

September 15,2005

Dear Mrs.....

I have received your letter concerning the Senior Prom (or lack thereof) at Kellenberg Memorial. I will give first some clarifications, then some explanations, and finally an overview of what we are really dealing with in our Long Island culture when we say “Senior Prom.”

You are correct – the school calendar does not indicate the date for a Senior Prom. It is not on our school calendar. KMHS is no longer sponsoring a senior prom. As your own letter suggests, if parents and/or seniors want a senior prom, they will have a prom, no matter what the administration says or does. In fact, that is precisely the reason why we are no longer sponsoring a senior prom – it is so much beyond our control that it is mere tokenism to put our name on it. Further, why assume moral and legal responsibility for something that has a life of its own independent of KMHS. So much for the clarification.

What led to this decision? You are acquainted with the events of last May concerning the KMHS senior prom and its Hampton highlights. You received a letter outlining the situation and giving some history of what the prom has become. Below are some points that take up from last May and give some flashback on what has happened in previous years.

1) In spite of our “expose” on the illegal and unjust and unsafe rental of “prom “ houses in the Hamptons, nothing changed. The house was sold to another group, and other houses were engaged. Nothing changed.

2) Over the years parents have become more active in creating the “prom experience,” from personally signing for houses for a three day drug/sex/alcohol bash, to mothers making motel reservations for their sons and daughters for after prom get-togethers, to fathers signing the contract for Captain Jim’s booze-cruise out of Huntington for an after prom adventure. We have become convinced that some parents support this type of activity, some tolerate it, prefer not to see it, or dismiss it as part of growing up. Some

have expressed the view that it is better to lose one's virginity and get drunk before going to college, so that parents can be around to help. You figure!

3) There are also pre-prom cocktail parties (real cocktails!) sponsored by parents. The limosine to the prom is also well stocked, often with parents' knowledge. Seniors often enter the limousine with a present from home, just in case they run short.

4) Each year it gets worse – becomes more exaggerated, more expensive, more emotionally traumatic. It would not have gotten this far if a significant portion of parents, either explicitly or tacitly, did not accept it or tolerate it. We are withdrawing from the battle and allowing the parents full responsibility. KMHS is willing to sponsor a prom, but not an orgy.

5) Then comes the rejoinder: yes, but why let a few spoil it for the rest! First of all, it is not just a few. Secondly, peer pressure and competition create an atmosphere where young people are drawn into this prom culture which forces them to act, spend, show off, take risks which they would not normally do. The prom culture is sick – from the hankering that starts in the freshman year (I have been looking forward to this for four years), to the preoccupation about dates, dress, competition that absorbs so much of the senior year. It isn't worth it on the mature scale of things.

6) Because of this hype many seniors admit later on that it was not all that they expected it to be. It was over-projected, lacked spontaneity, and became an expensive formal show. In the Christian community this is called "vanity," emptiness. It is one of the capital sins.

7) It is amazing to see how much effort has been made over the past twenty years to keep the prom from becoming an orgy, from raffling off a car at 6:00 AM (you have to be there to win it), to forcing them to stay till 6:00 AM, to putting the prom right before graduation (with the result that a number of seniors are still intoxicated or supremely hung-over at graduation). Why go to such outside exertions to keep something sane? If it constantly becomes such a problem, just drop it. What is so sacred about a prom?

8) One could use the argument which insurance personnel would advise, namely, why attach your name to something which is so prone to problems and over which you have little effective control. Good logic (and financial policy)! This argument becomes even more cogent, given the rise of a sue-happy population and a cadre of unscrupulous lawyers looking for deep pockets (KMHS has experienced both). However, KMHS is not liability-shy. We are willing to take on the risks for programs that fulfill our educational mission. The culture and practice of the senior prom on Long Island can no longer justify its place in our mission, not just in our liability.

9) Speaking of liability and the ease with which parents want to shift responsibility, we do have a prom story that involves all the negative aspects of current prom culture as well as a challenge to KMHS liability. Here is the story. A senior girl was going to the KMHS prom. After the prom she wanted to go with her prom party to “party” at the family’s cottage on the Eastern end of Long Island. The mother said no. The girl secretly stole the key without her mother’s knowledge and put it in her purse. Her older sister knew what was to happen at the cottage and did not want her sister to go to the cottage after the prom. So, she secretly removed the key from her sister’s prom purse. The senior went to the prom with her prom party, confident that the key was in her purse. They left the prom at the end and were on their way to the East end of Long Island when all of a sudden she could not find the key. In a panic they returned to the locus of the prom (the KMHS prom had closed) to look for the key, which, she was sure, had fallen out of her purse. However, at the prom site were the remains of a raucous wedding celebration. Some members of her prom party got involved with some members of the wedding party. A fight ensued, well-fueled by you know what. The police were called but would not enter the establishment. The physical damage to one of the prom party was so bad that it required hospitalization. Guess what? The prom party wanted KMHS to pay for the damages, including the hospitalization, since “we did not provide adequate security for the prom party.” Who needs this?

10) Some ask about a “compromise.” What is there to compromise? Sanity, proportion, modesty, common sense?

11) Long Island, known in some circles as Wrong Island, is an alcohol culture. It starts early and never ends. Because of our affluence and arrogance everything has to be exaggerated – bigger, better, more, over the top. Our students do not learn how to drink socially. Their goal is to get roaring drunk as quickly as possible and boast about it the next day. The incidence of binge drinking is rising on college campuses. Long Island has more than its share of what is an American flaw – we eschew moderation. Here is the irony: we decided some years ago that a youth reached “majority” at eighteen years of age – for everything (marriage, contracts, etc.) except for drinking! He and she can get married, buy a home, have a child, but legally cannot have a drink at their own wedding. Europe does not have that adolescent problem of drinking. Why can’t we be moderate?

12) Aside from the bacchanalian aspects of the prom — alcohol/sex/drugs — there is a root problem for all this and it is affluence. Affluence changes people. Too much money is not good for the soul. Our young people have too much money. Sounds simple, but it is true. When Jesus said that it was very hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, it shocked his hearers and it still shocks us. Wealth is powerful, not only in terms of possessions, but in being possessed by it. Wealth changes personalities, priorities, principles. The prom has become the occasion of conspicuous consumption – from dress, to limousines, to entertainment.

13) We do not wear our wealth well in Long Island, particularly as we are one of the wealthiest areas in the United States. Is our wealth corrupting us? The attached article describes the extravagance associated with “Sweet Sixteen” parties. Again, the competitive culture forces parents to throw a party for these middle adolescents which many cannot afford and those who can should not afford. What are we teaching our children? And then we come to the wedding! Fifty to one hundred thousand dollars is not rare. And to what end? Vanity of vanities and all is vanity, say the Scriptures.

14) Some may say: it is my money; I can do what I want with it. Well, yes, you can, but not without moral repercussions. And now we come to the heart of the matter. It is not primarily the sex/booze/drugs that surround this event, as problematic as they might be; it is rather the flaunting of affluence, assuming exaggerated expenses, a pursuit of vanity for vanity’s sake – in a word, financial decadence. But it is my money, I can do what I want with it. Yes, but not without moral repercussions.

15) Wealth is a wonderful thing. It is a sharing in the fruits of God’s creation. Becoming a millionaire can be a spiritually enriching experience, **provided** you answer two questions correctly: how did you get it, and what are you doing with it. Was it gotten at the expense of God, family, integrity, by shady deals, corporate ‘conspiracy, taking unfair advantage? And what are you doing with it (and what has it done to you and your family)?

16) I do not intend here to give a treatise on the capital sin of avarice or greed. Suffice it to recall St. Paul’s words: the lust for money is the root of all evil. How true! But we are concerned about how our young people are being educated in the use of wealth and the experience of power that wealth gives. A great deal of their future happiness or unhappiness, both human and spiritual, will be determined by their interaction with wealth or the desire for it. Most people think of sex and murder when they hear the word morality. But there is a morality of money. The bad use of money or wealth in any form is immoral. Finally, we have begun (only) to become conscious of how we use our natural resources. There can be (and often has been) an immoral use of land, water, wildlife, and natural elements. Our Lordship over all creation is not without moral consequences. As with time, so with wealth – we will be called to account for how we have used them. The current culture of the prom on Long Island does not represent to us a proper Christian use of wealth.

17) A school establishes its academic profile to fit the goals for which the school is founded. The academic profile is complemented by an activity profile. It is through these activities that adolescents learn skills that the academic profile does not give – such as self-reliance, cooperation, loyalty, affective relationships, social consciousness, personal performance, etc. For example, physical sports or athletics are introduced into the school

program, not because we are in the entertainment business or because parents want to relive their adolescence through their own children, or because the administration is a bunch of frustrated all-Americans, but because these activities, natural to adolescents, can be a powerful vehicle for attaining the affective goals of the school. The athletic activity itself, like the senior prom, is prone to distortion. Sometimes the sport itself degenerates into a physical activity that has little to do with education. And sometimes the legitimate athletic activity is distorted through its use by coaches, parents, or school administration. The conduct of the sport is no longer governed by the educational needs of the students, but by the ego-needs of the adults. Such was our experience with hockey. After repeated attempts, we admitted defeat on two counts: the sport itself kept degenerating into physical mayhem, while the parental role and conduct of the parents was primitive. It no longer was a fit vehicle for the educational goals of the school. And so, KMHS no longer sponsored a hockey program. Hockey still exists and a number of KMHS students may play hockey, but we do not consider it a proper vehicle for education.

18) So, too, with the senior prom. We have come to the conclusion that it has a life of its own which is no longer commensurate with the goals of Christian education. And so we dropped sponsoring it. We eliminated it from our roster of activities (as we did with hockey). Senior drinking parties will continue; three day bashes will continue in the Hamptons; parents will continue to organize all these activities; a great deal of money will be spent. The only difference is that Kellenberg Memorial High School will not be part of that scene. That's all!

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