Minnesota’s marriage amendment battle: Power of ‘messaging’ may be the key

By Beth Hawkins | 03/09/12 – MinnPost - http://www.minnpost.com/politics-policy/2012/03/minnesota%E2%80%99s-marriage-amendment-battle-power-%E2%80%98messaging%E2%80%99-may-be-key?page=1

Illustration by Linda de Haan and Stern Nijland

The marriage scene from the children's book 'King & King'

On Oct. 7, 2008, one month before California voters were to decide whether to amend that state’s constitution to strip gays and lesbians of the right to marry, opponents of same-sex marriage aired a game-changing television ad.

“Mommy, Mommy, guess what I learned in school today?” a pig-tailed girl announces, rushing to show her mother a pink picture book. “I learned how a prince can marry a prince and I can marry a princess!”

If Proposition 8 did not pass, narrators cut in, schoolechildren would be taught about gay marriage and parents would have no right to object: “Think it can’t happen here? It already has.”

Gay rights supporters first froze and then, with less than two weeks to go, responded with fact-based ads that utterly failed to assuage voters’ fears or strike emotional chords.

In terms of messaging, the princess ad, as it has since become known, is a direct descendant of Anita Bryant’s Save Our Children campaign, whose late 1970s TV and print ads warned that gay-rights laws here and elsewhere would enable teachers to have sex with students and foster child prostitution.

The message’s endurance is partly explained by its effectiveness. In California, the princess ad aired over and over, part of a saturation campaign that is credited with handing Yes on 8 a narrow upset victory. Of the 13.7 million votes cast, 52 percent favored the amendment opposing gay marriage.

Powerful, pivotal ad

According to an exhaustive analysis later performed by LGBT-rights strategist David Fleischer, 500,000 of the 600,000 deciding voters were prepared to vote against the initiative until Yes on 8’s ads began airing.

The picture book the ad’s princess protagonist brought home from school was “King & King,” a Dutch fairy tale about a crabby queen who wants to hang up her crown but can’t persuade her son to marry. She lines up princess after princess, but it’s not until one shows up with her brother in tow that a royal wedding is in the cards.

In the 12 years since its publication, the book has gained more notoriety at the hands of same-sex marriage opponents than young readers, appearing in ads in other states where marriage rights are the subject of legal, legislative or election challenges.

Indeed, “King & King” and the conservative meme that has grown up around it has already hit the airwaves in Minnesota in a series of “Marriage Minute” videos being circulated by Minnesota for Marriage, the umbrella organization campaigning for the one-man, one-woman marriage amendment here.

“Children at a very young age, as early as kindergarten, will be taught in school that marriage is between any two adults, no matter what they have been taught at home, in church or in their ethnic traditions,” MOM spokeswoman Kalley Yanta explains in one of the group’s spots as the book’s cover is displayed. “Under that kind of law, those who believe otherwise will be treated as racists and bigots.”
In remarks published by the LGBT news site The Colu.mn, the former KSTP anchor took the message a step further.

“If marriage between homosexuals is legalized, what would some of the consequences be?” she asked rhetorically. “Parents who want to opt their kids out of the public school on the day that they’re teaching about homosexual relationships how it should be OK and accepted, and the parents are charged with discrimination and are hauled away sometimes in handcuffs. ... We just can’t allow this to happen.”

“King & King” has been the subject of several battles between parents and school districts, but no dispute has ended in the shackling of anyone, and there is no law that allows individuals to be “charged” with having bigoted or religious views. And yet, in the 29 states where gay marriage bans have gone to voters, the impressions created by the princess ad and others like it have proven incredibly difficult for same-sex marriage proponents to combat.

Commercial mentioned in article = https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0PjicgqFYP4

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**Parker v. Hurley (2007)**


**Synopsis:**
Two sets of parents objected to sexual material in their son’s classrooms (kindergarten and first grade). One father, David Parker, refused to leave his kindergartener’s school until he was able to speak to someone about opting his son out of such material. Parker was arrested for trespassing and spent the night in jail. The district court denied that parents have the right to prescribe the curriculum in public schools, including the option to opt their children out of material that parents find offensive. In 2008, the Supreme Court refused to review the case, leaving the district court’s ruling as a nationwide precedent.

**Quotes:**
"The Parkers and Wirthlins have chosen to send their children to the Lexington public schools with its current curriculum. The Constitution does not permit them to prescribe what those children will be taught."
"[Allowing an opt-out] might also undermine the defendants’ efforts to educate the remaining other students..."
"In view of the value to the community of preparing students to respect differences in their personal interactions with others and in their future participation in the political process, the conduct at issue in this case is rationally related to the goal of preparing them for citizenship."

**Bottom line:**
Parents have no right to opt their children out of offensive material in public schools. Additionally, parental rights apply only to the decision of which school a child will attend and not to what occurs in public schools.