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Crowd prays with football coach as he defies school district

By **Seattle Times (WA)** October 19, 2015 6:55 am

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BREMERTON -- Surrounded by members of his team, players from the rival Centralia High School and scores of supporters from Kitsap County and beyond, Bremerton High assistant coach Joe Kennedy knelt on the 50-yard line after Friday night's game and prayed.

It was some version of the basic prayer he's said for years, he said afterward.

"Lord, I thank you for these kids and the blessing you've given me with them. We believe in the game, we believe in competition and we can come into it as rivals and leave as brothers."

He said he never intended to become part of the controversy surrounding his postgame prayers, but had to stand up for his right to practice his faith when challenged by the school district.

"I always taught my kids to do what's right ... and fight for what you believe in."

Previous story - [Bremerton football coach vows to pray after game despite district order](#)

The school district says Kennedy must stop his prayers, which it says violate the separation of church and state. Lawyers representing the coach say his right to religious freedom is being violated by the district's rules.

Numerous people at the school homecoming game came to support Kennedy and his longstanding practice of kneeling and praying at the 50-yard line after games, often among a crowd of players and other coaches.

Bremerton High School Coach Kennedy Prays Despit...



Kennedy initially agreed to stop his postgame prayers, but earlier this week said he changed his mind after the Texas-based Liberty Institute took up his cause.

Andy Lancaster of Silverdale came to his first football game at Bremerton High on Friday to pray with Kennedy after the game.

"I'm here because I can't stand ACLU bullies," he said.

Gordy Byrd, who attended Bremerton's East High School years ago, said he hadn't been at a high-school game in 40 years but he, too, came to pray with Kennedy.

State Rep. Jesse Young, R-Gig Harbor, stood next to Kennedy in support throughout the game.

The controversy has played out in public since the district told Kennedy last month to stop his postgame prayers.

Cory Flournoy, 17, a senior who was filming the game for his media class, said students are "sick and absolutely tired of it all."

"It's ridiculous that he got in trouble at all," he said. "The students basically support the coach regardless of their religious beliefs," Flournoy said.

"It isn't a big deal at all," said Brandon Chavez, who played football with the team as a freshman. "I prayed because I'm Catholic, but some walked off. There was never any pressure."

Brady Beaton, Class of 2013, also said he prayed with the team and said he wondered how it ever "became a thing."

"They're making a big deal out of nothing," Beaton said.

The district argues that Kennedy's postgame prayers violate the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, which precludes the government from making any law "respecting an establishment of religion." It also forbids the government from favoring one religion over another.

The Liberty Institute says the coach's right to religious freedom is being violated and threatened to sue if the district were to fire Kennedy over the dispute.

Jeffrey Ganson, an attorney with Porter Foster Rorick, the Seattle law firm that is representing the school district, emailed a letter to the Liberty Institute on Friday taking issue with how the prayers had been characterized.

Ganson wrote that, contrary to Kennedy's statements, he did invite other coaches to join him, and that video of an on-field prayer Sept. 14 showed that the prayer began with the word "Lord" and ended with "amen," contrary to a claim that the prayers did not name a specific deity or end with an amen.

The letter also took issue with the idea that Kennedy is off-duty immediately after the game ends. It said the prayers occur "when students are still on the football field, in uniform, under the stadium lights, with the audience still in attendance, and while Mr. Kennedy is still in his District-issued and District-logoed attire. Critically, at that time, Mr. Kennedy remains on duty. ..."

Liberty Institute's Hiram Sasser responded: "The school district may resolve this issue by announcing a disclaimer that Coach Kennedy is acting in his private capacity and not as a representative of the school district ..." Sasser wrote.

Bremerton School District and Bremerton High School officials did not return phone calls from The Seattle Times on Friday seeking comment. An email from the school district included statements from Thursday's

school board meeting.

"I want to be clear -- the District is in no way taking away an athletic coach's freedom of expression," District Superintendent Aaron Leavell said in the statement. "What we are doing is what every state-funded agency and school district must do: abide by the laws that govern us. Like every public school district in the nation, our teaching and coaching staff is not allowed to include religious expression, including prayer, in talks with students while on duty for the District."

Kennedy describes himself as a God-fearing former Marine, who served 20 years including in operations Desert Storm and Desert Shield in Iraq. He said he believes he is "helping these kids be better people." He says he is not a lawyer and "I don't know the Constitution."

However, he said earlier this week, "I spent my years defending it."

This story includes information from Seattle Times archives.

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19 Comments

1.  Comment by proudoftheusa
October 19, 2015 @ 9:09 am

Good for Coach, his players and the people of Bremerton to stand together in unison to fight for freedom. To remain silent will further erode our way of life. It is time to push back. There are so many more of us than there is of them. It is amazing how the cair organization can fight for 1% of the population and win, we can fight for 80% of the population and squash the atheists once and for all. Like those students said “we are sick and absolutely tired of it all!” Amen

Finally one uplifting story!

Rate this comment:



Rating: 5.0/5 (6 votes cast)

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2.  Comment by MustLiveFree
October 19, 2015 @ 9:46 am

Why is this b.s. allowed to continue? All the first amendment says is that “congress shall make no law...”. How much clearer can that be?? How is Congress involved in this??

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-  Comment by 4liberty
October 19, 2015 @ 10:36 am

Congress refuses to become involved in this due to cowardice or collusion with the aclu and muslims. That is the problem. All of these anti-Christian lawsuits could be stopped if congress would act to uphold our Constitution.

Rate this comment:



Rating: 5.0/5 (2 votes cast)

3.  Comment by torridjoe
October 19, 2015 @ 9:49 am

Why isn't the headline "scores of people support blatant defiance of Constitution and American principle?" The coach hopefully will be fired for teaching ignorance.

Rate this comment:



Rating: 1.7/5 (6 votes cast)

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- Comment by jeffd
October 19, 2015 @ 10:13 am

Put this to bed once and for all. Put this to a vote of the AMERICAN people. That will shut idiots as you up.

Rate this comment:



Rating: 5.0/5 (3 votes cast)



- Comment by chapduck
October 19, 2015 @ 10:23 am

Scores of people stand up for freedom of speech and action! We must state that we do not live in a fascist state, yet!

Rate this comment:



Rating: 5.0/5 (4 votes cast)



- Comment by dcrt08
October 19, 2015 @ 10:32 am

It's because that would be an inaccurate headline. Please show us where in the Constitution it says that people can not pray in a public place or on public property? I'll save you some time. It's not in there and it's quite the opposite. The Constitution assures that people can pray anywhere they like including public property. The First Amendment's prohibition clause is there to stop the government from creating a church then mandating everyone has to go to only that church as happened in England. Remember, the Founders prayed on public property and in fact, Congress' first book approved for print was the Bible (called the Aitken Bible). It's pretty clear that the Founders would be appalled by your headline.

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- Comment by torridjoe
October 19, 2015 @ 10:43 am

It has nothing to do with a public place. The coach is an agent of government acting in his official capacity. There are multiple SCOTUS rulings against that, which is why the district is trying to

avoid losing tens of thousands on lawyers in a losing cause.

Rate this comment:



Rating: 0.0/5 (0 votes cast)



- o Comment by jas1019
October 19, 2015 @ 10:52 am

The FIRST AMENDMENT READS:

Amendment I. Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof;

Do you understand the words “OR PROHIBITING THE FREE EXERCISE THEREOF”?

Or do you have a high quality PUBLIC EDUCATION?

Rate this comment:



Rating: 5.0/5 (1 vote cast)



- 4. Comment by chapduck
October 19, 2015 @ 10:00 am

The ACLU, atheists...etc. are trying to shut down our freedoms for a small vocal group, we should encourage all members of our communities to pray for our children, our country and it's leaders. This is what made America strong and will be the binding force to bring Americans to the realization that we must be strong and take action to defend our freedoms! I would love to see whole communities praying at the 50 yard line of every football, soccer, volleyball and “Home” plate at all baseball games, now that would send a message to our government. defining just who we are and what we will stand up for! Thanks, coach Kennedy and the Bremerton community!

Rate this comment:



Rating: 5.0/5 (3 votes cast)

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- 5. Comment by jeffd
October 19, 2015 @ 10:01 am

“Separation of Church and State” simply means the church cannot run the state (as in England) and the state cannot run the church. Where did all this other BS come from?

Rate this comment:



Rating: 5.0/5 (5 votes cast)

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- o Comment by abbey

October 19, 2015 @ 10:08 am

DEMOCRATS!

Rate this comment:



Rating: 5.0/5 (4 votes cast)



- o Comment by torridjoe
October 19, 2015 @ 10:44 am

Thomas Jefferson.

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Rating: 0.0/5 (0 votes cast)



- 6. Comment by jeffd
October 19, 2015 @ 10:02 am

AND PRAY on sir.

Rate this comment:



Rating: 5.0/5 (3 votes cast)

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- 7. Comment by abbey
October 19, 2015 @ 10:08 am

God is not dead!

Rate this comment:



Rating: 5.0/5 (3 votes cast)

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- 8. Comment by jenersea
October 19, 2015 @ 10:30 am

This is what they would have done 20 years ago. No way would this stuff that is going on today be allowed to happen. People would have taken to the streets to protest it. Now, people are afraid of being labeled bigots or they are afraid of the world in general. Remember Jesus is greater than the world. We need to stand up to these people who promote evil for good. This is all about the battle between the GOD and Satan. The world is run by Satan for now and you see what they are promoting.

Rate this comment:



Rating: 0.0/5 (0 votes cast)

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9.  Comment by jobert
October 19, 2015 @ 10:30 am

Good for him and Pi\$\$ on the School District

Rate this comment:



Rating: 5.0/5 (3 votes cast)

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10.  Comment by Mort_f
October 19, 2015 @ 10:51 am

I do not live in that area of the country, else this jew would kneel with that coach and recite that same prayer.

Rate this comment:



Rating: 0.0/5 (0 votes cast)

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11.  Comment by jas1019
October 19, 2015 @ 11:00 am

Yet if this was a story about a muslim cleric, they would praising his courage.

Can anyone, A N Y O N E, tell what is it about JESUS that you fear so much? And please, spare me “it’s His followers”.

Rate this comment:



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- "You and your offspring need to stay out of my state. We don't want you."
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