



04/11/2008

Temple's Civil Rights Violations Are A Disgrace

By: Chris Freind , The Bulletin

White males are not a protected class under the Constitution, and veterans do not have First Amendment rights. After all, their concerns should be ignored because they are "mentally unstable" from being "trained to kill." And disagreeing with one's professors can result in insults such as "gnat," "juvenile" "liar" and "fool." As far as academic freedom of speech, forget it.

Welcome to taxpayer-funded Temple University.

Temple finds itself at the center of a firestorm regarding an appalling case of squashed academic freedoms and restricted First Amendment rights. The victim of Temple's suffocating speech code is a graduate student simply trying to earn a master's degree in military history. He also happens to be one of our ultimate defenders of freedom, a decorated sergeant in the Pennsylvania Army National Guard. This man's civil rights were violated, not overseas in a hostile fire zone but right back here in Philadelphia, birthplace of the nation and cradle of liberty. How's that for irony?

But since this is still the United States of America, and politically correct professors don't rule the day, this grave injustice is on track to be rectified. All it took was a huge dose of courage.

Meet Sgt. Christian DeJohn.

Sgt. DeJohn was called to active duty by the Army after the Sept. 11 attacks while attending Temple graduate school. When serving in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Temple did the unconscionable and sent him invitations to weekly "Dissent in America" anti-war "teach-ins," sponsored by Temple professors. Sgt. DeJohn objected and immediately became the target of retribution and retaliation - which continues to this day.

What did the university do? According to Sgt. DeJohn, he was dismissed from the school (later reinstated), was denied guidance and advice during his thesis completion, obstructed his graduation, contacted potential employers to sabotage his job search and even destroyed his personal credit by falsely reporting that he had graduated.

This situation led to Sgt. DeJohn testifying before the Pennsylvania Select Committee on Academic Freedom, which ultimately brought about reform referred to as "the biggest victory in the history of the academic freedom movement." He then filed a federal civil rights lawsuit to challenge the school's "speech codes," through which Temple claims it has the right to restrict and deny students' First Amendment rights. Sgt. DeJohn won, and a federal judge issued a permanent injunction against the speech codes. With its tail between its legs, Temple appealed, and arguments were heard on Thursday at the Federal Court of Appeals.

What's really troubling in this whole affair is that Temple, an institution of higher learning, is supposed to be run by intelligent, objective people. Yet they actually argued in court that Sgt. DeJohn was a "marginal learner, barely passing" with failing grades, knowing full well that he had a 3.2 GPA and had never received a grade lower than a B-minus. When called on this, the Temple attorney referenced the failing grade Sgt. DeJohn received - in high school. Go figure.

In a display of uncommon maturity, history department chair Richard Immerman wrote about his hope that Sgt. DeJohn will "self-destruct." In his "professional" critique of Sgt. DeJohn's 300-page thesis, Prof. Immerman wrote abusive comments such as these: "You use juvenile argumentation"; the thesis was "a monotonous agony"; Sgt. DeJohn sounded like a "crackpot"; and the thesis came across as a "comic book for five-year-olds."

If that's not constructive criticism fostered in an open atmosphere conducive to learning, I don't know what is.

Interestingly, this fight for academic freedom is not a partisan one. Sgt. DeJohn has allies across the spectrum who have filed amicus briefs with the court, from the ACLU and Feminists for Freedom of Expression to the Alliance Defense Fund and the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education.

And Temple's allies? None. Nada. Can't imagine why.

When Sgt. DeJohn wins, his efforts and courage in the face of fire - both at home and abroad - will have resulted in a landmark case in the academic freedom movement.

Sir Edmund Burke stated, "All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing."

Thanks to people like Sgt. Christian DeJohn, such evil is being vanquished, and he deserves our salute.

Chris Freind can be reached at cf@thebulletin.us.

©*The Evening Bulletin* 2008