Interview with Dr. Cynthia Mader, Professor

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Interview with
Dr. Cynthia Mader
Professor
Interviewed By Roger Wilson, GVSU Faculty
Illustration By Lisa R. Tennant
Student Attitudes

Question: Have student attitudes changed during your years at Grand Valley State University?

About three years ago I began noticing a huge difference. One of the classes where it came up was EDF 672, which looks at how politics and social values affect schools. Years ago students were almost adamant about not having any responsibility as teachers with LGBT students other than obviously not allowing gay slurs. I was pretty open about my life, but I was told by some students that I would go to hell. The amazing thing is that they weren’t doing it anonymously; they were writing on the course discussion board under their own names. They tried to be kind about how they said it, so I do have to grant them their sincerity and how deeply they felt.

I don’t want to imply that there are no problems anymore, but things do improve over time. When I taught high school in the seventies and tried to bring up topics like sexism and feminism, students were outraged—and not just the boys. The girls insisted that they liked being taken care of, they didn’t want to be in charge of things. Now, some of them head major businesses. Times change, and this issue will change with it. Even a few years ago, I would have laughed at any suggestion that there would be marriage equality in my lifetime.

In July of this year, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) which had previously defined marriage as between one man and one woman. For her views on this and education-related topics, Colleagues interviewed Dr. Cynthia Mader, Emeritus Professor in the College of Education. Dr. Mader retired this past year after 23 years at Grand Valley State University. She has received several awards for her work at GVSU on social justice issues, including the LGBT Faculty/Staff Association’s Prism Award and the Women’s Commission Lifetime Achievement Award.
**Norms And Growing Up**

*Question: What was it like growing up?*

I don’t know how relevant my growing up was compared to today’s kids because it was the 1950’s when I was in high school. Culturally, that’s light years ago in the gay movement. I had a very nice middle class upbringing, maybe kind of sheltered. Homosexuality wasn’t even on anyone’s radar as far as I knew. It wasn’t until college that I even recall hearing the concept, and by then I had figured out that it probably applied to me.

I was born and raised Catholic, went to Catholic schools for twelve years, then college, then taught in Catholic schools for over twenty years. I never experienced any of the stereotypes that you hear about. The nuns were kind and smart and really encouraged us to think and question. They were very savvy. But the whole church was different in the fifties and sixties. I don’t recall much about sin and damnation. The focus was on poverty and social justice rather than abortion and homosexuality as it is so much today.

Today? I call myself a cultural Catholic because it’s so much a part of my upbringing. I haven’t left the church—it’s more like it has left me. The people I still have contact with are wonderful, but the institutional church seems very remote now. If I’m angry about anything, it’s the fact that the anti-gay preaching in some churches gives people license to hate.

I wish there were more discussion on the psychology of why this issue bothers people so much. One suggestion is that the very term sexual orientation casts gay people as hyper-sexual beings and erases all the other reasons that draw people together such as love, caring, compatibility. Another theory is that a deep-seated sexism against women is really at the root of it all because gay relationships challenge the very essence of the male-female power structure. But maybe these are topics for another time.

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**Schools Today**

*Question: What do gay and lesbian students experience in schools today?*

Middle school and high school are hard for all kids, but with gay kids everything is multiplied. The bullying and high suicide rate get a lot of press—and rightfully so because it’s awful—but there are subtle things that don’t get as much attention.

One of the subtle things is the whole dating scene and the presumption that everyone is heterosexual. High school is when kids practice being adults, and in most schools gay kids can’t practice that very easily. There are virtually no sanctioned school events, nowhere they can be open, and their parents aren’t likely to encourage them either. Gay and lesbian kids just can’t have the range of experiences and relationships that help kids mature.

Another problem is silence and invisibility. There are rarely any gay characters or gay figures in literature class or history. The exception might be health class where it’s often treated as abnormal if it’s even discussed at all. Not many teachers bring up the subject either, even when it would fit in their classes, because they’re afraid of ruffling feathers. And gay kids have almost no role models in gay and lesbian teachers because most of them can’t afford to be visible either.

Another area—I wish we had some research on this—is the toll it must take on a person to always be the subject of debate. To be bombarded every day with TV, newspapers, media, churches—all of them weighing in on whether or not your very being is acceptable. What all this teaches gay and lesbian kids is that they’re not okay, they should keep quiet, they are “wrong.” That’s a terrible message to send to anyone. It’s a wonder any gay kid grows up to be a sane adult. Seriously, it’s a testament to their internal fortitude.
Teachers And Administrators

Question: What should teachers and administrators be doing?

First of all, I think that teachers are probably the fairest people on earth. They want to do right by kids, especially when they realize that their classroom will probably have at least one or two gay or lesbian students—not to mention all those who have gay families and friends. But they may not be sure what to do other than monitor bullying and gay slurs as best they can.

One of the things they can do is inform themselves through their own reading or with great organizations online such as GLSEN (Gay Lesbian & Straight Education Network). They can hold teacher in-services. They can look at their harassment policies, counseling services, library media collections, and student clubs such as GSA’s (Gay-Straight Alliance), which are becoming very popular in schools. Their language can be inclusive; for example, “parent,” “spouse” and “date” rather than “father/mother,” “husband/wife” and “boyfriend/girlfriend.” Visual materials, posters, and school publications don’t all need to be what I call relentlessly heterosexual. Most of all, classrooms need to be safe places for lesbian and gay students and safe places where all kids and teachers can talk about anything.

Many years ago I read an article about how the school curriculum should have both “windows” and “mirrors.” Most school subjects at that time did a good job helping students learn about the outside world—those are the windows. But there weren’t many places where girls and students of color could see themselves represented—there weren’t many mirrors for them in the curriculum. To improve this, we started to revise textbooks and we also set about making the entire school culture more diverse. Two good things came of that. First, girls and minority students started seeing themselves in the curriculum and school culture. But also, majority students started realizing that the world doesn’t belong only to them. We have a long way to go before that happens on gay issues, and that’s a disservice to all kids—gay, lesbian and straight.

Marriage Equality

Question: Did the Supreme Court ruling on gay marriage have any effect on you and your partner?

Yes, it did. For one thing, we decided to get married now rather than wait for Michigan to come around. We were married this past October on a beautiful fall day in Vermont, which has had marriage equality for some time now. The court ruling means that married gay couples, no matter what state they live in, are now eligible for the same federal benefits other married couples have. As soon as the details get worked out in all the federal agencies, that will mean health benefits, medical care, retirement benefits, social security, dependent care, tax benefits, and hundreds of others. There are over 1,000 federal benefits that will now go to gay couples too.

Here at Grand Valley, the decision is already having an impact. For example, a few years ago, Grand Valley began domestic partner benefits, but gay and lesbian faculty and staff still had to pay extra federal taxes if they took family health benefits because it was considered extra income, which of course wasn’t the case for other employees. Now they won’t be taxed extra on those benefits, and they can file for a refund on past taxes if they were married during any of those years. The federal ruling will have major ripple effects. Meanwhile, gay and lesbian couples are leaving non-equality states like Michigan in droves to be married in other states—bringing hundreds of millions of dollars to those places. Michigan will come around in time.

The financial and legal benefits will be nice for us, but we still had some misgivings about whether to get married. First of course there’s the patriarchal history of marriage. Then there’s the question of why any relationship—straight or gay—should be given special benefits. There’s also something wrong that any government can say which relationships are okay and which ones aren’t. But after 25 years together, it seemed like the right thing to do, not just financially but symbolically and politically too.
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