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1,000 Words

Acceptable Discrimination?

by

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The *Corry Journal*, a local newspaper in Pennsylvania, broke a story that got picked up by Headline News (HLN): A 43-year old man was re-elected to Fire Chief of his local volunteer Fire Department.

This story would normally remain relegated to local news and never receive the attention of the big television news networks, but in this case it was deemed worthy of national news due to the fact that Fire Chief Gilbert was a “registered sex offender” for having molested a 4 year old child. This previous conviction was nearly 20 years ago and wasn’t kept a secret – his Mayor and fellow fire fighters were all properly notified of his previous criminal conviction, and they not only voted him their Fire Chief once, but twice. There were obviously no laws or probation restrictions that prevented him from being a volunteer fire fighter. No rules were violated, nothing covered up. Yet the HLN anchor appeared righteously indignant, pointing out that “youngsters look up to fire fighters as role models.” She also pointed out that Chief Gilbert resigned the night before thanks to the intense media scrutiny and subsequent social media firestorm.

Why are seemingly intelligent people indignant about a previously convicted sex offender doing something positive and becoming successful with his life? What exactly is the issue? Yes, his past crime was deplorable, but that was nearly 20 years ago, and he’s not only talked the talk about positive change, he’s walked the walk. Yes, he did the crime, but then he did his time and repaid his debt to society. He successfully completed a period of supervised parole or probation. Twenty years is a long time to have proven himself, especially when in therapeutic terms, recidivism rates are usually calculated at 5 years. During this period, Gilbert chose to become and remain an upstanding law-abiding, tax-paying citizen who wanted to give back to his community by volunteering with his local Fire Department. In the correctional field, this is what is called “Restorative Justice” or “Repairing the Harm.” There is absolutely no accusation or suggestion of any current complaint or even a hint of impropriety. The fact his fellow fire fighters and Mayor were fully informed of his past (and still fully supported him) gives further confirmation of his character and willingness to work hard in trying to live a productive life. Omitted by the national news, the original newspaper article in the *Corry Journal* gives a clue to the reason this was in the news: The Mayor is quoted as saying that she “doesn’t understand why the victim’s mother won’t drop this.” The news was created not by the now 24 year old victim, but with the victim’s mother.

Sex offenders are the latest group to be legally ostracized, stigmatized, segregated and openly harassed by society. The news-worthiness of a black, gay or female person in a local leadership position is past, but there was a day when the media would have similarly spun

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negative narratives on such stories. It's time to grow up. There are millions of sex offenders in our Country, and many of them are good people who made a bad mistake. Chances are increasing that you already work or live near one (or three). There are so many restrictions against sex offenders that prevent them from being an active part of their community, I'm amazed (but pleasantly surprised) that Spartanburg had no laws prohibiting Gilbert from becoming a volunteer fire fighter. I bet they'll pass a new law or ordinance within a few months to take care of that "oversight." But sex offenders are people too. They need a place to live and a place to work. They need to go shopping and have social outings with friends and family. In fact, it is exactly this support by an accepting community that is one of the biggest factors in helping them remain law abiding citizens. The fact this story made national news is itself proof of the inherent inequities and injustices facing ex-sex offenders who are simply striving to do the right thing and give back to the community they harmed. Chief Gilbert is quoted as saying "Every day I get up and try to do good." What is so wrong with this dream? Why should the national news networks get involved in helping to destroy this man's life? Chief Gilbert's only current "crime" was rising above the prejudices and stigmas of being labeled a "sex offender" and choosing to become a successful and contributing member of his community. The solution to the sexual abuse epidemic isn't locking people up forever. It's holding people accountable for their actions, giving them the treatment and tools needed to live a law-abiding life, and then welcoming them back into our community with open arms and helping them make good, pro-social life choices.

The media could have just as easily done this as a positive story about heroes and redemption, discussing the challenges Chief Gilbert faced in overcoming his past issues and highlighting his volunteer spirit of helping to give back to the community. He has redeemed himself, day by day. He didn't give up on life; he decided to give back to life. His community accepted him (maybe not everyone, but enough to elect and re-elect him to a Fire Chief position). This is the amazingly positive and uplifting story that SHOULD have made the news to help celebrate his continued victory over his past mistakes and show other sex offenders that it is possible to have a constructive and meaningful life after being convicted of a sex offense.

Sexual abuse is abhorrent, but the dehumanization of people convicted of sex offenses is also wrong and needs to be stopped. The negative spin the news put on this story reinforced hateful prejudices and gratuitously inflamed public outrage. HLN and the *Corry Journal* should be ashamed of their role in actively perpetuating hateful stereotypes, promoting discrimination and promoting this story as "news." Their actions caused a gross injustice to a man who has repaid his debt to society.