

Higher Learning

Confessions of an angry alumnus

"Be true to your school," The Beach Boys sang in 1963.

But what if your school isn't true to you?

I'm referring to my alma mater, Pepperdine University, which made headlines recently for its perceived support of Proposition 8, a hateful effort to overturn the California Supreme Court decision legalizing same-sex marriage. The well-funded Yes on 8 campaign debuted its first television spot Sept. 29, including a fear-mongering claim that acceptance of same-sex marriage is "mandatory."

"That changes a lot of things," Pepperdine law professor Richard Peterson warns in the ad, "people sued over personal beliefs, churches could lose their tax exemptions, gay marriage taught in public schools."

Progressive Portlanders might be horrified to see an institute of "higher learning" stepping into such a divisive minefield, but Pepperdine isn't your typical university. For starters, the Malibu, Calif.-based school is affiliated with the Church of Christ, which frowns on dancing and putting women in positions of power.

When I arrived on campus in 1990 to pursue a bachelor's degree in journalism, Pepperdine had just recently lifted its ban on campus dances. A couple of years later, the female dean of students was allowed to lead the prayer at a school assembly—one small step for womankind.

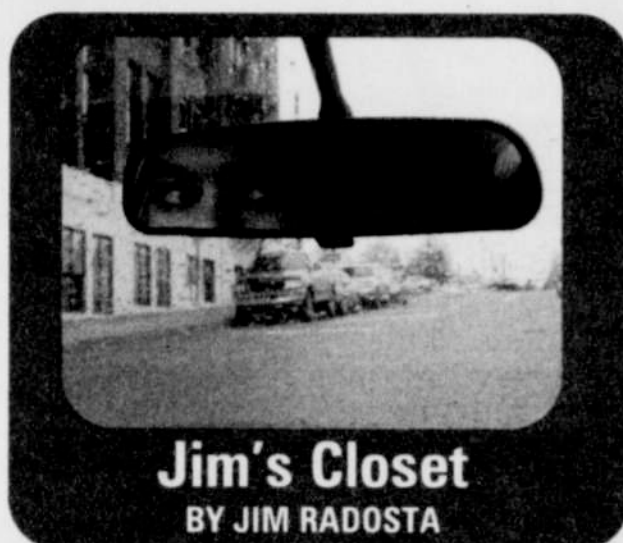
Like so many conservatives, Pepperdine also confuses faith with politics. As a student it was hard to tell whether I was at college or at a GOP think tank: Invited speakers included the likes of former Attorney General Ed Meese and Solicitor General Ken Starr, who went on to achieve infamy as the independent counsel who spent \$40 million of taxpayer money on a witch hunt to destroy President Bill Clinton. Oh, and guess who's now on staff shaping the minds of future lawyers? You got it: Law School Dean Kenneth Starr.

So, given that track record, it shouldn't come as much of a surprise that Pepperdine remains in lockstep with the right-wing agenda by opposing equal rights for all couples. Or does it? After a vocal outcry from alumni who were furious about the Yes on 8 ad, the administration tried to distance itself from the campaign.

"We'd like to stress that the professor does not represent a Pepperdine University-endorsed position, as the university does not advocate for/against political candidates or ballot propositions," public relations executive director Jerry Derloshon said Oct. 2. "The professor in the ad was not advocating a Pepperdine position, but his own personal position. We have received confirmation that our request to have the reference to Pepperdine University deleted from the ad will be honored...perhaps by today."

Since that statement was issued, Pepperdine's name has yet to be removed from the ad. In fact, Peterson shows up again in an even more inflammatory spot that uses the ultimate scare tactic: A little girl comes home from school and excitedly tells Mommy about how she's going to grow up to marry a "princess."

"Think it can't happen? It's already happened!" Peterson bellows. "When Massachusetts legalized gay marriage, schools began teaching second-graders that boys can marry boys. The



courts ruled parents had no right to object."

The deception tactics already seem to be succeeding. While early polls indicated Prop 8 was behind by as much as 38 percent to 55 percent, the ads are being credited with flipping numbers around: Led by a major shift among young Californians, a CBS survey says that likely voters now favor the measure by a five-point margin, 47 percent to 42 percent.

For a school that boasts "the highest standards of academic excellence and Christian values," Pepperdine doesn't seem to place much importance on either. California law already bans bias based on religion and prohibits public schools from teaching students anything about family issues against the will of their parents, so Peterson's bogus declarations put the entire university's reputation on the line.

Furthermore, the school isn't exactly being Christlike by spreading the lie that it knew nothing about the professor's involvement. According to its student newspaper, *The Graphic*: "Peterson said he informed School of Law Vice Dean Tim Perrin in advance that he was appearing in the commercial and that he would be associated with Pepperdine. Perrin did not voice any concerns, according to Peterson."

This isn't the first time that Pepperdine has underestimated the backlash that comes from homophobia. Way back in 1992, when I was editor of *The Graphic*, a group of underground gay students approached me to make their presence known. In the middle of the night, they had painted a pink triangle on "The Rock"—the only free-speech zone on campus—but it was immediately covered up by a Bible-banging adversary.

When I called that student for a comment, his blunt reply was shocking: "No way is homosexuality tolerated or should be tolerated. If they want to paint it during the day, I'll watch over them with my baseball bat."

The bigot was surely expecting backslaps and high-fives, but my article ended up turning him into a campus pariah, and he eventually transferred to an even more conservative university. It was a tense time—especially for a closeted student like me—but at least it got people talking.

In a follow-up story, I interviewed one sensitive administrator who said a mouthful: "I would hope on a campus like this that we're able to talk about issues like this in less emotional, less confrontive kind of ways. I suspect that we'll be talking about those things on campus for a long time." ☐

Arts and Culture Editor JIM RADOSTA needs your feedback. E-mail him at jim@justout.com.

justout

1983-2008
25 YEARS

Boxxes
&
Red Cap
congratulates
Just Out
on 25 years
of community
partnership

Don't miss the
party of the year

Anniversary

Saturday,
November 22
9:00 P.M.

Corner of
SW 11th and Stark
503.226.4171
21+ w/id

You are
invited to an
evening of
song, dance,
burlesque,
door-prizes
and more.

Visit www.justout.com
for daily updates on
entertainment acts and
special guests.



We'll see
YOU!
there!