

Carnegie-Mellon Admits “Mistake” After League Threatens Suit

On April 19th, Pittsburgh's Carnegie-Mellon University admitted that it had made “a mistake” in charging student Patrick Mooney with harassment. The charge was made after Mooney conveyed to a visiting professor his outrage over the posting of a highly offensive portrait of John Cardinal O'Connor by a student organization.

The poster, which featured a picture of John Cardinal O'Connor with the inscription “Know Your Scumbags,” was posted by the gay campus organization, cmuOUT.

Mooney was also charged with the offense of removing one of the unauthorized posters. He did in fact take one down, but only in order to show it to administrators.

Mooney was initially placed on “disciplinary probation.” CMU has now reversed its sentence by downgrading the penalty to a “disciplinary warning” and has promised that upon Mooney's expected graduation this May, it will remove any mention of this from his records.

This was not Mooney's first run-in with gay and lesbian politics on the CMU campus. In 1991, he was victimized for his refusal to wear a pro-lesbian button during the in-service training period for resident assistants. Mooney, a Roman Catholic, cited religious convictions for his refusal to wear the button, but was nevertheless stripped of his resident assistant status resulting in a substantial loss of financial assistance.

The Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, which had threatened a lawsuit against the university for the current

poster incident, was pleased by the decision. Commenting on this was Catholic League president Dr. William A. Donohue:

"We are pleased that CMU came to its senses and found that Mooney was not guilty of 'harassment' for merely stating his objections to vile and bigoted anti-Catholic propaganda. By bringing charges of harassment against a student for the mere exercise of his constitutional right to freedom of speech, CMU placed itself in very unseemly company. Free speech is central to liberty and no category of speech is deserving of more protection than political discourse. This is especially true of speech that is conveyed in a temperate and respectful fashion, as was the case with Mooney.

"The reduction of charges for removing one of the posters marks progress. However, it is still fair to wonder whether any penalty would have been forthcoming if the vicious poster in question had offended the sensibilities of gays instead of Catholics. The fact that CMU still seeks to muzzle the free speech of Mr. Mooney by denying him the right to discuss this matter indicates that tolerance and free speech are nothing more than empty platitudes at CMU, at least when it comes to Catholics.

"The Catholic League is pleased that it did not have to seek justice in the courts for Mr. Mooney. And it is especially pleased that Mr. Mooney's record will bear no imprint of this affair once he graduates. But the Catholic League will not be satisfied until CMU officials are fully sensitized to the pain that Catholics feel when persons like Cardinal O'Connor are viciously portrayed by unrepentant bigots. The time is ripe for CMU to introduce campus workshops on Catholic-bashing; from the looks of things, they will need a very large conference room to accommodate the overflow crowds that need to attend. The Catholic League will continue to monitor CMU's treatment of Mr. Mooney until he graduates and will not shy away from going to court if further instances of injustice are forthcoming."