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To the Church, It Was a Case of 'Dirty Dancing'



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SAD FAREWELL: Maria Ibarra, grandmother of a student, hugs Bill C. Rugh, founder of Creative Planet after-school arts program at the Santa Anita Wesleyan Church in El Monte, as they pack.

To the Church, It Was a Case of 'Dirty Dancing'

Pastor says expulsion of arts program protects children. Others say the homosexuality of some staff members played a role in the decision.

By CARA MIA DiMASSA
Times Staff Writer

All Pastor Edgar Chacon wanted to do, he says now, was protect the children. If a child were to stumble across a snake, he says, he would kill the snake to save the child.

This time, he killed the dancing.

A nonprofit arts program was evicted last week from the campus of the church where Chacon presides. As a way to build self-esteem and artistic talent, the program encouraged kids to dance and practice yoga.

With Chacon casting the tie-breaking vote, the board of Santa Anita Wesleyan Church in El Monte voted to close the after-school program, called Creative Planet.

Yoga, Chacon said, is a pagan practice and should be banned. Modern dance is also taboo.

"If these children are learning how to dance, it will be so easy for them when they get to be in any discotheque, because they will already know how to dance. And discotheques are not the best places. . . . In those places, the young people can get drugs and knowledge of things that do not edify them.

"In my mind, I did the right thing," said Chacon, who was reached by phone in the Dominican Republic, where he is attending a church conference. "I am protecting the children."

The decision mystified Creative Planet students, most of whom do not attend the church.

"I'm heartbroken," said Lydia Renteria, 11, an aspiring singer and dancer who had been hoping to get a solo in the program's Christmas show. "This place has been like a second home for me."

Last week, Lydia and other students helped Bill C. Rugh, the director of Creative Planet, move out of the building it has occupied for nearly a year and a half.

Rugh's family has been involved with Santa Anita Wes-

leyan since the 1930s, and the controversy over Creative Planet has severed those ties.

Rugh taught third and fourth grade at the church's elementary school, and his father, Bill E. Rugh, was treasurer of the church board until he resigned last week in protest. His mother, Kathryn, was principal of the elementary school, but quit her job after she was ordered to discipline her son for his efforts to save Creative Planet.

When the church board voted to close Creative Planet, it also fired Bill C. Rugh from his teaching job. (His brother, Robert, remains on the church board.)

Bill C. Rugh, who has worked as a dancer and actor, started Creative Planet with the belief that students well-rounded in the arts develop higher self-esteem. Many of the students attending the program come from communities where resources for arts education are lacking.

When Creative Planet began in mid-2001, Santa Anita Wesleyan's pastor at the time, Dave Ellis, supported Rugh's goals and gave him access to an eight-room former nursery school on the church campus.

The church board approved Creative Planet, which in addition to yoga and modern dance, offered courses in acting, music, voice, ballet, tap dance and creative writing.

The church provided no financial support for Creative Planet, said Rugh, who paid most costs out of his own pocket, because many of the program's 48 students attended on scholarship. He called upon friends in the entertainment industry—including actress Elizabeth Berkley and writer Terry Haley of "Married With Children"—to teach and mentor students.

But soon after Creative Planet opened, Ellis left to work at Wesleyan Church headquarters in Indiana, and Chacon became pastor.

"I knew he was conservative," said Bill E. Rugh, one of three board members who voted to keep Creative Planet open. "But not this much."

Bill C. Rugh tried to save his program. Children wrote letters, parents sent e-mails. Some parents boycotted the church elementary school for a day. Others pulled their children out of the school altogether.

As a result of that campaign, Rugh was fired for insubordination, he and his parents said.

Most board members did not return calls seeking comment, but Bill E. Rugh said the meeting held to decide the program's fate

had been divisive, with members criticizing a Creative Planet performance in October at the L.A. Arts Open House.

"I don't think they understood," he said. "They were stuck on this German song by Beethoven."

The chorus the children sang, "O Welche Lust!" is from "Fidelio." The opera is set in a prison, and the chorus evokes the gratitude of prisoners briefly allowed outside their cells.

Rugh said church leaders misinterpreted the German *lust* as the English "lust." A translation of the opening lines gives a far different meaning:

"O welche lust! In freier Luft/ Den Athem leicht zu heben" . . . "Oh, what enjoyment/ to breathe the fresh air of heaven."

When asked about the performance, which portrayed the dream travels of a young boy with both secular and religious music, Chacon said that it had featured an "evil" modern dance.

Bill C. Rugh's defenders say another issue has been lurking behind criticisms of Creative Planet: Rugh is gay, and some of his teachers are as well.

Rugh said Creative Planet students and parents have long known of his homosexuality. "I sing with the Gay Men's Chorus. I was on an episode of 'Will & Grace,'" the popular television sitcom that features two gay characters. "It's not like they didn't know."

The issue was raised at a Nov. 7 church meeting, according to the San Gabriel Valley Tribune, which reported that board member David Herrera had told fellow congregants that the "kingdom" did not approve of homosexuality.

At a meeting with the three board members who eventually voted to close Creative Planet, Rugh said, his own sexuality never came up. "But they asked me if I had gay teachers," he said. "I said yes, and they asked me to fire them. I refused. I told them the few teachers they thought were gay weren't the ones who are gay."

Rugh hopes to find a new location for Creative Planet.

Chacon, meanwhile, hopes to open a program that would teach computers and Spanish—"things that we believe would be better for the children."

And, perhaps, less controversial.

"I told myself, 'Well, the parents will be happy that somebody is taking care of the children,'" he said. "But what a surprise I had. . . . They were so mad with me."