

Cheerleaders' Bible banners raise community controversy

Contributed by Bob Allen

Associated Baptist Press

FORT OGLETHORPE, Ga. -- Hundreds of people gathered Sept. 30 in northern Georgia to support cheerleaders at a public high school ordered to stop using religious messages on banners carried on the field during football games.

Cheerleaders at Lakeview-Fort Oglethorpe High School have used inspirational Bible verses like Philippians 4:13 -- "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" -- on paper banners that players burst through as they rush onto the field for years. The school is located in a bedroom community near Chattanooga, Tenn., just across the state line.

The practice ended abruptly when a single resident complained verbally to the superintendent that the school was breaking federal law. After consulting their attorney, Catoosa County Public School officials determined the religious signs violated the First Amendment's prohibition on government establishment of religion.

Superintendent Denia Reese said she personally appreciated the signs and reads the Bible daily, but she had the responsibility of protecting the school district from lawsuits. She said federal courts have ruled that religious activities at high-school football games create the "inescapable conclusion" that the school unconstitutionally endorses the religion.

Supporters of the cheerleaders contend the banners are legal, because they are initiated by students and not paid for with public funds. Cheerleaders prepare the signs in advance over the summer, when school is not in session.

A rally scheduled at a Chick-fil-A restaurant had to be moved to an open athletic field to accommodate a crowd estimated at more than 500.

"The cheerleaders are not trying to push a religious cause, to shove religion down someone's throat," Brad Scott, director of student ministries at Fairview Baptist Church and an organizer of the rally, said, according to the Chattanooga Times-Free Press. "The cheerleaders are just using Scripture to show motivation and inspiration to the players and the fans."

Scott, who was president of the school's graduating class in 2004, told the newspaper there was a complaint about the signs when he was a student, but the cheerleaders were allowed to keep them because they were students and, in his view, not agents of the state.

Scott and other area youth ministers started a Facebook group called "We Support the LFO Cheerleaders! LET THEM HAVE THEIR SIGNS BACK!" which attracted nearly 4,000 members and prompted nearly 500 wall posts. Scott said he was surprised by the response.

"I think the response we're getting is people are tired of this, tired of the government taking away our rights telling us what we can and cannot do when it comes to our freedom of speech," Scott said, according to Chattanooga CBS television affiliate WDEF.

The district superintendent said the problem is not the signs but their placement. She said the cheerleaders could continue to use the banners prior to games in a designated area outside of the football stadium.

Cheerleader coach Susan Bradley told the Times-Free Press the girls would obey the superintendent and make new signs with acceptable slogans to use on the field.

But that doesn't mean they agree. Two cheerleaders appeared in uniform on Fox News to voice their disapproval. "The majority is Christians, and it's just not fair that we can't spread God's Word," said cheerleader Courtney Born. "It's just our football team running through motivational Bible verses. I mean it doesn't hurt anything."

Legally, experts say it boils down to a question of whether cheerleaders in uniform on the field at a football game speak only for themselves or if they are representing the school.

"Religious freedom is a fundamental right, and public-school students have many opportunities to express their religious views," said Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty. "Public schools, however, must refrain from sponsoring religious exercises or otherwise promoting religion."

"School-sponsored events should not send a religious message," Walker said. He said the Georgia school system "gets it right in saying parents should be able to trust that the public education their children are receiving does not purposely advance religious views."