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This Essay Is So Gay

I used to cashier at the local car wash. It wasn't the most prestigious job in town, and not exactly the best paying job, either; but the hours were good and my boss didn't mind if I did school work at the desk, so I was happy. I was one of the only female employees working at the car wash, and the guys ranged from high school dropouts to retired drug dealers. We had the occasional part-time high school students, too, but they never lasted long. For the most part, though, they were good guys. They'd harmlessly poke fun at me when they saw me reading or doing homework and they'd compliment me if I decided to wear my hair a different way. I liked them. I had never been exposed to people from such different backgrounds than mine, and I learned a lot from them.

I'll never forget the time that one of the part-timers, *Greg Canville, came into work bragging about what he had done that day in school. It was spirit week at Mansfield High, the public school in my town, and that particular day had been designated "Pajamas Day." From what I came to understand, there was one openly gay student at the school, and that student decided to wear women's lingerie. Greg told the story swearing and carrying on like this was the worst offense and greatest act of disrespect that he could ever be expected to endure. In any event, Greg was the type of kid to take things into his own hands. He wrote "fag" and other derogatory comments all over the boy's locker, and during lunch in the cafeteria, some of his friends violently attacked the kid until a teacher came and broke it up. Greg, regrettably, had been in class

* Name changed to protect the ignorant

and missed all of the action, but he assured me that “the kid got what he deserved.” I found Greg’s actions and attitude disgusting. Fortunately, I didn’t have to work with him much longer; he was fired a few days later for stealing CD’s from customers’ vehicles.

Greg and his friends committed a hate crime that day. Hate crimes are any act of criminal conduct that is partially, or wholly, motivated by prejudice towards a group of people because of their race, religion, sex, or sexual preference. Closely related to hate crimes, but for some reason not considered as dire of an offense, hate speech is defined as “any form of expression directed at objects of prejudice that perpetrators use to wound and denigrate its recipient” (Boeckman 19). Greg and his friends have probably heard the word “fag” used hundreds of times throughout the course of their lives, as have most high school students, so their depraved use of the word may seem acceptable. It is not.

Words such as “gay” or “fag” have at least two different definitions by today’s standards and can be used in very different contexts. The more commonly known usage for these terms usage would be in direct correlation to homosexuality, and in the past few years this type of usage has been more openly condemned but in many situations it is perfectly acceptable for a person to use anti-gay slurs. Words such as “fag” and “gay” aren’t necessarily even used to imply anything homosexual, anymore. My generation has changed the usage of these words to become synonymous with “dumb” or “stupid.” This is an appalling example of heterosexist traits within society; words that are used to label homosexuals now are also used to label anything bad. Heterosexism is “a widely and unobtrusively accepted pervasive social disease in society” (Griffin 33). Greg and his friends are perfect examples of heterosexism and how the use of anti-gay slurs supports malicious and violent attitudes. Using the term heterosexism, unlike using the term

homophobia, “highlights parallels between anti-gay sentiments and other forms of prejudice such as racism, anti-Semitism, and sexism” (Herek 1990). It is more descriptive of societal institutions and norms, whereas homophobia is used to describe an individual’s feelings. Greg and his friends demonstrate many traits that are classified as homophobic, but their story illustrates a more acute problem: that the oppression of non-heterosexual people is accepted within the norms of society.

It is a vicious cycle. Heterosexists use words such as "fag" and "queer" to insult each other which only “perpetuates heterosexism and the stigmatization of gays” (Burns 1). That very thing sustains the same heterosexist society that accepts the use of these derogatory terms. The more society uses terms like “fag,” the more desensitized society becomes towards the actual hateful connotation those words carry with them, thus becoming less accepting of homosexuality in general.

A major influence on society is the media, which not only expresses, but also seems to mandate the norms. Media images are by and large heterosexual, leaving children without any exposure to positive homosexual images early in their life. Any homosexual references or characters that might be encountered in teenage years are portrayed as oddities and seen as different (Herek 3). For example, the popular TV show *Boy Meets World*, which now airs syndicated episodes on the Disney Channel, often puts main characters and best friends, Corey and Shawn, in homosexual situations such as Shawn dressing in drag and Corey acting effeminate. They are equating stereotypical homosexual behaviors with abnormality for a quick laugh. This type of humor can be found in several television shows, but there is something especially disturbing about such blatant heterosexism on a child’s television network. If each new generation believes that

homosexual people are different, or abnormal, then heterosexism will always reign over our society, embracing intolerance and prejudice.

Society's apathetic and ignorant view towards homosexuality goes far beyond cafeteria brawls and nasty words being tossed around. The story of Matthew Shepherd made everyone painfully aware of what can happen when ignorance remains unchallenged within society. Matthew Shepard, if you don't remember, was a 21-year-old college student at the University of Wyoming. On October 12, 1998, two men lured Shepherd out of a bar and brutally murdered him, leaving his mangled body to be found lifeless on a fence post. Heart wrenching tragedy, all because Matthew was gay and his homophobic murderers grew up under the wing of society's unquestioningly disapproving, heterosexist attitude.

Unfortunately Matthew Shepard hasn't been the only casualty of heterosexism, but his death did raise awareness and lent support to those that are committed to changing heterosexist norms. There are organizations such as GLAAD, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, that are "dedicated to promoting and ensuring fair, accurate and inclusive representation of individuals and events in all media as a means of eliminating homophobia and discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation" (GLAAD). Anyone can be a "watchdog" of the media and everyone can be accountable for his or her own words and actions. If society really wants to change, then people must start taking responsibility for their own heterosexist tendencies and try and influence others to do the same. It is not difficult to ask someone to refrain from using offensive language such as "fag." Whether the person heeds this request or not, they have been made aware that what they are doing may not be as acceptable as they thought.

I am sick of the Greg Canville's in the world who believe that different equals wrong. I have learned that if I want things to change, it has to start with me, and if I could go back in time I would have expressed to Greg Canville exactly what I was thinking, instead silencing my disgust. I am now glaringly aware that silence perpetuates hate and ignorance just as effectively as violence, if not more.

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