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3 are arrested at gay-rights group's event

CUMBERLANDS ONE OF 32 STOPS

By Bill Estep

SOUTH-CENTRAL KENTUCKY BUREAU

Police arrested three people yesterday when a gay-rights group tried to talk to students at the University of the Cumberlands, which found itself embroiled in controversy last year after expelling a gay student.

About 25 people taking part in the Soulforce Equality Ride had stopped at the school. Soulforce is visiting 32 colleges and universities to draw attention to policies the group says discriminate against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, and to promote hope and reconciliation, members said.

Members have been arrested at other stops, including earlier this week in Louisville.

"Throughout our stops in the South we have encountered a lot of hostility," said Matt Comer of Greensboro, N.C., an organizer of Soulforce.

Comer said that when the bus got to the school about 10 a.m., Michael Colegrove, the school's vice president for student services, told the riders they would be trespassing if they came on campus.

Dozens of police officers were on hand. Comer said police told the activists that they could not stand on a public sidewalk beside the campus, but rather would have to keep walking or face arrest.

Williamsburg Police Chief Denny Shelley said police charged Soulforce member Jacob Reitan with trespassing and failure to disperse. Two Cumberlands students were charged with failure to disperse.

Comer said it seemed the university and police tried to keep the Soulforce riders from talking to students.

"It sounds ridiculous to even say" someone could be charged for standing on a public sidewalk, Comer said. "The police know what they're doing is wrong."

Shelley, however, said police did not try to harass or discourage the group's members, but told them they needed to keep moving so they wouldn't block the sidewalk, a safety issue.

Police "bent over backwards" to accommodate the group -- offering an alternative site for the event, for instance -- and arrested people only after repeated warnings.

Shelley said he called in extra police not because he worried that the activists would cause problems, but out of concern they would be harassed.

Colegrove said the university also tried to cooperate with the group and offered members a spot on campus for their visit. However, the group wanted free run of the campus, which wasn't possible because of the potential disruption, and rejected the university's offer, he said.

Comer, however, said Soulforce did not reject the university's offer. A university official quickly withdrew the offer because of a miscommunication and later refused to agree to terms in writing, he said.

The group talked to students for about three hours.

Later yesterday, Soulforce members held a rally on the steps of the Whitley County courthouse. About 40 people listened and about 10 protesters stood on the courthouse lawn holding signs with Bible verses on them.

Many conservative Christians believe the Bible condemns homosexuality. Soulforce members, however, say that belief is hurtful and wrong; several said they consider themselves Christians.

Emily Harlow, a freshman at the University of the Cumberlands, said she came to the rally to hear what group members had to say.

"It's time Cumberland realized it's OK to be gay and be a Christian."

There had been concern on campus that students could face trouble for talking to Soulforce members or attending the rally.

Colegrove, however, said that wasn't the case. Students have First Amendment rights too, he said.

Still, Jordan Palmer, president of the Kentucky Equality Federation, which helped pay for the Soulforce visit to Williamsburg, gave students cards and said to call him if they encountered a problem as a result of coming to the rally.

Kyle DeVries, a Soulforce spokesman, identified the two Cumberlands students who were arrested as Warry Woodward and Annie Decrescente.

Last year, the university expelled Jason Johnson of Lexington, who had disclosed on a Web site that he is gay.

The university's policy said any student who engages in or promotes sexual behavior not consistent with Christian principles, including homosexuality or sex outside marriage, could be suspended or asked to leave school.

University President Jim Taylor said at the time the policy was in line with traditional denominational beliefs.

Johnson returned to Williamsburg yesterday to be with the protesters and thanked students at his former school.

"Bless you," he told the students. "You have more courage than you know."

Johnson is now a student at Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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