

Teacher Forced to Halt Origins of Life Course

Angry parents accused the Pentecostal minister's wife of trying to promote creationism

A Pentecostal teacher came under fire in January for leading a course on the origins of life that some parents claimed was a guise to endorse creationism.

"You could ask any of the students if I was biased and they'd tell you no," said Sharon Lemburg, who has taught at rural Frazier Mountain High School in Lebec, Calif., since it opened 12 years ago. "I bent over backwards to make the class fair and to present each side, each theory fairly so the kids themselves could decide. They were to draw their own conclusions."

Thirteen students participated in Lemburg's month-long Philosophy Design course, which discussed evolution, intelligent design and creationism. But legal action by 11 angered parents backed by the Americans United for Separation of Church and State caused the school district to cancel the course 18 days into the class.

The lawsuit, filed in U.S. District Court, claimed the course "was designed to advance religious theories on the origins of life." Superintendent John Wright said all along the elective was appropriate for a philosophy class intended to introduce students to diverse perspectives.

"Our legal advisers have pointed out that they are unaware of any court or California statute which has forbidden public

schools to explore cultural phenomena, including history, religion or creation myths," Wright said in a statement released by the school.

None of the parents involved in the lawsuit attended the class, and none had children in the class. The man who initiated the suit, Ken Hurst, declined Lumburg's invitation to address the students.

"The class was never really presented with the idea of creationism, other than a brief one-day discussion," said Lumburg, whose husband, Larry, is pastor of Frazier Park (Calif.) Assembly of God. "We didn't bring the Bible into class. We didn't quote Scripture. We just said this is what creationism believes."

A federal judge in Fresno, Calif., heard the case in January. Though never making a ruling, Lumburg said, the judge favored the school, noting that the course was an elective, required parental permission and was an overview of theories. "If our district had the money, we could have fought this and won hands down," Lumburg said.

Paula Harve, head of the district's teacher's association, approved of the decision not to pursue the case and told the Associated Press (AP), "We can ill afford to spend all this money defending what the superintendent is calling a philosophy class."

The plaintiffs wanted to end the class two weeks early and never convene it again, but the school district agreed to end the class a week early and to not endorse creationism or intelligent design.

There is support among students to continue the class. "If you don't want your kids in the class, it's one thing, but you can't keep someone else from seeing another opinion," Nick Lonerio, a junior at Frazier Mountain, told the AP.

Lemburg said the parents were misleading in their charges because they used only the first two of the four syllabi she presented to the school board, which had approved the class 3-2 in December. The first two syllabi are marked as "tentative," she said, and were "a work in progress."

"Everyone who has seen the fourth syllabus says there is nothing wrong with it," Lemburg said. "But they had to use the first two and to attack me as a minister's wife. That's all they were left with. According to the judge, they didn't have a leg to stand on."

Hurst said he would support offering the class next year if it was presented fairly and if Lemburg wasn't the teacher. "The course isn't just teaching about the concept of intelligent design," Hurst said in a statement on the school Web site. "Rather, it's advocating a religious position."

In December, a federal judge in Pennsylvania ruled that it was unconstitutional to teach intelligent design in a public school science class because it promoted a particular religious belief. After that ruling, California lawmakers ruled it permissible to discuss intelligent design in a philosophy, comparative religion or social studies class.

Lemburg, who has taught geography, history, physical education and special education, said she will continue to tweak the class syllabus and work with Americans United for Separation

of Church and State to develop an agreeable course outline. "Then when that happens I'll take it to my superintendent and he'll present it to the board, and they'll decide if they want to do this again," Lemburg said. "I'm hoping I get a chance to teach this class again."

Gail Wood