

District pulls plug on speech

Foothill valedictorian criticizes decision to censor her proclamation of faith

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She knew her speech as valedictorian of Foothill High School would be cut short, but Brittany McComb was determined to tell her fellow graduates what was on her mind and in her heart.

But before she could get to the word in her speech that meant the most to her -- Christ -- her microphone went dead.

The decision to cut short McComb's commencement speech Thursday at The Orleans drew jeers from the nearly 400 graduates and their families that went on for several minutes.

However, Clark County School District officials and an attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union said Friday that cutting McComb's mic was the right call. Graduation ceremonies are school-sponsored events, a stance supported by federal court rulings, and as such may include religious references but not proselytizing, they said.

They said McComb's speech amounted to proselytizing and that her commentary could have been perceived as school-sponsored.

Before she delivered her commencement speech, McComb met with Foothill administrators, who edited her remarks. It's standard district practice to have graduation speeches vetted before they are read publicly.

School officials removed from McComb's speech some biblical references and the only reference to Christ.

But even though administrators warned McComb that her speech would get cut short if she deviated from the language approved by the school, she said it all boiled down to her fundamental right to free speech.

That's why, for what she said was the first time in her life, the valedictorian who graduated with a 4.7 GPA rebelled against authority.

"I went through four years of school at Foothill and they taught me logic and they taught me freedom of speech," McComb said. "God's the biggest part of my life. Just like other valedictorians thank their parents, I wanted to thank my lord and savior."

In the 750-word unedited version of McComb's speech, she made two references to the lord, nine mentions of God and one mention of Christ.

In the version approved by school officials, six of those words were omitted along with two biblical references. Also deleted from her speech was a reference to God's love being so great that he gave his only son to suffer an excruciated death in order to cover everyone's shortcomings and forge a path to heaven.

Allen Lichtenstein, general counsel for the ACLU of Nevada, had read the unedited version of McComb's speech and said district officials did the right thing by cutting McComb's speech short because her commentary promoted religion.

"There should be no controversy here," Lichtenstein said. "It's important for people to understand that a student was given a school-sponsored forum by a school and therefore, in essence, it was a school-sponsored speech."

Lichtenstein said that position was supported by two decisions by the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, in 2000 and 2003.

Both cases involved graduation ceremonies and religious speeches given by commencement speakers. In the 2003 case, Lichtenstein said, the plaintiff even petitioned the Supreme Court to have the decision reversed, but the request was denied.

In 2003, the Clark County School Board amended district regulations on religious free speech, prohibiting district officials from organizing a prayer at graduation or selecting speakers for such events in a manner that favors religious speech or a prayer.

The remainder of the amendment allows for religious expression during school ceremonies.

Where students or other private graduation speakers are selected on the basis of genuinely neutral, evenhanded criteria and retain primary control over the content of their expression, however, that expression is not attributable to the school and, therefore, may not be restricted because of its religious (or anti-religious) content," it states.

"To avoid any mistaken perception that a school endorses student or other private speech that is not in fact attributable to the school, school officials may make appropriate neutral disclaimers to clarify that such speech is not school sponsored."

District legal counsel Bill Hoffman said the regulation allows students to talk about religion, but speeches can't cross into the realm of preaching.

"We review the speeches and tell them they may not proselytize," Hoffman said. "We encourage people to talk about religion and the impact on their lives. But when that discussion crosses over to become proselytizing, then we tell students they can't do that."

McComb, who will study journalism at Biola University, a private Christian school in La Mirada, Calif., doesn't believe she was preaching. She said although some people might not like the message of her speech, it was just that, her speech.

"People aren't stupid and they know we have freedom of speech and the district wasn't advocating my ideas," McComb said. "Those are my opinions."

"It's what I believe."

Response

After reading "District Pulls Plug on Speech", write a paragraph that includes a brief summary the main idea and your reaction to the content of the article. Was the school district correct in their action or did they go too far?