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“Sinful” store holds W.Va. up to ridicule, woman says

by *CANDICE BOSELY*

INWOOD, W.VA. – Alecia Knupp loves West Virginia, especially its family values and rural character, but said she fears the state could continue to be fodder for stereotypical T-shirts if changes are not made.

She gave as an example an adult store that opened recently next to Bunker Hill (W.Va.) Elementary School.

It’s no wonder, she said, that Abercrombie & Fitch sells a T-shirt that depicts two goofy-looking children sitting in a kiddie pool. Over an outline of the state the shirt reads, "West Virginia: No lifeguard at the gene pool."

“When they allow things like this to happen, it is bad-mouthing West Virginia to a degree,” Knupp said of the adult store, named Slightly Sinful. “Mountaineers are always free - that’s our motto - but sometimes I think we’re a little too free.”

Knupp wrote a letter to Gov. Bob Wise about the matter, which reads in part, “I read with great interest your dismay at the Abercrombie and Fitch West Virginia T-shirts. As (a) resident of our beautiful state, I too do not like to see West Virginia portrayed in such a negative manner. Unfortunately, we get the reputation honestly.”

Jodi Omear, a spokeswoman for Wise, said the governor had not had a chance to read Knupp's letter, so she could only offer a general comment on his behalf.

“The governor certainly doesn't want our kids to be exposed to that,” she said of Slightly Sinful's location, “but it is a local matter.”

Slightly Sinful owner Paige Critchley said Tuesday she does not believe her store is helping feed into the state's negative image.

“Everyone’s always picked on West Virginia,” she said.

Critchley has maintained that the first time she looked at the property, she did not realize an elementary school was next door. Even if she had, she said the location might not be considered inappropriate since the building previously housed a gun shop, complete with a basement shooting range.

Knupp moved to Bunker Hill 15 years ago from Gaithersburg, Md.

“Quite frankly, I just see it going in a totally different direction from when we moved,” she said of the area.

Laws in the state could be described as archaic, she said, noting that West Virginia ranks last in the nation in income level.

“We're never going to get any better. With this kind of thing going on, how are we going to get industry, how are people going to get jobs to better themselves?” she said.

Visitors to the state only know it by what they see as they drive through. On U.S. 11 heading north from Virginia to Martinsburg, a visitor will see Slightly Sinful and numerous strip clubs.

“My focus is just on basically cleaning up some of this,” Knupp said.

She wrote to the governor, “We currently have 11 strip clubs here in Berkeley County with no regulations regarding them. Please understand, we know that these businesses have a constitutional right to exist. We are not trying to close them altogether, we just want some responsible legislation to regulate their locations and to control health, safety and quality-of-life issues.”

Although Berkeley County passed an ordinance last week that prohibits adult-oriented businesses from opening within 2,000 feet of a church, school or home, the county law likely will not withstand a court challenge, the county commissioners have said.

“This is but one of many examples (of how) our state hurts itself with our archaic and ambiguous laws,” Knupp wrote. “This type of issue makes one understand exactly why West Virginia has become the ‘joke on the T-shirt’ and until we wake up and make some changes, it will continue to be that way.”

Mockery loves company

Wise has written letters to Abercrombie & Fitch asking that they stop carrying the “gene pool” T-shirt, along with a previous shirt that read, “It's all relative in West Virginia.”

“I enjoy a joke - including one about me - as much as you do,” Wise wrote most recently in a letter to Abercrombie & Fitch CEO Michael Jeffries. “What I cannot understand is attempted humor that wrongly and cruelly stereotypes people.”

The governor's letter pointed out what he considers positive aspects of the state - including the PROMISE Scholarship Program, the highly rated Army National Guard program and prominent West Virginians such as former POW Jessica Lynch.

West Virginia is not the only state or place to be mocked on Abercrombie T-shirts.

Kentucky is the subject of two shirts: One reads, “Electricity in almost every town,” while the other reads, “Doin' it 'til the cows come home.”

At least one logo shirt might be considered positive. It depicts a scuba diver and reads, “Key Largo is to dive for.”

Others read “North Carolina: It's great to be on top” and “Iowa: We do amazing things with corn.”

State Sen. John Unger, D-Berkeley, co-sponsored a bill in the last legislative session that proposed giving counties some control over the location of adult businesses.

It failed.

“We've been trying for years to empower the local communities so they could, in essence, do zoning without implementing comprehensive zoning,” Unger said.

The problem with getting a bill passed is that other counties with less people and less prosperity may not have the same problem with adult-oriented businesses. Convincing legislators from those areas that the problem is critical in this area is difficult, Unger said.

Without zoning in place, as is the case in Berkeley County, any bill that attempts to regulate the location of adult businesses could run into a First Amendment-based court challenge.

“The bottom line is counties can take this on. It means that they're going to have to step up to the plate and look at zoning,” Unger said. “That's what I'd prefer.”

Still, Unger said he plans to reintroduce the bill in next year's session of the Legislature.

Locally, Knupp said she intends to run someday for a County Commission seat. She already has put in an application for a seat on the county's Planning Commission.

In office, Knupp said she might be able to help protect some of the qualities of the area that drew her here – open land, friendly people and families involved in their children's lives.

“I love West Virginia. It's a beautiful state and there are so many wonderful things,” she said.

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