Let's talk about sex--the debate continues

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Lexington Park, MD- The controversy continues surrounding the planned teen Sex Education workshop at the Lexington Park Library May 21. Despite statements from the St. Mary’s County Commissioners and the St. Mary’s County Board of Trustees, opposition efforts are still underway.

The BayNet.com recently received a Letter to the Editor from Virginia (Cookie) Pontzer of Great Mills. Her letter included the following: “I believe our libraries fall under our Maryland Department of Education. Therefore, the same child protection policies for our public schools should apply to our community public libraries. To protect our community’s minors, no sex education talks should be allowed at the library because we don’t have the resources to guarantee the safety of the minors.”

The BayNet.com obtained a copy of the law pertaining to St. Mary’s County public libraries. According to the law: The governing body of each county may establish, and appropriate an amount to support, a county public library system free from political influence. Some have attacked commissioners claiming they’re hiding behind the law.

“They’re asking the commissioners to be moral police. We stand behind the law, we’re not hiding behind it. The library, for many years, has been the place where free thinking, free thought and learning can happen. You can have your opinion but you can’t silence someone because you disagree,” Commissioner John O’Connor stated.

“Maryland library doesn’t allow county commissioners to shut it down. I’m delighted the commissioners stand behind the library laws. I consulted with the American Library Association (ALA) and received advice about what the library can and cannot do. If we make sudden changes to meeting room policies, we’re opening ourselves up to a lawsuit,” stated Michael Blackwell, library director.

O’Connor continued saying he has no idea why people are still upset. “If there’s no criminal act being conducted, why is it such a big ordeal? It’s a voluntary class.” Non-profit organizations are permitted to use library meeting space for open door meetings. However, if a private citizen or group would like to pay for the space, they can do so and can then choose to close the doors to the public.

The entire controversy stems from initial plans for St. Mary’s County Library to co-sponsor a talk with certified sex educator Bianca Palmisano. “My talks are largely focused on clinical education and giving teens a safe space to ask questions without the watchful eye of parents,” she stated. After a public outcry over the library’s co-sponsorship of the workshop, the library’s Board of Trustees decided to cancel. That’s when the Southern Maryland Area Secular Humanists (SMASH) stepped in. Chapter Coordinator Samantha McGuire stated, “I feel the fact that the first planned workshop was canceled was homophobic and leaning toward Christian ideals. We felt it was censorship. I reached out to Bianca (Palmisano) and offered to host it. She said she would love to come and give the talk.”

When asked about some of the accusations made against her, Palmisano said she wants to set the record straight. “I’ve been accused of giving sexual instruction. That’s not true. Once you turn 18 you can go to classes.” She was also accused of being an atheist who hates Christians. “I’m not an atheist—I would be comfortable being identified as an agnostic. Even if I was an atheist, that’s my right and just because people don’t believe like you, doesn’t mean I can’t teach sex education.”

The BayNet.com also asked Palmisano about claims she’s a gay, pole-dancer and prostitution promoter, “I do identify as queer and I have a wife. I did train as a pole dancer for two years—for exercise. I don’t promote prostitution, I work with sex workers, IV drug users and the homeless. The big platform is to decriminalize sex workers. I don’t feel criminalizing them helps them and that’s my opinion.”

Palmisano said giving teens a safe space to have their questions answered is important. “I have open question policy and kids can write down questions. I will answer them and have a conversation about it. If someone asks, I’m going to tell them. I don’t like to tell kids there are questions they can’t ask.” However, Palmisano said she will not answer questions about her personal life.

The BayNet.com asked about accusations that parents couldn’t view the material ahead of time. “No one has asked to see material ahead of time. Any parents who want to discuss the course content to decide if the class is appropriate for their child can contact me directly.”

Palmisano provided The BayNet.com with talking points of her sex education workshop for high school students. “I cover STIs and contraceptives. We have a long conversation about consent. I discuss how to have conversations with your doctor. I would also be happy if people would delay their sexual experience as long as they can. It’s better for their emotional and physical health.”

Rich Olon, from Leonardtown and a member of the Faith-based community in St. Mary’s County, said he was pleased to hear Palmisano say that. “I agree with her 100 percent that teens should wait to have sex.” He went on to say he fully supports the First Amendment. “The majority of the faith community respects freedom of speech. We disagree with her message but we support the right to host the event,” Olon stated.

When it comes to members of the community still pushing for county commissioners to shut down the talk, Olon said that’s overreaching. “There comes a point when there’s a line you don’t want to cross. You don’t want to take away the rights of the constitution. You have to fight within the rights of the laws.”

Olon reiterated the fact the class is voluntary. “It’s up to the parents to decide if their child will attend. You can disagree with their version of sex education but it’s up to the individual parents.” Commissioner O’Connor agreed. “The parents are signing something allowing their children to attend. If this argument is about upholding morals and ethical values upon another group, they also have their ethics and their morals,” O’Connor stated.

As for receiving consent from the parents, that consent is required in two forms. “Parents have to give consent when signing up their teen for the class. They will be asked to sign a consent form the day of the workshop,” McGuire explained.

Some frustrated community members are also asking for the resignation or the firing of Blackwell, over the plans to co-sponsor the workshop in the first place. “I understand they’re upset but they need to consider our meeting room policies and know that we have very carefully reviewed them and I’m standing up for the library. I’m not going to resign over something that has to do with libraries,” Blackwell stated.
“It’s unfounded and it’s an overreaction,” O’Connor said. “We have more than 110,000 people in this county that the library serves. You have a small group upset about a class that’s volunteer and to request him to resign over that is ridiculous.”

Olon said he can understand why some made that request in the beginning. “I think if people wanted his resignation the first time around, I can understand that call to action. There was no permission required.” Since the library cancelled the first meeting, Olon said his opinion has changed. “Everything has changed now. The library has no authority to censor what’s going to be talked about in its meeting rooms and it is abiding by the rules.”

There are currently 12 teens registered for the workshop. Palmisano said she feels bad for the library. “I never meant to cause this strife.”

“She’s not to blame,” Blackwell said. “I want to set the record straight: I have been accused of working with secular humanists to promote liberal policies and that’s totally false. I have no affiliation with them, we don’t support or oppose them.” Blackwell continued, “This is the United States of America—land of the free and the brave. People are free to assemble to speak and talk and the library guarantees equal access. We can’t discriminate who gets to use meeting rooms. We’re delighted any group can be in our meeting rooms.”

St. John’s Youth Group has rented a room at Lexington Park Library May 14 to hold an alternative class for teenagers on abstinence. Blackwell said, “I’m glad they can also use the library. I’m proud to work for the library. The county has been very welcoming. I’m sorry this whole situation has angered some people and I hope they will still continue to use the library. If they have concerns we ask them to continue to voice them.”

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