

Decatur, Ill. • Thursday, November 18, 1999 CENTRAL ILLINOIS A5

Jackson lists goals for ending dispute over school expulsions

Activist requests review panel and admissions by school board.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Rev. Jesse Jackson accepted an invitation to meet Wednesday morning with members of the Herald & Review's editorial board to discuss the expulsion controversy. His comments were made before the filing of lawsuits by the Decatur School District and the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, and prior to announced plans to enroll the expelled students in an alternative school.

By Ken Dickson
Herald Staff Writer

DECATUR — The Rev. Jesse Jackson wants three things before he will end his crusade on behalf of six students expelled from Decatur high schools for the rest of the school year.

He wants a blue-ribbon panel to periodically review each student's performance in an alternative school with the possibility of reinstatement in the home school as early as January. He also wants the school board to acknowledge that two years is too long for expulsion and that the board should have offered the students alternative schooling before expelling them.

Jackson, founder and president of the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, shared his demands Wednesday during a meeting with the Herald & Review's editorial board. The Rev. James Meeks, vice president of Rainbow/PUSH, and four others accompanied him.

After expelling the students Oct. 1 and 4 for two years for their alleged involvement in a fight at a Sept. 17 football game at Eisenhower High School, the school board agreed Nov. 8 to shorten the expulsions to one year. At the same time, Gov. George H. Ryan allowed the students to enroll in alternative schools immediately.

Jackson said earlier Wednesday he would endorse sending the students to alternative schools if the blue-ribbon panel was formed and could assess the students' progress between now and the start of the year.

He said the Decatur School District, the Illinois State Board of Education and Rainbow/PUSH should be represented on the panel.

The Decatur school board on Tuesday rejected that and other proposals submitted by Glenn W. McGee, superintendent of the Illinois State Board of Education, and Rainbow/PUSH.

But during a rally Wednesday night, Jackson announced plans to enroll the students today in an alternative school. Jackson said the decision was based

upon concern that alternative school could cease to be available if the students held out any longer.

In a separate interview on Wednesday, Decatur Superintendent Kenneth Arndt said the Jackson camp doesn't seem to realize that the clock is ticking on the students to enroll in an alternative program.

He said the two seniors could still graduate in June if they enroll in an alternative program by January and likely could not if they went back to traditional classrooms. He explained that courses needed for graduation are often offered only in fall or only in spring.

Arndt also said while some Decatur students have been referred to Safe School, an alternative school run by the Macon-Platt Regional Office of Education, the school board chose not to refer these expelled students "because of their individual records and the severity of the offense."

During his meeting with the editorial board, Jackson identified a gap in trust between the community and its students. He said 77 percent of Decatur's residents are African-American, yet about 50 percent of the district's students and their parents are black.

"Eighty-three percent of the people have the power, and only 50 percent of the children," he said. "So there is a power imbalance. We need to bridge this gap."

Jackson continued to contend that the parents of the expelled students, all of whom are African-American, did not understand the process when their sons were heading into the expulsion hearings Oct. 1 and 4. "They were notified, but they were not communicated with," Jackson said. "They did not understand what their options were."

Meeks wondered if the school board is protecting itself from backlash for changing the time of intercity football games.

Many years ago, the school district opted for a 5 p.m. game time to combat violence at night games. In an effort to get families to attend the games this year, the district moved the time back to 7:30 p.m.

"Did the fight at night strike a blow at the school board's insistence at putting the games back at night?" Meeks asked. This rush to judgment may have a lot to do with protecting themselves from that decision.

"It has to be something. If it is not race, if it is not precedent because they don't give two years for every fight, and it's not an overreaction to Pearl, Paducah or Columbine, then maybe it's (this)."

"Or a combination of them," Jackson said.

T-TOWN: Colleges express interest

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levels — Division I, II and III. "The best part is, a lot of people don't even know how good he is," said coach Ken Crawford. "The progress he has made in the off-season is unbelievable."

The daughter, Stephanie Gobjczyk, is a 6-2 center who coach Dennis Koester thinks is on the verge of a breakthrough season, which will only increase the current delivery of five or six recruiting letters a week. "This is going to be her season, I believe that," Koester said.

The father, Leon Gobjczyk, is the local State Farm Insurance Co. agent. At 6-foot-9 1/2, he was a Teutopolis scoring machine who then rewrote the Millikin University scoring records during his career in the early 1970s. He averaged 35.8 points per game in the 1973-74 season, second highest in the nation, and scored 40 or more points 22 times in his Millikin career, including a 62-point outburst that matches the university's best ever.

He played professionally for seven seasons overseas and it was in France where his children were born, where 11-month-old Stephanie took her first steps on a basketball court, and where his wife, Becky Gobjczyk, learned to love the language enough to teach French now at Allamont High School.

Becky Gobjczyk is sweeter than the slices of apple pie and chocolate cake she insists on visitors. Interestingly, she attended arch-rival Effingham St. Anthony High School, where on the tension-filled day of the "T-Town vs. St. Anthony" game, she confesses to having pasted cutout wooden shoes (Teutopolis' nickname) on the school floor, then stomping on them so violently the school nuns had to subdue the spirited outburst.

If you were meeting towering Leon Gobjczyk for the first time, you might believe what he says as he motions toward the 19-foot, 8-inch pinnacle of the cathedral ceiling in his living room.

"I can barely touch it when I jump," he says with a deadpan look. Immediately, though, his family bursts into laughter, knowing that although the family patriarch might have been a prolific scorer, he couldn't jump over the proverbial candlestick.

"Becky is not very coordinated," Leon said, "but the kids got their jumping ability from her."

Although basketball has always been a focal point in the sprawling Gobjczyk home, it is more so than ever this season as Andy and Stephanie head into their senior years.

The recruiting attention is heating up and it is likely to increase once colleges see how Andy has responded to serious knee surgery and how Stephanie becomes a more forceful part of a Teutopolis girls' team Koester thinks could be much better than people expect.

"I like it," Becky says of the recruiting process. "I guess it's kind of complimentary. And it provides some nice opportunities to visit other campuses and see what's out there."

For Leon, he is reliving the recruiting experience. During his senior year of 1971, he was recruited by more than 15 colleges, including Eastern Illinois, Southern Illinois, New Orleans, Southern Methodist, Centenary and Texas-Arlington. "You could take as many visits as you wanted, so I did," he recalls. "I didn't want to make a mistake."

Finally, he chose Millikin, which remains a possibility for his children.

Stephanie is completely open to Millikin, where she said she can easily envision herself playing basketball and majoring in English education. "I want to teach English in high school," she said.

Andy, on the other hand, is weighing more options. He recently made an unofficial visit to Illinois Chicago, where coaches Jimmy Collins and Dick Nagy have expressed an interest. He's also checked out Eastern Illinois and made an unofficial visit to Millikin.

Andy has known Millikin Coach Tim Littrell "forever" and is clearly fond of his father's former Millikin teammate. But the concern that he'll somehow be compared to his dad is a drawback, he said.

"That's the only objection," Andy said. "I know I'm not the same kind of player as my dad, but I feel like people would say, 'You never did this or did that.'"

The recruiting ground rules were laid down early, discussed between the parents and the children.

"I want them to get a great education," Leon said. "Basketball is fine, but time in goes by quickly. Basketball is going to use them for a certain amount. They need to parlay the chance to play into an education. I think we're all pretty firm on that."

That Andy is even getting a chance wasn't certain until two years ago, when a nagging knee injury was finally diagnosed by Dr. Robert Gurtler, the orthopedic surgeon who serves as one of the University of Illinois' athletic team doctors.

"At first I thought it was tendinitis or growing pains," said Andy, whose right knee began aching after his freshman season. The condition was misdiagnosed at first, but after only a few minutes in Dr. Gurtler's office, the problem was pinpointed.

"He said I could have osteochondritis desiccans," Andy said. And that's what it was.

Sometimes called "a dead spot" on the bone, Dr. Gurtler informed the Gobjczyks that Andy had a serious condition, but one that could be treated.

Just two months earlier, in August of 1997, the FDA had approved a breakthrough procedure that resulted in three surgeries. Basically, the "dead" portion of

the bone was removed, a bone graft was taken from Andy's hip and placed on the knee and a bone cells (taken from Andy and grown at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology) were used to help seal and heal the repaired area.

He missed the entire sophomore season and the first eight games of his junior year before returning to action. Now, Crawford says, the knee is stronger than ever.

"I was apprehensive when he had returns," Crawford said. "But come to find out, that (repaired) knee is in better shape than the other one."

Andy averaged just 8.9 points last season but played limited minutes in some early games. Crawford often used him in the post, mainly because Teutopolis' regular center broke his hand.

This season, Crawford said, he'll try to use Andy in a way that plays more to his strengths.

"He has a lot of athletic skills that even Leon told me he didn't have," Crawford said. "He can handle the ball in the open court, he can shoot it and he can take it to the hole. And this kid can jump. When you say that word to Leon, he just laughs."

Stephanie, on the other hand, has been injury-free. She is one of just two returning starters from Koester's 28-4 team. In the summer, Teutopolis won the Class A team camp at the University of Illinois and Koester is quietly optimistic about this group.

Stephanie Gobjczyk is one reason why.

"Last year she was a rebounder and scored on some put-backs. This year, we'll go to her more inside. When I put her in offensively this season, it was like turning on a light switch."

"The college coach who gets her will get an even better player down the road," Koester said. "She's deviously strong, but when she is exposed to a college weight program, she could be really good."

So as the high school seasons begin, a celebrated basketball family will help carry Teutopolis' banners high. Andy with the boys, Stephanie with the girls, father Leon chronicling the action on radio station WISQ, mother Becky cheering nervously from the stands.

Miles from town, a visitor can spot the towering steeple from the St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church. Down below, tucked among the autumn trees, quiet streets and paved driveways, are those basketball hoops that caught coach Gray's attention nearly 30 years ago.

"It should be a heck of a year," said Koester, well aware of the building fever in a community where basketball is at least the second most popular religion in town.

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