

The Friendly Line

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Des Moines Valley Friends Meeting

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'Tinker' 3 recount stand that led to high court law

Long-time Meeting members and proponents of civil liberties remember a celebrated U.S. Supreme Court decision which originated in Des Moines in 1965 when John and Mary Beth Tinker and Chris Eckhardt were suspended from school for wearing black armbands to show their support for Senator Robert Kennedy's suggestion of a cease-fire and to mourn the dead in the Vietnam war.

Mary Beth was in 8th grade at Harding, John was a sophomore at North, and Chris was a sophomore at Roosevelt. Mary Beth and John, with their parents, Leonard and Lorena Jeanne, and brothers and sisters, were regular Meeting attendees here while Leonard was Peace Secretary for the AFSC office, until he moved to the AFSC St. Louis office.

They were back at Roosevelt last month as Visiting Scholars with their lawyer, Dan Johnston, who later became Polk County Attorney and now practices law in New York. They spoke at an evening forum at Roosevelt, and the next day to students.

At the forum, they were introduced as four people who helped assure that teachers and students "don't shed freedom of speech at the schoolhouse door."

Chris, the first to speak, was a classmate of Melinda Voss, Roosevelt parent and Des Moines Register reporter who was panel

moderator. He said that in November, 1965, 60 Iowans went to Washington, DC, for a Vietnam war protest. His mother, John's mother and John were among them. An article about it was not allowed in the school paper. In December, he and a number of other Des Moines students decided to wear armbands to school. Chris said that when he was called to the office and refused to remove his armband, the vice-principal asked him if he wanted a busted nose, and said he could look for another high school to attend. Other students were hostile, especially in gym class. Chris now is a child support enforcement supervisor in St. Petersburg, FL.

Mary Beth, now a nurse in St. Louis, said that the main two issues of that time were the civil rights movement and the Vietnam war. She was disturbed as a child watching on TV the effects of napalm burning a child's body. She said the students at Harding were interested, not hostile. The effect of this case on their lives, she said, has been to make them more committed to try



John and Mary Beth Tinker took their principles (and principals) to court in 1965 over their armband protest.

Courtesy Des Moines Register

to solve problems.

John, a computer specialist in Olin, IA, said his and Chris's parents had been involved in peace and justice issues, and they had access to information not accessible to their peers. He said the Vietnam war was part of a bigger

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problem, militarism, which "treads heavily on history and takes away the potential of the human race." In 1965, the image of ugly B-52 bombers destroying villages with high-tech weapons was too convincing. "The simple human juxtaposition of machine and flesh was something children could understand." At North he wore an armband the day after Chris and Mary Beth had been suspended, but it wasn't visible over the dark suit jacket he'd worn to make a good impression when he was kicked out. After gym class people noticed it on his white shirt. The principal, he said, "was patronizing, not mean."

The families appealed to the school board, which tabled a decision for 2 weeks, then backed the principals 5-2. The Iowa Civil Liberties Union was involved from the start.

Dan Johnston, their ICLU attorney, said, "Don't get a case like this, with clients like this, when you're 30 years old. The rest of life is dull... Would we win the case now? Clearly, no." The federal judicial system at that time stood up for rights, he said. "There always have been teachers who realized you can't raise children in a totalitarian environment and expect them to be responsible citizens later." At that time, it was the role of schools to protect children from unpopular views. He thinks that because of this decision, schools won't be like that again soon.

Underscoring that statement were the armbands many Roosevelt students donned a week before to protest the Rodney King verdict in Los Angeles. — Sherry Hutchison