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Oscar-winning director defends anti-bullying message in 3 films being shown in Vallejo schools

By Lanz Christian Bañes

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Director Debra Chasnoff is not surprised by how some parents reacted to her organization's educational films depicting gay and lesbian families.

"We have seen this kind of reaction in other communities at different times, and I think it's because it is relatively new that schools would take the initiative to proactively prevent anti-gay bias," said Chasnoff, president of Groundspark.

The San Francisco-based company created the three films stirring controversy in Vallejo.

Chasnoff won an Academy Award in 1991 for her short documentary "Deadly Deception" about the production of nuclear materials by General Electric.

Last week, the school board screened Groundspark's "That's a Family," which is shown to elementary schools once a year in the Vallejo City Unified School District.

The district must incorporate anti-bullying lessons into its curriculum as part of a settlement with the American Civil Liberties Union.

The ACLU had filed a harassment complaint on

behalf of former Bethel High student Rochelle Hamilton, who is an out lesbian.

Parents criticized the district for not notifying them of the films' content and further charged that the movies were slanted to focus on anti-gay bullying instead of a wider look at bullying.

One said a "That's a Family" segment dealing with children with gay parents was by the far the longest in a movie showing divorced families, mixed-raced families and children being raised by grandparents, among

others.

"The whole film is 35 minutes, and I believe the section on lesbian and gays is something between seven or eight minutes. The rest of the film is featuring heterosexual guardians and parents," countered Chasnoff.

Additionally, Chasnoff said she and her staff carefully considered how much screen time each segment would get, focusing on topics not usually talked about in schools.

"The section on families where kids have gay and lesbian parents is constructed that way because that's a topic that children have a lot of questions about and very little access to information," Chasnoff said.

Parents of the largely African American crowd also took issue with the portrayal of black people in "That's a Family." This view was echoed by school board member Hazel Wilson.

"There were several things that popped out at me that I found somewhat offensive because it was stereotyping," said Wilson, who is black, during last week's meeting.

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Parents cited scenes where black children were being raised by their grandparents because their biological parents were strung out on drugs.

However, a white child in the film initially gave the same reason as to why he was living with his grandparents.

"These are facts about family life, and what we try to do in this film is to provide students with both a mirror to see their own type of family reflected back to them and to provide them with a window so they could understand in a respectful way about family life," Chasnoff said.

She added that "That's a Family" has been lauded by the National Black Child Development Institute, the National Council of Negro Women and noted African American child psychologist Alvin Poussaint.

Chasnoff said she hopes the outcry dies down and that parents remember the school district's goal.

"That's to prevent students from being harassed and bullied. ... The reason why we chose to focus on talking about different types of families to address bullying and violence is because family is the foundation for all kids," she said.

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