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'I will cry in the darkness and help will come': Teacher of the Year talks advocacy

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Kentucky's 2022 Teacher of the Year Willie Carver spoke about marginalized student groups in education at Western Kentucky University's Jody Richards Hall on Tuesday night.

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“Advocacy is using your voice. advocacy is calling for help. Advocacy is seeing someone hurt, refusing to abandon them, using your voice to get them the resources that they need.”

This was the message delivered by Willie Carver, Kentucky's 2022 Teacher of the Year, at his talk at Western Kentucky University Tuesday night.

Sporting his trademark pair of rainbow glasses, Carver spoke to students about his personal view of advocacy and how he, an openly gay man, navigated the teaching world before leaving the profession.

Carver taught in the Montgomery County school system for over a decade before earning the Teacher of the Year honor. He said he was warned against coming out during his first year on the job.

“I was pulled into my office on the first day of school and was told, ‘If you are gay in this community, you will be crucified,’ ” he said. Despite this warning, he said this was never a problem to his students.

“I don’t think I’ve ever had a single student in 15 years of working in eastern Kentucky who was in my class who had anything negative to say,” Carver said.

Carver wanted to be a teacher from the get-go.

“It was my goal from the first day I went to school because school was safe,” he said. “School promised a better tomorrow. School helped me think about other people. My teachers were kind to me, and told me that I was worth something.”

Carver saw his students blossom during his time in the district, and at one point its “Open Light” LGBTQ+ affirming club boasted over 40 students. He said if he had

a funny story about pranking his husband, he would share that anecdote with students just like heterosexual teachers.

“Again, this is a small school district in eastern Kentucky,” he said. “But then the darkness came.”

Carver said a small group of community members made accusations toward him and his students, which ultimately led to him dropping the teaching profession.

“They accused me of being a groomer. They accused my students of being groomers. They said that my club was a grooming ground,” Carver said. “As if my existence as a gay man, as if their existence as LGBTQ students, made us immediately suspect, immoral, wrong, worthy of destruction, even if through blatant lies.”

His response, as the 2022 Kentucky Teacher of the Year, “in the midst of all of this chaos and this pain, was to write.”

That act of writing turned into his upcoming poetry book, “Gay Poems for Red States,” which contains poems that tell the story of Carver’s inner child that he still advocates for today.

He recited words from Toni Morrison to illustrate this personal advocacy.

“All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was,” he read. “Writers are like that: remembering where we were, that valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place.”

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Carver said the teachers of the year are given the chance to meet the president and first lady. Shortly before this visit, he received a message on social media from a distressed father, setting off a chain of events that would reinforce his drive for advocacy.

“A father, who I don’t know, reaches out to me. His trans child had worn a rainbow pin to school, and this was their first act of sharing themselves,” he said. “And their teacher made them remove it.”

He went down to CVS and bought a card for the child, intending to have President Biden sign it when Carver made the Teacher of the Year visit.

“I thought, ‘this isn’t crazy, I’ll just sneak this card in past secret service,’ ” he said. “I’ll hide it in my jacket pocket and then I’ll ask the president to sign this card. Easy.”

After a scary moment with the Secret Service – “if you don’t know what it feels like to have the Secret Service running at you, your brain stops working” – the card was given to the president, and Carver later received a letter from the Oval Office to give to that child.

“I succeeded – that father succeeded, and there were so many potential ‘no’s,’ ” he said. “That father could have assumed I wouldn’t have helped, I could have said ‘this is crazy, the president is not going to help one kid.’ ”

According to Carver, that is how a fighter thinks – not an advocate. That father stood by his child and called for help, so Carver would, too.

“I will stand by and I will call out for help and I will cry in the darkness and help will come,” he said. “And even if it hadn’t worked, advocacy means ‘hopeful belief in others.’ Had it not, I would have done something else.”

Carver also touched on the veto override of Senate Bill 150, which was met with a student-led protest in Frankfort on Wednesday. SB 150 bans gender-affirming medical care for trans youths across the state and restricts conversations about gender identity and sexuality in schools.

“I think it’s going to be the biggest (protest) because these kids are fired up and they really need the support. We’re most excited about hearing what these students have to say,” Carver said.

He said he misses the students in Montgomery County, thinking about them constantly.

“I worry about their mental health, I worry about mental health in students in any rural district that is too cowardly to really stand up for their rights, which is why I try to do as much advocacy as I can in big ways so that it reaches them,” he said.

He said the image he used to have in his mind is carrying his students on his shoulders, lifting them up out of the mud. Now, as an advocate, he envisions himself wiping the mud off.

One of the realizations Carver said he’s had since changing careers is that he is not alone.

“I have slowly come to the realization that there are enough good people here in this country and in this state that I do not need to fight as hard as I thought I did,” he said. “And that things will be OK once the majority is heard.”

Carter’s visit to WKU was part of the Potter College of Arts and Letters’ Cultural Enhancement Series, which brings intellectuals, artists and other speakers to campus.

