

A Child Learns a Harsh Lesson in Politics

By Julie Salamon
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For adults, the fuss over a PBS children's television show featuring an animated bunny - and real lesbian mothers - was nothing new. But for Emma Riesner, 11, who was supposed to be a star of the now-controversial episode of "Postcards From Buster," what began as a participatory social studies lesson has become a harsh lesson in exclusionary politics.

"I was pretty upset when the show was canceled, because I was very excited about it," Emma said in a telephone interview from her home in Vermont. "I know some people don't like gays and lesbians because they think they are bad people. That's just a stereotype and it's kind of hurtful. I don't think people should think of us as very different. We are just the same except we have two moms."

PBS decided last week not to distribute the program to about 350 stations amid objections from various quarters, including a strongly worded disapproval from the new education secretary, Margaret Spellings. Since then, 39 stations have acquired the rights to the episode from WGBH-TV in Boston, which produced the series.

The flap over "Buster" highlights what television schedules make apparent: while gays may be acceptable on television in the evening, children with same-sex parents are not very welcome in Mr. Rogers' old neighborhood.

"We don't want to violate the trust parents have with us," said Allan Pizzato, executive director of Alabama Public Television, explaining why he wouldn't have shown the program even if PBS had distributed it. "Parents can make the decision about when they want to talk about lesbian parents. If PBS sent a program down that said there was no Santa Claus, I wouldn't air that one either. Parents should make that decision, too."

Mr. Pizzato emphasized that the issue for him was about children, not gays. "We air programs that deal with gay lifestyles all the time on Alabama public television," he said, referring to recent programs like "The Congregation," a documentary in which a Methodist pastor revealed that she was gay.

But the lifestyles shown on such shows - or commercial fare like "Will & Grace" and "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" - don't reflect the lives of Emma, her brothers and their parents, said one of her mothers, Gillian Pieper, who works for an insurance company. "There are no positive role model images of families like ours anywhere in mainstream media," Ms. Pieper said.

Emma's family, including her other mother, Karen Pike, was filmed about a year ago for an episode of "Postcards" meant to show things like where maple sugar and cheese come from. The episode, titled "Sugartime!," is one of 40 live-action episodes in which Buster, a cartoon character from the "Arthur" books and television series, visits real children around the country to show how they live.

The series's mandate from the Department of Education - which provided \$5 million in financial support for the show, 63 percent of its budget - is to highlight diversity.

Covering 24 states, Buster has visited Hmong children as well as Mormons, Muslims and evangelical Christians.

"One part of the culture we are exploring is family structures," Pierre Valette, an executive producer of the show, said, adding, "We had not done a same-sex household and had our eyes open to that when we came across Karen Pike and her family. We really liked the kids. They worked well on camera. They were really connected to their community."

Vermont, where civil unions are allowed, turned out to be one kind of community. Washington, where PBS raises money, and where Ms. Spellings just took office, is another. Ms. Spellings, who had been President Bush's domestic policy adviser, made her feelings about the episode clear in a letter to PBS, saying it was inappropriate for young children.

A few days earlier, the president, questioned in an interview with The New York Times about gay adoption, said, "Studies have shown that the ideal is where a child is raised in a married family with a man and a woman." Experts say there is no scientific evidence that children raised by gay couples fare any worse than those raised in more traditional households.

Still, with federal money at stake, and grumblings from conservative groups about the association of cartoon characters - including SpongeBob Square Pants - with possibly pro-homosexual attitudes, PBS pulled the show.

Commercial children's television hasn't been much more adventuresome. Nickelodeon, the cable network where SpongeBob makes his home, has no programs featuring same-sex parents. Cyma Zarghami, Nickelodeon Television president, said the subject was delicate.

"When is it O.K. to introduce topics to kids that parents may not be ready to introduce to kids?" Ms. Zarghami asked. "It's very personal. It's polarizing. It's probably different state by state, age by age, boomer parents versus Gen X." Nickelodeon dealt with the issue two years ago, in a special edition of Linda Ellerbee's "Nick News," when a group of young teenagers from different backgrounds discussed what it meant for children to be raised by gay parents. A month before the special was taped, evangelical Christian groups denounced it.

Right now, a cautious attitude prevails. "We're seeing it boil down to the response of the community," said John Hesse, general manager of Houston Public Television. He said eight people wrote in urging the station to show the "Buster" episode and no one asked that it be banned. The station's solution is to broadcast the program at 8 p.m., on Feb. 18, then follow it with a panel discussion on "The Connection," a weekly talk show.

Ms. Spellings said in the letter to PBS that parents would not want their children exposed to households headed by lesbians. PBS's chief operating officer, Wayne Godwin, said in an interview that the decision not to distribute the episode was "in the better interest of the trust factor with parents and children of this country."

But Nancy Carlsson-Paige, a professor of education at Lesley University in Cambridge, Mass., who in the past has been a consultant for WGBH, said keeping Emma and her brothers out of sight was harmful. "Attitudes or ideas of stereotype

and bias develop in kids' minds in part from images they see in books and media," she said. "There's a kind of stereotyping by omission that occurs. We form our categories about families by images we've seen. It is important for children to see their own lives and subcultures reflected to feel they are part of society."

For some conservative groups, having families with same-sex parents feel part of society is precisely the danger they want to combat.

"My big concern is there's an effort in the gay activist movement to indoctrinate kids under the banner of tolerance and diversity to give misleading and inaccurate information about homosexuality," said Bill Maier, child and family psychologist in residence at Focus on the Family, the Christian organization that recently criticized SpongeBob's creator for allowing the character to be used in a what it called a "pro-homosexual video." The video's creator said it was intended to teach children about multiculturalism.

Yet even in a liberal state like Vermont, the children of same-sex marriage can feel ostracized. "At school, kids say that people say having two moms is stupid and I'm stupid because of it," said Emma's brother James, who is 11.

Farah Siddique also knows what it means to feel marginalized, and she is grateful to "Postcards From Buster" for helping her feel less so. Farah, 12, lives in a Chicago suburb with Pakistani and Filipino parents who are Muslim. In a telephone interview, she explained why she was happy to appear on "Postcards From Buster," wearing her hijab (a head covering) and studying the Koran.

"It was important to tell people about my religion and everything," she said. "Some people think we're bad because of 9/11 or something, and I'm telling them we are not bad, we're not trying to hurt anyone or do anything wrong."

Asked what she thought about PBS's decision not to distribute the "Buster" episode about the children with two mothers, she said: "We don't believe in that stuff. My opinion is that it is bad or wrong. My sister is 7, and she watches PBS Kids shows. I wouldn't want her to watch that kind of thing."

What if people said they wouldn't want to watch the episode about her because they don't like Muslims?

Without hesitation Farah replied: "Wow, I hadn't thought about it like that. Can I change what I said? If people were judging me because of my religion I would get really sad. Now I think maybe they should show it."

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