

Cali High School Forbids Bible-Based Brick Pavers

✖ Brick pavers are at the center of a new Christian controversy in La Quinta, Calif.

Two Christian women purchased brick pavers through a school-directed fundraiser. The women were later told they would not be included in the sidewalk alongside other similarly inscribed inspirational, commemorative, and tributary messages on the Palm Desert High School campus because of their religious content.

Alliance Defense Fund (ADF) attorneys filed a lawsuit on Thursday against the Desert Sands Unified School District Board of Education on behalf of the two women.

“Christians shouldn’t be discriminated against and excluded from expressing their faith on public high school campuses when that door of communication is open to virtually everyone else,” says ADF Senior Counsel David Cortman.

“The government cannot single out Christians because their religious viewpoint does not coincide with campus orthodoxy. Christians have the same First Amendment-protected rights as everyone else does on public school campuses, and their messages are no less worthy of exposure than other individuals’.”

Here’s the back story: In February 2010, the Palm Desert High School PTO announced its brick pavers fundraiser, which was approved by the school principal, as well as by the board and superintendent of the school district. No limitations were given as to the content of the messages on the pavers—other than the length—and the fundraiser policy stated that the messages could be used to pay tribute, create a legacy, commemorate a special event, or give recognition to various

entities.

Shortly thereafter, Lou Ann Hart and Sheryl Caronna submitted requests to purchase brick pavers with Scripture verses engraved on them, for which they later paid. In August, after the bricks were made, but before they were installed on the new campus' walkway, Hart and Caronna were notified that their pavers' inclusion on the walkway was denied because they quoted Bible verses.

According to ADF, officials cited the so-called "separation of church and state." Hundreds of other pavers had been accepted, including ones with inspirational and religious messages. Nevertheless, school officials erroneously asserted that the Bible verses used by the women would establish an unconstitutional establishment of religion. Each woman paid several hundred dollars; neither received refunds.

In November, ADF attorneys sent a public records request letter on behalf of Hart and Caronna to school officials, informing them that their denial violated the ladies' constitutional rights, requesting a copy of the paver fundraiser policies, denial communications, and a list of all other approved brick inscriptions. ADF reports that the officials denied the request for the documents later that month, and also refused a second request for the documents in December. Hart's five bricks and Caronna's larger brick remain uninstalled.

ADF attorneys contend that the school has accepted hundreds of other messages similar to Hart's and Caronna's, including other religious quotes, such as a Hindu quote from Mahatma Gandhi and the Bible quote "Yes, it is possible," written in Spanish.

The lawsuit Hart v. Tomack was filed with the U.S. District Court for the Central District of California. Peter Lepiscopo of San Diego, one of nearly 1,900 attorneys in the ADF

alliance, is serving as local counsel.

Desert Sands Unified School District Board of Education was not immediately available for comment.