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Adding Tolerance to the Law

RALEIGH—Recently I went to the General Assembly to attend a press conference. The issue of the day was the School Violence Prevention Act, an anti-bullying bill that has been caught up in the culture war during the last two sessions of the legislature. I was there along with several other religious leaders to lend moral support for a bill that would seem like a no-brainer.

To be honest, my expectations for the event were low. I knew there would be several politicians making speeches, and even though I was likely to agree with what was being said, I figured it would all be predictable and rote. Boy, was I wrong.

The first speaker was Rep. Rick Glazier, the chief sponsor of the bill in the House of Representatives. He spoke with passion and eloquence about a subject he clearly cares about.

The sticking point to this anti-bullying measure is that it dares to name sexual orientation and gender identity as two categories that school administrators should pay attention to in providing protection for students. Even though a broad coalition is behind the bill (the N.C. Council of Churches, the N.C. Association of Educators, the PTA, etc.), conservative religious groups have successfully opposed it by saying it gives “special rights” to gay people. Glazier moved me with his determination not to allow religious bigotry to get in the way of protecting vulnerable students.

The next speaker was Sen. Julia Boseman. Boseman is the only openly gay member of the General Assembly. As she gave voice to her support for the anti-bullying measure her words cracked a little and she wept softly. She acknowledged how important the bill was to her personally, but more than that she spoke on behalf of the thousands of gay teenagers who face the terror of school violence simply because of who they are. I have deep admiration for Boseman and I hope that her presence in the legislature will help break down the walls of prejudice that exist in our state.

But the person who stole the show was the final speaker, a young woman named Kate Mabe from Mount Tabor High School. She told her story of coming out in middle school and the bullying she experienced because she acknowledged that she was gay. The cruelty she faced followed her to high school and she eventually had to transfer to another school in order to feel safe. Here are the final words Kate shared with us that day:

“Sometimes I feel really lonely and like no one cares about me. And I think that’s how a lot of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender teens feel; because not a lot of people will stand up for me, or anyone like me in schools. I have come to realize that I take on two jobs when I walk through the door of my school. I take on the job of learning, and the job of standing up for myself and who I am. It hurts knowing I have to do something most students never even think about, but every time I hear ‘that’s so gay’ and a teacher does nothing about it, it’s a terrifying confirmation that I’m on my own, without protection, as soon as I get out of my mother’s reach. I’ll never ask for ‘special rights’ in school, I’ll never ask for ‘special rights’ anywhere, all I’ll ever ask for is what every straight kid has in school. I want tolerance, I want to be able to learn without fear, and I want the freedom to be myself without consequence. That’s all I’ll ever ask for.”

When Kate finished her speech you could have heard a pin drop in the press room at the General Assembly. No one who was there will forget that courageous young woman and her powerful story. It was simply a sacred moment.

I hope people will encourage their representatives and senators to support House Bill 548 or Senate Bill 528. The School Violence Prevention Act is not about the issue of homosexuality in our society; it’s about the safety of every child who walks into a public school in North Carolina. All of the “Kates” in our state deserve our support.

Jack McKinney is pastor of Raleigh’s Pullen Memorial Baptist Church

NEWS & OBSERVER OP-ED

April 8, 2009