

Campus receives a new commandment
Judge says community college wrong to order preacher off campus

By [MARC PARRY](#), Staff writer

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SCHENECTADY -- The school portrayed the preacher as a menacing zealot who shouted at the top of his lungs.

The Rev. Greg Davis' lawyer called him a gentleman who was only trying to spread the gospel on campus when Schenectady County Community College stomped all over his constitutional rights.

Davis won the court case that arose from the conflict. Last month, a Schenectady judge acquitted him of trespassing. This week, supporters trumpeted the verdict nationally as a victory for religious expression on campus.

"Because it's religious speech, it doesn't mean it has to be confined to inside a church," said Jim Trainor, Davis's Malta attorney. "I think it's important for anyone to realize that they have that right and should be able to exercise it in any public forum."

A federal lawsuit against the college and local officials is pending.

The character at the center of this case is originally from Olivebridge in the Catskills. Davis described himself as a former actor and director -- in "low budget" movies, "stuff down in Florida," as he put it -- before he "got saved" in 1995.

Now the 37-year-old is an ordained Baptist minister who hopscotches from campus to campus across the country. He travels in a camper with his family. Students call him "Bible Greg."

He brought his tour to Schenectady on Sept. 8, 2006. That morning, he showed up on the community college's grassy quad with the sandwich board he wears to display religious sayings. He also carried literature to hand out and a video camera to record the scene.

"I'm there to preach the Bible and tell people that Jesus Christ can make a difference in their life," Davis said Thursday.

Others don't think his motives are that simple.

Davis has been through this before. He sued Ulster County Community College in 2005, claiming the school violated his free speech rights by barring him from speaking on

campus. When the case was settled in 2006, Davis got \$2,000 in damages and the college paid \$20,000 for his legal costs.

He went after the college with legal help from the Alliance Defense Fund. That's the same national organization that backed him in the Schenectady case -- and is promoting it as a victory for religious expression. Trainor, a lawyer affiliated with the group, said "you can probably call us the antidote to the ACLU."

"We're making headway, but there's a long way to go with the ACLU and its allies dedicated to establishing the fictional 'wall of separation' they claim exists between church and state," concludes a write-up about Davis's case on the alliance's Web site. "We have to stand and fight if we are to win!"

Davis knew from experience that, because the community college was public property, "he has a right to be there, and they can't just ask him to leave unless and until he is disruptive of the college operation," said District Attorney Robert M. Carney.

"I think it's a case of somebody who did what he did to -- I don't want to say provoke or incite -- but to obtain a reaction," Carney said.

He got one. After Davis set up on the quad, Assistant Dean Michael D'Annibale came up to the minister and repeatedly asked him to leave, according to court papers.

When he wouldn't, the school called Schenectady police. When a police officer asked him to leave and he again refused, he was arrested for criminal trespassing.

The charge was reduced to a violation, less than a misdemeanor.

D'Annibale claimed that one reason he ordered Davis to leave campus was that he "felt threatened" by the "disorderly, irrational and unstable" preacher, according to court papers.

"He described the defendant's behaviors as approaching individuals on the campus in an intimidating and threatening manner and shouting at the top of his lungs with his arms raised and flailing," the court papers say.

City Court Judge Vincent Versaci ruled that Davis' video does not match D'Annibale's description of his behavior.

Without evidence of any misbehavior, the judge wrote, "the People failed to establish a legitimate basis for ordering the defendant to leave the campus."

College spokeswoman Heather Meaney released a statement Thursday noting that Davis was "taping students" with a video camera, which he refused to turn off.

"He was asked to leave -- he refused," she said. "The police were called in order to

avoid any further disruption to the educational process."

"Bible Greg" just wrapped up a Northeast tour. He's spending time in churches while he waits for the fall semester.

Next stop: Rochester.

Parry can be reached at 454-5057 or by e-mail at mparry@timesunion.com.

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