God Is Alive And Well In Rapides Parish

BY SUZIE BUTLER

Louisiana’s law allowing voluntary prayer sessions in public schools was ruled unconstitutional in recent months, yet many schools are continuing to let the students pray. The schools in our neighboring Rapides Parish certainly are, due to the Rapides Parish School Board, unanimously adopting a resolution on April 4, 1981, which allows public school students to participate in a voluntary prayer plan.

The Rapides Parish School Board has just received national news coverage from such places as CBS News and The Washington Post due to their decision and continuing implementation of voluntary school prayer. This national coverage was spurred by a similar case where the Louisiana’s American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) challenged Jefferson Parish’s one-minute school prayer sessions. In August of 1981, the Circuit Court ruled the voluntary prayer sessions in Jefferson Parish unconstitutional.

Since the sex education controversy at Central Elementary basically stems from the same issue, excluding God from public schools, this prompted the Gazette to travel to Alexandria for a look at how they responded to the Supreme Court, the law, and the voice of the people. The Gazette conducted an exclusive interview with the Rapides Parish School Board member A.M. Martin who was author of the parish’s school prayer plan. Martin represents approximately 16,000 constituents in his district, from the 135,000 people in Rapides Parish. According to Martin, he is also representing 14 different religious denominations within his district and the majority of his constituents want voluntary prayer in the schools.

His uniquely composed resolution calls “for schools to allow any or all students wishing to enter into communication with any Supreme Being that the student do so at the beginning of each school day, by groups, classrooms, or individually.” Martin explained that he tried to word the guidelines so they would be impossible for any court to throw it out on constitutional grounds. He went on to state that sources say the ACLU has already contacted the Rapides Parish School Board for a copy of this resolution. “I’m afraid they are going to have a mighty hard time finding this resolution unconstitutional,” Martin said.

Martin stated his reasons for introducing this resolution to the school board, “We are having a hard enough time in the schools as it is. The majority of voters that I represent wanted prayer in the schools, but I realized that the Supreme Court would rule against it unless it could be stated in a different way than was Jefferson Parish’s resolution, for instance. I knew I had to find the right wording so Madelyn O’Hare and the ACLU lawyers couldn’t find anything against it,” he explained.

Looking back at the past history of Supreme Court rulings regarding voluntary prayer in the schools, it has been continuously ruled unconstitutional. In 1963 the Supreme Court ruled against organized prayer in public schools. So Louisiana got around this law by making prayer voluntary in 1980. Then the Supreme Court upheld a 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruling that Louisiana’s voluntary school prayer law violated the First Amendment’s provision for separation of church and state. This is why Jefferson Parish’s resolution was struck down. The appellate court stated that “the unmistakable message (continued on page 8)
of the Supreme Court's teachings is that the state cannot employ a religious means to serve otherwise legitimate secular interests."

But Martin sees it like this, "I'd rather be right with God than the Supreme Court."

According to Martin, more than half of the 47 public schools within Rapides Parish are conducting some kind of voluntary prayer program."

The President of Rapides Parish School Board Terry Farrar, is also in favor of — and in support of — this resolution. "We are going to continue to do things the way we have always done them, that is until our school prayer policy is challenged. We are closer than Washington to what the people in this community want. The courts have gone too far. They have reached the point where they are trying to regulate everything about our lives," he concluded.

So, despite the high court's decision, the majority of the people of Rapides Parish feel that it is their responsibility to keep God alive in the classrooms, and if necessary defend Him and their prayer sessions.