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‘All hell broke loose’ when activism hit rural parts of state

By David Doorley

It started with the wedding announcement for Joe Wilson and Dean Hamer. Not the one published in *The New York Times*. The one the men submitted to the local newspaper in Oil City, Pennsylvania.

The Derrick, Monday, May 10, 2004 – Weddings & Engagements: “Washington, DC, residents Joseph Hall Wilson, an Oil City native, and Dean Heilman Hamer were married on April 10 at Stanley Park in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. The ceremony was performed by marriage commissioner Johanna Hickey and witnessed by Oil City native Cathy Reinsel-Torres and her husband Alvaro Torres of Tacoma, Wash....”

Because Hamer is from the New York area, he put an announcement in the *Times*, which has been printing commitment ceremonies and same-sex weddings since 2002.

“We got congratulatory notes, and I thought I’d do the same thing and put it in my hometown newspaper,” says Wilson, who is program officer for human rights at the Public Welfare Foundation in Washington, DC. “So I called *The Derrick*, which is an independently owned family newspaper in Venango County. They were great. They said sure.”

It was a first for the Oil City newspaper and, as Wilson recalls, after the announcement appeared, “all hell broke loose.”

“The newspaper was flooded with letters to the editor condemning the paper and speaking very negatively about lesbian and gay people,” Wilson says.

Over the next months, Wilson viewed the controversy from afar, feeling “horrified and angry,” as it intensified in the small town north of Pittsburgh.

Then the public response shifted.

“Soon other letters started to pour in from people who had very different viewpoints and wanted to counter these messages of hate,” Wilson says. “These people were speaking more from the heart about why diversity is important and challenging the bigoted notions. They were speaking from a personal family perspective – not gay people but straight people were condemning the bigotry.”

As the dispute played out, Wilson decided to document it. Without a specific plan in mind, he began contacting readers who had written to *The Derrick*. Would they be interested in being interviewed? Many said yes.

“So my partner and I grabbed our [movie] cameras and went to talk to the people who responded to us,” Wilson says.

“Now the people who responded were people who wrote positive letters – except for one couple, an Evangelical pastor and his wife, who wrote to say they wanted to cancel their subscription. They responded positively to me, so we interviewed them. That initial process led to ... a much bigger project, something we wanted to follow with our cameras. We wanted to tell this story because we thought the way the people in this community were responding to this issue would have resonance in other parts of the country.”

That project became *Heartland USA*, a documentary that covers the initial controversy in the conservative rural area and then broadens its scope to GLBT civil rights. The film, which Wilson is now editing, explores the judgments of fundamentalist preachers, politicians and school authorities who were intolerant or indifferent to gay rights, as well as views of ordinary residents who were thrust into the spotlight and became gay activists – often not planned and against their will.

“One of the things I’m trying to do with this documentary is counter that viewpoint that heartland America is where all the bigotry is,” Wilson says. “I think that is absolutely not true. I mean, look who’s in the White House. But I just wanted to show that there are different kinds of challenges [in rural America], and we need to be able to counter those more effectively if we’re going to make change over the long term.”

While Wilson wanted to spotlight the discrimination faced by GLBT residents, he didn’t want to exploit his subjects while doing it.

“Because our announcement caused such a backlash, we first wanted to check in with local gay and lesbian folks before we went too far with this. We didn’t want to stir up more backlash,” Wilson says.

“One of my old neighbors is a lesbian who’s lived [in Oil City] a long time, a very prominent figure in the community. She’s out and very well liked and accepted. I hadn’t met her before, even though I had grown up two blocks away from her, but I knocked on her door and told her what I was doing. We formed a great friendship, and she opened up all kinds of doors. I found out there is a huge GLBT population there and met a number of people who are living quiet lives in the community. They were excited about this project, and one thing led to another.”

The “another” is a section of Wilson’s larger work called *We Belong*, which became a short documentary complete in itself that records the story of two gay boys, one from Venango County and one from Crawford County. C.J. Bills and Tim Dahle faced daily

discrimination, harassment and violence in their high schools without anyone in authority ever stepping in to stop the antigay behavior.

“As a result of the work we were doing on our documentary, I guess I became a visible face in town,” Wilson says. “One day I got a 17-page handwritten letter from C.J.’s mother where she laid out all the crap her son had been dealing with [at Franklin High School]. That was the beginning of my relationship with them. The other case is well known, where the family of Tim Dahle took a lawsuit out against their school district to challenge the fact that their son wasn’t being protected. We wanted to tell Tim’s story and its resolution and then talk about C.J.’s story, repeating what Tim had gone through, issues that were already settled and now other families have to fight.”

(*We Belong* recently won a \$10,000 prize as one of two finalists in the Weeds of Tolerance video competition. The contest is sponsored by Third Millennium Foundation, which was founded as “an initiative for unlearning intolerance in the new millennium,” and the national cable channel Current TV, Channel 107 of Comcast in Pittsburgh.)

In *We Belong*, the kids and their families were very frank with the filmmakers. C.J. tells about his “eight hours of hell” everyday when other students punched him, shoved him into lockers and called him “fag” and “queer.”

For his class project, C.J. decided to make a documentary on gay discrimination and how administrators and teachers turn “a blind eye and a deaf ear” to what GLBT students have to endure. The principal said absolutely not. Nothing that reflected negatively on the school or the community would be permitted.

C.J. decided to make the documentary anyway but not enter it as his school project, and filmmaker Wilson recorded his efforts.

C.J. interviewed Tim Dahle, a former student from Titusville School District, who says, “You name it, I went through it, all because I’m gay.” He tells about being pushed down the stairs while students shouted, “Die fag. We don’t want you in this school.” After that, he began skipping classes and finally attempted suicide.

Tim’s family eventually brought a suit against the school district and won. The district was ordered to pay the family \$312,000 as part of the out-of-court settlement, one of the largest amounts ever awarded for failing to stop the antigay harassment.

According to Wilson’s documentary, while C.J.’s family didn’t take a civil action, they raised their complaints to the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission in 2006.

As *We Belong* notes, the Dahle family business suffered because of the publicity from their case, and C.J., now a 10th grader, no longer attends Franklin High school but is enrolled in a cyber charter school and participates at home.

“Being a public face does not come without consequences,” Wilson acknowledges. “The video and stories in the local press caused a backlash, and it has been very hard for [C.J.’s] family. Initially when the documentary came out, they weren’t happy. They took serious criticism for it. C.J. essentially became a prisoner in his own home. The few times he went out he was harassed by kids, threatened with death. He was really frightened, and to some degree regretful that he was now seen only as ‘the gay kid’ or ‘the queer.’ He said to us, ‘I wish I had just gone on and tried to live my life until I could get out of here.’”

But there was also a flip side to the media coverage and the film being posted online.

“As a result of this video getting such exposure, C.J. and Tim started to get feedback from people around the country and around the world on My Space pages,” Wilson adds. “Kids were saying, ‘I found the video, and I’m going through the same thing and can’t speak out. But you did. Thanks.’ C.J. and Tim became touched by the fact that they were making a difference.”

Unfortunately, harassment and discrimination in schools is nothing new. As families of GLBT children take a stand, what they often find is an unresponsive or hostile reaction from the adults in authority, the ones charged to protect their children.

Slowly that attitude is changing, thanks to families challenging the system and documentaries like *We Belong* and *Heartland USA*.

“How can efforts to achieve greater visibility and equality in that setting take place?” he wonders. “What are some of the obstacles, and what are people doing to overcome those obstacles? We’re exploring the trials and tribulations of those organizing efforts, and we’re trying to expose and challenge the extremist forces against GLBT folks and how they dominate local culture. I hope [my film] portrays how the courage of people who live and work in these communities can really lead to meaningful long term change.”