

Academic freedom or prejudiced opinion?

The Clackamas Print Opinion Editor, Salena De La Cruz interviewed Donald Epstein regarding this statement--"You are better off dead than being a homosexual"--allegedly made during his Judaic Studies Class. Excerpts below are from that interview as well as the interview The Print had with the Josh Alexander, the student who filed the complaint.

Epstein

Print: What we heard is that you said, "People are better off dead than being a homosexual."

Epstein: Yeah. That's what the Bible...I didn't say that.

Print: People say you are an outrageous teacher.

Epstein: I am very outrageous. I am politically incorrect.

Print: Do you feel it's too outrageous sometimes, or just your protocol?

Epstein: Nothing is too outrageous. Students have been exposed to politically correct since elementary school and somebody has to stir them up. When we look at our cultural diversity, we don't seem to think that even political diversity is of value. We just have to have different people, all thinking alike. My point of view is I don't care what kind of people you have, but we don't all think alike. So, people have to be exposed to different point of views. They are not exposed to different people just because they look different, they need to be exposed to different people that think different. I don't have to think like those people do and most people think I should.

Print: O.k.. Any last takes on it (the student complaint)?

Epstein: No, I don't know what to make of it. It's normal for students to drop class just because they didn't particularly think my point of view was valid. I'm not trying to say anything in my defense, but in a Judaic Studies courses if you don't cite the Bible--what are you going to cite? I think this is something homosexuals don't seem to appreciate. They think the Bible is invalid. And moral judgement is invalid. And for the purpose of Judaic Studies the Bible is valid. And all judgements are very valid. And I might add that... That which is morally wrong should not be legally right. And that you can quote me on.

Print: How does it feel to be news?

Epstein: I have been news for 30 years. I have been outraging people for 30 years.

Alexander

Alexander: I had two encounters with Epstein, one in the classroom and then I went to him to talk about it. First of all he stated that he was close to retirement and did not care what people thought of what he said or what people said to him. It seemed to me that he was just basically saying that he could do whatever he wanted.

Basically the biggest thing he said was you are better off dead than being homosexual. I know Jewish (belief) does not allow homosexuality....later in his office he showed me in the (Hebrew Bible) where it says men shall not lie next to men as men lie next to women; but in the classroom we had not been talking about that. It seemed like he said you're better off being dead than homosexual just to antagonize. He was using that classroom, he was using Judaism and that line in the (Bible) as an excuse to bash homosexuals.

I told him, I believe everyone has a right to his own opinion, no matter what it is, no matter if I disagree with it or not, but in the classroom I don't believe you should bring your own prejudices....

I was disappointed—I signed up for the class because I wanted to learn more about the Holocaust....it's a disappointment not to be able to take a class that is objective.

Print: Would you feel that way if it were any issue other than homosexuality?

Alexander: Yes, he could be bashing anyone..... it wouldn't change anything. You're better off dead than homosexual? No one needs to say that, it isn't relevant. What if he was to say you're better off dead than being black? Would that fly?

Print: I am going to ask a very hard question--Are you gay?

Alexander: No.

Print: So, this is totally a matter of principal for you?

Alexander: Yes.

A Student's Voice...

'Words will never hurt me'

To whom it may concern:

I would like to respond to the article regarding being offended by instructors or material at school.

I am reminded of the old phrase "sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me."

While I think that some word are offensive and some may actually hurt your feelings, we all need to look below the surface to examine the meaning and behavior behind the words before we form opinions.

If an instructor is making statements that are deemed "politically incorrect" is that instructor demonstrating behaviors that actually are bias

in nature? For instance, if an instructor says that he is sexist and thinks women have a certain role, does he treat the females in his class differently than the males? Does he grade his students based upon gender? If so, then we have a problem. More than likely, the instructor is fair in his practices and entitled to his own opinion.

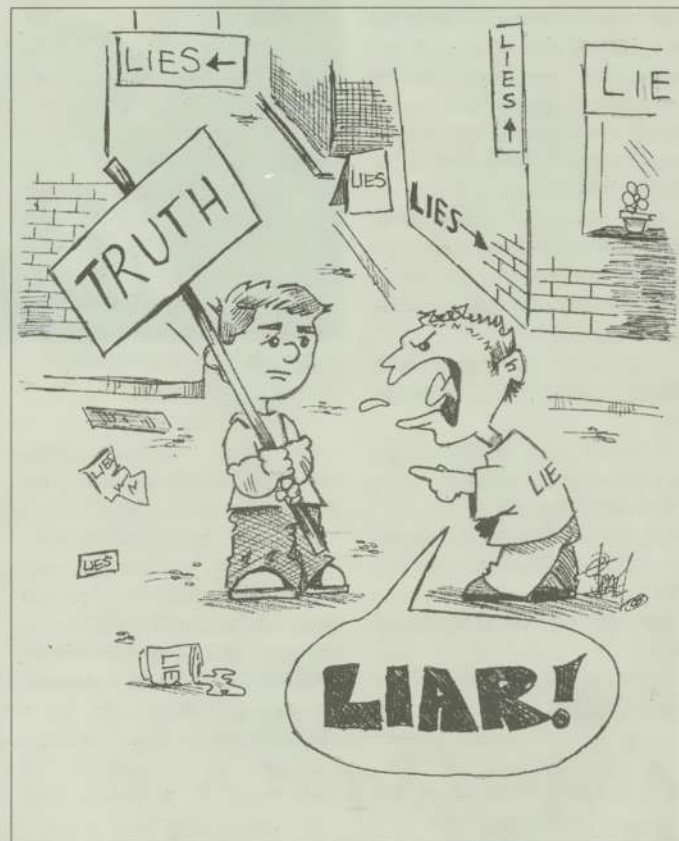
A popular and charismatic teacher can get away with much more than a teacher with whom you share no common bond. Often, the perception by the students seems to be based on their personal opinion of the teacher rather than the statement itself.

I think when we look for things to offend us, we will invariably find them. I think we

have to look beyond the words and attempt to see if there is truly any bias in practice. If a teacher is unfair in his treatment of students, yes, this is an issue. Should teachers cater to students with (as the article stated) "low tolerance level for bias?" I don't think so. Maybe this provides an opportunity to re-examine our personal biases and if in fact if it is the words themselves that bother us.

When we begin to worry and dissect every word in fear of offending someone. How far are we from ceasing to share or even have opinions that differ from the ones popularly held.

Sincerely,
Lori Sanders
Student



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