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# Editorial

## The question of prayer at graduation

In a time when the importance of diversity is stressed, the issue of prayer at graduation is constantly being debated. Prayers chosen and led by students, a practice implemented at Behrend, can be seen as free speech. The remarks are entirely chosen by the student, and a prayer isn't required, although most remarks include a prayer. To restrict this option may be seen by some as censorship. However, Penn State is a state funded school. Prayers in the guise of "student remarks" violate the basic principle of the idea of separation of church and state.

One of the occasions that a prayer may be present is at convocation, held during freshman orientation, which is considered mandatory for incoming students. To have a prayer at a

mandatory event is, in effect, to force students with different belief systems to listen to a prayer.

Freedom of religion is also freedom from religion. Prayer at a mandatory event violates this freedom from religion. Students making remarks at these ceremonies should have the courtesy to respect the freedom and beliefs of others. Thanking God is one thing, but leading and audience in prayer is entirely different. A personal thanks is not the same thing as a blatant practice of religious beliefs.

At a state funded school, such as Behrend, prayer does not have a place at obligatory functions like graduation. Students' thanks and good wishes need not include a prayer. It defies one of the most basic constitutional principles.

# It's the resurrection of Hillary Rodham Clinton

By Marie Cocco (c) 1997, Newsday

The hair is there. No lesser authority than Oprah has pronounced that Hillary Rodham Clinton has finally got it down, hair and all. And as Oprah goes, so goes the nation.

There was the first lady, reviled by the right as a threat to Middle America if not to motherhood itself, chatting up Oprah the other day with tales from the empty White House nest and talk of multivitamins. Members of the studio audience - those heartland homemakers who, we've been told, have everything to fear and nothing to gain from listening to Hillary Clinton - hung on every word.

They chuckled at her stories of hanging around the White House before Chelsea went off to college, trying to catch a "sighting" of her busy teen-ager. They applauded her description of how she methodically shielded her daughter from public scrutiny. They nodded when the first lady spoke of her concern about children, and asserted that when it comes to the many varieties and motivations of working families, "we ought to be more respectful of the choice parents make."

Finally, it seems, the nation is coming to terms with Hillary Rodham Clinton, just as the first lady has come to terms with the limits of her own role.

The hoopla surrounding her 50th birthday (her Oprah gig was part of the public celebration) has bathed her in the most flattering light she's ever enjoyed. A recent U.S. News and World Report poll showed 59 percent of the public looks favorably upon her, and 67 percent approve of the "job" she's doing. All of which begs the question.

Why now? Certainly, the absence of a campaign to provide a forum for the Clintons' ideological opponents helps, as does the first lady's decision to emerge from the self-imposed exile where she

took refuge after the humiliations of health care, Whitewater and assorted other missteps. Just as Nancy Reagan burnished her image with an antidrug campaign after she'd become known for fancy china and designer frocks, Clinton has undertaken a concerted public-relations effort this year. It's aimed at laying the groundwork for her to influence the public dialogue again - and not just with whispers in the president's ear.

Still, there has always been something elemental about the public's reaction to Hillary Rodham Clinton. It is imbued with emotions that escape the reach of even the most adept image-molders. These same, powerful forces are at work even now. The difference is that the first lady has learned to work within their constraints and use them to her advantage.

First, there is nothing that improves a professional woman's standing more than letting the men believe she recognizes and accepts the supremacy of testosterone. That's what Hillary Clinton has done.

Of all the political mistakes the Clintons made when they were new to Washington, the worst was allowing Hillary Clinton to share power openly with the president. Bill Clinton wasn't the least bit uncomfortable with this. But every other man in Washington was. And so were most fraternity brothers across the land. Now that the first lady has retreated from the policy-making nerve center to the safe periphery of "women's issues" like day care and international family planning, you can hear the sound of ruffled feathers falling back into place.

Second, there is nothing that boosts a political figure more than being in sync with the public's pulse on the issues. This is the unheralded secret of Hillary Rodham Clinton's recent success.

Last year, when Republicans were decrying her book, "It Takes A

Village," as a Communist tract, the public was eating it up. The book, which advocates greater community commitment to children and praises France's government-funded child-care network, was a best-seller for 20 weeks. This month, a flurry of new polls shows overwhelming public support for increased federal child-care funding and, yes, providing health insurance for all Americans.

There will be no grand solutions from the nation's chastened first lady. And anyway it's the president, she repeats reflexively, who proposes policy.

She told Oprah she wants to have a positive influence at the grassroots, the place to which we have sent her. It is left to those she touches there to turn her influence into power.

Cocco is a columnist for Newsday.

# Eye on Erie

## Diehl school teacher charged with harassment

by Kristi McKim  
features editor

Recently, the sleepy school of Diehl Elementary has been dealing with allegations of assault made by former students of Maria Read. She is currently under investigation for cruelty to first-graders who reported that she was pinching and hitting them during the first three weeks of this school year. According to one father, Read had left bruises on his daughter's left shoulder, right arm, and neck; and she had scratched her arm and shoulder. While these complaints are being investigated, Read is suspended without pay from the Erie School District.

This was Read's first year teaching at Diehl, though she had been employed with the district for the past 19 years. Prior to her position as first-grade teacher, she had taught at Wilson Middle School, Pfeiffer-Burleigh Elementary, Glenwood Elementary, East and Strong Vincent High, Grover Cleveland Elementary, and JoAnna Connell Elementary. Though she moved around quite a bit during her teaching career, Erie School District Superintendent Dr. James Barker claims that none of these moves were forced transfers.

According to recent reports, though, Read has been accused of student harassment during her employment at Wilson Middle School. Jamaal Stewart, now a sophomore at Edinboro University, made the latest accusation against Read, as he reported an encounter from April 1989. Apparently, Stewart was talking with his friends during class, and she ordered him to report to the office. When Stewart hesitated and questioned her authority, Read allegedly hit 13-year-old Stewart on his back and then pushed him into a door as he walked

out of her seventh grade classroom at Wilson Middle School. In 1989, Stewart reported this incident to the police, who charged Read with harassment.

These charges mysteriously disappeared; though Emma Cooper, Stewart's mother, who pressed the charges, never dropped the charges and was upset to learn that they had been dropped. District Justice Dominick DiPaolo, who was a detective sergeant with the Erie police in 1989, had taken numerous statements from the children in the classroom at that time; and they all reported the same story of Read's harassment.

Regardless of the circumstances surrounding the dropping of the charges, it seems that there was some bargaining behind closed doors which took place between the police department and the school district officials to hush up the situation and prevent a full blown scandal from erupting.

If this case had been properly dealt with at the time of its occurrence, then perhaps Read would not have been in such a position to harass her first graders this past year. Barker assures that "in the future, parents and the community should be confident that the first day an allegation is made, the Erie School District will respond to it, begin an investigation, and take appropriate action. The safety of our students is one of our primary concerns."

Certainly, one would hope so, since the school is funded by taxpayers' dollars; it surely would be not too great an expectation that the school district would give serious attention to and take sincere consideration of the quality of educators who are instructing the younger generation.

# Why not cash-for-contraception for crack moms?

By Patt Morrison (c) 1997, Los Angeles Times

Until the stock market bit off more than it could chew this week, the talk topic had been "that woman" - nobody could summon her name to mind - who is offering \$200 cash to any crack-addicted woman who got her tubes tied.

For the record, her name is Barbara Harris, and she lives in Southern California, where she and her husband have three teen-agers of their own and four younger adopted kids - half of the eight crack babies born to the same addict mom in Los Angeles County.

Also for the record, Harris is white and her husband is black, which may give her some purchase in the minds of those who are about to take a deep breath and holler racism. When her first son was born - the one who has won so many leadership awards - Barbara's mortified parents lied and told everyone he was Mexican. Years later, dying of cancer, Barbara's mother, with her last breaths, sorrowed that her grandson wasn't white.

After bringing up four crack babies, here is Harris' reasoning:

"When everyone's responsible for your children but you, that's wrong. It's a bigger picture than not wanting someone to have babies. They're having addicted babies ... the argument has been, this'll affect minority women. And I say, don't minority babies matter?"

"I'm glad we don't live in a country where you don't have rights, but my 6-year-old son has been force-fed drugs (as a fetus) and been shot (at

random, as the family was driving home one Fourth of July) because someone has the right to have a baby, and someone else has the right to have a handgun. There should be a clause - you have a right to do this IF ..."

We are not a country of moderation - not in ambition, not in appetite or attitude. Our national character is disinclined to half-measures.

When I lived in Britain, I was astonished to find paracetamol-codeine tablets sold over the counter; that could never happen here, where the FDA opted against a cholesterol-lowering drug for over-the-counter sales because Americans could not be trusted to be sensible about it. As one doctor testified, "I just ate at McDonald's, let me take this cholesterol drug" - this is the way people think."

The slippery slope is not our native terrain. We like the flat plains of parity or the mountaintops of principle. To take one step off the pinnacle is to slide to the bottom. Ban armor-piercing bullets one day, the National Rifle Association warns, and the next day there won't be so much as a BB gun left in the continental United States.

Now it's cash-for-contraception for crack mothers - and who's next on that slippery slope, we wonder immoderately: Drunk mothers? Teen mothers? Cancer mothers?

The stock market, after its scary swan-dive 10 years ago, put in trigger mechanisms to stop itself from panic-sliding all the way down the slippery slope. Can our judgment do the same?

To drive a car requires a license, and

passing a test to get that license. Until last year, you couldn't buy a can of pepper spray in California without watching a half-hour training video or taking a test. The manicurist who lacquers your fingernails requires 400 hours of training. Yet creating another human being demands nothing more than a working set of his-and-hers plumbing.

That last is a right; everything else is a privilege. For a government to set the terms of that right invokes the ugly history of the eugenics movement, of Hitler and "Lebensborn," of forced sterilization of "defectives."

No limitation on that right can pass constitutional muster. (What would a right-to-parent test look like, anyway? Could my folks pass? Could Jeffrey Dahmer's? Could Bill and Hillary?) But Harris' deal is voluntary, \$200 for sterilization, \$50 for Norplant, straightforward as a crop subsidy. Some call it an incentive, others call it a bribe. Family planners in India gave transistor radios to men who underwent vasectomies. Nowadays, we pay people to create babies; science and surrogacy contracts make babies who wouldn't be conceived otherwise. Why not the converse? (Optional add end)

A while back, I was talking to Carl Djerassi, the eminent Stanford University chemist, a "father" of the birth control pill and a pretty fine novelist, about paltry advances in birth control, and lamenting the unwanted infants abandoned in prom-night trash cans and neonatal wards.

In a tone both fanciful and wistful, he imagined a utopia where every youth of 16 makes copious deposits

in secure and free sperm banks, then gets a vasectomy. When he wants to be a father, the laboratory would make a "withdrawal," and then a "deposit" with the woman in question, guaranteeing that every child would be deliberately and not casually conceived.

I took it a step further: grow every fetus in a high-tech, bedside baby aquarium - warm, secure, out of reach of a too-hot curry dinner, a two-pack-a-day parent or a crack habit.

It won't happen, and it won't need to. Crack babies are coming of age. Any day now, one will handle this the American way: hire a lawyer and sue mom.

Morrison is a Los Angeles Times columnist and frequent commentator on National Public Radio's "Morning Edition."

