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Pro-life students try for recognition

By Joyce Howard Price
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The Student Bar Association at Washington University's law school in St. Louis is scheduled to vote today on whether the institution should recognize a student pro-life group, which it has rejected twice already.

"It does not look good for us," said Jordan Siverd, a second-year law student who heads the group, Law Students Pro-Life.

"Almost all of the SBA members who spoke at a meeting last Thursday spoke against us. And some who had abstained in earlier votes said that they will vote against us, saying they don't like having the media or anyone else infringe on their power," he said.

The Student Bar Association has said Law Students Pro-Life is "too narrowly focused." SBA President Elliott Friedman has sent letters to the group, objecting to the fact that its constitution does not include opposition to the death penalty as one of its missions.

Like many pro-life organizations, Law Students Pro-Life concentrates on opposition to abortion, euthanasia and assisted suicide.

Greg Lukianoff, director of legal and public advocacy for the Philadelphia-based Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), which is helping the pro-life students group, said colleges and universities often have student governing bodies in charge of approving or rejecting student organizations.

"But I've never before seen a student organization that makes decisions about the content of a group's" goals and purposes, Mr. Lukianoff said in a telephone interview.

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"It's as if the SBA is barring a Catholic organization because it believes in the doctrine of transubstantiation," he said.

David Hacker, secretary of Law Students Pro-Life, said that because the group is not officially recognized by the SBA, it cannot use campus facilities for its meetings or receive funding from the university.

When it was previously turned down by the SBA, Law Students Pro-Life appealed to law school administrators.

If rejected again today, Mr. Siverd said, his group will "probably reappeal" to the chancellor and other law school officials.

The university's hierarchy seems to have little influence with the SBA. Late Thursday, Joel Seligman, dean of the school, told The Washington Times he had intervened in the case. He said an SBA meeting would be held that day, and he was confident the body would recognize Law Students Pro-Life. That didn't happen.

However, the pro-life group gained another advocate as the American Civil Liberties Union of Eastern Missouri on Friday backed the cause of Law Students Pro-Life.

The two groups issued an "open letter" in which they urged the SBA to "recognize the right of your fellow students to organize in accordance with their own beliefs, even if you disagree with those beliefs."

Sarah Foster of Feminists for Life, a group that helps organize pro-life groups on college campuses, said, "I am stunned and disappointed to hear that the Washington University law school is not allowing a pro-life group on campus. I know the university has an active pro-life undergraduate group."

However, Mr. Hacker said Saturday that the constitution of the undergraduate pro-life group at Washington University states that it opposes the death penalty.

Leaders of major pro-life organization such as National Right to Life Committee, the Family Research Council, and Concerned Women for America said they were appalled at the treatment Law Students Pro-Life had received.

Ken Connor, president of FRC, said this case flies in the face of academic freedom and "exposes academics for the frauds they are."

David N. O'Steen, executive director of NRLC, questioned how the Washington University law school's SBA can say the pro-life group's focus is too narrow, when it recognizes a group called the Golf Club.

"Are they going to make the Golf Club take up basketball and hockey?" he asked.

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