

Let Freedom Ring on Metro

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In his recent editorial, Kevin Naff criticized Metro for accepting public service advertisements from Parents & Friends of Ex-Gays (PFOX), and stated that the issue is one of truth in advertising rather than the First Amendment (“No truth in advertising,” editorial, Oct. 31). Naff must therefore be pleased by Metro’s announcement of plans to bar non-governmental organizations from access to PSAs. Both Naff and Metro are misguided.

In 1978, D.C.’s Gay Activists Alliance, as it was then known, launched a PSA campaign to place ads in Metro buses proclaiming “Someone in Your Life is Gay.” The ads were rejected by Metro. In 1979, GAA filed a lawsuit that succeeded in forcing Metro to run the ads. In the decades since then, Whitman-Walker Clinic and PFLAG have run controversial PSAs. That would end under Metro’s proposed new policy.

Naff wrote, “It’s an outrage that Metro would enable [PFOX] to send its messages — which are not grounded in any valid scientific research — to unsuspecting commuters, including gay and questioning young people who may be struggling to understand what it means to be gay.” Unsuspecting? Treating an advertisement like a mugging underestimates the ability of readers to think for themselves.

D.C. Council member Jim Graham, who is also chair of the Metro board, has told the Blade he is “exploring ways in which we can legally and constitutionally extricate ourselves from this dilemma” of giving space to PSAs that are not only controversial but also of questionable truthfulness.

Since the PSAs already must include an explicit disclaimer by Metro, the plan to abolish them altogether suggests a recognition by Metro that attempting to police advertising claims would be burdensome and fraught with legal difficulties, chief among them being that the disputed ads, however malignant, are protected advocacy.

Rather than fight everyone from PFOX to the ACLU, Metro wants to cut the Gordian Knot. A WISER COURSE was suggested by Graham in an e-mail he wrote a year ago: “In the mid 1980s, when I was director of Whitman Walker, I well remember the struggle we had to get PSAs which were the slightest bit suggestive of sexual activity. I would prefer a more robust and open and less subjective process, such as what the current policy provides. I worked hard to achieve that policy. Am I happy about the [PFOX] ads? No not at all. Let’s do some counter advertising. That’s a better solution than censorship.”

I couldn't agree more. As Rhonda Buckner, executive director of the D.C. chapter of PFLAG, recently told the Blade, "I hate that [the PFOX ads] are there, but if PFOX couldn't do it, we couldn't either. And I want our ads out there."

Metro's proposed action is reminiscent of Salt Lake City authorities abolishing all student groups in order to avoid a Gay-Straight Alliance.

As Graham wrote in another e-mail from a year ago: "The [equal access] policy has permitted a very robust debate which previously would have been censored, e.g., the ads on the Catholic bishops and condoms and the legalization of marijuana. It would be two faced for me to now call for censorship of these ads under that very same policy."

Not only would it be two-faced, it is not the way a free society responds to controversy. We can refute PFOX. This is demonstrated by former Human Rights Campaign staffer Wayne Besen in his new book, "Anything But Straight: Unmasking the Scandals and Lies Behind the Ex-Gay Myth."

We hardly need to resort to censorship, which only plays into the hands of the Christian right. The fundamentalists love to portray themselves as victims of intolerance rather than promoters of it. Why give them ammunition?

As Justice Robert Jackson wrote in the 1943 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that no one may be forced to participate in the Pledge of Allegiance, "Freedom to differ is not limited to things that do not matter much. That would be a mere shadow of freedom."

The ACLU sums it up perfectly when it says that the best response to offensive speech is more speech. This echoes Thomas Jefferson's words on academic freedom: "Here we are not afraid to follow the truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is free to combat it." That, rather than censorship, would be the best lesson for our youth.