

# Diversity Committee

April 2, 2000

To Whom It May Concern:

I had the pleasure of hosting the photo-text exhibit *Nothing to Hide: Mental Illness in the Family* in my school district for the past two weeks.

For the past four years the Diversity Committee at Southwick-Tolland Regional High School has planned a Diversity Awareness Week program. I had heard about Family Diversity Projects and in 1998 had a very successful showing of the exhibit *Of Many Colors: Portraits of Multiracial Families*. When I heard about the new exhibit dealing with mental illness, I immediately knew that I wanted to bring it to the school. Over the years the Diversity Committee has done very little with mental illness/disabilities and this would be a perfect way to begin those discussions. The photo-text exhibits provide a unique opportunity to expose students to issues because they provide both a verbal and visual way to learn about a topic. It also puts a face on diversity issues we talk about but can't always see.

I am fortunate to have the support of the local cultural council which has funded both of the exhibits shown in this school district. In Massachusetts, local cultural council grant applications are due October 15. I wrote the grants to cover the majority of the cost associated with the exhibit. One reason that I feel has helped me get funding is that I rent the exhibit for two weeks and display it for one week at our middle school and one week at the high school. This allows for more people to view the exhibit, therefore helping the Cultural Council meet its goal of making their projects as widely viewed as possible.

*Nothing to Hide* was very powerful. Both students and staff remarked how moving and educational the stories were. Many people could see a family member, friend, peer or co-worker in the pictures and could relate to their stories. "It displayed mental illnesses in a whole new light," and "It was extremely informative and something everyone should see," were some of the student comments after viewing the exhibit. I also had the complete support of the administration and faculty in bringing the exhibit here and making sure students went to see it.

I was also able to plan programs after school and at night for in depth discussions about mental illness. The editors of the exhibit, as well as an advocate from the Alliance for the Mentally Ill were invited to speak to students, staff and community members. They spoke about the exhibit, their experiences with a family member who is mentally ill and how to educate people and break down the stigma associated with being mentally ill. I would highly recommend such discussions take place while the exhibit is on display as it helps to bring the issue to the forefront.

I can't say enough about *Nothing to Hide* and encourage its viewing in every school. It sends a powerful message and helps to make our society more tolerant and accepting.

Sincerely,



Bob Bardwell