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## A RHODE ISLAND TOWN SURVIVES ITS NIGHT TO REMEMBER AS AARON TAKES PAUL TO THE PROM

In most high schools the senior prom is a moment to be treasured, an evening of paper moons and corsages, of celebration and sentimental farewells. But in Cumberland, R.I. the annual spring dance became a test not only of a small town's forbearance but perhaps of its understanding as well. The reason: Cumberland High School senior Aaron Fricke, 18, had won the right in federal court to attend the prom with the date of his choice. Aaron, a homosexual, wanted to

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Though some parents considered them pawns of older gay activists, Fricke (left) and Gullbert regard their triumph as a "personal satisfaction."

A few seniors were irritated when Fricke (standing, left) and Gullbert (right) danced together, but others saw it as a lesson in tolerance.



DANIEL G. DUNN/PICTURE GROUP

## TROUBLE

bring his gay friend Paul Guilbert.

Before the dance had even begun, the evening was tense. Police kept reporters and photographers at bay outside while tight-lipped chaperons watched for trouble on the dance floor. Fricke, wearing an electric-blue tux, and Guilbert, in formal black, were driven to the dinner dance at the nearby Pleasant Valley Country Club by a member of the Rhode Island Gay Liberation Task Force. A protective phalanx of officials ushered them to the door, where Fricke turned to face the press and TV cameras, waved and gleefully stuck out his tongue.

During the evening the boys posed for the traditional color photograph and danced with each other several times. The most uncomfortable moment, according to school superintendent Robert B. Condon, came when Fricke put his head on Guilbert's shoulder, and other promgoers ringed the couple to stare. The superintendent halted the music temporarily to defuse the situation, and Cumberland High principal Richard T. Lynch quietly asked Fricke and Guilbert to stop.

School officials had sought for more than a year to avoid the encounter altogether. Before last year's prom Guilbert, then a student at the high school, was denied permission to bring a male date. His case never went to court because he was a minor at the

time and his parents refused to file suit. Now 18, Paul claims his parents have disowned him, and he has left home to live in Brooklyn, N.Y.

This spring Fricke took up Guilbert's crusade and brought it to a successful conclusion. Two days before the prom U.S. District Court Chief Judge Raymond J. Pettine held that Fricke's right to make a statement of his sexuality took precedence over fears of student violence on the dance floor. "The First Amendment," he ruled tartly, "does not tolerate mob rule by unruly schoolchildren."

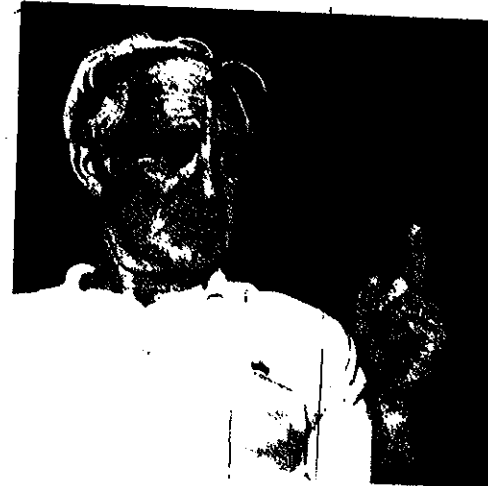
The potential for nastiness was underscored several weeks ago when Fricke was punched in a hallway by another student, suffering a gashed cheek requiring five stitches. School officials suspended his attacker and the message was not lost on the students. The warning apparently worked. "I was expecting more trouble than we got," Guilbert said after the prom. "Mostly the guys just jeered and called us fag and queer—that sort of thing."

Fricke's home life, like Guilbert's, had been disintegrating even before he publicized his sexual preference. His parents have separated, and Aaron, rated an average student with a flair for drama, expects to move in with his father, a ship's pilot, and pursue his theatrical interests. Many fellow graduates regard him with bemused interest—and not a little resentment. Senior class president Moira Cashman admits

some of her classmates left the dance early, feeling that their prom had been taken away from them and "they just couldn't stand it anymore." Superintendent Condon, however, noting that some 500 of Cumberland's 570 seniors attended, pronounced himself pleased and relieved by the outcome. "What I was afraid of was the lunatic fringe," he admits, "but the kids at the school were just great."

KAY CASSILL

"The seniors felt there was too much notoriety," says school superintendent Condon. "They wanted it to be their prom."



Saying goodbye at Union Station in Providence (below), Fricke prepares to see his friend off on the train to New York.

