

eliminating racism empowering women

ywca

EXHIBIT 6
DATE 3/7/05
SB 198

Good Afternoon Madam Chairperson and members of the House Education Committee.

My name is Kathleen Harrington. I am the Executive Director of the Young Women's Christian Association of Helena.

I am testifying in support of SB 198. The Young Women's Christian Association is the oldest women's organization in the United States. It is celebrating 147 years of service to women and families. It has a proud history of promoting equality and the elimination of discrimination. However, recently it had lost sight of its mission. It had chosen services over advocacy. It was so busy attending to the victims of abuse or attending to the everyday needs of its clients; it forgot the mission of advocacy.

According to the National YWCA CEO, Peggy Sanchez Mills, "We lost sight of our mission. The YWCA has provided so many wonderful services over the years, but we have to return to advocacy. And one of the things we want to do is help girls understand that being called awful names is not acceptable. They've become numb to the words, and we want to help girls feel comfortable saying, I am an important person. I am somebody."

The YWCA wants not just girls becoming sensitive to the power of discrimination. We want all children to become aware that there are certain groups that are currently being targeted. Until we assure that known groups are being protected, we cannot protect all children.

The YWCA provided me with a strong message about how we need to address certain issues before we can move forward. The new logo of the YWCA is "eliminating racism, empowering women." Many of the local Associations wondered why the elimination of racism was the first item in the logo. We all knew that we were working to empower women and many, if not most, of our programs were centered on that part of the mission. However, many associations did not have current programs dealing with racism and although the YWCA was a leader in desegregation, it had not focused on that issue for a long time. Even associations with strong black membership questioned the change. When I heard the answer, I was struck by its simplicity. "You cannot empower all women if you don't eliminate racism." If you only focus on the larger picture, you will fail to notice that some individuals are not being empowered. If you don't focus on the individuals who are being targeted, then you will not eliminate the problem.

I know that you will hear about "local control" and "we are already doing that". Well I worked for the Board of Public Education in the late 80's when accreditation standards were being revised and I can remember hearing over and over, "If it ain't broke, then don't fix it." What they were doing wasn't working but they disliked change more than anything else. There were some local districts not wanting to utilize distance learning options because it would expose the children to places outside the community. Since the children were going to stay in the community, they didn't need to know those things.

Public education was based on the need to have an informed electorate. By not asking for some uniformity in providing information on the very basics of civil discourse, we are short-changing our children and our country. Bullying does not just affect the victim, it also is inappropriate training for the bully and poor modeling behavior for those witnessing it.



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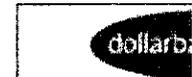
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Then she read it, and when she saw the word "bitch" she felt a rage that could scare away thunder.

Then she sat down and wrote the boy a letter.

"I am distressed with the language you used," she wrote. "These aren't words of respect. If this language is used again, then the next conversation is with your parents."

Her daughter fumed.

The boy apologized.

And Danforth, who is executive director of the YWCA of Greater Cleveland, found herself swept up in the cause.

This week, the national YWCA launched a new ad campaign aimed at young adults who watch MTV, MTV2 and BET networks. One ad, titled "Unspoken," addresses subtle forms of racism in everyday life. The other ad, "Little Girls," is enough to make a parent weep.

Visually, the 30-second spot is a celebration of the whimsy and playfulness of young girls, but the soundtrack — gleaned from rap, hip-hop, pop and country music — is an assault:

Just another ho . . .

Bitch you know I love you . . .

You cheat and you lie . . .

You don't have to listen to today's music to know the language of love is changing in younger circles. Just visit a high school or talk to teenage girls.

If you dare.

"Parents don't have a clue how frequently these words are used," Danforth said. "This kind of behavior crosses all social, racial and economic lines. And think of the impact on girls. When you start as a little girl absorbing this devaluation, think of the impact later. Think, for example, how it can set her up for domestic violence later: If you can call me a bitch, you can slap me, too.' "

The YWCA is 147 years old this year. It is a proud organization with even prouder members, which I learned the hard way once when I mistakenly called it the YMCA in front of my mother-in-law, a longtime YWCA activist.

"Please," she said, squeezing my arm a tad too tightly, "please don't ever make that mistake again."

This new campaign signals a return to the YWCA's roots, when it was a leading advocate for women and civil rights.

It's time.

"We lost sight of our mission," said CEO Peggy Sanchez Mills. "The YWCA has provided so many wonderful services over the years, but we have to return to advocacy. And one of things we want to do is help girls understand that being called awful names is not acceptable. They've become numb to the words, and we want to help girls feel comfortable saying, I am an important person. I am somebody.' "

The YWCA's laudable efforts don't let parents off the hook. Nobody is better poised to help girls discover their value in the world than the adults raising them.

Danforth urges us to start talking sooner rather than later.

Aim for a chat, she says, not God-as-my-witness theatrics begging for a back shot of Atlanta burning.

"With my own daughter, I had to get away from lecturing mode to conversational mode, when we're not arguing about something," she said. "We were watching a sitcom and the man referred to that bitch.' I said, I can't believe he just said that.' It gave us an opening."

Of course, there's someone else who needs a talking to, and that's any boy who thinks it's OK to call a girl names we wouldn't use on a dog.

There are lines, and parents ought to draw them, but a lot of times they don't.

It takes a lot of courage for a girl to draw her own line in the dirt and say, "Uh-uh. Not me. Not ever."

It's up to us to help her find it.

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Bullying: You Don't Have To Take It Anymore

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