

Bigotry Becomes Teacher's Pet Peeve

Meet Colin Higgins Courage Award Winner Dana Rivers



A teacher injects life and excitement into his high school curriculum and is regarded by students as the one teacher most likely to be remembered as a major influence in their lives. He develops an innovative program for unmotivated students to involve them in new extracurricular activities. He coaches baseball and serves as a role model and educator inside and outside of the classroom. Nine years into his teaching career, having been exalted by his community, awarded by his school and granted funds for his program, all of his hard work and accomplishments are tossed aside when he informs his colleagues and students that he'll be returning next fall as a woman – the appropriate gender role.

Dana Rivers, formerly David Warfield, had every intention of beginning a normal school year when she returned to Center High School in suburban Sacramento last fall. She says of the letter that she sent to her colleagues announcing her transformation, "I wasn't trying to make a political statement. I was trying to keep my job. I am first and foremost a teacher."

She didn't expect the school board to ask her to resign after four letters of protest against a transgender educator. She didn't expect to become an advocate for transgender youth and a spokesperson for transgender issues. She didn't expect to be honored with a \$10,000 grant by the Colin Higgins Foundation for courage in the face of discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation.

Since being forced to resign, Rivers has kept busy serving on the boards of gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgender organizations, educating herself on the discrimination and hardships that transgenders face, and speaking to the media. Recently the California State Credentialing Commission closed her file without comment, clearing her to teach again. "By nature, I've always been a person who is willing to stand up for what is right ...But this time it's about me and people like me and I'm able to use my activist skills for something very personal."

Her willingness to stand up for what is right is exactly the attitude that established her as a loved and respected teacher in her small community of 1500 families. It was the attitude that led her to explain her condition – known as gender identity dysphoria – and warn her colleagues of her gender change rather than just report to school with a different name and face. It was the reason that she chose to address circulating rumors and speculation with a school newspaper interview that explained frankly (the Board determined too frankly and improperly) her 44-year battle with gender dysphoria and the procedure she was undertaking to overcome it. These days it is the motivation for her to continue to give interviews to journalists, to speak at events such as the Millennium March on Washington, and to help design better programs to serve the needs of transgender youth around the country.

Last fall when Center High's favorite teacher wasn't in class, the students united in a full campaign to publicly protest the suspension of Dana Rivers. They canvassed around the community on her behalf and they hounded the local Top 40 radio station with phone calls that led to daily monitoring of the story by popular djs. Their campaign put them before the school board and finally to the steps of the state capitol where they rallied to keep the member of their community that had given so much. Though she was accused of violating parent rights and improperly imparting information to the students at Center High, Dana Rivers contends that she did -- and continues to -- act responsibly by speaking out against discrimination.

In the face of unemployment, homophobia, and divorce, Rivers feels that she still hasn't a choice but to continue to be true to herself, saying, "I'm driving my attorney crazy because I think it's important to keep telling my story, to keep talking to people. I'm not trying to be a martyr but I'm not going to pass up the opportunity to let people understand the struggle of gender dysphoria."

To arrange to interview Dana Rivers or other recipients of the 2000 Colin Higgins Courage Awards, please contact Paul Cates at 212/245-0510 or by e-mail at pcates@promediacomm.com