

A teacher fired years ago for being gay watches it all happen again

Perspective by [Petula Dvorak](#)

Columnist

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The kids in Rockville, Md., liked their middle school's new science teacher.

"He acted like he was a kid once, too, you know?" one eighth-grader said. "Like, you know, he treated us like people — not, you know, just like little kids."

The students at Parkland Middle School told "[60 Minutes](#)" in a 1973 broadcast that they didn't know much about Joseph Acanfora until he was called to the principal's office in the middle of the day — after news surfaced of his involvement in a [landmark](#) civil rights case on gay rights.

"It was the last time I was in the classroom," said Acanfora, now 71 and living in California, where he has watched as a Republican-led backlash to making schools safer for LGBTQ youths has fomented outrage with the same harmful consequences he endured.

Teachers across America are being disciplined, fired and sued for being gay, talking about gay, saying "gay."

They're being targeted for online harassment by a vigilante mob of conservatives, their information fueled by toxic social media campaigns and laws like Florida's legislation restricting LGBTQ discussion that critics have dubbed the "[don't say gay](#)" bill.

They've twisted any conversation about sexual orientation or gender expression, mislabeling it as "grooming" — as though by acknowledging that Jaden has two dads, teachers are somehow preparing children to be the quivering victims of pedophiles or candidates for sex trafficking.

"It's totally strange. And sad," he said. "Sad that we're having this conversation 50 years later."

What we know now that wasn't widely recognized then is just how harmful this targeting is for LGBTQ youths. More than 40 percent of the LGBTQ kids surveyed by the [Trevor Project](#) said they've considered suicide in the past year.

But we do know that LGBTQ youths [benefit](#) from having mentors — like a teacher — who affirm them.

Acanfora made national headlines in 1972 when he was one of the students suing Penn State University for support of their gay and lesbian student group — Homophiles of Penn State, or HOPS.

When the lawsuit was made public, he was yanked out of his student-teaching assignment. He filed for a court injunction and got his position back.

But then the school held up his teaching certificate, even though he completed all the coursework and the student-teaching job with high marks.

Court records show six deans, including the dean of the college of education, Abram VanderMeer, conducted an explicit and bizarre interrogation.

VanderMeer asked: “What homosexual acts do you prefer to engage in or are you willing to engage in?”

Acanfora answered: “Which homosexual acts?”

VanderMeer said: “Yes, which acts of expression of love, as you put it, for male friends?”

Acanfora replied: “Well, there’s a certain tradition of respect for privacy in our country, and especially in an academic community, and I would think that I would ask you to withdraw that question with respect to that.”

VanderMeer refused: “I don’t withdraw the question, but you obviously don’t have to answer any questions you don’t want to answer.”

Meanwhile, a football coach named Jerry Sandusky was just two years into a career at that very school that ended by giving America a textbook example of what “grooming” looks like.

Acanfora was in his California kitchen waiting for the refrigerator repairman to come this week when we talked about the frightening backslide he’s seeing in our nation; to a time when he lost his job, his dream, everything he worked for because he refused to hide who he was. “It’s just another tactic today, as it was back then,” he said. “It’s an endless series of tactics to find power over the vulnerable.”

When Penn State dragged its feet on the teaching certificate, Acanfora appealed with the Pennsylvania education secretary and got the job in Montgomery County, which didn’t require certificates of their teachers.

A month into the job, he got a telegram from the secretary congratulating him — he got the certificate. And newspapers across the Eastern Seaboard covered the news.

That’s what got the attention of Montgomery County, and it’s what got him yanked from the classroom, into an office and away from students.

The administration kept him away from kids, even though there was never any evidence of anything inappropriate.

This is not too far from what we’re seeing today.

Culture warriors — from social media accounts like Libs of Tik Tok to legislation like the Florida bill — are getting teachers disciplined and even fired for speaking about the undeniable configuration, nature and geometry of human relationships.

I am so grateful that people like Acanfora fought for their right to teach. (He never made it back into a classroom, but he continued with behind-the-scenes activism when he moved to California and worked for the University of California at Berkeley.) Four of the most influential teachers in my sons’ lives are out. We know their husbands, wives and partners; we meet them at the picnics and fairs. And they immeasurably enrich our lives.

They're not grooming "for sex trafficking, of anything else," as Rick Stevens, a founder of the conservative educational advocacy group Florida Citizens Alliance and the pastor of Diplomat Wesleyan Church in Cape Coral, fears.

These weaponized attacks — like all culture war campaigns fueling the division that many Republican leaders claim they want to heal — aren't about what's best for kids, but what's at stake for adults.

Acanfora said his students — even kids in 1972 — didn't have any interest in his personal life.

"The biggest positive to come out of the whole experience for me? It was the support of my students," he said. "There they were, 12-, 13- and 14-year-olds who were speaking at the court hearing, taking petitions around to get me reinstated.

"It was an inspiration that young people who hadn't been fed hate had compassion," he said.

He believes youths will be the moral compass today, too, because they are organized and have experienced inclusion and equality.

"The younger generation, the gay generation that has been free, the ones who have been accepted by their friends and families, they've had a taste of freedom," he said. "And they won't go back."