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'IT'S ELEMENTARY'

Letting Grade School Kids Teach the Teachers about Homosexuality

Nearly four years ago, when Academy Award-winning film maker Debra Chasnoff and co-producer Helen Cohen set out to make a series of videos that elementary school teachers could use to introduce the subject of homosexuality to their students, they discovered that the world wasn't quite ready for their project: Most teachers and schools, they found, were scared to death of the subject—even though kids are clearly hearing about gay and lesbian issues from a variety of sources and "faggot" has become a common playground insult.

"We felt we had to play a role in changing the political climate around education in this country in order for teachers to be able to use" the videos they wanted to make, Chasnoff explains. The result is Chasnoff's new film, "It's Elementary," which has its world premier June 5 at San Francisco's Herbst Theater. The feature-length documentary is a funny, touching, engrossing look at the way a handful of schools and teachers handle a subject that still sends what Chasnoff calls "waves of terror" through even the most liberal educators.

Chasnoff is no stranger to controversy. When she won a 1991 Oscar for "Deadly Deception: General Electric, Nuclear Weapons, and Our Environment," she acknowledged her lover in her acceptance speech, becoming the first woman to come out on an Academy Awards show—and then called on the audience to boycott G.E.

Still, she wasn't entirely prepared for how anxiety-inducing the subject of homosexuality is for educators. "Most adults have this idea that 'gay' isn't a subject that's relevant to kids' lives or that they need to think about," she explains. "But the reality is they're already exposed to it and dealing with it. It's irresponsible not to give them an appropriate forum."

That's a need Chasnoff has observed first-hand with the oldest of her two children, a second grader in a San Francisco public school. "It's appalling to me that my kid would be in school and homophobia would be all around him—and none of the responsible adults would do anything about it," she says. "I think that's outrageous."

Her son's school has made efforts to deal with gay and lesbian issues and homophobia, but the process hasn't always been easy. "For Valentine's Day they did a lesson about different kinds of love, and my partner and I actually spoke to the class," Chasnoff recalls. "I walk in the door and this second grader runs up to us and says, 'Are you a lesbian?' And I said, 'Uh-huh'—and she screamed and jumped back: 'AAAAAIIHHH!' This is a kid going to a really hip school, who's in second grade, and a lesbian is



Producer/Director Debra Chasnoff (left) and Co-producer Helen Cohen.

a monster." And even in San Francisco, she notes, "the principal has gotten an enormous amount of flak."

Chasnoff filmed in a handful of schools around the country—mainly in liberal communities like Cambridge, Mass., Madison, Wisc. and San Francisco. But even in such bastions of tolerance, teachers and school officials were terrified about publicly acknowledging that homosexuality is discussed in their classrooms. Filming classes, after all, meant getting permission from both the school and the parents of the children involved, and in some cases getting those approvals took more than a year.

"There were a lot of teachers we talked to who said, 'Yes, I do this,'" Cohen says, "but if I even mention a film crew or acknowledge it any clear way I think I'd be fired—or all hell would break loose and parents would be banging down the door the next day."

Chasnoff adds that school principals were intimidated by the idea that "they would have to put themselves in the position of advocating, that they stood behind a curriculum that includes gay issues. That was something they did not want to take on *at all*."

From the Mouths of Babes

Not surprisingly, the true pearls of wisdom in the film come from the kids. In the opening sequence Sen. Bob Smith (R-New Hampshire) raves on the Senate floor about the need for "keeping this kind of trash out of our schools"—deftly intercut with the refreshingly down-to-earth comments of the kids. "Who really *cares* if you're gay?" one girl says. "What's the big whoop?" Later, an eighth grade girl declares, "If kids are too young to be taught about homosexuality, then they're too young to be taught about heterosexuality."

Much of what Chasnoff set out to do was to demystify the idea of approaching gay issues in the classroom, particularly the idea that discussing gays and lesbians means teaching children about sex. The film shows different ways teachers introduce the subject: Asking

the kids what comes to mind when they hear the words "gay" or "lesbian," for example, or if they've ever experienced prejudice. Throughout, the children come across as interested, honest and far more level-headed than most adults.

One teacher starts a discussion of gay people by introducing the students to some famous gays and lesbians. After going through some historical figures like Michaelangelo, the teacher plays a song and asks the children if they recognize it. "That's from 'The Lion King!'" several excited young voices call out.

"And do you know who it is singing?"

"Elton John!" the kids answer eagerly.

"Did you know Elton John was a gay man?" the teacher asks, and the kids are astonished. Several shout their surprise, and one young girl simply stares in drop-jawed disbelief.

It is a priceless moment, but one that almost didn't make it into the film. The Walt Disney Company at first refused to allow the song to be used, and only relented after the singer himself intervened.

After the San Francisco premier, "It's Elementary" will be shown in other parts of the country—probably including several lesbian/gay film festivals—during the summer and fall. And the film makers hope to see it aired on the PBS series "POV." They don't expect the film to change the minds of homophobes, but they do expect it to be a tool that teachers' groups can use to introduce curriculum ideas to squeamish school administrators. Chasnoff says, "We are hoping people will see this and say, 'Oh, I do a unit about families in second grade. Well, maybe when I do that unit I'll work in that some families have two moms.'" Then they'll be ready for those instructional videos Chasnoff wanted to make—and which start filming this summer.

"It's Elementary" premieres at 7 p.m. June 5 at the Herbst Theater. For ticket information, call City Box Office at 415/392-4400. For more information about the film, call Women's Educational Media at 415/641-4616.