

They Dress to Express

Political T shirts—on the right and the left—pit teenagers against their school administrators

By Vanessa Juarez
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Oct. 4 issue - When Tim Gies was a sophomore at Michigan's Bay City Central High School, the United States was preparing to go to war in Iraq, and Gies became so passionate about politics that he began wearing his views on his sleeve—literally. He started producing his own line of antiwar, anti-Bush apparel by painting symbols and slogans onto T shirts and sweat shirts. When school administrators noticed, they weren't pleased and told him many times to remove his tees. Gies refused, and was repeatedly suspended for weeks at a time. "I just wore the shirts and took the punishments," recalls Gies, now 17. When the administrators threatened Gies with expulsion earlier this year, Gies called the local ACLU—which notified the school that it was infringing on its student's First Amendment rights.

In this election season, pundits and pollsters are anxiously studying the youngest voters, hoping that on Nov. 2, kids will demonstrate that their passions go beyond the latest lip gloss or basketball kicks. But in high schools across the country, there are more kids like Tim Gies sparking controversy by wearing their political beliefs emblazoned on their backs. Since 2001 there have been more than a dozen highly publicized cases of kids and school administrators clashing over T-shirt slogans, and many of those cases have wound up in court. Until this year, most school dress-code disputes were related to gangsta gear or showing too much skin, says Jennifer Dounay, a policy analyst for the Education Commission of the States. Politics "does seem to be a recent development or a redevelopment, if you want to call it that." Regardless of which wing or party they represent, teens are making their fashion statements political.

In the only known case of its kind, monetary damages—\$30,000—were awarded this year to a plaintiff in a T-shirt dispute. Nicky Young, 16, together with her mother, sued the City of New York after Nicky was sent home from her Queens public school for wearing a shirt that said BARBIE IS A LESBIAN. Young was moved to wear the T shirt, she says, after her teacher told her that all gays were going to hell. Last year Bretton Barber, a Dearborn, Mich., student, was reprimanded for wearing a T shirt that read INTERNATIONAL TERRORIST next to an image of President Bush. He contacted the ACLU; the group filed a lawsuit and won. These skirmishes take place on the right as well. Elliot Chambers, a student at Minnesota's Woodbury High, attended class in 2001 wearing a T shirt with the words STRAIGHT PRIDE. After the school principal forbade him from wearing the shirt again, Chambers's parents filed a lawsuit on his behalf, and a federal judge ruled in their favor. And earlier this year Daniel Goergen was barred from wearing his hooded ABORTION IS HOMICIDE sweat shirt to his Newport News, Va., high school. A Christian law center warned of legal action, and the school backed off.

Not five years ago, teens were getting riled over the right to "sag" their pants at school. These days teens say their lives are directly affected by such issues as gay rights, the Iraq war, terrorism and talk of bringing back the draft. And they're savvy enough to use the legal system to make their point. Thanks to the ACLU's efforts, Bay City school administrators rescinded their prohibition on Tim Gies's tees last April—a week and a half before he was due to graduate. Tim "knows a lot more than I'll ever know—bookwise, streetwise," says Jamie Graczyk, Gies's mom. "He sat my parents down and told them exactly why the government is the way it is today. And my parents were totally floored."

For the most part, a Vietnam-era Supreme Court ruling protects these kids and their shirts, but the horrors of the 1999 Columbine shootings have made parents and administrators especially concerned about school safety. School officials say they're trying to create a hostility-free environment by giving students who wear potentially offensive clothing a slap on the wrist.

In Tyler (Chase) Harper's estimation, his dispute with California's Poway High School was one-sided. Earlier this year he wore a HOMOSEXUALITY IS SHAMEFUL tee (which he lettered with masking tape) in response to the school's Day of Silence, a nationwide event set aside to protest discrimination and harassment against gays, lesbians and transgender students. Harper says the principal told him the shirt was inflammatory. "How can you tell me I have to be tolerant of your views, but you can't be tolerant of mine?" asks Harper, who ended up with a one-day, in-school suspension for refusing to take off his T shirt. (Harper's shirt was disrupting the class, says Dan Shinoff, the lawyer representing the school district.) Harper called the Alliance Defense Fund, an organization that defends religious liberty, and filed a lawsuit against the Poway Unified School District. Harper and ADF are awaiting a decision on their motion for a preliminary injunction and the school district's motion to dismiss.

Tim Gies says his victory came way before he contacted the ACLU. "We'd have whole political discussions in the classroom because of a shirt I was wearing," says Gies, who's currently planning an anti-Bush protest in Michigan. "Kids started making their own pro-war shirts and pro-Bush shirts, just to counteract my shirt. That was exactly what I wanted, so it worked out." The Founding Fathers would be proud.

With Claire Sulmers

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