

# ACLU: Federal chastity program ringed with religion

By Cynthia L. Cooper  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

NEW YORK (WOMENS E-NEWS)—The Silver Ring Thing is a live three-hour, high-tech sound, light and video show complete with actors and comedy sketches with a stated mission to impress teens to promote teen chastity and so-called Christian values.

The mobile shows—set up in churches, conference centers and other venues around the country—culminate with teens pledging abstinence until they present a silver ring that symbolizes their celibacy to their spouse on their wedding day. They also sign a covenant agreeing to follow “biblical standards.” Teens who don’t want to participate in the religious testimonials that are part of the ceremony are allowed to leave the room.

## Expulsion

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tional and lifelong success,” he said.

One program that has helped young children make the adjustment to entering school is Head Start. Created in 1965, Head Start is the most successful, longest-running, national school readiness program in the United States. It provides comprehensive education, health, nutrition, and parent involvement services to low-income children and their families. More than 21 million preschool aged children have benefited from Head Start.

But for some, programs are not enough. Jawanza Kunjufu, head of Chicago-based African-American Images, which publishes and distributes books that promote self-esteem, collective values, liberation and skill development, believes there are also cultural differences that contribute to expulsion at such an early age.

“Without knowing the makeup of the staff, my first point is that teachers simply do not allow for gender differences and so the child that has the greatest energy is going to be African-American male children. They’re going to have the shortest attention span, the greatest energy and less maturation,” Kunjufu said. “The other thing to remember, especially at the pre-school level is almost 99.9 percent of the teachers are female.”

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Of the 3.5 million teachers, approximately 861,000 (25 percent) are

The \$15 silver rings that teens are encouraged to buy for the ceremony are inscribed with a biblical reference of 1 Thessalonians 4:3-4, which reads “God wants you to be holy, so you should keep clear of all sexual sin. Then each of you will control your body and live in holiness and honor.”

Photographs of Silver Ring Thing events in newsletters and on its Web site depict a majority of female teens in the audiences.

The program is operated by the John Guest Evangelistic Team, based in Sewickley, a suburb of Pittsburgh, Pa. Guest, a crusading evangelical minister influenced by Rev. Billy Graham and who is now based at Christ Church at Grove Farm in Sewickley, is a frequent speaker to groups such as the Promise Keepers.

“The ministry of John Guest and his team is to call our world to Christ,” reads a passage of the group’s April 2004 newsletter. “The Silver Ring Thing is now the primary outreach.”

The same newsletter mentions Jesus Christ 17 times in eight pages.

“Who would have ever thought we would see the day when promoting sexual abstinence among students would become an opportunity to communicate the Good News of the Gospel?” the newsletter asks.

The American Civil Liberties Union and others are apparently wondering the same thing.

On May 16, the American Civil Liberties Union issued the first direct challenge to the extensive Bush abstinence campaign when it sued the U.S. Department of

Health and Human Services for mingling religious and governmental messages in the case of The Silver Ring Thing. The ACLU cited promotional materials like the Guest Team newsletter as some of its evidence in the suit.

The lawsuit was filed in federal district court in Massachusetts, one of the states where The Silver Ring Thing operates.

“People are surprised to learn that taxpayers are underwriting programs that ask students to accept Christ in the lives,” said Julie Sternberg, a senior staff attorney for the Reproductive Freedom Project of the ACLU in New York.

“The Department of Health and Human Services only needs to do 30 minutes of research to find out that the program has religious con-

tent. The funding of The Silver Ring Thing suggests whatever enforcement mechanisms the government has in place are highly inadequate.”

Critics charge that abstinence-only education programs are turning into fountains of gold for religious and evangelical organizations as the Bush administration pours hundreds of millions of dollars into chastity programs for teens and singles.

In fiscal year 2005 alone, the federal government used three separate initiatives to grant \$167 million to abstinence-only-until-marriage programs.

In fiscal year 2004, the range of funds distributed to states ran from a state high of \$12.3 million to programs in Texas to \$6 million in Illinois, according to analysis released in March by the

Sexuality Information and Education Council of the U.S., a policy organization in Washington, D.C. President Bush has asked for another \$39 million for 2006.

In 1988, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in a 5-4 decision that government funding of abstinence education must be limited to institutions that are not “pervasively” religious and programs that eliminate religious indoctrination. At the time, the government spent \$4 million on abstinence education for the entire country.

“At first, there was a stream of federal dollars,” said Sternberg. “The stream has become a raging river.”

The Silver Ring Thing has received over \$1 million in federal abstinence-only funds in the past three years.

Denny Pattyn, founder  
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*“If your child is disciplined, he’s taught to respect all adults. Secondly, if your child is only being disciplined with a belt and schools are not allowed to use it what are schools to do?”*  
—Jawanza Kunjufu

men, compared to 259,000 (75 percent) women. Only 6.2 percent (approximately 217,000) are Black men.

Kunjufu, although disappointed, is not surprised that the study also found that boys were expelled at a rate more than 4.5 times that of girls.

“You have teachers who feel overwhelmed by the student-teacher ratio. In pre-school they try to keep the ratio 12-to-1 or 15-to-1, but with budgetary cuts it’s possible that you can have one teacher, 20 students and a teacher’s assistant once or twice a week,” he explains. “For a teacher, Black, White, male or female the ideal child is the one that is quiet and can sit still for long periods of time working independently on ditto sheets. If you have two boys that are fighting, pushing, hollering, screaming and demanding your attention, it’s human nature to want to rid yourself of those two boys.”

Lynson Beaulieu, with the D.C. based National Black Child Development Institute, agrees.

“It’s a very complex situation. I think we have a combination of children with

very challenging behaviors and we have teachers that aren’t trained to positively manage the challenging behaviors,” she said. “Challenging behaviors could mean being aggressive, hitting other children, striking out at teachers, biting, crying, and children who have other kinds of issues like disabilities, children who are impacted by alcohol and drugs and most programs really don’t have the support services they need in order to know how to support children in those environments.”

Beaulieu believes that in order to alleviate problems in the classroom, parents and teachers must work together.

“Parents play a big role. Sometimes we have some very young parents and parents who don’t have the support of extended family and strong support systems—it can be very stressful. Sometimes our parents are very poor, so they are without resources, they are often undereducated and may not have had good relationships with school themselves,” she explains. “They feel very challenged by their child’s challenging behaviors as

well.”

Beaulieu says it’s very difficult to talk to parents about their children—especially if the news is not good news. She also says that teachers have a hard time engaging parents in conversations about improvement plans for the children and the children suffer because of it. “You can’t expect the school to work on the problem without the family also working on the problem as well.”

Kunjufu, who has written several books about Black male children in the education system, also blames parents for not recognizing their child’s needs.

“How children are being socialized is also a factor. Unfortunately, in many Black homes, when someone hits you, you hit them back. In school, if someone hits you, you’re supposed to tell the teacher. We have to resolve this school culture versus broadband culture,” he explains. “If your child is disciplined, he’s taught to respect all adults. Secondly, if your child is only being disciplined with a belt and schools are not allowed to use it what are schools to do? We have a dilemma.”

Discipline and cultural issues aside, Gilliam incoming director of Yale’s Edward Zigler Center for Child Development and Social Policy recommends that children not be expelled without ensuring that alternative services has been accessed.

“When we fail to provide these supports, we place children and their families in a very difficult situation—

where some children are bounced from one program to the next and parents may end up viewing their child as an educational failure well before kindergarten,” he says.

He adds, “We also place teachers in a very difficult situation. As a former public school teacher, I know that

no teachers want to give up on a child—especially not one who only learned to talk a year or two ago. Without supports in place, these prekindergarten teachers... are forced to decide between the good of the individual child and the good of the class. And that’s not fair to these teachers either.”

## Closing

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D.C. Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton (D) has gone on record as opposing the closing, noting the loss of 5,360 jobs and the fact that “the flagship Army medical facility has been a part of the community since 1909 and treats 16,000 patients a year, including injured soldiers, veterans, congressman and presidents.” Norton spokeswoman Doxie McCoy said the congresswoman would be holding meetings with Walter Reed officials about the fate of the property.

D.C. Mayor Anthony Williams (D) opposes the closing and dislikes the fact that D.C. officials have had little input. “I believe the decision to close Walter Reed had not been thought out,” Williams said. “Now I learned that the military is not even holding a hearing in Washington to hear from District residents about this proposal.”

“Whether Walter Reed remains open or not, it is critical that the military engages in a dialogue with District officials and residents so that whatever happens at any of the affected installations is in the best interest of the city.”

While Bolling Air Force Base, the Naval District Washington and the Potomac Annex are scheduled to lose jobs, the lion’s share of job losses will come from Walter Reed. The site is considered prime real estate because of its acreage, its location off of a major avenue and the paucity of land for retail and large-scale development in the city. President Bush has issued a directive that any land the federal government does not need in the District should be given to the city.

Fenty, in a May 19 letter to Francis J. Harvey, secretary of the Army, requested that the U.S. Army transfer the property to the District’s jurisdiction if Walter Reed is closed.

James Wright and Velencia Mohammed writes for Afro Newspapers.