

THE ROANOKE TIMES

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CASEY: Montgomery County needs 'Pray for Common Sense' T-shirts

By Dan Casey

By now you've probably heard about what happened at Blacksburg High School, and how members of its girls lacrosse team have been barred from wearing school-ordered "Pray for Peace" shirts during team warm-ups. The shirts also sported an image of the Ukrainian flag.

Turns out the offensive term in the three-word slogan wasn't "pray," as some Montgomery County School Board members initially assumed. Rather, the troublesome term was "peace."

Apparently, that's too loaded a concept for a high school in Virginia.

The issue came up a couple weeks ago at a Montgomery County School Board meeting, to the surprise of at least two board members — Chairwoman Sue Kass and Linwood Hudson. My colleague, Yann Ranaivo, wrote a story about it.

"I find it hard to believe that our interpretation of some of the policies would politicize peace, if that's what we're doing here," Hudson said at the meeting.

Kass said she initially thought "Play for Peace" might be an acceptable compromise — until school officials informed the board that "pray" wasn't the problem — "peace" was.

"I really struggle with how 'peace' would be controversial," Kass said.

To explain it, interim Superintendent Annie Whitaker used a Socratic argument that bore a whiff of moral relativism. (We'll examine its broader applications below.)

"What is the peace from?" Whitaker asked. "A war. And a war is rooted in what? It's a political war, from people who have differing views."

The school officials noted they would never bar such a slogan if a student wore his or her own shirt with that message to class.

But a school ordered-and-paid-for shirt, worn at team practices, was a different question. It could send a message the Montgomery County schools endorse peace. Evidently, that's unthinkable.

It's also left a number of people, me included, imagining what other kinds of messages on school-supplied shirts could be permitted or forbidden.

For example, suppose the girls lacrosse team slyly changed the slogan to "Pray for Peas," which sounds almost the same. Would that be acceptable? Under Whitaker's logic, perhaps not.

After all, what are peas from? They're from plants, more specifically vegetables, which are favored by vegetarians. And what's the opposite of a vegetarian? A carnivore.

A school endorsement of vegetables over meat could easily set that stage for a never-ending gastronomic clash between flesh-eaters and salad-munchers.

This is why "Pray for Peas" should never appear on school-supplied garments. It could turn the Blacksburg High School cafeteria into a war zone of people with differing culinary views.

Another possibility is the team could order new shirts with the slogan "Pray for Piece."

Considering that message is nonsensical, it should be totally inoffensive in a school setting, right?

Wrong.

What if snickering students read the phrase with an added implied article — as in "Pray for [a] Piece." We know from American slang that that refers to either sexual activity or a handgun. Quite legitimately, school officials should never endorse either.

Some people have wondered if the girls lacrosse team should have aimed for a less offensive slogan, such as "Pray for Education." But isn't that a sticky wicket, too?

Education, we know, comes from knowledge. Its flip side is ignorance. And despite the best efforts of its school system, there's still a deep well of that in Montgomery County. We know because occasionally it emerges as not-quite elegant sophistry at Montgomery County School Board meetings.

Also, school administrators must be very careful to avoid even inferred biases towards education, because that could unintentionally malign the uneducated.

Under Whitaker's reasoning, it's not even clear that school-supplied "Pray for Love" T-shirts would be allowed in Blacksburg High.

After all, what is love? One definition is, the opposite of hate. From that perspective, "Pray for Love" might be seen as a sneaky message against the philosophical underpinnings of the pro-hate community.

Don't they have the right not to be demeaned by pro-love slogans in public schools?

By now, I hope you understand this important issue, and how unintentional institutional biases displayed on a high school lacrosse team's warm-up shirts pose a threat to our society.

Especially with the reckless use of irresponsible terms like "peace" and "love."

By the way, today's the perfect day to ruminate some more on those words.

Happy Easter!

THE ROANOKE TIMES

July 10, 2022

CASEY: Montgomery Co. woman can't cook, but she loves the attention anyway

By Dan Casey

Russell County, down near the Virginia-Kentucky border, is home to an extraordinary culinary artist, Linda Skeens. In June, at the Virginia-Kentucky District Fair, she won 25 of the fair's 80 different home-cooking contest categories. That news went viral on social media.

Skeens took top honors for cakes, pies, brownies, spaghetti sauce, canned corn, sauerkraut and more. She won best jelly and best jam and best apple butter, too. Some categories she swept entirely, winning blue, red and white ribbons for her cookies, savory breads and candies.

That Linda Skeens is a wife, mother and grandmother in her 60s who doesn't use social media or own a cellphone. But this column is not about her.

This is about the Linda Skeens in Blacksburg, a laughter-loving former dental assistant who hates to cook and who didn't learn to drive until she was 20.

To put it mildly, she's a character.

Unlike the other Linda Skeens, Blacksburg Linda has a Facebook page. And she's totally grooving on all the attention she's received, from people around the world, who've mistaken her for the kitchen-magician in Russell County.

"I've been touched by so many people," Blacksburg Linda told me Thursday. "It just makes me so happy. It's just been the time of my life."

She's still fielding phone calls from radio deejays and reporters looking for the other Linda. She pinned a disclaimer-post to the top of her Facebook page, notifying readers she's not the stove-and-oven wizard.

She's replied to every message and social media comment addressed to her. Those number in the hundreds.

"I AM NOT THE LINDA SKEENS BAKING PHENOM WHO WON ALL OF THE RIBBONS AT THE KENTUCKY VIRGINIA DISTRICT FAIR," the pinned post reads. "I sure wish I was, because I have been contacted by people from Pennsylvania inviting me to Thanksgiving dinner and offering to pay my way to get there, I've heard from a nice guy from Indonesia, and all kinds of WONDERFUL people CONVINCED it is me!! But, alas, I am not the one."

In some of the social media comments, people wrote things such as, "That's OK, I think I like you better."

One guy proposed marriage in a Facebook comment. For kicks, Blacksburg Linda replied, "Yes I will. Your move." The guy in Pennsylvania who invited her for Thanksgiving offered \$200 in travel expenses.

She's now Facebook friends with the other Linda's granddaughter, Franki Skeens. And she's heard from yet another Linda Skeens, in Morehead, Kentucky, who's far less amused at the mistaken-identity hullabaloo.

"I'm getting so durn tired of getting all these phone calls from radio stations, I'm just going to hang up on the next one," Morehead Linda told her.

"She's not getting the joke," Blacksburg Linda said.

Linda Skeens is 68, joyously single since 1985, retired from an administrative job at the veterinary teaching hospital at Virginia Tech. She lives in a bungalow on 30 acres with five cats she owns and others she occasionally fosters. She rents the place from a landlord who lives in Montana.

In the past 18 months she's lost 90 pounds, through a diet that involves what sounds like self-hypnosis. Now, she's down to a trim 125 and she's feeling better than she has in 30 years, she said. She's looking forward to her 50th high-school reunion in August.

Blacksburg Linda grew up in Dublin. As a child, she walked to Dublin Elementary, which she started in first grade because, "back then only the rich kids got to go to kindergarten and I wasn't a rich kid."

She walked to Dublin High School, and New River Community College, too. Her late father, a supervisor at a textile factory in Newbern, forbade her from ever getting behind the wheel of his beloved Ramblers. That's why she didn't learn to drive until she was 20.

At age 19, she robbed the cradle and married a high-school senior. "It was a scandal," she said gleefully. He was a valedictorian from Christiansburg High. While she worked in dental offices in Virginia and Alabama to support them, he earned a doctorate in veterinary medicine, she said.

Eventually they moved back to Blacksburg, where he got a job at Virginia Tech, and they divorced. Later, she ended up working at the veterinary teaching hospital, she said. She helped initiate a fund there, for people who couldn't afford treatment for their sick pets, she said.

She was the only girl in a family of four children. One of her brothers, Randy, died tragically at age 38. Randy was developmentally disabled. He was hit by a vehicle in a crosswalk, and lingered in a vegetative state for two years, she said. That year, Dublin named its Christmas parade in his honor.

As a young girl, she helped raise another brother who was 10 years younger. That experience mostly taught her she never wanted to have children, she told me.

She has her mother's name, Billie Jean, tattooed on her left forearm. On her right, she has "Wildwood Flower," the title of her late father's favorite song. Outside the textile mill, Dale Skeens could "could play the guitar like a professional," she said. "And he sang." He favored old-timey country-roots music.

The tattoos are great conversation-starters, she told me. When people ask about them, it provides an opening for her to talk about her beloved parents. Billie Jean is still with us, at 89.

“I come from a loooong line of storytellers,” who were raised in the hills of far northwestern North Carolina. That’s her mom’s side of the family, she added.

Her late father was from Russell County. Some armchair genealogists she knows are trying to figure out if she and the other Linda are somehow related.

“Daddy had nine siblings,” she said. “I had all these aunts. They could take a dirt clog and cook it and make you think you were eating a baked potato.”

Blacksburg Linda isn’t totally useless in the kitchen. She can boil water, and sautee squash, onions and curry with a tab of butter in a frying pan. That recipe she discovered during her recent weight-loss odyssey, which she covered on her Facebook page, and for which she’s received great encouragement.

But “baking bread, or baking a cake? Are you kidding me? I’ve never done anything like that in my life,” Blacksburg Linda told me. “I’ve got lots of skills, but cooking is not one of them.”

She can sew like a demon, she said. She learned as a child. Growing up, “I made all of my own clothes,” she told me.

“I could sew you a pair of trousers,” she said. “I could sew you a sport coat.”

I think she would, if I asked.

Blacksburg Linda is also an award-winning artist. She paints landscapes and flowers and animals, and draws portraits, and makes sunflower-dotted pro-Ukraine polymer lapel pins. She’s mailed hundreds of those, gratis, to anyone who requests one — more than 300 in all, she estimated. The other day, she shipped one to a little girl in Norway.

In that package, she also included a cicada lapel pin she painted; some information about the insect; a cat-inspired lapel pin; a Dublin, Virginia, T-shirt; and a personal letter from Dublin Mayor Benny Skeens. He’s Blacksburg Linda’s cousin.

The postage for that package was \$64, she said.

We were on the phone Thursday for at least 90 minutes. What you’ve read so far covers less than 25% of that conversation. Suffice it to say, Blacksburg Linda is the happiest-sounding person I’ve spoken to in ages. If she could bottle and sell that joie de vivre, she’d make a mint.

“The authentic Linda Skeens deserves every ribbon she’s won. She deserves all the credit,” Blacksburg Linda said

“But I’ve had the most wonderful time, and met the most incredible people,” she added. “Their comments are HILARIOUS, and they are so sweet.”

THE ROANOKE TIMES

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CASEY: Was hooded-Klan image posted out of ignorance or malice?

By Dan Casey

Remember the old Highlights magazine? That was a kid-friendly staple in many a physician's waiting room. One of its most charming offerings was a single-page feature called "Hidden Pictures."

Typically, those consisted of a large drawn scene, such as children climbing aboard a school bus. Deviously penned into the larger drawing were smaller images of objects like a candle or a slice of pizza, which were not immediately apparent. The challenge was to find all the hidden smaller objects.

The technique is known as "steganography," but the practice is not always so innocent. This we know because of a red-white-and-blue elephant image which — until Friday — dominated the homepage of the Patrick County Republican Committee's website.

Six strategic black blots beneath the patriotic pachyderm's legs created three new and distinct steganographic images — of hooded Klansmen. Oops!

Patrick County Republican Chair Lynne Bogle reacted with utter horror after my colleague, Luke Weir, brought the imagery to her attention Friday. (Weir had been tipped off by another Republican, state Del. Marie March of Floyd.)

Bogle immediately swapped out the KKK-imagery for Virginia's seal, which features a Roman goddess with a bare breast. (That had its own run with infamy in 2010, under former attorney general Ken Cuccinelli, remember?)

In her first response to Weir, Bogle seemed to indicate the Klansmen image was posted in error.

"We had obviously not realized that this image could be interpreted that way," she said. "Now that it's been pointed out to us, we have removed the image entirely and changed our website password."

That's a fair enough statement, because not everybody immediately grokked the racist imagery. (It also got posted, and was soon taken down, in August, on an Alabama county GOP committee's Facebook page.)

But in a later statement to this newspaper, Bogle raised the possibility of sabotage and skullduggery.

"We're horrified that this disgusting imagery appeared on our website. We're still looking for additional information, but it appears the image may have been placed maliciously by an outside actor," she wrote.

So was it an unintentional goof, or deliberate malice?

It can't be both, because the gulf between those positions is too wide. The former's an embarrassing but forgivable mistake, while in Virginia the latter could easily constitute the crime of Computer Trespass. Here's what Title 18.2 of the Virginia Code says about that:

"It is unlawful for any person, with malicious intent, or through intentionally deceptive means and without authority, to ... temporarily or permanently remove, halt, or otherwise disable any computer data, computer programs or computer software from a computer or computer network."

From the above we can deduce that, at the very least, a potential crime has occurred. According to the Virginia code, it could be either a Class 1 misdemeanor or a Class 6 felony, depending on the circumstances.

Monday I sought clarification from Bogle with a series of emailed questions. One of them was, "Who later took down the offensive image and replaced it with the Virginia seal?"

Bogle replied: "I removed the image myself."

From this we can deduce that Bogle knows the login and password to the inner workings of patrickcountygop.org.

Another question: "Have you determined who posted the image?"

Bogle replied: "This is still under investigation."

Her answer strongly suggests someone other than Bogle is the culprit. Because if it had been her, she would know she did it. And in that case, there would be no need for the question to be "still under investigation."

"When was the klan-hood image posted?" I asked.

"This is still under investigation," replied Bogle, who assumed leadership of the Patrick County GOP in August.

"How many people knew the website's [former] password?" I asked. That answer might help narrow the universe of potential malefactors. But Bogle's did not.

"This is still under investigation," she replied.

Then I asked her for the old password to the website that may have been maliciously compromised. If it was something easily guessable, such as "MAGA" or "Trump2024" or "BidenSucks," that could tend to support her malicious-actor theory.

"The password has been changed and two part authentication activated," Bogle replied. "I am currently the only person with the new password."

But that didn't answer the question I had asked. So I asked again.

"I understood the question but wasn't comfortable sharing any passwords, for security of all accounts," Bogle replied.

After all, it's a potential crime that's "still under investigation." Any stray fact might compromise the probe, eh?

That raises an additional question — who is investigating? I struck out with that one, too.

First I called the Virginia State Police administrative offices for Division 6. Though located in Salem, it covers Patrick County, too. The woman who answered had no idea what I was talking about. But she took a message and said a sergeant would call back if it was them.

It was the same story at the Patrick County Sheriff's Office. I left a message there, too. Neither agency called back. So I cannot confirm that either is investigating this potential computer trespass.

I also asked Bogle which law enforcement agency she contacted.

"Mr. Casey, as long as this is ongoing I'm not disclosing details for security reasons," she replied.

Come on. Whatever the answers are, they're not national defense secrets. Disclosing the name of an investigating agency doesn't compromise anything.

The posting of KKK-imagery on the Patrick County Republican Committee's website was either dumb or deliberate.

The central question is, which? It shouldn't take a whole weekend to figure out.