

Seventeen Years of an English Professor's Pro-Life Activism in the Academy

Jeff Koloze

I HAVE TAUGHT and facilitated a variety of Business Writing, Communications, English, Literature, and Rhetoric courses for seventeen years on both an adjunct and full-time basis at various non-profit and for-profit educational institutions in the metropolitan Cleveland, Ohio areas as well as in Columbus and Springfield, Ohio. This one sentence of forty-seven words is supposed to be a summary of the fact that I have worked hard over the past seventeen years in academia. It may also indicate either that I am unstable in employment or that my pro-life beliefs have subjected me to constant shifts in employment in colleges and universities. I know that I am controversial in the classroom for two reasons. First, I am not afraid of broaching controversial topics in my courses, especially argumentation courses, which have readers filled with essays on the life issues of abortion and euthanasia. Second, I am tight when it comes to grading papers, often loading them with comments that irritate students who think that, as long as they paid the tuition, they should get an A—never mind the quality of their work.

Fourteen of those seventeen years were difficult. I could have made lots of money for my growing family if only I had shut up when it came to being pro-life, or at least stifled the compulsive need to write about the life issues from the perspective of an English professor. I know that my talking about pro-life events and my being pro-life were not appreciated at Cleveland State University and Kent State University. I hesitate mentioning those schools where being pro-life was all right for fear that somehow some anti-lifer reading this might either attack the schools directly or harass other faculty who are pro-life. (I would often have a faculty member come up to me, whispering his or her support for a pro-life event, fearful of being “found out” as one in sympathy with the movement.)

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I was once told by another instructor at Cuyahoga Community College that I probably would have obtained a full-time instructor position had I not listed all of the pro-life papers in my resumé or in a companion file. Hearing this, I refused to think about suing the college for employment discrimination. (Perhaps I should have. I always wanted to be a major donor to pro-life groups, so what better way to get money quick than to sue someone, like many other Americans do?) Instead, I vowed that I would continue to write and present papers in my discipline on the life issues and aim for their publication. I also vowed that I would take pride in those papers, my “children,” even if people on hiring committees did not.

Even after obtaining my first full-time position at Clark State Community College in 2002, I could not keep my pro-life mouth shut, or, more accurately, my pro-life mind and fingers from furiously typing out some analysis of the right-to-life issues as expressed in adolescent fiction, rap music, scholarly works, science fiction, or any of the other topics I have written about and presented before University Faculty for Life and many other conferences.

I had the misfortune to have spent three years at Clark State Community College. The first year that I applied for funding to present a paper at UFL, the dean at that time approved it without question. The second year’s funding request was denied outright. I could not convince that anti-lifer that UFL is a non-profit organization; he just saw that the conference was held at a Catholic university and judged it—and me—accordingly. I vowed that I would never be so unfair to my faculty.

I think that the proverbial straw that broke the back of Clark State Community College was an article that I wrote for a women’s conference held at the University of Dayton, wherein I addressed how abortion was treated in African-American literature. Of course, I discussed how the abortion rate for African Americans is three times that of white mothers. Certain members of a committee charged with implementing diversity at Clark State apparently didn’t like that article, and, soon after, my contract was not renewed. (So much for diversity! It’s fine to recognize politically-correct forms of diversity like color or sexual orientation, but being pro-life is not an element of diversity in an academy that is hostile

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to right-to-life interests.)

Of course, I cannot claim that the loss of my annual contract was due solely to that article. Besides, nobody at Clark State would openly say that I was being canned because of my pro-life writing. This occurred last year, an unhappy time for us—all of my family—as I was faced with the loss of a full-time job. While Joan and I were enjoying last year's conference at Ave Maria School of Law, she had no idea that on the Monday after that beautiful conference, I would find out that my contract was not being renewed. While losing the contract at a mere community college was indeed a great blessing, at the time it seemed as though my world was crashing; I will never forget the negative feelings that Clark State Community College created.

Now that I am in administration as well as teaching, I can honestly say that the past seventeen years have admittedly been difficult, but also wonderful. If it were not for the hard circumstances that others forced me into by denying me a full-time job, I would not have the career that I have now. I would not appreciate my wife as much as I do. Joan has taught in Catholic schools all her life, and in the most difficult years, it was Joan's income that provided for our bambini and paid our bills.

Moreover, I would not have developed the courage to continue to fight for what I believe in the field that I chose if it were not for University Faculty for Life. I mentioned during the banquet speech that I had the fortune to give at the end of one of our conferences that UFL inspired me to strive to do my best work and encouraged me to continue to support pro-life concerns in the academy—no matter how hostile that academy is. Being a part of UFL has another benefit: I have the great fortune to know some fine scholars who are not only extremely professional, but also kind people. With support like this—from a loving wife, from four successful children (the bambini mentioned earlier who are no longer bambini) of whom I am very proud, and from interesting and friendly fellow UFL members, God willing, the next seventeen or more years that I have left to agitate for the first civil right, the right to life, as an English professor will be even better.