

If he's gay, then it's 'No way!'

WEST Chester," according to a local wisecrack, is the only town where you can arrive in 'Gay' and exit 'High.' " The wordplay, of course, refers to street names. But it also reflects a growing homophobia among suburbanites concerned about the borough's decision to name a new high school after the late civil-rights leader and native son Bayard Rustin.

That is why the West Chester Area School Board recently moved to reconsider the issue, citing Rustin's conscientious-objector status during WWII and his imprisonment related to it as the reason for their decision, rather than his homosexuality.

Joseph P. Green Jr., the board member who introduced the resolution, maintained that the district "owes it to the thousands of students" who will attend the new school to "investigate the facts" to determine whether Rustin was a true felon or if he was a valid conscientious objector.



BURT SMITH/Bayard Rustin Foundation

Bayard Rustin with Martin Luther King Jr. in 1965.

Let's investigate the facts:

- Rustin, a black native of West Chester, was raised by a Quaker grandmother whose teachings inspired an early commitment to pacifism.
- As a young man, Rustin trav-

eled to India to study the nonviolent protest of Gandhi, later integrating that philosophy into the U.S. civil-rights movement.

- During World War II, Rustin applied for and received conscientious objector status because

of his Quaker upbringing.

➤ In 1943, Rustin was imprisoned for refusing to report for a physical exam for public-service work. He believed that such service would tacitly condone the prosecution of the war and as such was inconsistent with "the will of God."

"I regret that I must break the law of the state," Rustin said, "but I am prepared for whatever may follow."

Rustin's stance was based on the same kind of moral courage that inspired the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., an avowed pacifist, to oppose the Vietnam War and go to prison on several occasions for leading civil-rights demonstrations.

Rustin taught King the tactics of nonviolent protest, serving as a key adviser to the younger Baptist minister. He worked behind the scenes, helping with King's

speeches and in founding the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Most notably, Rustin coordinated the 1963 March on Washington, which drew an estimated 250,000 people and is widely regarded as the climatic event of the civil-rights movement.

Would Green and the district residents who support his resolution object to naming the new high school after King, whose own pacifism and prison record were more pronounced than Rustin's? Probably not. But then, King wasn't gay.

Perhaps the school board will have the moral courage to stick with its original decision and name the new school after Bayard Rustin, who should be honored for his moral stand against war and contributions to civil rights — not denigrated because of his sexual orientation. ★

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