

Gay and Transgender Issues in the Workplace

If We Smell Gas, Say So

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Asking if Sarah Palin, and others who use inflammatory rhetoric, share blame for the attempted assassination of U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords is like asking if spilling gasoline around a house had anything to do with its destruction by fire. Palin, Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh, among others, didn't light the match, but they encouraged someone else to strike it, and despite their "shock" that anyone would look their way, they're not without personal guilt. But neither are any of us who didn't complain loudly that we smelled gas.

Anti-gay bullying by straight and deeply-closeted sailors in the U.S. Navy can likewise be attributed to the homophobic rhetoric of Captain Owen Honors, chief officer on the U.S.S. Enterprise, who used anti-gay slurs in his video communication with his 5,600 crew members. He doused his sailors with gasoline, but no one, until the video was finally leaked to the media, spoke up about the fumes.

If the head of your political party places a target on someone and repeatedly uses the terminology "lock and load," and if your commanding officer repeatedly refers to gay sailors as "fags," there is an increased likelihood of violence. But don't we all share some blame if we had the ability to speak up, and didn't?

The violence in the Arizona mall parking lot, and the offensive videos shown on board the Navy aircraft carrier, may seem far away and much removed from our lives, but we all live in the environment created by the rhetoric of the cultural wars, and there is a Captain Owen Honors in almost every place in the country. When we fail to speak up in the movie theater, the elevator, the grocery store, the family gathering, the ball park, the subway, the diner, the cab, or wherever we find ourselves, how can we say, "Isn't that awful?" when something really bad happens? If we smell gasoline, we need to say so.

Despite corporate rules, or state laws, there are managers and high volume producers in stores, offices, and manufacturing plant floors across America whose unchallenged, hostile rhetoric creates havoc in the day-to-day lives of gay and lesbian people. People ask us gay and transgender people, "Did you speak up?" "Did you complain?" They're good questions. If we don't speak up and complain each time we hear an unwelcoming comment, we allow an inflammable agent to be poured. But an equally good question is, "Did you?" Ending the vitriol is everyone's responsibility, not just that of the Democrats, or of the gay man or woman.

A gay man with years of abusive experience as a banker told me yesterday that he was recently asked why he didn't complain when his colleagues consistently called him "Rainbow Man." He said "I did. No one did anything about it." What's worse than not complaining is not doing anything about it when you're in a position of authority. Teachers complained to the college administration about the bizarre behavior of the Arizona gunman, Jared Lee Loughner. Why didn't the administration contact his parents and the police? And if they did, why didn't the police contact the

FBI and Homeland Security? And if they did, why wasn't Jared Lee Loughner hospitalized? "I smell gasoline."

The smell of gasoline permeates our society. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people work in hostile environments, even when their corporation has a perfect score from the Human Rights Campaign. Middle managers defy corporate policy because they reason, as Captain Honors must have, that "no one is being hurt by these harmless comments." Sometimes the managers ignore the anti-gay comments of their big producers because they don't want to upset them, and have them go work in another firm, or because they assume there are no gay people present. So, gasoline is poured around the office either by the persons in charge, or with their approval, and Human Resources keeps wondering why no one complained.

Someone should have said that Jared Lee Loughner was a threat. Someone with a voice should have publicly condemned Sarah Palin's rhetoric. "Have you no shame?" Some junior naval officer should have reported Captain Honors the first time a derogatory video of his aired throughout the ship. Someone should speak up about the anti-gay language of the guys on the trading floor in New York, or the plant manager in Mobile, or the Human Resources manager in Dallas.

We all have the responsibility to speak up and say, "I smell gasoline," and "That's unacceptable behavior."

What happened in the Arizona mall parking lot is a horrible tragedy, but it is not surprising. Nor is it surprising that Captain Honors felt comfortable broadcasting his bias, or that my banking friend's colleagues thought it was funny to call him "Rainbow Man." They're all related. They're all examples of some people pouring gasoline, and of other people acting as if they don't smell it.