

Citrus College officials settle free-speech lawsuit

College agrees to pay student's attorney fees

By Terry Webster, Staff Writer

Tuesday, August 12, 2003 -

GLENDORA -- Citrus College has reached a settlement in a lawsuit filed over the community college's "free-speech zones."

Under the agreement, the college will pay \$24,500 for student Chris Stevens' legal fees and will design a new policy for free-speech zones.

The lawsuit maintained that restricting student rallies and demonstrations to three designated areas on campus is a violation of free-speech rights.

Under the agreement, Stevens, 20, of Azusa, will not receive a share of the settlement. "The settlement is for attorneys' fees, Mr. Stevens does not receive any funds from this and we of course will bear our own attorneys' fees," said Citrus College President Michael Viera, who took over for retired president Louis Zellers on June 2.

Carol Horton, vice president of finance and administrative services, said the bulk of the legal fees will likely be paid for by the college's insurance consortium.

Stevens said filing the lawsuit was worthwhile.

"Free speech is precious and it's something that should be protected," he said. "And it's something that doesn't really need a policy. State and federal laws show that any kind of restriction on a (public) college campus is unlawful."

Stevens said the college already flubbed one policy and he remains poised to "make another legal challenge, if necessary."

"Citrus' legal counsel approved the now-rescinded policy. I think they need to run this by counsel a little more closely," he said.

Viera said the process for designing the new policy will be handled fairly and openly. "It's unfortunate that this issue had to be litigated, but we're moving forward with a more open dialogue," Viera said.

A college-appointed committee will design a new policy by the close of the fall semester, officials said.

But it appears the issue will flare up again before that happens.

Stevens said Monday he plans to hold an anti-abortion protest on campus sometime this fall.

“We're going to test this and see if free speech is really what they have promised it to be,” Stevens said. “We'll see if it goes well as far as administrators keeping their hands out of it. Pro-lifers were previously arrested on campus and that's really how all of this got started.”

On May 7, college officials denied Stevens' request to march throughout the campus in celebration of victory in the war against Iraq.

One quirk in the old policy is that it allowed “officially recognized” groups to hold events outside of the free speech zones. Unrecognized groups were not given that right.

Stevens also said he was told he could be expelled or arrested for violating the policy. His attorney, Carol Sobel of the Philadelphia-based Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), filed the lawsuit in U.S. District Court in May.

After the lawsuit was filed, Zellers placed an immediate stay on the free-speech zone policy.

FIRE has pledged to fight against free speech zones on college campuses throughout the country.

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