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Sun Feb 12 2006

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Columns

Tuxedos, tolerance, and the religious right

March 6, 2005

*To thy teachings
and each other
True eternally
Golden Eagles,
loyal true,
One pulse our hearts will beat,
Year by year, the ages through
Till in Heaven we meet.*

Meant to be inspirational, the school song of Fleming Island High School, near Jacksonville, Fla., fits right in with the school's motto of "Preparing tomorrow's leaders, today."

The school prides itself on its ability to train its students for the rigors of college and the demands of the business world by offering specialized instruction in an "internationally recognized pre-university curriculum," along with foreign language classes, band and a Naval Junior Reserve Officer's Training Corps program.

It's also scared as hell about lesbians.

That much became clear in the wake of a recent decision by the school's principal, Sam Ward, to ban from the school yearbook the senior photo of a female student wearing a tuxedo.

Kelli Davis, a straight-A student, posed for the photo wearing a tuxedo because she felt the suggested dress code for females, a "traditional black drape," was "too revealing." The Florida Times-Union reports that Davis' decision went against both the wishes of the school administration and the dress code set by her fellow students, who voted last year to go with the drape for female senior photos.

As one might expect, uproar over the issue culminated in a board meeting. While Ward stated that the issue was primarily one of following the rules, many of those who have backed Davis' decision and protested the Feb. 25 meeting saw the hand of homophobia in the air.

Meanwhile, the student editor of the yearbook has been relieved of her duties for refusing to pull the photo, and at least one teacher has reportedly made disparaging remarks about Davis' moral character.

Why all the fuss over a tuxedo? Well, if you have to ask, you haven't been paying attention to one of the biggest battlegrounds for the soul of America—high school.

The panhandle of Florida, which includes Jacksonville and Orange Park, is traditionally known as an exceedingly conservative area with a large military population. And it's not the first time an area high school has had to handle questions of "inappropriate dress": The Times-Union reports that in 2002, a Tampa-area high school student, Nicole Youngblood, unsuccessfully sued in federal court when her high school refused to let her wear a shirt and tie instead of the drape.

But beyond Florida's panhandle, other battles are taking place designed to set the moral agenda for today's youth by attacking their First Amendment rights.

For example, a federal lawsuit was filed Feb. 15 by the Alliance Defense Fund, a self-described pro-family legal group. The suit alleges the First Amendment rights of middle and high school students in Boyd County, Ky., are being violated because they are forced to attend diversity and tolerance training and are told homosexuality is not a choice.

Likewise, at Scotts Valley High School in Santa Cruz County, Calif., a controversy has erupted over some posters meant to fight discrimination and harassment that feature an inverted pink triangle, the symbol used by Nazis in World War II to target homosexuals. Some parents have taken the posters as a promotion of a "homosexual lifestyle," and have called on the Santa Cruz County school board to take the posters down.

The issue has become somewhat of a cause celebre among many right-wing Christian groups, who hold Scott Valley High School up as an example of everything that is wrong with education in this country.

It's all part and parcel of a belief among many Americans that if they let their child leave the house and mingle with other children in a public school setting, they're going to be exposed to some sort of soul-destroying liberal agenda that will sap their strength and shake the foundations of their faith.

How else would you explain the recent attempts by a Virginia legislator to notify parents when their child refuses to say the Pledge of Allegiance in school?

The bill was sponsored by Mark Cole, a Republican from Spotsylvania, after a student in his hometown refused to stand and recite the pledge in accordance with a state law that allowed prayer in public school but made provisions for students to opt out. The bill was deemed by many to be unconstitutional and failed to pass into law, but it was widely hailed by conservatives and religious types as a long-overdue step.

According to Davis' mom, Cynthia, her daughter's decision had little to do with the issue of gay rights — or even freedom of speech — but had everything to do with her discomfort with the drape. Davis is reportedly a National Honor Society member who plans to go to college after graduation and very much wanted her senior photo in her high school yearbook.

Unfortunately, what she wants seems to have run right up against other people's own beliefs about who she is and what she stands for.

And, in deciding that she wanted to wear something that made her feel comfortable and not too exposed on one of the most important days of her life, Davis seems to have turned into a symbol of something much larger, and much more troubling.

For instead of simply being an issue about a dress code, Davis' story instead reveals the deep-seated and rampant homophobia that still exists among a large percentage of us, and the ways in which those afraid of American ideals like diversity and tolerance are trying to pass along their fears to the next generation as well.

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