

SUMMER 2003

the

CHILDREN'S BEAT

A JOURNAL OF MEDIA COVERAGE

Tales From the Toddler Room

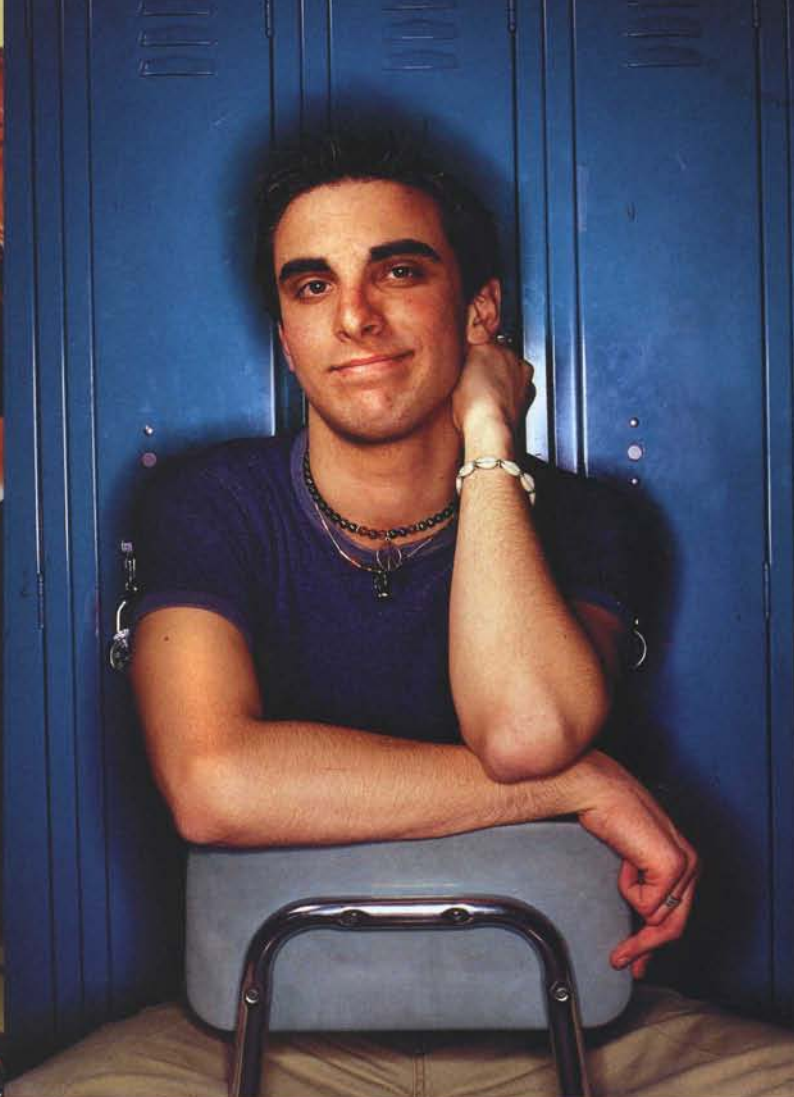
**Fresh takes on early
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REPORTING ON GAY TEENS

THE ENVIRONMENT AND CHILDREN'S HEALTH

HIGH SCHOOL IN A HANGAR



Chicago-area high school senior Mike Piazza and sophomore Luz Duarte shared their "coming out" experiences with reporter Nara Schoenberg and readers of the *Chicago Tribune Magazine*.

JEFF SCIORTINO, CHICAGO TRIBUNE

When They Want to Tell

The challenges of reporting on gay teenagers

BY CARA NISSMAN

When a jogger discovered 16-year-old Kyle Skyock severely bruised and burned beside a Rifle, Colo., highway two years ago, the public responded with a fury of insinuations and accusations about the cause of his injuries. But *Denver Post* reporter Nancy Lofholm resisted immediately writing about rumors that he was gay, in part because his family begged her to keep the possibility secret.

"I went to meet the family in the hospital and they said they had always thought he may be gay, but he never told them, and they didn't want everything in the paper," Lofholm says.

The plea created a dilemma at the *Post*.

"It was very tough," says Lofholm. "My editors and I were thinking that it may have been like the Matthew Shepard case." (The 1998 bludgeoning death of a gay college freshman). "You can't 'out' somebody in the newspaper. So the fact that there was a large piece of the story there and I had to ignore it until it was confirmed was really hard."

Lofholm also encountered conflicting reports about how the slight youth sustained his injuries. Skyock's family claimed that he was assaulted. But a forensic pathologist who examined him disagreed. Given the teen's .230 blood alcohol level, the

pathologist surmised that Skyock plummeted down a steep embankment near the highway and was injured by jagged rocks.

Yet as word spread of the incident – and a recovering Skyock announced to the media that he was gay – some press and gay activist groups began speculating that the case was a hate crime. Lofholm stayed her course, continuing to report on other possible causes of Skyock's injuries. Eventually, the district attorney decided the incident was not a crime.

"I knew I had to keep an open mind for other information," Lofholm says. "I never felt pressure to change my stories at all, but it was very tough to stick to that angle."

Like Lofholm, other journalists have found that reporting on a teen's homosexuality, especially on a tight deadline, can be fraught with risk. Young sources may not believe that stories can put them in peril or reinforce negative stereotypes. Even if the story illuminates injustices, a reporter may be left wondering if a teen is sure enough of his sexual orientation to proclaim it in print. Many newsrooms remain tentative about tackling the topic.

The lives of gay teens are underreported, says Jean-Paul Renaud, a general assignment news reporter at the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel's* Miami bureau who recently wrote a story on homeless gay youths. "A lot of activists are telling me that."

Stories are more common in the education beat, says his colleague, Jamie Malernee, who sees less shame and fear among gay students than in the past. "We have had a lot of stories about gay issues in the past few years," she says. "The fact that there are more gay-straight alliances at schools that didn't exist 15 years ago shows you something."

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette police reporter Andy Davis recently covered a homosexual 14-year-old boy's plan to sue his school district over discrimination. The boy, who claimed a teacher preached Bible scriptures to him upon learning that the teen was gay, wanted to make his story public. Davis expected the article to generate a lot of flak.

"Obviously the South is known for being pretty socially conservative," says Davis. "That's part of what makes it a good story, you know, because it's a topic that's going to be pretty controversial."

That may have been so around the water coolers, but the paper received scant response from angry readers.

Upholding objectivity

Still, controversy over teen homosexuality is rife in most neighborhoods and communities, as well as within families. Reporters must be especially enterprising about representing the complexity of emotionally charged debates.

When the *Sun-Sentinel's* Malernee went to cover a local anti-gay demonstration organized by an out-of-state church, she could not help feeling she was just fueling the group's agenda. After letting the newspaper know of their plans, members of the Topeka, Kan.-based Westboro Baptist Church marched in front of a Florida high school to object to Broward County's policy of teaching tolerance toward homosexuals. Protesters waved signs proclaiming "God Hates Fags" and "No Tears for Queers."

"They knew how to get attention and play the system," Malernee says. "I went out there feeling bad about that."

But she quickly found a few teenagers on their way to school that morning – including a gay teen who had appeared in a diversity training video for teachers – to react to the protest, giving her story balance.

"It made the story more nuanced, rich and emotional," she says. Without access to the teenagers, "I would have had to call different groups and the story would have been a little more stilted."

Most anti-gay incidents are less sensational, say gay youths, and that complicates a reporter's job. When interviewing young adults who claim to have suffered some form of injustice, reporters must maintain the appropriate amount of skepticism to discern the truth.

"I realized with a teenager making allegations [that it was important] to make sure we had more than his word against the entire school district," says the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette's* Davis of the discrimination case he covered. "It helped his credibility that his parents backed up everything he said."

Yet even parents can bend the truth to bolster their child's dignity, as the *Post's* Lofholm discovered, and challenge a reporter's impartiality.

"I think [Skyock's] parents wanted to be part of a bigger cause," she says. "And if people knew he just got stinkin' drunk and stoned and fell down, they'd lose all the public's support. My personal opinion – not as a reporter – is that they wanted to believe he was a victim."

Other reporters wrestle with remaining dispassionate.

"It challenges your objectivity because you sort of want to protect them," says Nara Schoenberg, a *Chicago Tribune* features writer who recently wrote a magazine piece about several teens who came out in high school. "You want to be careful and respectful of the kids. But you also have to keep in mind, I'm a reporter, not an advocate. It's important to say this is happening in society, to tell the truth about what's going on. I think a lot of what's going on in high schools right now reflects the bigger issues emerging in society."

Or closer to home. The *Sun-Sentinel's* Renaud, who is gay, privately worried that if he highlighted drug abuse and prostitution among gay youths, he might paint the gay community in a bad light.

"For people who don't agree with that sexual orientation, they might use that as a weapon," says Renaud. He ultimately went ahead with his story, eventually finding a gay teen who was willing to talk openly about his life, including struggles with discrimination and family rejection.

"It wouldn't have been as powerful if I had just quoted a gay activist," Renaud says. "I wanted to find somebody who had lived through the stereotypes of prostitution and doing drugs and being homeless."

Harassment or harm?

As gay issues make national headlines, many newsrooms are just beginning to establish guidelines for coverage. Reporters at some papers now have to consider whether identifying a teenager's sexual orientation might put them at risk for harassment or harm.

"We haven't sat down and had a discussion about naming people," says Jamie Malernee. "But if they don't mind giving their full names, I don't think they're literally in danger of their lives."

Teens might be at risk in other areas. Indeed, 83 percent of 904 homosexual students surveyed nationwide in 2001 by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network reported being verbally harassed in the past year because of their sexual orientation.

Malernee says she once elected not to push a bisexual teen for her last name, recognizing that the student's opinions mainly provided background for her story.

"If she had said something controversial that needed to be backed up with proof, I would have needed her name," she says. "But I was just quoting her feelings, adding a personal voice to the story. She wasn't accusing somebody of something."

Malernee says reporters should not feel compelled to treat these stories as they would rape stories, in which the media traditionally omit victims' names. But when a story's subject is sensitive, she decides on a case-by-case basis, then has a discussion with her editor.

"Sometimes people make the argument that if you don't use their names, that's saying they're ashamed," she says.

The *Tribune's* Schoenberg, who sought parental permission before interviewing and publishing the names of teens younger than 18, found that persistence and patience reaped results when it came to gleaming names.

"Parents are protective and have concerns about their children's safety," she says. "I did run into one case where the parents said, 'No how, no way.'"

Even when reporters take care not to take advantage of a gay teenager's vulnerability, they may be hurt.

As the teen reporter at the *Boston Herald*, I recently wrote about the progress of gay-straight alliances in Massachusetts (where the nation's first group was founded in 1989). Most students worried not about publishing their names, but about sharing their sexual orientations. I decided that discussing the activities they had organized and changes they had inspired in their schools proved more relevant than whom they wanted to date, and left out their orientations.

But, despite my efforts to shield her identity, a student told me that she had received a hurtful letter at school that said homosexuality "causes earthquakes and heartbreaks." Although the letter, which she believes was penned by an elderly person in her community, did not contain any threats, it rattled her. Nonetheless, the teen was proud that her views had been heard.

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They're out there

- Six out of 10 high school seniors surveyed nationwide by Hamilton College and Zogby International in 2001 said they had openly gay classmates.
- More than 1,600 gay-straight alliances (high school clubs that champion tolerance) are active nationwide, according to the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network. Fewer than six were active in 1990.
- A 2001 University of North Carolina study estimated that 5 to 6 percent of students ages 17 and younger in the United States identify themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual.

Investigating youth homosexuality

Seek the help of experts if you're not certain how to approach a story regarding gay youths, says Nara Schoenberg of the *Chicago Tribune*.

"It's hard to call someone up when you're still kind of stupid on the issue," she says. "But it saves a lot of time."

Sources include:

- Caitlin Ryan, director of policy studies at the San Francisco State University Institute on Sexuality, Inequality and Health, and Rafael Diaz, SFSU professor of human sexuality studies and ethnic studies, are conducting the first-ever study of affects on homosexual youths of coming out to family members during adolescence. Contact Matt Itelson, 415-338-1743, 415-338-1665; matti@sfsu.edu
- Stephen Russell, professor specializing in adolescent development and sexuality at the University of California at Davis, who has published several statistical studies of gay youths. 530-752-7069, strussell@ucdavis.edu.

Informational Web sites:

- Pro-homosexuality
- The Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network, 212-727-0135 or www.glsen.org.

- The Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, 212-809-8585 or www.lambdalegal.org.

Anti-homosexuality

- Family Research Council, 202-393-2100 or www.frc.org/homosexuality.cfm
- Focus on the Family, 800-232-6459 or www.family.org.

Ease into an interview

Jean-Paul Renaud of the *Sun-Sentinel* says reporters should keep in mind the following tips when interviewing youths:

- Take the time to listen to their stories and their concerns, even if they meander.
- Show patience and respect.
- Maintain your role as reporter, not moral judge.
- Seek out stories that will examine, not strengthen, stereotypes.
- Gauge the potential consequences of your story as well as its probable benefits.

—Cara Nissman