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REPRESENTATIVE OF WOMEN’S EDUCATIONAL MEDIA, BOARD MEMBER JO ANN SMITH, MAKES STATEMENT AT EVESHAM TOWNSHIP SCHOOL BOARD MEETING ON 2/13

NOTE TO MEDIA: Jo Ann Smith, Board Member of Women’s Educational Media will also be available for comment on Wednesday, February 14th. For more information or to schedule an interview contact Renna Communications.

The following statement can be attributed to Jo Ann Smith, Board Member of Women’s Educational Media:

“Good evening - my name is Jo Ann Smith and I am a Board Member of Women's Educational Media, the company that produced *That's A Family!*, the film being discussed here tonight. I am also a retired school superintendent with more than 30 years experience in a public educational system. So, I am no stranger to the situation in which we find ourselves tonight, and I have a deep understanding of the pressure being brought to bear on the Superintendent and her staff and on the Board as you deliberate this matter.

It is my belief, however, that there are no competing moral points of view when it comes to promoting respect for all persons. I trust we can all speak with respect for each other even if we have different opinions. There has been a lot of misinformation and divisive – even abusive – commentary about *That's a Family!*, and I am glad to have the opportunity to speak on behalf of our film and our organization.

That's a Family! is a film that was made to help elementary-school aged children understand the different shapes families take today.

Simply put, *That's a Family!* takes the lesson of the Golden Rule and illustrates it with real world examples for children and by children.

The unfortunate anti-gay hostilities expressed recently by some parents in response to this film are proof that this lesson is needed now more than ever.

You only need to take a look at the latest United States census data to understand that families take many forms in this country. Here is the reality:

- Single parents account for 27% of American family households with children under the age of 18.
- More than *half* of Americans today have been, are or will be in, one or more stepparent or blended family situations.
- In the United States, 1.6 million children under the age of 18 live with their adoptive parents.
- Interracial families are also an expanding part of our national community: nearly 2.8 million Americans children identify as more than one race.
- And, finally, estimates show that ***approximately 2 million American children under the age of 18 are being raised by their lesbian or gay parents.***

All of the types of families I just described exist within Evesham Township school district. ***All of them.***

One thing upon which I believe that ***all*** of us in this room can agree is that schools ***must*** be safe and nurturing environments for ***all*** children – not just children who are growing up in a certain kind of family. As all of my fellow educators in this room understand, if a school environment is ***not*** safe, learning does not happen.

That's a Family! was designed *specifically* to help schools create just such a protective and supportive learning environment. The film presents the lives of diverse families *through the eyes of the children within those families*. The film also comes with an extensive teaching guide to help educators facilitate classroom discussion about these issues at different grade levels and in an **age-appropriate** manner. The children featured in the film speak candidly about what it's like to grow up in a family with parents of different races or religions, divorced parents, a single parent, gay or lesbian parents, adoptive parents or grandparents as guardians.

We made the film **not** to change the opinions of any individual families or children. But rather we made the film but to help schools create a safe and respectful environment for **all** the children in their care.

The fact is that harassment and bullying happen every day in classrooms and cafeterias, and on playgrounds and school buses. Studies show – and teachers will tell you – that this kind of activity begins as early as kindergarten and that **anti-gay slurs are some of the most common and vicious forms of verbal abuse among children**.

For a minute – just a minute – I want you to imagine **being** that eight year old child on the receiving end of bullying, name-calling and cruelty about the people you love the most, the people who care for, nurture and protect you: *your parents*.

Just imagine that. Well, the reality is that it happens every day.

Unfortunately, in the last few weeks we have seen another form of bullying – bullying by parents – parents who want to have this film removed from the curriculum. And tonight, they might think that they have been successful.

But our hope at Women's Educational Media is this: that the committee will convene and review the film and will see the tremendous value of *That's a Family!* and the spirit of respect for all that it promotes. We hope that the members of the committee will be guided by the official policies of both the school district and the Department of Education of the State of New Jersey about these matters, *all of which are clear and inclusive of family status and sexual orientation issues*.

Finally, we hope that members of the committee will recognize that ***the families and children in this film represent actual families and actual children that exist within your schools***. We hope that you will indeed uphold the values stated in your district's mission statement to respect, protect, and meet the needs of **ALL** your children, including those with gay and lesbian parents.

The decisions you make as trustees of this school district must always be made in the context of your well-considered mission statement, no matter how pressured you are to decide otherwise. From my experience as a superintendent for twelve years, I know that most of the decisions you as a board are asked to make are routine in nature. Once in a while, there comes an opportunity like this one.

I urge you with all the passion I still feel for children in our marvelous but often beleaguered public schools to **do the right thing**, not just for the loudest, **but for those who need your protection the most**.

Thank you.”

For more information or to schedule an interview contact Renna Communications.

Jo Ann Smith is a retired school superintendent and has more than 30 years experience in the California educational system. Her past positions include serving as Superintendent to Sequoia Union High School District, Redwood City and Grossmont Union High School District in La Mesa, acting as Adjunct Professor at the University of California, Berkeley and at Point Loma College in San Diego, and serving as principal, Vice Principal, Department Chair, counselor and teacher in various schools throughout California. She is currently a Board Member of Women's Educational Media.