

The Stand

HOT FLASHES: VOLUME 1, ISSUE 2, SPRING 1994

Librarians much prefer reading to the “infantry” rather than becoming the infantry in a cultural war. In April 1993, teachers and librarians respected by students and parents were suddenly accused of obscenity and anti-family, anti-Christian pornography. A pre-digested list of “dirty” language cut and pasted out of context and in violation of copyright was mailed to Hughes Junior High parents. Shelves of books which had served students without remark for a decade became “filth” overnight. Librarians opened our morning papers to find ourselves accused of plotting to put *Playboy* in school libraries. The same lie was distributed by the Cindy Hochstetler group in fliers by the ream at kids’ soccer games and echoed in letters in the *Bismarck Tribune*.

Concerned parents generally do not force a private agenda for their own children on the children of others. The American Library Association recognizes that not all expressions of concern are a censorship attack. But when a hidden political agenda is driving the censorship attempt, then real trouble begins.

Unaware that an ambush was commencing, Bismarck’s librarians and teachers were overwhelmed by negative publicity, becoming grist for TV sound bites, front page headlines, newspaper editorials, anonymous personal attacks broadcast on Bismarck’s radio talk shows, harassment calls, threats from Hochstetler and followers, intimidation of our own children, screaming rebukes at parent-teacher conferences, sneers in meetings, denigration of our professionalism and religious faith, and letters to the

editor by the score. Since our previous claim to the spotlight mostly involved photo ops with *Mother Goose*, the experience was harrowing.

Library activity soon resembled the Salem witch hunt more than the joys of reading. Novels were pilloried on the basis of title alone. *Sex Education*, a work that has received *Library Journal* stars as a work of exceptional merit, was challenged. Self-appointed book critic Cindy Hochstetler admitted that she had only skimmed it. Likewise, her cohort Sam Freshwater prowled the schools and sat in classes seeking “evidence,” which he freely interpreted and rushed to the newspaper.

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Freshwater stoked the controversy, denouncing a comment about horror genre authors by the Simle Junior High librarian. With Hochstetler’s help, he tried to leap-frog school board policy and ban all Stephen King books from the district without having read a single title. Since he could not have possibly judged these works for himself, who is feeding him lists of allegedly ob-



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BY VAL MOREHOUSE.

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LIBRARIANS STOOD UP FOR
INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM.

scene books? Our junior high schools were becoming a toolbox for the agenda of the religious right. Classic red herrings of book challenges, personal attacks and sensational lies were used to divert attention from the real issues.

And the prize? A school board majority, control of curriculum and the minds of your child and mine. In *Spiritual Warfare: the Politics of the Christian Right* (1989, p. 240), Sara Diamond describes the now familiar tactics--"the intentional use of media or information to impact individual or collective action," including 'lying,' distortion, hyperbole and mystification of objective reality to perpetuate its political and religious ideology."

Manufactured complaints planted at each board meeting followed the book challenges, as the real objective of the challenges emerged: not book removal, but the cynical creation of controversy as a vehicle to gain name recognition and political power. Red herrings guaranteed column inches to an unknown like Hochstetler, who parlayed notoriety into a school board seat.

"Another policy we could use as a guide is actually ND State Law, Chapter 12.1-27.1. It states that a person is guilty of a Class C felony, if, knowing of its character, the person disseminates obscene material. These teachers and librarians are disseminating obscene materials to our children. The penalties for violating this state law are steep! Now wouldn't it be something to see a teacher or librarian being charged with this crime?" -- *Cindy Hochstetler, from her testimony read Aug. 2, 1993.*

Faced with an assembly-line controversy, librarians and teachers could either capitulate or take action. "Will I **stand for something, or for nothing?**" we asked. We supported each other and resisted colleagues of lesser courage who whispered, "Dump the

books -- give up -- keep quiet." We chose action, although the specter of sudden unemployment rose like a skunk's tail. Hochstetler's first act after election was to arrive with a fistful of reprimands for the

personnel files of librarians who defended challenged materials, and teachers who used instructional methods with which she disagreed.

Unsuccessful with that, she moved a "new" book reconsideration policy that would remove teachers and librarians as the first step, and end the decision-making power of the review committee

which included citizens. Next, she moved to amend a 19th century purity clause from the Century Code into the text and library selection policy, and to remove from it a preamble supporting democracy. Then she proposed "citizens' reading committees" to read books before selection, a ban on R-rated movies in the schools (*Schindler's List? 1984?*) and instant removal of any challenged title from the shelf *before* reconsideration.

Thoroughly alarmed, educators, authors, parents, and interested citizens joined to work for First Amendment rights. "Hope for the best, but prepare for the worst" became standard procedure as Hochstetler stormed into the Solheim teachers' lounge to tear down a meeting notice, while we prepared for a classic censorship case and researched the hidden agenda behind her attacks.

What is needed now is public information and public exposure. **Who are these book banners? What viewpoint do they espouse? With whom do they align locally and nationally?** And what is their connection to Mel and Norma Gabler, Texas censorship artists who produce and distribute pre-digested lists of "forbidden" words and quotes out of context?

In January '94 Hochstetler cohort Steve Cates handed literature to the school board from the Berean League (anti-First Amendment) and the Eagle Forum (anti-OBE and pro-school board takeover movement). In March, the *Intelligencer* documented a visit



to Bismarck by a field director from Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition, and in April, aided by a mailing out of Virginia Beach, VA, the local group formed. With Ron Shaw of LDDS Communications as organizer, the Coalition is preparing a voter phone tree to help the "team" win a majority on the school board.

Shouldn't the public be told that in summer/fall 1993, Hochstetler published a pro-censorship article in the *Son Times*, an unsavory, extremist tabloid out of Valley City/Fargo? Another tabloid writer, a Washington, D.C. employee of a Lyndon LaRouche organization, held anti-OBE meetings in Bismarck which were attended by Department of Public Instruction employees. He also organized a drop of leaflets full of accusations of satanic activities, drug use, and child abuse, slandering Bismarck educators. Only the neo-Nazis produce worse hate literature. Are these the associations and agendas Bismarck needs represented on our school board?

Hochstetler has now succeeded in restricting students' access to borrowing from the Bismarck-Mandan on-line library catalog and access to databases available via the national information superhighway and the Internet, as well as interlibrary loans. What's next? Are librarians an endangered species? Is education? The answer is in the voting booth June 14th, where the "team" of Hochstetler and Maguire is running against James Miller and Marcia Olson (4-year terms), and Hochstetler "team" member Patrice Dietz is running against Bill Lockwood and Sonna Anderson (2-year terms).

Let our teachers teach. Let librarians instill a love of reading and learning. Help put an end to the hostility and animosity that is turning our schools into battlegrounds. Don't even *think* of sitting this one out. **Remember, Hochstetler won by one vote.**



Support teachers and librarians on the front lines by joining *Public Education: The Public Trust*. Call 258-3526 or 222-4852.

HERE'S WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- Help organize "get out the vote" calls.
- Make corrections to distortions you see or hear in the news.
- Protest unethical use of broadcast media.
- Condemn intolerance and support a positive approach to education in letters to the editor.
- Support positive candidates with dollars, signs, and work.
- Research and reveal the hidden alignments.
- Vote June 14th and bring five friends.

"Book banners, after all, insist that the entire community should see things their way, and only their way. When a book is banned, a whole set of ideas is locked behind the assertion that there is only one valid set of values, one valid set of beliefs, one valid perception of the world." -- Stephen King, *Bangor Daily News*, March 20, 1992.*

****Among the books challenged by Cindy Hochstetler were nine novels by Stephen King.***

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