9. James Chamberlain

The controversy sort of erupted in a very innocent way. And that was because I read *One Dad Two Dads Brown Dad Blue Dad* to my kids. This was in 1996, and it was around Father's Day.

And I read it because a student in my class had two moms; a birth mom, and as he said, a real mom. And Zachary was kind of getting funny looks from the other kids whenever he talked about his moms. And so I read *One Dad Two Dads* to affirm the fact that he had two moms, and that had nothing to do with same sex families.

And that was my first year of teaching, and I submitted my class plans to the principal every month, with a complete list of every book that I read in the classroom. I didn't know that you need to do that. And so I was being very thorough with all the listing of my books.

And she said to me, “what's this book about?”

And I said, “Oh, it's a book about same sex families and two moms or two dads,” and she said, “Well, you're actually not allowed to read that book in the classroom without it being approved at the board level or at the ministry level.”

And I said, “Oh, well, what do I do about that?”

And she said, “Well, you need to submit it for district approval.” And then she cautioned me that I shouldn't do that. She was a principal who had taught in the district for quite a while and she was actually quite a progressive person, but she was very concerned about how it would play itself out in Surrey, and she said, “This could become very ugly. If you put these forward for approval.” She said, “In this district, it's very socially conservative. It's, you know, I'm concerned about, you know, what impact it will have on you; really think carefully before you decide to do this.”

So I submitted them for approval and the district required, there was a 30 day turnaround period written into the policy; that they would review books and make a decision within 30 days. And of course, 30 days went and passed and nothing was done, and three months went and passed, and nothing was done, and four months went and passed and nothing was done—and then I phoned my union. And I said, “Look, something's up.”

And so my union sent a letter to the board saying, “These books have been sitting for four months. This is the policy; this is what's required; consider them and make a decision on them, or we're filing a grievance.”

So under the threat of a grievance being filed against the board, the board held a board meeting, and they passed a motion saying that no resources or materials from Gay and Lesbian Educators of British Columbia be allowed for use or redistribution in any Surrey school. Well, there were already resources in the district--the *Counseling Lesbian and Gay Youth* book had been in the district for two years at that point in time. Teacher Librarians had been mailed out recommended resource lists through the Surrey union two years previously.

And so that suddenly, you know, they tried to suddenly think that you know, nothing could be allowed in the district. So people started to take down posters—like, we have a “You are not alone” poster--people started to remove posters, they started to say, “Well, these counseling books are not allowed in the schools,” even though it was a professional resource for teachers; it wasn't a read aloud, that you would read in the classroom. And things started to become heated. And then the book issue came up in the news in Surrey, and the local school board chairperson at the time, said, “Any teacher who teaches about same sex families or homosexuality in the kindergarten classroom instead of protecting a child's innocence, they're raping a child's innocence.” Now he didn't use my name specifically, but we kind of knew who it was meant to be put towards. And it just kind of grew from there.

And the parents from my classroom had never heard of the books. And one parent got all the books from the public library, and circulated them to all the parents, all the parents read them, and then a number of parents signed a petition in favor of the use of the books; 17 out of 20 families supported the use of the books. And then there was a public meeting two weeks later, for the board to consider the books. And there were three presentations in favor of the use of the books: one from Gay and Lesbian Educators, one from the BC Civil Liberties Association, and one from the parents from my classroom. And the board did not expect the parents from my classroom to be positive, the present continue to be positive, and the trustees were kind of shocked and looking a bit appalled as the parents from my classroom were saying what wonderful resources they were and how they wanted their children to learn in an inclusive way. And then the board banned the books that night. Basically saying, these books have no place in the school system. And it was a really nasty, heated, hateful meeting. There were people screaming and yelling at each other. I felt very unsafe. I waited until almost everyone was gone. And then I had one of the security people escort me to my car. And through the whole thing sort of starting, I met with my union and my union president at the time, he said to me, “You know, there can be death threats, and there can be all sorts of things that can happen to you through this process. Are you sure that you want to keep going along this path?” And I naively kind of said, “Well, yeah! I've got a thick skin. I'm going for it!” And so we did, and sort of continued from there. And so the case sort of wound its way through the courts over seven years, and have various supporters along the way.

But the upshot of the win, if you like, is that it stopped everybody else who might have been thinking about doing that in their boards in their tracks. And that was a huge success. Because there are other boards like Surrey with the same kind of conservative makeup of individuals and personal agendas, but they're not going to try to follow that same path. Not to say they're not going to suddenly be inclusive and accepting about same gender families, and they may put up different kinds of blockades along the way, but they're not going to resort to court cases.

But the reason why the Surrey board lost was that they were trying to impose a certain set of values on a public school system, where all value systems need to be acknowledged, and all families need to be valued. And where, if people hold socially conservative values, they do have the right under provincial curriculum to opt their children out of the discussion. And they always have had that. I don't personally agree with that. But it is their right under the provincial curriculum. But they can't impose a narrow set of values on every other family, in a school or in the district. And that's where they basically, there was no argument I mean, they lost it big time. Because they were trying to impose a narrow set of values on an entire school district of 60,000 students.