

The People in the Outfits

by Amber Barnhill

It's a truly bizarre experience watching those I once admired and esteemed as inherently good people turn into some of the most vile creatures around. This happened with people that I've been the closest to, that I have laughed with, cried with, and with whom I've spent years of my life. Such was the case last summer in a Facebook conversation that began, "It (the movie *God Is Not Dead*) just goes to show that if you don't stand for God, than what DO you stand for?!" and ended with, "Well I'll just be offensive to those who oppose JESUS!"

I have to remind myself that people like this will tenaciously hold on to their negative stereotypes of what non-Christians are like rather than listening to the actual real-life atheist they've known most of their lives. I hit the handy little "block" button of Facebook, and moved on.

Unfortunately, that block button doesn't function so well in real life, creating rather awkward social encounters, such as the time I attended my first Open House at China Elementary School. There I was ushered in by a "friend" and his like-minded brother-in-law, who were both dressed in full Boy Scouts of America (BSA) troop leader uniforms. Their cute little Cub Scout minions marched in single file to lead the Open House program.

I avoided all interaction with the BSA recruitment table that evening, hoping that the children of my friend and his brother-in-law were enrolled at the school.

I was wrong. When I picked my first grader up from school that week he was excited beyond words. "Guess what, Mom," he exclaimed as he handed me some flyers. I couldn't help but notice that his arm was covered in BSA promotional rubber wristbands as he jumped up and down excitedly proclaiming, "I'm in the Cub Scouts!!!"

During the inevitable conversation my son assured me (no less than five times) that "any boy can join." He knew this to be true because the "people in the outfits," visited his classroom and told him so.

I had heard that last year the locals were in an uproar over the BSA policy change to allow gay youth, but I hadn't paid much attention until this point. According to the *Beaumont Enterprise* newspaper, by "losing its moral compass" the Scouts lost "about two churches in each of the four (local) districts." It seems both Christians and secularists alike find their current policies problematic.

I was a little confused by what happened. Surely there are school policies on club recruitment and distribution of non-curricular materials that exclude class time. I didn't care that the club had a recruitment table at the open house/parent meeting, but I DID have a problem with my child being told he was already a member in a club that maintains discriminatory practices. I wondered how BSA was given free reign to classrooms in a public school that has a clear anti-discrimination policy. How do you explain these things to a six-year-old who has just had his hopes up in being accepted as a member?

Such was my introduction to the inappropriate recruitment techniques used by BSA within the public school system. I went to the school's website. There I saw a Cub Scout group photo on the home page. Then I saw statements



about BSA receiving several hundred dollars in PTO funds along with school sponsorship.

I discovered another nonreligious family in the community who was put in the same situation the previous year. They let their son join because they didn't want to tell him no, but eventually pulled him from both the Cub Scouts and from China Elementary school. They said they did so because he just wasn't "a good fit."

The damage was done, but I didn't want this kind of thing to be a continuous problem so I sent the vice principal an email explaining the ethics of partnering with an openly discriminatory private organization. I also requested to be notified in advance of future guest speakers at the school. Below is what I sent to the China Elementary Assistant Principal via email:

Dear **Dianne Timberlake**,

Good Morning! I wanted to address something that I was bothered by on Tuesday of this week. My son came home extremely excited about the Boy Scouts and was thoroughly convinced he was already a part of this club. I am highly disturbed to find out Boy Scouts of America (BSA) leaders are in classrooms, in uniform, recruiting children and getting young kids all pumped up about a club they may be excluded from joining on the basis of their families' religion, sexual orientation, or sex. You may not be aware that the United States Supreme Court ruled on June 28, 2000 that the Boy Scouts are a private group with the right to exclusionary practices.

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In February 6, 2002, the National Executive Board of the BSA passed a formal resolution that expressly excluded atheists, agnostics, and homosexuals from membership. Furthermore, the Board resolved that all counsels and sponsoring organizations must sign a statement to the effect that they will enforce all policies of BSA including the exclusion of homosexuals, agnostics, and atheists as members.

In 2014, BSA changed its policy to allow homosexual youth to join, but retained its position forbidding homosexual parents/adults to volunteer. As government agencies, public schools are bound by the First Amendment not to provide fiscal support (in this case class time) to religious organizations. Allowing any group that openly discriminates against students based on their religious beliefs or sexual orientation of themselves and/or their families to recruit students during school hours is a violation of both state and federal laws as well as our school's own policies regarding discrimination of protected classes and distribution of outside materials.

Current demographics on minority groups in America show that 16.1% of Americans say they are unaffiliated with any particular faith today. People who identify as atheist are at a grossly high risk for becoming the target of harassment, bullying, threats of violence, ostracizing by peers, and actual violence. An estimated 5 to 9% of American youth identify as LGBT or are unsure of their sexual orientation.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the LGBT population are members of every community, come from all walks of life, and include people of all races and ethnicities, all ages, all socioeconomic statuses, and from all parts of this country. As many as 93% of American youth regularly hear derogatory words about sexual orientation in their schools, 78% of perceived LGBT youth are bullied by their schools and community, and a national survey of nearly 3,500 youth states one-third reported that students in their school are frequently harassed because of their perceived or actual sexual orientation.

LGBT youth are at a much greater risk of physical assault than other children, are four times more likely to be threatened with or injured by a weapon, are three times more likely to drop out of school, are less likely to get the support they need due to adult intolerance, one-third report the school made no effort to respond to LGBT bullying, LGBT youth are at a higher risk for engaging in self harming behaviors, and are two to three times more likely to commit suicide. Suicide and attempted suicide rates are significantly higher in areas where homosexuality is not accepted.

Two of the China Cub Scout troop leaders in particular have both personally verbally attacked me in the past by publicly making accusations and insults against myself including my children, specifically regarding our difference in Biblical interpretation and family values. One of them proudly and vehemently condemns those who do not subscribe to his particular interpretation of Christianity stating that he "will just be offensive to those who oppose JESUS!" in a conversation about treating religious minorities equally. I was excited about the "Meet the Teacher" night, but felt immediately uncomfortable and unwelcome when I saw those men in a position of leadership during the meeting. I would never leave my children alone

with either of those two men and am disturbed to find they are given free rein to promote their hate-based agenda on campus and in the classrooms.

Southeast Texas is notorious for its discrimination and bigotry, that cannot be avoided. However the school should be a safe place for children of all religious backgrounds and sexes.

I make it a high priority to teach my children compassion for others and tolerance for diversity in a culture where that is not the popular thing to do. My son will not be a part of the Cub Scouts until he is old enough to understand their homophobic and discriminatory policies. I finally had to tell my son last night after his endless questions that they only let certain boys join and left it at that.

He actually replied that he didn't think that was very nice and said he did not want to join anymore. He said groups "should let any boy join no matter what."

Children are not born prejudiced, they are made that way by their environment. I have been thoroughly impressed with China Elementary thus far. My children both love it and the atmosphere is tops which is why I am so disappointed that valuable learning time was spent promoting a prejudiced homophobic hate group.

On October 23, 1993, the Girl Scouts of America (GSA) changed its policies to accommodate non-religious members. GSA President **B. LaRae Orullian** stated that it was "a very strong statement that Girl Scouts continue to be on the cutting edge, and this is a continuing effort to show that we have strength in diversity and that we are an inclusive organization."

Until the Boy Scouts does the same, partnering with them is in my opinion, morally wrong and is an inevitable invitation for discrimination within the schools. I am also concerned about other discriminatory groups seeking equal access to the student body.

Any group that issues invitations to students in federally funded schools needs to abide by the admissions standards of said schools and stop discriminating on the basis of religious belief or sexual orientation.

Until the Boy Scouts, an otherwise excellent organization, dismisses their anti-gay and religiously-exclusive policies and makes amends for all the children they have hurt, I cannot tolerate my child being exposed to their proselytizing. I would appreciate confirmation that this will not happen again in the future and from now on, I expect to be notified of all future speakers in my children's school and the topic of discussion.

Thank you so much for your time and I look forward to hearing from you soon!

Sincerely,

Amber Barnhill

A few days later, I received the following email response from Timberlake:

Ms. Barnhill,

Thank you for sharing your concern. At China Elementary School we will work to ensure that all groups who come into our school join us in our effort to build students up and support their education.

I immediately wrote back to Timberlake saying:

Ms. Timberlake,

Thank you for your prompt reply! I'm not quite sure I understand how that addresses my concerns though.

Could you please give clarification for sake of future violations and a detailed response to my complaint? I still have concerns about groups that only have an interest in "building up" SOME students, rather than all, and those who might potentially have an interest in interfering with parental rights. My main concern in this matter is mainly with regard to inappropriate use of class time. What the school allows while my child is not present, even if it violates policies does not personally affect me. However, what happens during instructional hours is of my concern.

I'm quite certain HJISD Local policies address distribution of materials in classrooms and hallways during the school day. You may want to refer my inquiry to the district's legal counsel to avoid confusion. Thank you so much for you time!

I think Timberlake became concerned and troubled because I soon received an email message from her saying that she was referring my email correspondence to the principal of the school, Mrs. Sherman.

After attempting to communicate via email with the assistant principal, then the principal, and eventually the school superintendent over the course of the year, with no written answer to my questions, I finally arranged to meet with the superintendent in person.

The superintendent surprised me with his openness to hear my concerns and assured me that BSA recruitment during class time was indeed inappropriate.

The bigger picture here is a culture of school-sponsored intolerance and discrimination towards non-adherents. The most common response from this community is a loud resounding, "if you don't like it, leave!"

The students at China Elementary School are literally being taught by educational leaders that atheists "hate" them, are "attacking" them, and told repeatedly that we "intend to harm" them! The discriminatory policies maintained by BSA are not merely insignificant fine print, they are part of a culture that systematically builds walls between children and teaches them either to hate themselves, or to hate others not like them.

The proof of these things can be found on blogs and Facebook pages. I have collected a folder full of screen shots documenting the hateful language and efforts made to promote intolerances. Many religious people in the community made all kinds of threats against me and my family.

Hawks for Christ meets on school grounds. It is predominantly comprised of adults who are teachers and principals of schools from around the Southeast Texas area. Interestingly, there are very few actual students involved in this group. When Hawks for Christ learned about my efforts, they made lanyards for students, teachers and others to wear promoting a Bible verse Philippians 4:13, which states, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

A T-shirt is also being sold. The statement on one side of the shirt is, "Put on the whole armor of God take a stand" and on the other side, it states, "Put on all God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil." These items were created specifically as a response to what Hawks for Christ called "attacks on the school."

The BSA issue is only one of many separation of religion and government infractions. There are many violations at my children's public school. I am hoping my efforts to address such a contentious issue will be a step toward a more tolerant future for this small Texas bible belt town.

The below photo of a Hawks for Christ group was taken in the school gymnasium just prior to a school activity. The parents of the children in the photo have encouraged the children to stand up for their religious beliefs and to be fearful of those who are not followers. □

