

nerved, and I didn't rescue the situation from uneasiness—the way I usually might in difficult situations. We sat in this strange stillness. The charged feeling hung in the air. I had no particular strategy about where to take the class, but I had a strong sense that I didn't want to be less than honest about my reactions. This felt like the more respectful—if more potentially teacherous—path.

"Next class," I offered, "let's all bring in pictures of our family." We returned to the lesson plan of the day, but something had been opened up between us. It felt raw but honest.

For the next class, I brought in pictures of my sister. "She looks just like you," the students said, still seeming to study me with new eyes.

I showed them pictures of her sons. I showed them pictures of my parents and siblings and numerous cousins and nieces and nephews—my parents proudly in the center of it all. Ours is a mixed race family as well.

While we passed around everyone's photo albums, delighted over baby pictures, noted the family resemblances, and teased each other about the changes that are apparent over time, we talked about family. The students wrote about family being important because it offered unconditional love and because it was a source of comfort in a difficult world. We noted that this was something we had in common despite our di-

verse families. One student began to speak up about the importance of accepting people who are different from you. She talked about tolerance. She argued that people should mind their own business. "No one's asking *you* to be a homosexual," she said.

I did not attempt to steer the class toward any kind of resolution on the matter of homosexuality. But I hope I opened up a space for people to think about it differently, and for at least one student to voice her own argument against homophobia. As teachers, we often confront moments that challenge us to decide how to handle our own (sometimes very strongly held) political positions. There are various ways to take on these moments. In this particular experience, I learned that being personally honest but not didactic had some value. It was possible for me to pursue this course partly because, being straight, I did not have to take an enormous personal risk. It was also possible because I felt enough respect for my students to give them an honest reaction. This confluence of factors may not always be present in the classroom, but when it is, it presents a way forward. Teachers can draw off of it to find their way, respectfully and honestly, towards greater understanding.

---

*Cynthia Peters, co-editor of this issue of The Change Agent, teaches at the Worker Education Program of SEIU Local 2020.*

## Coming Out to Students

*by Deborah Schwartz*

*When I taught adult basic education at the Archdale Family Literacy Project in Roslindale, Massachusetts, I kept a journal. More precisely, we—the ten women students and myself—all kept journals. Our medium was stacks and stacks of green steno-pads. In them, we tried to tell the truth about our lives, though the students started noticing gaps in my story. They challenged me not to hide myself from them. Following are several edited entries from my own journal, which tell the story of coming out to my students. Most are from my experience with this class, but I also included two entries from two other classes I taught concurrently.*

### March 3

They are writing frantically in their journals. S writes about driving the rats out of her apartment. C writes about playing her music as loudly as she likes. L writes about her grandmother—about living with her in the mountains and drinking her coffee so black that it stings her eyes before she swallows.

When J reads, she interrupts herself to tell us that she's getting evicted because her oldest son Tom came home with some guy named Eddie who lit a joint in the hall then walked into her apartment with the lit joint and now the housing authority has the right to evict them.

C responds, "Even in this lousy project, you still have some rights." She is on her feet: "Do you know how often they've threatened to evict me? Just for playing my music after church on Sunday afternoon?"

C is smart and community-minded. She has set up this protocol of letting the neighbors know when she's going to be playing loud music. Half the time, they say it's fine and half of those times she invites them over because "it's no fun to dance alone," and the other half of the time, she shares chicken with them and then they change their minds, and half of the time they end up watching TV together.

"All those halves don't add up," B notices.

"They add up," responds C. "Believe me, they add up." Everyone laughs. The classroom is a world of words and stories and noise and quiet while we're writing.

We have authority over our lives for this brief time. The crocus doesn't just come up in the spring, but has the purple-colored chutzpah to bloom through the hard, cold earth. These women are like that. They give me bravery, but what do I give them? Room, that's all.

### April 23

"Read what you wrote, Deborah. You always make us read what we wrote," J notices that I skip passages when it's my turn to read. I remind her that it's ok to skip passages, or to not

even read at all.

"But Deborah, you never tell us anything about your life, or at least anything good," which I know is a code word for anything interesting.

"Well nothing all that interesting happens in my life," I counter.

"Are you kidding?" replies C.

"You come in here some mornings and you look like a train hit you. You and your double latte!

Then some days you come in looking like

a shining star. You have a life too, just cause you're a teacher doesn't mean you can hide behind that. Jesus, you know what color each of our bedroom walls is painted. We don't know anything about you. Nothing that counts anyway. You take a risk, Missy, and read!" That's what C says.

So I read without censorship. I read about how hard it is pretending to my family that I am not who I am and that my partner is not my partner and that the commitment ring that I wear is just another ring. Then there is a silence. C and L and B and A and J are there listening to me so intently. The way I try to listen to them when they read their truths.

I say, "Oh God, I am so sorry. I have been lying to you about having a boyfriend, and..."

"It's ok, honey, sometimes you have to lie, but here you don't," C says to me. "Keep reading."

When I'm done, B says, "Girl, you're a lesbian." That makes us all laugh.

Then A says, "My sister's cousin GG is a fag and we love him. He does all our hair."

It goes on like this. They want to know about sex and I tell them I'm too uncomfortable to talk about that. But I can give them some resources. They want to know who sleeps on the couch, and I tell them we try not to go to bed

---

**"Read what you wrote, Deborah. You always make us read what we wrote," J notices that I skip passages when it's my turn to read.**

---

angry. They want to meet Nancy. They want to call her at work and invite her to our end of the year party, which I remind them isn't until May.

Later, they draw a huge invitation to Nancy. Here's what it says on the front cover: *YOU ARE INVITED TO OUR GRADUATION PARTY*. On the inside it: "Thank you for putting up with Deborah. We love her and now we love you."

### May 26

Nancy came to the party last night. She played with the kids. J wanted to sit next to her and later came over to me and said she thought she was shy. C's teenage girls were staring at us at one point, but later they kissed us both goodbye. Nancy loved meeting the women and eating the heaps of food they piled on her plate. J's speech about being the first one in her family to ever get the GED made us all weepy, but when B put on "I'm coming out," saying that she knew we would like this "old people's music," and persuaded Nancy to dance with her, I thought I had died and gone to heaven.

[The same year I was teaching the ten women, I also taught two other classes in which the issue of sexual orientation surfaced. The following two entries are about experiences in those classes.]

### May 10/Notes from the VideoFest

During the first half of the Spike Lee film, "Get On the Bus," I struggle with the gay jokes and name-calling circulating in the room.

I try, "Let's respect everyone, please." Then: "Abide by our ground rules, or I'll kick you out of here." And finally, "No gay jokes. It's mean and it's unacceptable."

"What are you a Dyke or something?" S calls out so that everyone can hear.

I remember how I have just promised myself to never lie again. I look at him. He is waiting for me to say something. The whole room is waiting. "Well," I pause, not at all sure what it is

I will say, "Well, yes, I am a Dyke."

Some of the students giggle. We watch the movie. Later, as I walk up to the front of the room, floating a bit above my body, ready to hand out their assignments and then dismiss them without discussion, I hear S's voice loud and clear from the back of the room as he gets up to leave. "Hey Deb, I'm sorry." That's what he says.

---

**"What are you a Dyke or something?" S calls out so that everyone can hear. . . . He is waiting for me to say something. The whole room is waiting.**

---

### May 12

Before class, when I am usually alone doing some planning, a kid I have never seen before comes to visit.

"Listen," he tells me. "You can't tell anyone. I live up at the Beech Street Projects and I will be killed if they know." I tell him about BAGLY (Boston Alliance of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Youth). I tell him about the gay men of color group at the Fenway. He gives me one of those hip, youth handshakes. I'm really klutzy and don't know the moves, so I just hug him. When he leaves, I cry.

---

*Deborah Schwartz is the instructional specialist at the Adult Literacy Resource Institute, in Boston, MA.*

