

Coincidentally, the day of the meeting was also the first day of No Name-Calling Week, a program of GLSEN. "I saw an opportunity to leverage a bad event into what I call a teachable moment," says Jennings, a former teacher who emphasizes that he'd be more likely to talk to a 15-year-old than a celebrity. "That's why I accepted the invitation."

In short, they were making an example out of him. "I'm not a priest," Jennings says. "I'm not capable of granting Mr. Washington absolution for his sins."

And while Washington "was very sorrowful," Giuliano says, the point of the meeting was "focused on what this guy can do," says Jennings, not why he did what he did. Things like a public-service announcement were mentioned, or maybe having him participate in next year's No Name-Calling Week.

Jennings used to be a teacher; GLSEN is basically an education organization. It's allied with the larger antibullying movement in the schools right now. Its studies have shown that the top three reasons that kids are bullied are physical appearance, sexual orientation, and gender expression. No Name-Calling Week targets grades 5 through 8—apparently the dawning of the name-calling developmental stage, although that's obvious to anyone who suffered through middle school—and it's not limited to anti-LGBT names, of course.

Jennings looks at the Washington fracas as an opportunity to make it easier on kids. "I think a lot of the LGBT adult community think that in some ways things are so much better today, that this isn't an issue anymore," he says. "But harassment is the rule, not the exception." And, he adds, "our job is to change that, in particular around the word Mr. Washington used." A 2004 study conducted for GLSEN by Widmeyer Research and Polling and Penn, Schoen, and Berland Associates found that over 60% of high school students think it's OK to casually say "fag" or "that's so gay" when joking around; 34% of the boys and 20% of the girls in the survey admitted to saying "faggot."

The last time GLSEN became involved with a celebrity was when Eminem was using "faggot" in just that way (according to the rapper, at least): not to denigrate gay people per se but to signal a disapproval of certain people. Of course, it's next to impossible to separate those ►

"How you durrin'?"

The national debate over a blackface drag routine

While Isaiahgate was commanding attention from news media and gay rights groups like the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation and the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, some black gay activists and bloggers were outraged at what they perceived to be a double standard: How could so many gay activists come down against Isaiah Washington while continuing to ignore Chuck Knipp?

A white Quaker minister from Kentucky, Knipp has portrayed the character "Shirley Q. Liquor" in a controversial blackface drag routine since at least 2001. He describes his character—or caricature, depending on whom you ask—as an "inarticulate Southern black woman on welfare" with 19 children, and performs her in blackface while sipping cocktails and speaking in exaggerated "ebonics" to packed audiences, often at gay bars and clubs with a predominantly white clientele.

To many observers Knipp's act is at least as offensive as Washington's transgression, if not worse. "How can the gay community be upset with Isaiah Washington when turning a blind eye toward Charles Knipp's minstrel show?" asks Jasmyne Cannick, a black lesbian blogger and journalist. Says H. Alexander Robinson, executive director of the National Black Justice Coalition, the nation's largest black gay rights organization: "Knipp's act perpetuates racist, sexist, and misogynistic stereotypes."

Knipp—who declined to be interviewed for this story—denies that his skits are racist. He's insisted in the past that the stereotypes promote discussion and "can actually help heal racism."

But Cannick and others don't buy that—and they also don't like that gay bars and clubs are booking Knipp and giving Shirley Q. Liquor a venue in which to perform. Especially galling is when the act plays during the

Martin Luther King Day holiday weekend or February's Black History Month. After Cannick launched a nationwide protest of Liquor in January, the West Hollywood, Calif., city council, black civil rights groups, and the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center joined her in successfully pressuring proprietors of the Factory in West Hollywood to cancel a planned February appearance.

But other club owners and managers have been defiant in the face of the pressure. "Being a 32-year-old white guy, Black History Month didn't pop into my head," said Bryan Couzens, manager of Hartford, Conn., gay bar ChezEst, which at first refused to cancel or reschedule Liquor's February appearance. In his interview with the *Hartford Courant*—he declined to talk to *The Advocate*—he added that the pressure amounted to "censorship." But days after that interview, the club's owner decided to cancel Liquor's appearance anyway, saying in a statement that he was "concerned about any performance that threatens, angers, and appears to divide our Hartford gay community."

While negotiating the Isaiah Washington situation, Neil Giuliano, president of GLAAD, heard numerous complaints about Knipp's routine—enough that he lent his organization's voice and resources to "those taking a stand against Knipp's offensive caricature." That included sending out a press release decrying Knipp's act and posting online information about whom to contact to protest upcoming club dates.

Giuliano and other critics might be surprised to hear what one famous defender of the Liquor act—RuPaul—has to say about them. In a widely publicized 2002 blog post at her personal Web site, the erstwhile gender-bending performer was quoted as saying that protesters were "unsophisticated barbarians" attacking a "loving homage" to Southern black women. But to quote one Southern black woman, "What's love got to do with it?"

—Rod McCullom