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I REMEMBER

by Kevin Jennings

I remember Mr. Hooker (his real name), my seventh grade gym teacher at Southwest Junior High School in Clemmons, North Carolina, in 1976. Quite simply, he scared the hell out of me. Whereas his co-teacher, Mr. Mercer, was all smiles and encouragement, Mr. Hooker seemed to have a smoldering rage burning inside him, and I tried to steer as clear of him as possible. He made gym class an ordeal.

This was a shame because, as the youngest of four athletic boys, I loved sports, and was one of the better students in P.E. But there were even greater problems with gym class than dealing with Mr. Hooker. The locker room was a source of tremendous anxiety, as I was terrified that my eyes would linger a little too long on the male bodies around me, to which I was increasingly and disturbingly drawn. I wasn't yet ready to admit what that meant to myself, much less to anyone else.

Sometime in the winter we did a unit on wrestling. The stimulation of this particular sport was just a little too much for me, and I began to approach class with dread, as I feared for my ability to keep my feelings successfully hidden from my largely-fundamentalist classmates. One in particular, Gary, was the most distracting of all. With feathered blond hair parted in the middle (this was the eve of the disco era, after all) and a budding musculature that seemed to predestine him for the pages of *International Male*, Gary entranced me, even though I hated him and, more importantly, myself, for doing so. I could barely take my eyes off him.

I was fighting just this internal battle on the day we began our wrestling unit, as Mr. Hooker droned on and on about the sport's scoring system. Try as I might, I just couldn't seem to look away from Gary, who was blissfully absorbed in Mr. Hooker's lecture. Mr. Hooker, however, seemed more attuned to where my eyes were focused. He stopped in mid-sentence, fixed his gaze on me, and said very slowly and clearly, "Stop looking at his legs."

As my classmates slowly turned to look at me amidst the dead silence of the wrestling room, I felt as if a stake had been driven through my heart. A few moments of silence passed, and Mr. Hooker then went back to his lecture.

I never went back to being the person I was before that moment. Humiliated, I never played on an organized school team again from that day forward. I never again felt like I belonged at school. I never forgot Mr. Hooker.

I remember Mr. Korn (not his real name), my ninth grade

Geometry teacher at Mt. Tabor High School in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. I hated Math, but I love Geometry. I loved Geometry because I loved Mr. Korn. I loved Mr. Korn because he noticed me. One time, I had been out of class with the flu for a week. Fearing the effect on my grades, I had dragged myself back, even though I still wasn't feeling well. No one else much noticed my absence or my return, so I was feeling pretty sorry for myself by the time I went to Geometry. When he called the roll, Mr. Korn customarily stayed next to the overhead projector and rarely looked up. On this day, however, when he got to my name and I croaked "Here," Mr. Korn looked up with a smile. "Kevin Jennings is back," he said, and then went back to calling the roll. In those few seconds, he let me know that I mattered to him. I would have walked off a plank if he'd asked me to.

While the other kids acknowledged Mr. Korn as a gifted and inspiring teacher, they also mocked him behind his back. Slightly effeminate and conspicuously unmarried, Mr. Korn was a "faggot." His being labeled that didn't bother me; it intrigued me. At Mt. Tabor High School, the only person who seemed to get called "faggot" as often as Mr. Korn was a sophomore named Kevin Jennings. Unlike Mr. Korn, I was not given the courtesy of having it done behind my back. Haunted by Mr. Hooker's "outing" in seventh grade, I was taunted daily in the hallways, in the locker room, in classes before the teacher called the roll, even during class. Whenever I volunteered to answer a question or write on the board, a slightly-audible murmur from my classmates would arise. "Faggot," I would hear. I learned not to volunteer or raise my hand.

In Mr. Korn's class, it was different. While most teachers looked the other way in the face of this verbal onslaught, Mr. Korn made his class an oasis of safety. No one dared harass me that way, perhaps because they feared Mr. Korn himself would take offense at the epithet. I was protected there, and Mr. Korn encouraged my participation. I found myself excelling in math, a feat never duplicated before or since in my academic career, as I would eventually go on to flunk Pre-Calculus senior year and took no more math in college. I excelled because I mattered, and was valued, and was safe, all conditions created by Mr. Korn.

One day in the spring of freshman year, I simply couldn't take it anymore. I fled my homeroom, where the lack of a teacher-directed lesson left plenty of space for verbal targeting, and fled to the library. I asked the librarian to go and get Mr. Korn, to tell him that I desperately needed his help. He came a few moments later, clearly concerned. I poured out the story of my harassment, fighting hard not to cry so I wouldn't look like a "faggot." Mr. Korn listened sympathetically, comforted me, and promised to speak with some of my other teachers about putting a stop to this. Grateful, I looked up at him and asked, "Do you have any children, Mr. Korn?"

Startled, he replied, "No. What makes you ask that?"

"Because I think you'd make a great dad. I think you should have children, Mr. Korn."

He laughed. "I don't think that will be happening, Kevin." And, with a smile, he was on his way.

I know now that Mr. Korn must have been gay. And I know that this was what I was asking when I queried after his children. What I was truly asking for, however, was not information about his sexual orientation. I was asking for information about me.

I was asking him to tell me I was going to be all right, that I was going to grow up and be gay and be okay. I was asking him to show me something I had never seen before in North Carolina: a gay man who was happy with himself.

In 1976, in the land of Jesse Helms, I was simply asking too much. Mr. Korn could never have told me what I needed to hear. He told me what he could. And it got me through freshman year.

I remember John, one of my history students at my first teaching job at the Moses Brown School in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1985. On the surface, John had everything going for him. A varsity soccer player, he was a gregarious, handsome boy with many friends and a bevy of girls who followed his every move. He hid his needy side well from his peers, but shared it with me. John's parents were working-class people of Portugese descent, who had little connection with their prep school-educated son. His sisters had long ago moved out of the house, and John desperately needed an adult presence in his life. He wanted and needed a man who could serve as his role model. Early on in my days at Moses Brown, he latched on to me as just such a role model, and I was happy to take the time to help him. I felt like I was doing for him what Mr. Korn had done for me all those years ago.

All, however, was not well in my first teaching job. Fresh out of college, where I had been an openly gay activist, I found life at the Moses Brown School a bit of a shock to my system. My Harvard credentials had gotten me the job, but on my first day, I was quickly informed that the rules would be different for gay teachers in Providence than they were for gay students in Cambridge.

The headmaster took me aside after our first faculty meeting, a look of concern on his face. He said "I'd like to talk with you about that piece of metal in your left ear." I had gotten an earring that summer but, not being sure how I wanted to deal with being gay in the high school setting, it was my left ear that I had pierced, remembering the dictum "Left is right and right is wrong," to throw off any suspicions that this was a statement about my sexual orientation. It soon became clear that I had failed to throw this particular bloodhound off my scent. "If you're going to wear that tomorrow on the first day of classes," he continued, "don't bother coming in." Stunned and cowed, I took it out that night at home. I noted, a year later, that no such fuss was made when a colleague well-known to be straight had the same ear pierced.

The whole experience of working at Moses Brown was difficult. Having grown used to freedom at Harvard, I couldn't adjust to the closet in Providence, a small city where you frequently run into students and parents in the course of daily life outside the school. The attitudes that my first encounter with the headmaster evinced hardly disappeared as time wore on. In one faculty meeting, an advisor encouraged the faculty to stop students from harassing a boy they had nicknamed "Veg," short for vegetable, due to his phlegmatic demeanor. "Better a veg than a fruit," the Head quipped in response.

The classroom, by contrast, was an oasis for me. Filled with first-year enthusiasm, I eschewed our uninspiring texts and instead sought new ways to engage my students. I found primary documents, invented games designed to show how colonialism worked in Africa ("Wheel of Misfortune," I think I called it), and worked to get every student involved in discussion. I tried to

remember the lesson Mr. Korn had taught me: if a student knows he or she matters to you, he or she will excel in your class.

These students were my lifeline. They loved my class, they loved my subject, they loved me. Feeling unloved by my colleagues (only two of whom, one a gay man mentioned on the dedication page of this book, ever invited me to a social occasion), their affirmation was crucial. Older teachers were scandalized by my teaching methods and my emphasis on topics such as African-American and women's history, and it was only the fact that my students loved this material so much that enabled me to fight off the pressure to conform to the school's norms. These kids deserve better than the run-of-the-mill textbook garbage, I told myself, and I hung in there.

John, in particular, was a source of pride for me. Underachieving in the rest of his classes, he shone in mine. Around the school he often took the time to run up to me to say hello and to share the important events of his day. Having been the youngest in my family, I got a kick out of playing older brother to John. I knew that I made him feel like he mattered and that, in turn, made me feel like my work mattered, even though I was earning only twelve thousand dollars and the disdain of my colleagues for doing it.

In the fall of my second year, I was assigned to coach the JV soccer team--even though I had never played soccer in my life. I was careful not to divulge this to the kids, never playing in practice with them, and relying on my motivational techniques to get me by. Surprisingly, this worked, and we ended up with a winning record. Although dangerously close to being exposed as an impostor, I accepted the congratulations of the athletic director (who never seemed to realize that my name wasn't Keith) and the varsity players like John, who came to our games when they could and seemed to think I knew what I was doing.

At one game, John and some of his varsity buddies were perched on the embankment behind the field, just within earshot as I coached. John's friends must not have realized they were within hearing distance, as they proceeded to initiate a debate over my sexual identity. "He's a fag," one of them said with certainty. John hotly defended me against this "charge," undoubtedly motivated by his affection for me. The debate wore on as I stood frozen, terrified to look around. Finally, John brought it to a conclusion with what he thought was the definitive statement. "He can't be gay," John said, "he's too cool to be gay. I know. He's my advisor."

I knew for a moment how Mr. Korn must have felt in 1978, at Mt. Tabor High School, in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. I desperately wanted to be able to say that I was gay, and that you could be "cool" and gay, that the person John admired and wanted to grow up to be like was gay and that this didn't change anything. But I couldn't. By the end of that year, I could no longer tolerate the tension this created, so I left the Moses Brown School.

After some perfunctory attempts to stay in touch, John and I drifted out of contact. I heard a rumor years that he had developed a serious substance abuse problem in college, and was in fact a major supplier of drugs for his dorm. I felt guilty; even though I knew I was not directly to blame, I found it hard to forgive myself for leaving John. And I have found it impossible to forgive the Moses Brown School for making my leaving the only option I could pursue and retain my sense of

self.

I remember Brewster, a sophomore boy who I came to know in 1987, my first year of teaching at Concord Academy, in Concord, Massachusetts. Brewster was a charming but troubled kid. His grades didn't match up with his potential, his attendance could be irregular, and he often seemed a little out of it. He was clearly using some substance regularly, and was not very happy with himself. But I didn't have a clue as to why--at least not at first.

I had come to Concord from Moses Brown in search of a place where I could be more open about who I was. I wore a ring that symbolized my commitment to my partner, and students like Brewster started asking me what it meant. Confused, I went to the Head to ask how I should respond. "Tell them it's a gift from someone you love," he said. Incredulous, I replied "Do you say your wedding ring is a 'gift from someone you love'?" I answered Brewster's question about my ring honestly. To my surprise, he and the other students who asked didn't turn away from me, as my peers had turned away from Mr. Korn in 1978. They didn't seem to care much at all about my being gay.

Toward the end of my first year, during the spring of 1988, Brewster appeared in my office in the tow of one of my advisees, a wonderful young woman to whom I had been "out" for a long time. "Brewster has something he needs to talk with you about," she intoned ominously. Brewster squirmed at the prospect of telling, and we sat silently for a short while. On a hunch, I suddenly asked "What's his name?" Brewster's eyes widened briefly, and then out spilled a story about his involvement with an older man he had met in Boston. I listened, sympathized, and offered advice. He left my office with a smile on his face that I would see every time I saw him on the campus for the next two years, until he graduated.

I was thrilled to be able to do for Brewster what I had wanted Mr. Korn to do for me ten years before. But the conversation also left me troubled. I had been playing a variation on the "don't ask, don't tell" game with my students. If they asked, I told, but otherwise my sexual identity was not a fit topic for discussion. I grew uncomfortable with the message this was sending, with the air of secrecy and shame and scandal that my quasi-silence implied. I decided I needed to come out in a more forthright and honest fashion, and made plans to do so the fall of 1988, my second year at Concord.

The venue I chose was chapel. Three times a week, the entire school gathers in the school's nonsectarian chapel, to hear a talk by a senior or a faculty member on a topic of their choosing. It is the central ritual of school life, and a forum wherein personal sharing is commonplace. I decided to come out here, and signed up to give my chapel on October 11, 1988 -- the first-ever "National Coming Out Day," and the anniversary of the 1987 March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, which had been a turning point in my life. It seemed like the right way to commemorate the event and, more importantly, the right way to let students like Brewster know that they should feel no shame over being gay.

I met with my Head early upon returning that fall to discuss my plans with him. He reacted with alarm, fearing that such a public statement would frighten off potential applicants and alumni donations to the school. He asked me to postpone the talk while we "worked things out," and I reluctantly agreed to do so

as a sign of respect for his good will. In the meantime, my intentions had become a surreptitious subject generating fierce discussion among the faculty and eventually the students. Everyone seemed to know that I was planning to come out, and that whether or not the school would support was hanging in the balance. It had turned into a litmus test about how the institution viewed gay people. The import of my postponement was duly noted, and I worried about the message this was sending.

None of this was helped by the fact that I was twenty-four and in the midst of a performance review that would determine whether or not I would be offered a permanent position at the school. I had no role models. I didn't know a single openly gay teacher at that time, and had no sources of support from other gay people at the school. In fact, an older, closeted teacher had come to meet with me at the Head's request, and had reacted with horror at my plans. My resolve began to falter. Over lunch one day with some straight colleagues, I poured out my confusion, and confessed that I was thinking of cancelling my chapel talk. One of them looked at me and said slowly, "If you do, you will never be able to look at yourself in the mirror again. No job is worth that." I decided then that I had to go forward, no matter what the consequences might be.

On November 10, 1988, I rose to the pulpit of the Concord Academy chapel, my talk in my hands, sweat drenching my button-down shirt and soaking through to my blue blazer. My best friend had flown overnight from California to be there. A former teacher at the school named Karl Laubenstein, a gay man who had always wished to come out but had never been able to do so, came almost directly from the hospital to support me, leaning on a cane as his recent bout of AIDS-related pneumocystis made it hard for him to walk very far. But, most importantly, Brewster had found me in the dining hall right before chapel, had stuck by my side as I walked across campus, and had then perched himself in the front row. We hadn't discussed the whole controversy around this chapel. We hadn't even talked about what I was planning to say. But he knew, and I could tell from the look in his eyes how much my decision to go forward meant to him. I knew I had done the right thing.

Fifteen minutes later, I dismissed the students, having told them about my struggle with being gay when I was their age, a struggle that led to serious substance abuse problems and attempted suicide before I finally learned to love myself as a gay man. The reaction had seemed to be positive and, when I signaled for them to leave, I felt things had gone reasonably well. I didn't expect what happened next. Kids literally leapt up from their pews and rushed the pulpit, surrounding me and hugging me, many of them crying as they tried to thank me for what I had done. I was overwhelmed, and spent a good chunk of my first class embracing them. When I realized I was fifteen minutes late for U.S. History, I ran across the campus to my classroom and burst in, out of breath, to find the board covered with graffiti. I temporarily blanked out, so sure was I that they had written homophobic epithets across the slate. When my vision returned, I read what they had actually written. "We love you, Kevin, and we're so proud of you," it read. Each student had signed the board. Embarrassed and speechless, I simply erased the board, turned, and said, "Okay, let's talk about the Erie Canal." They smiled and opened their books to the right page.

Brewster's problems didn't go away overnight. He struggled with substance abuse and probably got grades below what he should have

gotten throughout his time at Concord. But he knew that it was okay to be gay and that he had a place to turn for support, and this enabled him to make it through high school in one piece. In 1990 he graduated from Concord, and went off to college. Except for a few phone calls, I heard little from him, and lost track of him as the years went by.

I remember April 3, 1993, when I went to Club Cafe, a gay restaurant in Boston, for the annual awards dinner of the Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Civil Rights. An organization I had helped found, GLSTN (the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Teachers Network), was being honored that night, and I had come to accept the award on our behalf. I sat with some friends, my back to the center of the room, and soon got engaged in conversation. From behind me, I heard a familiar voice. "Care for a drink, sir?"

I turned and it was Brewster. Shocked, we were both speechless for a moment, before we hugged each other and caught up. He was now twenty-two, taking time off from college, and living with his boyfriend. His smile showed that he had found his way to a happy adulthood. In that moment, I remembered why I had gone into teaching in the first place.

Spontaneously, I dedicated the award that night to Brewster, who stood mortified in the back of the room while I talked about our relationship. The key moment came when I recalled my own experience with closeted gay teachers in high school (Mr. Korn was hardly the only one), and how that had influenced me to come out as a teacher myself. "I'll be damned," I said, "if I will remain closeted and help teach another generation of young gay and lesbian people to hate themselves." Despite all of the struggles I had been through at my school, seeing Brewster that night made it all worthwhile.

The last time I saw Brewster was at the 1993 Boston Gay Pride March. He was standing on the side with his boyfriend as GLSTN marched past. He called my name and I broke away briefly to hug him and say hello. As I stood amidst the sunshine on the beautiful June day, I looked at Brewster, and I thought: You made it. I made it. We, as gay students and gay teachers, were going to make it, no matter how many obstacles and barriers stood in the way of our liberation.

I remember when I didn't think I could do any of this. And I am happy that that feeling of hopelessness is now but a memory.

(Excerpted from ONE TEACHER IN TEN: GAY AND LESBIAN EDUCATORS TELL THEIR STORIES by Kevin Jennings.)

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This document is one of the many practical resources available online from GLSTN's web site at <http://www.glstn.org/respect/>.

The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Teachers Network (GLSTN) is the largest

organization of parents, educators, students and other concerned citizens working to end homophobia in K-12 schools and to ensure that all students are valued and respected, regardless of sexual orientation.

To fulfill its mission and to raise awareness of these issues, GLSTN produces audio, visual and text-based educational materials, provides training, produces community programming and conferences, and organizes a growing national network of over 40 regional chapters.

Membership in GLSTN is open to anyone -- regardless of their occupation or sexual orientation -- who is committed to seeing that the current generation is the last to suffer from homophobia. More than 70% of our budget is funded by individual donations and we need your support to continue to make resources such as this available. GLSTN is a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation and all donations are fully tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.

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