

Trying to Stop Public School BSA Recruitment Assemblies

by Margaret Downey

Should a private discriminatory youth organization be allowed to conduct recruitment assemblies in a public school, during school hours, and with the help of teachers and administration? The answer is perfectly clear to those who advocate for and support non-discrimination policies in public schools. No child attending public school should be subjected to any type of bigotry, especially prejudices that are known and can be avoided.

Thanks to alert parents who contacted the Freethought Society (FS) in September 2014, concerned citizens became aware of such a situation taking place in the Octorara public school system. For many years, representatives of the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) have been allowed to conduct recruitment assemblies during the school day. Male students are escorted by teachers (and other school officials) to a venue on school grounds to hear the pitch.

FS representatives voiced concerns to Dr. Thomas Newcome, the Octorara School District Superintendent about the inappropriate endorsement of BSA recruitment assemblies. The recruitment effort entangles the school in a scenario where nontheist families are targeted as unwelcome. BSA membership rules prevent nontheists from participation as youth members, volunteers and participants.

Statistically, many families in the Octorara school district are potential victims as the number of Americans who do not identify with any religion continues to grow rapidly. Approximately 1/5 of the United States' population are religiously unaffiliated. A third of adults under the age of 30 are religiously unaffiliated. That is the highest percentage ever and was revealed by 2012 Pew Research Center polling.

Within the last five years, the number of unaffiliated adults has increased from about 15 percent to around 20 percent. Those percentages include more than 13 million self-described atheists and agnostics. That is nearly 6 percent of the United States public. Overall, 33 million people declare that they have no particular religious affiliation. For complete Pew survey information, please see the following link:

<http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>

BSA also discriminates against families who happen to include gay parents. While BSA's official membership policy allows the participation of youths under the age of 18 who think they are gay, no gay adult can volunteer or participate in BSA.

In early January 2015, the American Humanist Association (AHA) joined the discussion about how to convince the Octorara School District to stop allowing BSA to conduct assemblies on school grounds, during the school day, and using the assistance of teachers and school administrators to support the recruitment efforts.

Roy Speckhardt, the executive director of AHA suggested that I send him a list of zip codes in the Octorara School District so that they could alert AHA members that their tax dollars are being spent to assist the BSA (via use of time and facility). The zip code list is as follows: 19365, 19310, 19369, 19320, and 19350.

I extended the outreach plan to find more local voices of protest to additional national nontheist organizations. Several organizations cooperated and contacted their members in the Octorara School District. FS thanks AHA, the Freedom From Religion Foundation and the Center for Inquiry for their support and assistance. Dr. Newcome received many letters as a result, but he never acknowledged them or responded. Consequently, FS called for concerned citizens to testify at the Monday, April 20, 2015 Octorara School Board meeting.

In the meantime, on March 12, 2015, the Philadelphia Gay News published my comments about the Octorara BSA recruitment assemblies. With permission, that article is printed below:

Activists to Attend School Board Meeting

by Tim Cwiek

Several members of the Freethought Society, a nontheist organization, will attend an Octorara Area School District board meeting next month to protest on-campus Boy Scouts recruitment assemblies.

School officials allow the Scouts to hold recruitment assemblies in the district's elementary school, but Freethought members oppose the assemblies because the Scouts exclude LGBT adults and nontheist youths and adults.

"The Octorara public-school district shouldn't be giving preferential treatment to the BSA," said Freethought Society president Margaret A. Downey. "It's just common sense. Several parents are extremely concerned. We look forward to attending the April 20 meeting and appealing to school board members' sense of decency. The exclusionary policies of the BSA do damage, especially to impressionable youth. The on-campus BSA recruitment assemblies must end immediately."

The school board meeting is scheduled for 7:00 PM on April 20, 2015 at the Octorara Junior High School, 228 Highland Avenue in Atglen, Pennsylvania.

On April 16, 2015, Vice-Chair of the Camp Quest National Board wrote the following letter to members of the Octorara School Board:

Dear members of the school board,

I write you today in regards to the upcoming issue of Boy Scouts of America (BSA) recruitment in district schools.

This issue strikes close to my heart. As an Eagle Scout I felt the harm of discrimination in regards to the membership and employment policies of BSA. It is a long story, but it's a story that starts with a scout recruiter at at my public elementary school.

BSA claims to be a private organization, allowing them to discriminate in membership. At the same time they want to maintain public schools as a recruiting ground. In my case a Cub Scout recruiter was allowed on campus in uniform, and allowed to set up a membership drive during school hours. This included sending home flyers using school disbursement systems and even meeting space in the auditorium.

It goes without saying that the discriminatory policies of BSA were not included in the recruitment literature. Nor do I think I would of been able to understand them as an elementary school student. None of this stopped BSA from later firing me from my employment as an Aquatics Director at one of their camps. Nor did it stop them from teaching me and my fellow scouts that religious belief was an essential part of being a good scout and citizen.

BSA had a clear choice years ago to accept the benefits of being a public organization, but instead choose to forgo those benefits to gain ability to discriminate as a private organization.

When considering this issue please remember that BSA, time and again, stresses that they are not a public organization. They do not cater to the public and do not welcome the entire community that your schools represents.

In your considerations I urge you to suspend all support of BSA including recruiting, while they continue to discriminate.

Please feel free to contact me further for any clarifications or questions. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Neil Polzin

On Monday, April 20, 2015, I was joined by Glen Loev (the Vice-President of FS), Tom Schottmiller, John Stoltzfus and Jason Chesnet for the Octorara school board meeting.

During the public commentary portion of the meeting, I approached the microphone. As required and specified by the school board, I stated my name and my place of residence. The moment I said "Chester County," almost all of the 10 of the board members seemed to shout out in unison, "Out of the area. Commentary not allowed."

I said, "OK. Then I will just hand you my statement." I purposely made sure to hand out the papers to each board member even though I had to carefully step around audio/ visual electrical cords. This was important because I did not want any of the board members to claim they never received my statement. In anticipation of being silenced, Loev had combined his written statement with mine. Below is what we intended to say that night:

My Written Statement:

My name is Margaret Downey. I am the founder and president of the Freethought Society (FS).

FS is a watchdog nonprofit organization concerned with maintaining a wall of separation between religion and government and protecting nontheists from discrimination. We also advocate an end to negative stereotyping of the nontheist community.

I am here tonight representing FS members in the Octorara School District who are too frightened to address you in person. They fear losing their jobs and being subjected to community shunning — both of which are frequent consequences suffered by nontheists who dare to disclose their naturalistic worldview. These parents informed us in September 2014 that a private discriminatory youth organization, the Boy Scouts of America (BSA), are allowed to conduct recruitment assemblies in the Octorara School District.

The assemblies take place on the grounds of the public school, during school hours and school officials assist by bringing young and impressionable male students into the meeting venue. The reasons we object to the Octorara School District allowing BSA recruitment assemblies are:

** BSA is a private youth organization.*

** The organization has biased membership rules that prevent the participation of gays over the age of 18 and nontheists as either youth members or adult volunteers.*

** Local groups must abide by the Boy Scouts of America's national standards and are subject to losing their charters if membership rules are ignored.*

No child attending a public school should be subjected to any type of bigotry or discrimination, especially prejudices that are known and can easily be avoided. The Octorara School District has a sound non-discrimination policy in place, but allowing BSA recruitment assemblies to take place violates that policy.

By allowing BSA to stage recruitment assemblies on school grounds and during school hours, the Octorara School District is involved in an unethical scenario where nontheist families are targeted as unwelcome members of society.

To be clear, BSA's national policy and membership rules specifically prevent nontheists from participation as youth members, volunteers and participants. BSA also discriminates against families who happen to include gays, but

another FS representative will be address-ing that issue.

I am here to voice concern about protecting nontheists in particular. Based on recent statistics, many families in the Octorara school district are potential victims of discrimination by BSA.

The number of Americans who do not identify with any religion is growing rapidly. Approximately 1/5 of the public in the United States are religiously unaffiliated and a third of adults under the age of 30 are religiously un-affiliated. That is the highest percentage ever and was revealed in the polling data in 2012 by the Pew Research Center.

Within the last five years, the number of religiously un-affiliated adults has increased from about 15 percent to around 20 percent. Those percentages include more than 13 million self-described atheists and agnostics, or nearly 6 percent of the United States public.

Overall, 33 million people declare that they have no particular religious affiliation, but regardless of the statistics, no child should be targeted or made to feel like a second-class citizen.

If you are having difficulty sympathizing with discrimination against nontheists, imagine how you would feel if BSA rejected your son on the basis of the family's religious faith. When you think of us as your friends, neighbors and as equal citizens, you will see how harmful discrimination at the hands of BSA can be to your community.

Tonight, on behalf of those nontheists who do not feel safe identifying themselves as your fellow citizens, we formally request that the Octorara School Board cease their implicit promotion of BSA and no longer allow recruitment assemblies on school grounds, during school hours, aided by school personnel.

Statement by Glen Loev:

My name is Dr. Glen Loev. I am Vice President of the Freethought Society (FS) and appreciate the opportunity to make some brief comments about the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) being allowed to promote their organization to public school students during the school day. I am speaking for parents and teachers from the Octorara School district who have contacted our organization, but are apprehensive about addressing the issue in public.

You are no doubt aware that in 2013 BSA changed their policy vis-a-vis gay Scouts. Troops are now permitted to accept openly gay members, but only until Scouts reach the age of 18, at which time, regardless of their individual circumstances, they are forced out simply for being gay.

You might think that since public school students are almost all under the age of 18, there's no problem with promoting BSA in public schools from the perspective of "the gay issue." That's not the case.

BSA's official current policy forbids gay and lesbian parents of Scouts from participating in the organization. The BSA position has not changed since they announced it in a press release on June 7, 2012:

"While the Boy Scouts of America does not proactively inquire about the sexual orientation of employees, volunteers, or members, we do not grant membership to individuals who are open or avowed homosexuals..."

Imagine how you would feel if you were a young boy in Octorara Junior High School, and found out that your mom or dad would not be allowed to volunteer with your troop if the national organization found out that your mom or dad was gay.

It should be obvious that all parents of Scouts who would like to volunteer to help with their children's troop activities should be allowed to do so.

My son, Noah, is a junior at Harriton High school in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. When he was in 6th grade, he came home with brochures and an application form from BSA that had been handed out in school. He was excited about it, since some of his friends were planning to join.

It was difficult and painful for my husband and me to explain to Noah that BSA would not accept him since he's from a nontheist family. Also, BSA would not allow us, his parents, to participate because we are a gay couple, even though we have been together for over 30 years, have raised two children and are legally married.

It is highly likely that there are students in the Octorara School District who are from nontheist families, and/or have gay parents. Do not send a message to these students that their parents, their families are inferior, and that it is OK to discriminate against them.

Allowing BSA to hold promotional meetings in public school during school hours, with the assistance of teachers, puts an official stamp of approval on BSA policies and rules

— the positive things that they do and stand for, but also their hurtful, discriminatory policies. Not intentionally, but effectively, you are condoning discrimination against gay people.

We urge you not to support any group, including BSA, that discriminates against nontheists, gays, or any category of people. Until BSA changes its membership policies, please do not allow them to hold promotional assemblies in the Octorara public schools during school hours.

By taking this principled stand, you will be sending a message to BSA that could help them to change their policies, and be welcoming to all boys, and their families, who would like to participate in scouting.

Statement by John Stoltzfus:

I am proud to have received my diploma here at Octorara. I feel this has been a great place to earn my education, and I believe it is an honorable institution, which is why I'm frankly baffled that Octorara continues to go against the First Amendment of the United States by allowing Boy Scouts of America (BSA) assemblies that are discriminatory, especially since, if I'm not mistaken, the issue has been brought to the attention of the Board before.

In many respects BSA is an admirable organization, but it does clearly discriminate against those who do not share the belief that a god exists. One cannot become a member unless they swear an oath to a god.

Whether you share that belief or not, it is clear that the BSA is exclusive and has no place on public school grounds that are here to accommodate everybody: students from diverse backgrounds with differing beliefs.

As an atheist I often hear from people that I cannot be moral without the unsubstantiated belief in the existence of a deity. This is a nonsensical, false notion that I have struggled with particularly as a young man. For Octorara to promote a private organization that shares in this prejudicial view and disseminates it to the young men of this generation is dishonorable.

The problem is easily resolved by simply not allowing the BSA to have assemblies here. Let BSA recruit elsewhere, not in a public school like ours.

After Stoltzfus spoke, several residents addressed the school-sponsored BSA recruitment assembly issue. A recording of the statements was not available at the time I wrote this article. To be accurate, an article specifically about the commentary will be published in the next newsletter (July/August 2015 issue).

All community speakers, including school board members, were in favor of allowing BSA to continue conducting recruitment assemblies on school grounds, during the school day and using the assistance of teachers and school personnel. We anticipated such a reaction, but our goal of establishing a public record of our concerns was accomplished. Until that night, school board members and the superintendent had refused to acknowledge correspondence and have not responded to any questions or even media interviews.

FS representatives are on record as sending a warning about possible school entanglement with BSA bias membership rules. If they continue to ignore their own anti-discrimination policy and do nothing to prevent a family from harm, a lawsuit is sure to result. The board is more liable in such a situation because they had every opportunity to prevent a harmful situation. FS warnings are intended to encourage the Octorara school board to do everything possible to avoid prejudicial situations and to, of course, avoid any legal actions. Board members have a fiscal responsibility to taxpayers. Wasting public school money on attorney fees is a disservice to taxpayers, students and teachers. Taxpayer money should be spent on teacher salaries, books, maintenance, educational programs and so many other services that provide equal opportunities for all students and personnel.

The day after the April 20th board meeting, I spoke to a well-respected business man who lives in the Octorara school district. He conveyed support for what FS is doing and said that we need to continue our objection to the BSA recruitment assemblies. If this person goes public, his business would surely suffer, as evidenced by the reactions of the board members and commentary on local blogs. The discrimination issue must be addressed by willing members of the community as FS representatives are considered "outsiders."

FS seeks more commentary from the public. Those who want to send an email to the school superintendent can do so at the following address:

Dr. Thomas Newcome tnewcome@octorara.org