"Yale Five" Challenge College Coed Dorms

August 26, 1998

Google Ads are provided by Google and are not selected or endorsed by Eagle Forum

Five Yale University students have had the courage to challenge the rule that requires students to live in coed dormitories, where many engage in casual sex without shame and most use coed showers and toilets. The dormitory environment features the open availability of sex manuals and condoms, and attendance at safe sex lectures is required of freshmen.

The "Yale Five," as the media have labeled them, assert that this policy infringes on their constitutional right to practice their religion, which includes an obligation to observe chastity, decency and modesty. Yale, on the other hand, contends that dorm living is "a central part of Yale's education."

The five students, who are Orthodox Jews, tried for more than 18 months to make a reasonable case to the university, but found officials recalcitrant. Observers find this curious because the absolutism of the rule is recent. The rule applies only to freshmen and sophomores, and exempts students who are married or age 21 or over.

The details of Yale's residency policy have varied over time, but until 1996, the rule applied only to freshmen, and Yale also exempted students living at home with their families in the New Haven area. The university has accommodated religious objections in other ways, such as by allowing students to use their meal plan in the kosher cafeteria of the privately-funded Jewish center, and by providing traditional metal keys to Orthodox students when they enter their dorms so they can avoid electronic card-keys on the Sabbath.

One of the Yale Five, Batsheva Greer, has older siblings who attended Yale using the local residence exemption, and she assumed she could follow the same pattern when she entered the university last year. She and her family were amazed at having their request rejected. Negotiations about the dispute with college officials continued for more than a year. One of the five students, Rachel Wohlgelrenter, went through a civil wedding three months before her planned religious ceremony in order to avoid the rule.

Two others paid the room fee of $6,850 for the 1996-97 school year, but lived elsewhere. By the time the second year of the dispute rolled around, the students declined to pay such a large fee for rooms they never entered.

The Yale Five secured the pro bono services of one of the country's most prominent attorneys, Nathan Lewin of Washington, DC, who filed suit on their behalf, alleging religious discrimination. On July 31, U.S. District Judge Alfred V. Covello dismissed the suit, saying that, "The plaintiffs could have opted to attend a different college or university if they were not satisfied with Yale's housing policy." On August 8, the students announced they would appeal. Lewin said, "Yale has discriminated against these students and they will continue to stand up for their rights."

While the Yale Five have made no effort to change university policy or dorm mores for others, arguing only for their own personal exemption on religious grounds, Wohlgelrenter noted: "This issue is not uniquely Jewish, it's a moral issue." Publicity about the case had turned the spotlight on the immoral environment in college dormitories, in which Yale is not unique.

The Yale Free Press accused the university of "a new pagan orthodoxy," stating that, "When Yale was a conservative place and liberals sought to change it for the better, Yale was willing to accommodate them. But now that Yale is an overwhelmingly liberal campus, we find that traditional groups that ask much less costly accommodations are denied."

A good sense of the dorm atmosphere can be gleaned from reading the student newspaper, the Yale Daily News, which published "Yalexicon: Your indispensable guide to understanding Yale Speak." The definitions include: "Couch Duty: Being forced to sleep on a common room couch because your roommate and his/her significant other want some time alone together."

"Sexile: Banishment from your dorm room because your roommate is having more fun than you." "Walk of Shame: When you find yourself in rumpled evening wear, walking to your dorm from someone else's room early in the morning."

While some students support the concept of coed living, others admit that the permissiveness in the dorms "sometimes makes them uncomfortable." One male student observed: "I'm a senior and have my own room, but I have to share a bathroom with three women. I'll be in there brushing my teeth and they'll come in and, well, it's kind of weird."

Some of the dorms have single-sex floors, but separation is never enforced, and mixing is expected. As another student put it: "If you don't participate, you're a weirdo, a sexile."

Another one of the Yale Five, Elisha Hack, said: "We object to the fact that you have men staying overnight on the women's floors; women staying overnight on the men's floors; and bathrooms that kind of get wishy-washy as to whether they're men's or women's."

The liberals, who are now the ruling class at Yale and most college campuses, preach the dogma of tolerance, diversity, and non-judgmental acceptance of all lifestyles. But, it seems, the traditional lifestyle of chastity and modesty is not acceptable. Tolerance and diversity don't extend that far.