

Bookstore draws fire for inviting parents of gay sons

Boycott plans over authors' visit rumored in wake of debate over gay-themed books

By DAN MUCKELBAUER
Daily News Staff

Authors of a book about their two gay sons are generating protests over their scheduled appearance at Fireside Books and Gifts in West Bend Saturday.

A local blog and a letter in the Daily News have expressed unhappiness with the store. Since February, there has been a vigorous debate over gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender books in the Young Adult section of the West Bend Community Memorial Library.

"I have just heard many people say they will boycott Fireside," said blogger Ginny Maziarka, who added her group West Bend Citizens for Safe Libraries has not taken a stand on the issue. "The people say that in light of the situation with the library controversy, and that being a sensitive issue in the community, that the timing is inappropriate.

"I won't frequent the store anymore," she said. "I won't make that call for other people."

Jean Weymier of West Bend, who wrote a letter published July 30 saying Fireside was thumbing its nose at the community, said she has heard there will be pickets and does not plan to be there.

"It's not the gay person," said Weymier, who said she has friends who are gay. "We don't accept the gay lifestyle,"

"It's such a hot issue right now. Maybe it wasn't intentional, but that's not what it looks like," she said, noting the book signing announcement was carried on local blogs that supported the original Library Board. She said she thought the authors were being used as pawns in the issue taking place in ultraconservative Washington County. Hjordy Wagner, who wrote "Ready or Not ... They're Gay" with her husband Paul, said they were not influenced to attend the book signing by the library controversy. They go where they're invited, she said.

The overriding message of the book is to continue to love and support your child regardless of sexual orientation, she said.

"We're not biblical experts, we're not scientists, we're not psychiatrists," she said. "It's our story with the hope that it would help people."

Gary Christianson, who owns the West Bend store with his wife, said the book signing is unrelated to the library issue and he is not thumbing his nose at anyone.

He has received calls of support and has scrambled to get more than the four copies originally stocked for the book signing.

"Our position has always been that we have a diverse clientele and we try to carry a diverse selection of books. We don't want to alienate anyone as customers. We know we can lose business, but we can't allow a minority to censor the books we sell or the authors we host," he said.

Dennis Uhlig, part-time bookseller at Fireside, invited the Wagners to a book signing when he found out they were from Wisconsin - Eau Claire. He met them at BookExpo America in New York at the end of May and added there is no connection with the library issue.

"I don't turn authors down who want to come here," said Uhlig, who has been incorrectly identified by opponents as the store manager.

Should people disagree with the book's message of love and acceptance of people who are different than themselves, they can discuss their views civilly at the book signing, he said.

Christianson, who has owned the store for 26 years, said, "It's surprising the reaction is so vehement because this couple struggled with this news from their sons."

Hjordy Wagner said the book hinges on acceptance and nonacceptance and the varying degrees of that within their own family, she said.

"My dad said, 'Look what we would have missed, if we wouldn't have accepted your sons,'"

she said of her father Charlie, who died five years ago.

"We thought we were openminded, that we didn't hold prejudice in our hearts. When we found out, we had bridges to cross," she said about her and her husband after their eldest son Bradley told them he was gay 12 years ago.

Their son Andrew, age 14 on the night of the announcement, told his parents five years later he was gay. He also said he had contemplated suicide because he was gay.

Both professional educators, the Wagners also wrote the book with other educators in mind.

They write about the high rate of suicide among gay and lesbian youth compared to other young people.

Paul Wagner said he believed his best friend growing up was gay. The young man killed himself in college.

Finding out about their own sons collided with their assumptions about their boys' futures.

"I was thinking: 'This would be the path they would follow.' Up to age 18, we both thought this was the path they would have," he said, raising the concept of an ambiguous loss. "We're now looking at it as an ambiguous gain."

Their sons' daily lives are like other people's and it has helped them understand gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender individuals, Paul Wagner said.

And should picketers confront them Saturday in West Bend?

"I would ask them if they ever got to know a GLBT person," he said, "what they go through."

