

DON'T ASK, DON'T TELL

But don't forget who's takin' you home  
And in whose arms you're gonna be,  
So, darlin', save the last dance for me.

--the Drifters

On Saturday nights, when the dancing lamp was lit at the YMCA gymnasium, you could, for a mere 10 cents, jitterbug, stroll, bop, cha-cha, shimmy, Bristol-stomp, twist, hand-jive, and slow-dance to stacks of 45s for a few hours.

It was at these same YMCA dances that Mr. Eugene Nuss, dignified, silver-haired, story-telling, mild-mannered teacher of algebra and plane geometry, would play the role of Mr. Eugene Nuss, dignified, silver-haired, story-telling, mild-mannered dance chaperon. He always dispatched his duties as overseer of passels of hormone-hopped teenagers with the same gentlemanly grace that marked his teaching. As far as we could tell, when he greeted us at the door of the YMCA gym, he was pretty much the same ol' Mr. Nuss we'd last seen in class on Friday, teaching plane G and telling stories punctuated with the phrase "doncha know."

However, somehow, sometime during the evening's waning minutes, Mr. Nuss would morph into "Three Finger" Nuss and would enter the rarefied realm of with-it adult.

Maybe it was then that he recalled his teenage years, when one's body chemistry runs amok and one's feelings are so deep and vivid that they are forever etched in memory--or maybe he just took pity on us.

Whatever the reason, as the final stack of 45s dwindled down to a precious three, he would walk around the dance floor--his posture ramrod straight--with three fingers in the air, saying nothing. It was his way of reminding us guys that there were only three dances left in the evening--only three dances left for us to line up the cherished last dance (always a sloooooow one, doncha know) with our best girl.

Then, as the last dance began, something we regarded as bordering on the miraculous would occur: The "new," hip Mr. Nuss would turn off the lone source of light, a floor lamp that had been casting a beam toward the rafters, indirectly illuminating the dance floor.

Thus, it was Mr. Nuss--not President Clinton, and not the Pentagon brass--who instituted the first true "don't ask, don't tell" policy. Mr. Nuss didn't ask, and we surely didn't tell, what went on when the light went off for three glorious minutes during the last dance at the YMCA gym.