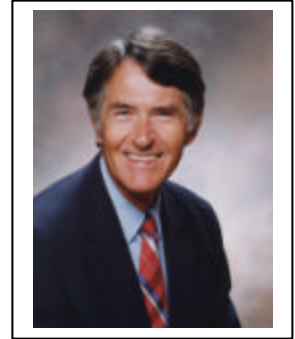


## **“Teacher Of the Year” Out of the Closet and Out of the Classroom**

*Meet Colin Higgins Courage Award Winner James Merrick*



Just two years ago, James Merrick was named “Teacher of the Year” at the Rio Bravo-Greeley Union School in Bakersfield, CA. But that was before Jim became vocal about the open homophobia of a Kern County Human Relations Commissioner.

The uproar began in May of 1998 when, at the urging of a friend, Jim attended a meeting of the Kern County Human Relations Commission. At the meeting, Human Relations Commissioner Rev. Douglas Hearn, made several hateful and disrespectful remarks about homosexuals. Outraged by the Commissioner’s remarks, Jim took the issue up with the local newspaper.

Although Jim had been “out” to his close friends and family for about a year, he had always remained quiet about his private life at school. When he began to be quoted in the papers, his support of gay rights was perceived as an admission of his homosexuality to some of his students’ parents. When he returned to school in the fall, a small number of vocal parents requested that their children be removed from his classes – although he was the only eighth-grade science teacher at the school. While the principal initially tried to quell their concerns, he eventually caved in to the parents and pulled the students from Merrick’s class.

Forced into the spotlight, Merrick, who was married for 42 years and has 4 children, bravely chose to come out in the local paper and fight the discrimination he was facing at the school. While this decision was ultimately “the most liberating experience” of his life, the anger of the parents increased as the issue became front page news. The school became a hostile climate for Merrick to the point that he felt his life was in danger and his only option was to take a leave from teaching.

But he didn’t give up the fight. Instead, he chose to take it up with the state’s Labor Commission who ruled in his favor. In a settlement agreement, James was granted an apology from the school board and the board agreed to change current policy to include “sexual orientation” and implement a diversity-training program to help staff better appreciate diversity of race, religion and sexual orientation. Terms of the agreement also restored salary, sick leave and retirement benefits and placed Merrick on the committee for the next ten years, charged with selecting the diversity training to be implemented.

“I received a tremendous amount of support from all over,” Jim said. “I’m particularly grateful that my struggle has made it easier for other teachers.”

Now retired, Jim continues his work in Bakersfield to end homophobia. He and his partner of five years have helped to establish a network of local gay, lesbian, bisexual and

transgender organizations online at [www.glcn.org](http://www.glcn.org). The web site connects local gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered persons to a wide variety of support including social, religious, youth and AIDS care organizations.

***To arrange to interview James Merrick or other recipients of the 2000 Colin Higgins Courage Awards, contact Paul Cates at 212/245-0510 or by e-mail at [pcates@promediacomm.com](mailto:pcates@promediacomm.com).***