer were married in Canada in April, 2004, and the announcement was published along with other local weddings. What would follow would change their lives, and the lives of many other Venango County residents forever.

At first, the letters to the newspaper and the public comments about the announcement were negative, if not down-right hateful. But soon other letters and comments defending Wilson and Hamer began to come forward and soon, Venango County was engaged in a dialogue about – of all things – the importance of diversity.

The couple decided to turn this dialogue into a documentary, dealing with the issues of homosexuality, diversity and tolerance in rural America. Some four years later, *Out in*



Contributed photo

C.J. Bills (left) gets a quick lesson in video camera techniques from Dean Hamer (right). Bills, who suffered harassment and physical abuse in high school because of being gay, is featured in the documentary film, *Out in the Silence*, which is being produced by Hamer and his partner, Joe Wilson.

the Silence is now in the final editing stages and will be aired next year on Public Broadcasting television.

According to Wilson, the aim of *Out in the Silence* is to expand public awareness about the difficulties that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people face in rural and small town

America and to promote dialogue that will help people on all sides of the issues find common ground. That aim is clearly evident as Wilson and Hamer delve into the stories of students C.J. Bills and Tim Dahle.

Bills and Dahle both endured daily harassment and anguish as openly gay teens at Franklin

High School and Titusville High School respectively. After learning about their plight, Wilson and Hamer were determined to tell the story of two rural teens who had the courage to stand up to bigotry and intolerance in their schools

— and the determination to tell their stories to the world.

“It’s their courage and commitment to live their lives openly and authentically that is helping the area to overcome the limitations, and often-harmful effects, of religion, tradition, and the status quo,” Wilson says.

Although they live in Washington, DC, Wilson and Hamer have spent a great deal of time in Venango County working on their documentary, interviewing individuals on both sides of the issue and in the process, fostering a remarkable community dialogue about love, hate and understanding in the rural heartland. Their unique combination of filmmaking and advocacy has led to the formation of a local grassroots group to promote diversity, changes in the school system and tolerance.

“As a result of CJ and Kathy’s (CJ’s mother) willingness to speak out and follow their complaint through a long legal process with the support of the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission and the ACLU, the

Franklin Area School District was required to implement comprehensive diversity training programs (conducted by the FBI’s Adopt-a-School Initiative) for teachers, administrators and students,” Wilson notes. “While it may not bring an end to all prejudice and bigotry, this victory will help countless students to avoid the harassment and discrimination that hampered CJ’s education.”

In Dable’s case, the family filed a harassment law suit against the Titusville Area School District, receiving financial settlement of \$312,000.

Wilson and Hamer completed filming *Out in the Silence* in early November and are excited about their partnership with WPSU-TV in State College to broadcast the documentary across the Pennsylvania Public Television Network in 2009. They are also hopeful about broadcasts on other PBS stations around the country.

“But the real value in

the film will be its use as a tool to stimulate dialogue and activism through screenings at the community level, particularly in smaller towns and rural communities, aimed at increasing visibility and achieving fairness and equality for GLBT people,” Wilson says. “We’re building outreach and educational campaigns with the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force, People for the American Way and the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. And we’d love to continue to expand this network.” Individuals or groups interested in helping to coordinate screenings should contact Wilson directly at: [QwavesJoe@](mailto:QwavesJoe@yahoo.com)

[yahoo.com](mailto:QwavesJoe@yahoo.com) or by calling (202) 588-5785.

Wilson admits that making this film was not easy and there is much work to be done in the Venango County region, “but the courage that our main characters have shown and the transformations that they have helped bring about will show audiences the remarkable change that is possible when people in small towns come together and begin to speak out about their lives.”