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NEWS

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### Controversy surprises group backing abstinence speaker

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. - When he set about bringing Pam Stenzel to Charleston earlier this year, John deBlecourt said he never anticipated the abstinence-only advocate would cause such an uproar.

DeBlecourt, executive director of Believe in West Virginia, a local religious and economic group, had seen Stenzel speak in person years ago and watched videos of her presentations online.

His group organized and paid for Stenzel to speak at two public high schools and a church.

He said it was an opportunity for someone to share his values on sex with teens.

"The reason we got involved with this is because we have a heart for kids," deBlecourt said. "We thought abstinence . . . it's a common goal."

But ever since Stenzel's speech, the group has found itself in the news as controversy continues to swirl around comments she made, including a message to young girls that "if you are on birth control, your mother probably hates you."

Some students and parents took issue with the presentation - most notably 17-year-old senior Katelyn Campbell, who

went to the media with her concerns. She called the event an exercise in "slut-shaming" and decried Stenzel's religious background.

However, Stenzel also spoke to students at Riverside High School and no one there has publicly voiced concerns about her presentation.

At last week's Kanawha County school board meeting, crowded with GW students and parents on all sides of the issue, board member Becky Jordon made an impassioned speech in defense of GW Principal George Aulenbacher - and announced that her husband had donated money to help bring Stenzel to Charleston.

That donation was made to Believe in West Virginia.

That pronouncement generated murmurs about the separation of church and state from some in the audience, but Jordon was hardly fazed. She has remained a staunch supporter of Aulenbacher.

This wasn't Believe in West Virginia's first jaunt into the sex education arena, and it's not the first time the group has brought abstinence advocates into public schools.

The group has a relationship with a group called The Silver Ring Thing, a Christian group that travels the country urging teens to wait to have sex until after marriage. The teens buy (or are given) a silver ring to symbolize their commitment to abstinence.

In the past, Believe in West Virginia brought The Silver Ring Thing to a slew of churches and community centers and a few schools.

The group was at Capital High School in 2004 and at Sissonville High School in 2011.

Ron Reedy, principal at Sissonville, said that to his knowledge administrators hadn't received any complaints about the presentation.

A graphic on Believe in West Virginia's website details the Silver Ring Thing's impact. According to that graphic, 270 people attended the assembly at Sissonville High School, 135 rings were bought, and 53 "commitments" to serve Christ were made.

In the organization's December newsletter, an article details the group's visit here and its efforts to "tailor their message for a secular audience." When they spoke to the general community, the group could "add the most important piece of the message about abstinence - a relationship with Jesus Christ," it reads.

DeBlecourt agrees that abstinence until marriage is an important part of a religious life, but he thinks it's important for teens regardless of their faith.

"I'm communicating the message that I think it's important for kids to hear," he said. "Whether someone else wants to deliver another message, I can't do anything about that."

"As far as where we are today, we're working within the guidelines that are established by the school system, by the state, and by the federal government for what we can do in schools."

DeBlecourt allows that his ideas about sexuality come from a biased and spiritual place but rejects the notion that anyone's views on human sexuality aren't equally biased.

"Each of us, no matter what our religious beliefs are, we have a set of values," he said. "We can't separate that from where you are. Now you may claim that my values are religious values, but even someone without religion has their own values coming from somewhere."

Among other programs, Believe in West Virginia operates Storehouse West Virginia, a warehouse on Hansford Street in Charleston's East End that supplies surplus goods to churches and other charitable groups.

According to its website, Believe in West Virginia's board includes C. Edward Gaunch, president; the Rev. Jack Henry, vice president and founder; Scott Barnett, secretary/treasurer; Joey Holland; the Rev. Jack Maxwell; the Rev. Ron Thaxton; Greg Thomas; Joseph Skaff; Ed Swartz; and Rick Harrah.

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